

CHAPTER XIX

POLITIC REPENTANCE

Perhaps no one--not even Mrs. Merrick--was so unhappy in consequence of the lamentable crime that had been committed as Diana Von Taer.

Immediately after her interview with Beth her mood changed, and she would have given worlds to be free from complicity in the abduction.

Bitterly, indeed, she reproached herself for her enmity toward the unsuspecting girl, an innocent victim of Diana's own vain desires and Charles Mershone's heartless wiles. Repenting her folly and reasoning out the thing when it was too late, Diana saw clearly that she had gained no possible advantage, but had thoughtlessly conspired to ruin the reputation of an honest, ingenuous girl.

Not long ago she had said that her life was dull, a stupid round of social functions that bored her dreadfully. She had hoped by adopting John Merrick's nieces as her protégées and introducing them to society to find a novel and pleasurable excitement that would serve to take her out of her unfortunate ennui--a condition to which she had practically been born.

But Diana had never bargained for such excitement as this; she had never thought to win self abhorrence by acts of petty malice and callous cruelties. Yet so intrenched was she in the conservatism of her class

that she could not at once bring herself to the point of exposing her own guilt that she might make amends for what had been done. She told herself she would rather die than permit Louise to suffer through her connivance with her reckless, unprincipled cousin. She realized perfectly that she ought to fly, without a moment's delay, to the poor girl's assistance. Yet fear of exposure, of ridicule, of loss of caste, held her a helpless prisoner in her own home, where she paced the floor and moaned and wrung her hands until she was on the verge of nervous prostration. If at any time she seemed to acquire sufficient courage to go to Louise, a glance at the detective watching the house unnerved her and prevented her from carrying out her good intentions.

You must not believe that Diana was really bad; her lifelong training along set lines and practical seclusion from the everyday world were largely responsible for her evil impulses. Mischief is sure to crop up, in one form or another, among the idle and ambitionless. More daring wickedness is said to be accomplished by the wealthy and aimless creatures of our false society than by the poorer and uneducated classes, wherein criminals are supposed to thrive. These sins are often unpublished, although not always undiscovered, but they are no more venial because they are suppressed by wealth and power.

Diana Von Taer was a girl who, rightly led, might have been capable of developing a noble womanhood; yet the conditions of her limited environment had induced her to countenance a most dastardly and despicable act. It speaks well for the innate goodness of this girl that

she at last actually rebelled and resolved to undo, insofar as she was able, the wrong that had been accomplished.

For four days she suffered tortures of remorse. On the morning of the fifth day she firmly decided to act. Regardless of who might be watching, or of any unpleasant consequences to herself, she quietly left the house, unattended, and started directly for the East Orange mansion.