

CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

Uncle John was both astounded and indignant that so bold and unlawful an act as the abduction of his own niece could have been perpetrated in the heart of New York and directly under the eyes of the police. Urged by the Major, Mr. Merrick was at first inclined to allow Arthur Weldon to prosecute the affair and undertake the recovery of the girl, being assured this would easily be accomplished and conceding the fact that no one had a stronger interest in solving the mystery of Louise's disappearance than young Weldon. But when midday arrived and no trace of the young girl had yet been obtained the little millionaire assumed an important and decisive air and hurried down town to "take a hand in the game" himself.

After a long interview with the Chief of Detectives, Mr. Merrick said impressively:

"Now, understand, sir; not a hint of this to the newspaper folks. I won't have any scandal attached to the poor child if I can help it. Set your whole force to work--at once!--but impress them with the need of secrecy. My offer is fair and square. I'll give a reward of ten thousand dollars if Miss Merrick is discovered within twenty-four hours; nine

thousand if she's found during the next twenty-four hours; and so on, deducting a thousand for each day of delay. That's for the officer who finds her. For yourself, sir, I intend to express my gratitude as liberally as the service will allow me to. Is this all clear and above-board?"

"It is perfectly clear, Mr. Merrick."

"The child must be found--and found blamed quick, too! Great Caesar! Can a simple affair like this baffle your splendid metropolitan force?"

"Not for long, Mr. Merrick, believe me."

But this assurance proved optimistic. Day by day crept by without a clew to the missing girl being discovered; without development of any sort. The Inspector informed Mr. Merrick that "it began to look like a mystery."

Arthur, even after several sleepless nights, still retained his courage.

"I'm on the right track, sir," he told Uncle John. "The delay is annoying, but not at all dangerous. So long as Fogerty holds fast to Mershone Louise is safe, wherever she may be."

"Mershone may have nothing to do with the case."

"I'm positive he has."

"And Louise can't be safe while she's a prisoner, and in the hands of strangers. I want the girl home! Then I'll know she's safe."

"I want her home, too, sir. But all your men are unable to find her, it seems. They can't even discover in what direction she was taken, or how. The brown limousine seems to be no due at all."

"Of course not. There are a thousand brown limousines in New York."

"Do you imagine she's still somewhere in the city, sir?" enquired Arthur.

"That's my theory," replied Uncle John. "She must be somewhere in the city. You see it would be almost impossible to get her out of town without discovery. But I'll admit this detective force is the finest aggregation of incompetents I've ever known--and I don't believe your precious Fogerty is any better, either."

Of course Beth and Patsy had to be told of their cousin's disappearance as soon as the first endeavor to trace her proved a failure. Patsy went at once to Mrs. Merrick and devoted herself to comforting the poor woman as well as she could.

Beth frowned at the news and then sat down to carefully think out the

problem. In an hour she had logically concluded that Diana Von Taer was the proper person to appeal to. If anyone knew where Louise was, it was Diana. That same afternoon she drove to the Von Taer residence and demanded an interview.

Diana was at that moment in a highly nervous state. She had at times during her career been calculating and unscrupulous, but never before had she deserved the accusation of being malicious and wicked. She had come to reproach herself bitterly for having weakly connived at the desperate act of Charlie Mershone, and her good sense assured her the result would be disastrous to all concerned in it. Contempt for herself and contempt for her cousin mingled with well-defined fears for her cherished reputation, and so it was that Miss Von Taer had almost decided to telephone Madame Cerise and order her to escort Louise Merrick to her own home when Beth's card came up with a curt demand for a personal interview.

The natures of these two girls had never harmonized in the slightest degree. Beth's presence nerved Diana to a spirit of antagonism that quickly destroyed her repentant mood. As she confronted her visitor her demeanor was cold and suspicious. There was a challenge and an accusation in Beth's eyes that conveyed a distinct warning, which Miss Von Taer quickly noted and angrily resented--perhaps because she knew it was deserved.

It would have been easy to tell Beth De Graf where her cousin Louise

was, and at the same time to assure her that Diana was blameless in the affair; but she could not endure to give her antagonist this satisfaction.

Beth began the interview by saying: "What have you done with Louise Merrick?" That was, of course, equal to a declaration of war.

Diana was sneering and scornful. Thoroughly on guard, she permitted no compromising word or admission to escape her. Really, she knew nothing of Louise Merrick, having unfortunately neglected to examine her antecedents and personal characteristics before undertaking her acquaintance. One is so likely to blunder through excess of good nature. She had supposed a niece of Mr. John Merrick would be of the right sort; but the age is peculiar, and one cannot be too cautious in choosing associates. If Miss Merrick had run away from her home and friends, Miss Von Taer was in no way responsible for the escapade. And now, if Miss De Graf had nothing further to say, more important matters demanded Diana's time.

Beth was furious with anger at this baiting. Without abandoning a jot her suspicions she realized she was powerless to prove her case at this time. With a few bitter and cutting remarks--made, she afterward said, in "self-defense"--she retreated as gracefully as possible and drove home.

An hour later she suggested to Uncle John that he have a detective

placed where Diana's movements could be watched; but that had already been attended to by both Mr. Merrick and Mr. Fogerty. Uncle John could hardly credit Diana's complicity in this affair. The young lady's social position was so high, her family so eminently respectable, her motive in harming Louise so inconceivable, that he hesitated to believe her guilty, even indirectly. As for her cousin, he did not know what to think, as Arthur accused him unreservedly. It did not seem possible that any man of birth, breeding and social position could be so contemptible as to perpetrate an act of this character. Yet some one had done it, and who had a greater incentive than Charlie Merstone?

Poor Mrs. Merrick was inconsolable as the days dragged by. She clung to Patsy with pitiful entreaties not to be left alone; so Miss Doyle brought her to her own apartments, where the bereft woman was shown every consideration. Vain and selfish though Mrs. Merrick might be, she was passionately devoted to her only child, and her fears for the life and safety of Louise were naturally greatly exaggerated.

The group of anxious relatives and friends canvassed the subject morning, noon and night, and the longer the mystery remained unsolved the more uneasy they all became.

"This, ma'am," said Uncle John, sternly, as he sat one evening facing Mrs. Merrick, "is the final result of your foolish ambition to get our girls into society."

"I can't see it that way, John," wailed the poor woman. "I've never heard of such a thing happening in society before, have you?"

"I don't keep posted," he growled. "But everything was moving smoothly with us before this confounded social stunt began, as you must admit."

"I can't understand why the papers are not full of it," sighed Mrs. Merrick, musingly. "Louise is so prominent now in the best circles."

"Of course," said the Major, drily; "she's so prominent, ma'am, that no one can discover her at all! And it's lucky for us the newspapers know nothing of the calamity. They'd twist the thing into so many shapes that not one of us would ever again dare to look a friend in the eye."

"I'm sure my darling has been murdered!" declared Mrs. Merrick, weeping miserably. She made the statement on an average of once to every five minutes. "Or, if she hasn't been killed yet, she's sure to be soon. Can't something be done?" That last appeal was hard to answer. They had done everything that could be thought of. And here it was Tuesday. Louise had been missing for five days.