

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

Madame Cerise, well knowing she had accelerated the march of events to a two-step, calmly sat herself down in the little housekeeper's room off the lower hall and, leaving Louise to her moody solitude upstairs, awaited the inevitable developments.

Outside the weather was cold and blustering. The wind whirled its burden of snowflakes in every direction with blinding, bewildering impartiality. It was a bad day to be out, thought the old Frenchwoman; but a snowstorm was not likely to deter an anxious lover. She calculated the time it would take Monsieur Weldon to arrive at the mansion: if he was prompt and energetic he could cover the distance in an hour and a half by train or three hours by motor car. But he must prepare for the journey, and that would consume some time; perhaps she need not expect him within two hours at the earliest.

She read, to pass away the time, selecting a book from a shelf of well-worn French novels. Somehow she did not care to face her tearful prisoner again until she could restore the unhappy girl to the arms of her true lover. There was still romance in the soul of Madame Cerise, however withered her cheeks might be. She was very glad that at last she had summoned courage to act according to the dictates of her heart.

Eh? What is this? A rumble of wheels over the frozen snow caused her to glance at the clock above the mantel. Not by any possibility could Monsieur Weldon arrive so soon. Who, then, could it be?

She sat motionless while the doorbell rang, and rang again. Nothing must interfere with the pretty denouement she had so fondly anticipated when Louise's faithful knight came to her.

But the one who had just now alighted was persistent. The vehicle had been sent away--she heard the sound of receding wheels--and the new arrival wanted to get in. The bell jerked and jangled unceasingly for a time and then came a crash against the door, as if a stalwart shoulder was endeavoring to break it down.

Madame Cerise laid down her book, placed her pince-nez in the case, and slowly proceeded down the hall. The door shook with another powerful impact, a voice cried out demanding admittance.

"Who is it, then?" she called shrilly.

"Open the door, confound you!" was the irritated reply.

The woman reflected. This was surely young Mershone's voice. And she had no excuse to deny him admittance. Quietly she unbolted the door and allowed it to open an inch while she peered at the man outside.

"Oh! it is Monsieur Mershone."

"Of course it is," he roared, forcing the door open and stalking in.

"Who in thunder did you think it was?"

"A thousand pardons, m'sieur," said Cerise. "I must be cautious; it is your own command. That you may be protected I deny admittance to all."

"That's all right," said Mershone gruffly, while he stamped his feet upon the rug and shook the snow from his clothing. "Haven't you any fire in this beastly old refrigerator? I'm nearly frozen. Where's Miss Merrick?"

"She is occupying Ma'm'selle Diana's room, in the west wing. Will monsieur please to come this way?"

She led him to her own little room, and so engrossed were they that neither remembered he had failed to rebolt the front door.

A good fire burned in the grate of Cerise's cosy den and Mershone threw off his overcoat and warmed his hands as he showered questions upon the old caretaker.

"How is the girl behaving? Tears and hysterics?"

"At times, m'sieur."

"Takes it hard, eh?"

"She is very unhappy."

"Ever mention a man named Weldon?"

"Often."

"Humph!" He did not like this report. "Has anyone been here to disturb you, or to make enquiries?"

"No one, m'sieur."

"We're safe enough, I guess. It was a mighty neat job, Cerise, taken altogether, although the fools have been watching me night and day. That's the reason I did not come sooner."

She made no comment. Mershone threw himself into a chair and stared thoughtfully at the fire.

"Has Louise--Miss Merrick, you know--mentioned my name at all?" "At times."

"In what way?"

"With loathing and contempt."

He scowled at her savagely.

"Do you think she suspects that I carried her away?"

"She seems to know it absolutely."

He stared at the fire again.

"I've got a queer job on my hands, Cerise, and I rely on you to help me," said he presently, assuming a more conciliating manner. "Perhaps I'm in a box, or a hole, or whatever else you like to call it, but it's too late to back down now--I must push ahead and win. You see the case is this: I love the girl and had her brought here to keep her from another man. By hook or crook I'm going to make her my wife. She won't take kindly to that at first, perhaps, but I'll make her happy in the end. In one way this delay has been a good thing. It must have worn her out and broken her spirits quite a bit; eh?"

"She seems very miserable," conceded the woman.

"Do you find her hard to manage? Does she show much temper? In other words, do you suppose she'll put up a fight?"

Madame Cerise regarded him wonderingly.

"She is a good girl," was her reply. "She loves with much devotion the man from whom you have stolen her. I am quite positive she will never consent to become your wife."

"Oh, you are? Well, I intend she shall marry me, and that settles it. She's unnerved and miserable now, and I mean to grind her down till she hasn't strength to resist me. That sounds hard. I know; but it's the only way to accomplish my purpose. After she's my wife I'll be very kind to her, poor thing, and teach her to love me. A man can do anything with a woman if he sets about it the right way. I'm not taking this stand because I'm cruel, Cerise, but because I'm desperate. All's fair in love and war, you know, and this is a bit of both."

He was pacing the floor by this time, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, an anxious look upon his face that belied his bombastic words.

The Frenchwoman's expression was impassive. Her scorn for the wretch before her was tempered with the knowledge that his cowardly plan was doomed to defeat. It was she who had checkmated him, and she was glad. Now and again her eyes sought the clock, while she silently calculated the time to elapse before Arthur Weldon arrived. There would be a pretty scene then, Cerise would have much enjoyment in witnessing the encounter.

"Now, then, take me to Louise," commanded Mershone, suddenly.

She shrank back in dismay.

"Oh, not yet, m'sieur!"

"Why not?"

"The young lady is asleep. She will not waken for an hour--perhaps two."

"I can't wait. We'll waken her now, and give her an idea of the change of program."

"But no, m'sieur! It is outrageous. The poor thing has but now sobbed herself to sleep, after many bitter hours. Can you not wait a brief hour, having waited five days?"

"No. Take me to her at once." As he came toward her the woman drew away.

"I cannot," she said firmly.

"See here, Cerise, I intend to be obeyed. I won't endure any nonsense at this stage of the game, believe me," he announced fiercely. "In order to win, there's just one way to manage this affair, and I insist upon your following my instructions. Take me to Louise!"

"I will not!" she returned, the bead-like eyes glittering as they met his angry gaze.

"Then I'll go alone. Give me the key."

She did not move, nor did she answer him. At her waist hung a small bunch of household keys and this he seized with a sudden movement and jerked loose from its cord.

"You miserable hag!" he muttered, inflamed with anger at her opposition.

"If you propose to defend this girl and defy me, you'll find I'm able to crush you as I will her. While I'm gone I expect you to come to your senses, and decide to obey me."

With these words he advanced to the door of the little room and opened it. Just outside stood Fogerty, smiling genially.

"Glad to meet you again, Mr. Mershone," he said. "May I come in? Thank you."

While Mershone stood bewildered by this unexpected apparition the detective entered the room, closed the door carefully, and putting his back to it bowed politely to Madame Cerise.

"Pardon this seeming intrusion, ma'am," said he. "I'm here on a little



matter of business, having a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Charles Connoldy Mershone."