

CHAPTER XV

A BEWILDERING EXPERIENCE

When Louise Merrick entered the brown limousine, which she naturally supposed to belong to Arthur Weldon, she had not the faintest suspicion of any evil in her mind. Indeed, the girl was very happy this especial evening, although tired with her duties at the Kermess. A climax in her young life had arrived, and she greeted it joyously, believing she loved Arthur well enough to become his wife.

Now that the engagement had been announced to their immediate circle of friends she felt as proud and elated as any young girl has a right to be under the circumstances.

Added to this pleasant event was the social triumph she and her cousins had enjoyed at the Kermess, where Louise especially had met with rare favor. The fashionable world had united in being most kind and considerate to the dainty, attractive young debutante, and only Diana had seemed to slight her. This was not surprising in view of the fact that Diana evidently wanted Arthur for herself, and there was some satisfaction in winning a lover who was elsewhere in prime demand. In addition to all this the little dance that concluded the evening's entertainment had been quite delightful, and all things conspired to put Louise in a very contented frame of mind. Still fluttering with the

innocent excitements of the hour the girl went to join Arthur without a fear of impending misfortune. She did not think of Charlie Mershone at all. He had been annoying and impertinent, and she had rebuked him and sent him away, cutting him out of her life altogether. Perhaps she ought to have remembered that she had mildly flirted with Diana's cousin and given him opportunity for the impassioned speeches she resented; but Louise had a girlish idea that there was no harm in flirting, considering it a feminine license. She saw young Mershone at the Kermess that evening paying indifferent attentions to other women and ignoring her, and was sincerely glad to have done with him for good and all.

She obeyed readily the man who asked her to be seated in the limousine. Arthur would be with her in a minute, he said. When the door closed and the car started she had an impulse to cry out but next moment controlled it and imagined they were to pick up Mr. Weldon on some corner.

On and on they rolled, and still no evidence of the owner of the limousine. What could it mean, Louise began to wonder. Had something happened to Arthur, so that he had been forced to send her home alone? As the disquieting thought came she tried to speak with the chauffeur, but could not find the tube. The car was whirling along rapidly; the night seemed very dark, only a few lights twinkled here and there outside.

Suddenly the speed slackened. There was a momentary pause, and then the machine slowly rolled upon a wooden platform. A bell clanged, there was

a whistle and the sound of revolving water-wheels. Louise decided they must be upon a ferry-boat, and became alarmed for the first time.

The man in livery now opened the door, as if to reassure her.

"Where are we? Where is Mr. Weldon?" enquired the girl, almost hysterically.

"He is on the boat, miss, and will be with you shortly now," replied the man, very respectfully. "Mr. Weldon is very sorry to have annoyed you, Miss Merrick, but says he will soon explain everything, so that you will understand why he left you."

With this he quietly closed the door again, although Louise was eager to ask a dozen more questions. Prominent was the query why they should be on a ferry-boat instead of going directly home. She knew the hour must be late.

But while these questions were revolving in her mind she still suspected no plot against her liberty. She must perforce wait for Arthur to explain his queer conduct; so she sat quietly enough in her place awaiting his coming, while the ferry puffed steadily across the river to the Jersey shore.

The stopping of the boat aroused Louise from her reflections. Arthur not here yet? Voices were calling outside; vehicles were noisily leaving

their positions on the boat to clatter across the platforms. But there was no sign of Arthur.

Again Louise tried to find the speaking tube. Then she made an endeavor to open the door, although just then the car started with a jerk that flung her back against the cushions.

The knowledge that she had been grossly deceived by her conductor at last had the effect of arousing the girl to a sense of her danger. Something must be wrong. Something was decidedly wrong, and fear crept into her heart. She pounded on the glass windows with all her strength, and shouted as loudly as she could, but all to no avail.

Swiftly the limousine whirled over the dusky road and either her voice could not be heard through the glass cage in which she was confined or there was no one near who was willing to hear or to rescue her.

She now realized how wrong she had been to sit idly during the trip across the ferry, where a score of passengers would gladly have assisted her. How cunning her captors had been to lull her fears during that critical period! Now, alas, it was too late to cry out, and she had no idea where she was being taken or the reason of her going.

Presently it occurred to her that this was not Arthur's limousine at all. There was no speaking tube for one thing. She leaned forward and felt for the leathern pocket in which she kept a veil and her street

gloves. No pocket of any sort was to be found.

An unreasoning terror now possessed her. She knew not what to fear, yet feared everything. She made another attempt to cry aloud for help and then fell back unconscious on the cushions.

How long she lay in the faint she did not know. When she recovered the limousine was still rattling forward at a brisk gait but bumping over ruts in a manner that indicated a country road.

Through the curtains she could see little but the black night, although there was a glow ahead cast by the searchlights of the car. Louise was weak and unnerved. She had no energy to find a way to combat her fate, if such a way were possible. A dim thought of smashing a window and hurling herself through it gave her only a shudder of repulsion. She lacked strength for such a desperate attempt.

On, on, on. Would the dreary journey never end? How long must she sit and suffer before she could know her fate, or at least find some explanation of the dreadful mystery of this wild midnight ride?

At last, when she had settled down to dull despair, the car came to a paved road and began to move more slowly. It even stopped once or twice, as if the driver was not sure of his way. But they kept moving, nevertheless, and before long entered a driveway. There was another stop now, and a long wait.

Louise lay dismally back upon the cushions, sobbing hysterically into her dripping handkerchief. The door of her prison at last opened and a light shone in upon her.

"Here we are, miss," said the man in uniform, still in quiet, respectful tones. "Shall I assist you to alight?"

She started up eagerly, her courage returning with a bound. Stepping unassisted to the ground she looked around her in bewilderment.

The car stood before the entrance to a modest country house. There was a light in the hall and another upon the broad porch. Around the house a mass of trees and shrubbery loomed dark and forbidding.

"Where am I?" demanded Louise, drawing back haughtily as the man extended a hand toward her.

"At your destination, miss," was the answer. "Will you please enter?"

"No! Not until I have an explanation of this--this--singular, high-handed proceeding," she replied, firmly.

Then she glanced at the house. The hall door had opened and a woman stood peering anxiously at the scene outside.

With sudden resolve Louise sprang up the steps and approached her. Any woman, she felt, in this emergency, was a welcome refuge.

"Who are you?" she asked eagerly, "and why have I been brought here?"

"Mademoiselle will come inside, please," said the woman, with a foreign accent. "It is cold in the night air, N'est-ce-pas?"

She turned to lead the way inside. While Louise hesitated to follow the limousine started with a roar from its cylinders and disappeared down the driveway, the two men going with it. The absence of the lamps rendered the darkness around the solitary house rather uncanny. An intense stillness prevailed except for the diminishing rattle of the receding motor car. In the hall was a light and a woman.

Louise went in.