

CHAPTER XXIV

A MATTER OF COURSE

All explanations were barred until the girl had been tenderly taken to her own home and under the loving care of her mother and cousins had recovered to an extent from the terrible experiences she had undergone. Then by degrees she told them her story, and how, hearing the voice of her persecutor Mershone in the hall below she had become frantic with fear and resolved to trust herself to the mercies of the storm rather than submit to an interview with him. Before this she had decided that she could climb down the trellis, and that part of her flight she accomplished easily. Then she ran toward the rear of the premises to avoid being seen and managed to find the lane, and later the cross-roads. It was very cold, but her excitement and the fear of pursuit kept her warm until suddenly her strength failed her and she sank down in the snow without power to move. At this juncture the farmer and his wife drove by, having been on a trip to the town. The man sprang out and lifted her in, and the woman tenderly wrapped her in the robes and blankets and pillowed her head upon her motherly bosom. By the time they reached the farm-house she was quite warm again, but so exhausted that with a brief explanation that she was lost, but somebody would be sure to find her before long, she fell upon the couch and almost immediately lost consciousness.

So Arthur found her, and one look into his eyes assured her that all her troubles were over.

They did not prosecute Charlie Mershone, after all. Fogerty pleaded for him earnestly, and Uncle John pointed out that to arrest the young man would mean to give the whole affair to the newspapers, which until now had not gleaned the slightest inkling of what had happened. Publicity was to be avoided if possible, as it would set loose a thousand malicious tongues and benefit nobody. The only thing to be gained by prosecuting Mershone was revenge, and all were willing to forego that doubtful satisfaction.

However, Uncle John had an interview with the young man in the office of the prosecuting attorney, at which Mershone was given permission to leave town quietly and pursue his fortunes in other fields. If ever he returned, or in any way molested any of the Merricks or his cousin Diana, he was assured that he would be immediately arrested and prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Mershone accepted the conditions and became an exile, passing at once out of the lives of those he had so deeply wronged.

The joyful reunion of the lovers led to an early date being set for the wedding. They met all protests by pleading their fears of another heartrending separation, and no one ventured to oppose their desire.

Mrs. Merrick quickly recovered her accustomed spirits during the excitement of those anxious weeks preceding the wedding. Cards were issued to "the very best people in town;" the trousseau involved anxiety by day and restless dreams by night--all eminently enjoyable; there were entertainments to be attended and congratulations to be received from every side.

Society, suspecting nothing of the tragedy so lately enacted in these young lives, was especially gracious to the betrothed. Louise was the recipient of innumerable merry "showers" from her girl associates, and her cousins, Patsy and Beth, followed in line with "glass showers" and "china showers" until the prospective bride was stocked with enough wares to establish a "house-furnishing emporium," as Uncle John proudly declared.

Mr. Merrick, by this time quite reconciled and palpably pleased at the approaching marriage of his eldest niece, was not to be outdone in "social stunts" that might add to her happiness. He gave theatre parties and banquets without number, and gave them with the marked success that invariably attended his efforts.

The evening before the wedding Uncle John and the Major claimed Arthur for their own, and after an hour's conference between the three that left the young fellow more happy and grateful than ever before, he was entertained at his last "bachelor dinner," where he made a remarkable speech and was lustily cheered.

Of course Beth and Patsy were the bridesmaids, and their cousin Kenneth Forbes came all the way from Elmhurst to be Arthur's best man. No one ever knew what it cost Uncle John for the wonderful decorations at the church and home, for the music, the banquet and all the other details which he himself eagerly arranged on a magnificent scale and claimed was a part of his "wedding present."

When it was all over, and the young people had driven away to begin the journey of life together, the little man put a loving arm around Beth and Patsy and said, between smiles and tears:

"Well, my dears, I've lost one niece, and that's a fact; but I've still two left. How long will they remain with me, I wonder?"

"Dear me, Uncle John," said practical Patsy; "your necktie's untied and dangling; like a shoestring! I hope it wasn't that way at the wedding."

"It was, though," declared the Major, chuckling. "If all three of ye get married, my dears, poor Uncle John will come to look like a scarecrow --and all that in the face of swell society!"

"Aren't we about through with swell society now?" asked Mr. Merrick, anxiously. "Aren't we about done with it? It caused all our troubles, you know."

"Society," announced Beth, complacently, "is an excellent thing in the abstract. It has its black sheep, of course; but I think no more than any other established class of humanity."

"Dear me!" cried Uncle John; "you once denounced society."

"That," said she, "was before I knew anything at all about it."