

## CHAPTER XX

### A GIRLISH NOTION

Colby came around next morning just as Mr. Merrick was entering the breakfast room, and the little man took the lawyer in to have a cup of coffee. The young attorney still maintained his jaunty air, although red-eyed from his night's vigil, and when he saw the Stanton girls and their Aunt Jane having breakfast by an open window he eagerly begged permission to join them, somewhat to Uncle John's amusement.

"Well?" demanded Maud, reading Colby's face with her clear eyes.

"I made a night of it, as I promised," said he. "This morning I know so much about pearls that I'm tempted to go into the business."

"As Jack Andrews did?" inquired Flo.

"Not exactly," he answered with a smile. "But it's an interesting subject--so interesting that I only abandoned my reading when I found I was burning my electric lamp by daylight. Listen: A pearl is nothing more or less than nacre, a fluid secretion of a certain variety of oyster--not the eatable kind. A grain of sand gets between the folds of the oyster and its shell and irritates the beast. In self-defense the oyster covers the sand with a fluid which hardens and forms a pearl."

"I've always known that," said Flo, with a toss of her head.

"Yes; but I want you all to bear it in mind, for it will explain a discovery I have made. Before I get to that, however, I want to say that at one time the island of Ceylon supplied the world with its most famous pearls. The early Egyptians discovered them there, as well as on the Persian and Indian coasts. The pearl which Cleopatra is said to have dissolved in wine and swallowed was worth about four hundred thousand dollars in our money; but of course pearls were scarce in her day. A single pearl was cut in two and used for earrings for the statue of Venus in the Pantheon at Rome, and the sum paid for it was equal to about a quarter of a million dollars. Sir Thomas Gresham, in the days of Queen Elizabeth, had a pearl valued at about seventy-five thousand dollars which he treated in the same manner Cleopatra did, dissolving it in wine and boasting he had given the most expensive dinner ever known."

"All of which--" began Maud, impatiently.

"All of which, Miss Stanton, goes to show that pearls have been of great price since the beginning of history. Nowadays we get just as valuable pearls from the South Seas, and even from Panama, St. Margarita and the Caromandel Coast, as ever came from Ceylon. But only those of rare size, shape or color are now valued at high prices. For instance, a string of matched pearls such as that owned by Princess Lemoine is estimated as worth only eighty thousand dollars, because it could be quite easily

duplicated. The collection of Countess Ahmberg was noted for its variety of shapes and colors more than for its large or costly pearls; and that leads to my great discovery."

"Thank heaven," said Flo, with a sigh.

"I have discovered that our famous expert, Le Drieux, is an arrant humbug."

"We had suspected that," remarked Maud.

"Now we know it," declared Colby. "Pearls, I have learned, change their color, their degree of luster, even their weight, according to atmospheric conditions and location. A ten-penny-weight pearl in Vienna might weigh eight or nine pennyweights here in California, or it is more likely to weigh twelve. The things absorb certain moistures and chemicals from the air and sun, and shed those absorptions when kept in darkness or from the fresh air. Pearls die, so to speak; but are often restored to life by immersions in sea-water, their native element. As for color: the pink and blue pearls often grow white, at times, especially if kept long in darkness, but sun-baths restore their former tints. In the same way a white pearl, if placed near the fumes of ammonia, changes to a pinkish hue, while certain combinations of chemicals render them black, or 'smoked.' A clever man could steal a pink pearl, bleach it white, and sell it to its former owner without its being recognized. Therefore, when our expert, Le Drieux, attempts to show that the pearls found in Jones'

possession are identical with those stolen from the Austrian lady, he fails to allow for climatic or other changes and cannot be accurate enough to convince anyone who knows the versatile characteristics of these gems."

"Ah, but does the judge know that, Mr. Colby?" asked Maud.

"I shall post him. After that, the conviction of the prisoner will be impossible."

"Do you think the examination will be held to-day?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"I cannot tell that. It will depend upon the mood of Judge Wilton. If he feels grouchy or disagreeable, he is liable to postpone the case. If he is in good spirits and wants to clear his docket he may begin the examination at ten o'clock, to-day, which is the hour set for it."

"Is your evidence ready, Mr. Colby?"

"Such as I can command, Miss Stanton," he replied. "Last evening I wired New York for information as to the exact amount of stock Jones owns in the Continental, and I got a curious reply. The stock is valued at nineteen hundred thousand dollars, but no one believes that Jones owns it personally. It is generally thought that for politic reasons the young man was made the holder of stock for several different parties, who still own it, although it is in Jones' name. The control of stock without

ownership is not unusual. It gives the real owners an opportunity to hide behind their catspaw, who simply obeys their instructions."

"I do not believe that Jones is connected with anyone in that manner," said Mr. Merrick.

"Nor do I," asserted Aunt Jane. "His interference with Goldstein's plans proves he is under no obligations to others, for he has acted arbitrarily, in accordance with his personal desires and against the financial interests of the concern."

"Why didn't you ask him about this, instead of wiring to New York?" demanded Maud.

"He might not give us exact information, under the circumstances," said Colby.

The girl frowned.

"Jones is not an ordinary client," continued the lawyer, coolly. "He won't tell me anything about himself, or give me what is known as 'inside information.' On the contrary, he contents himself with saying he is innocent and I must prove it. I'm going to save the young man, but I'm not looking to him for much assistance."

Maud still frowned. Presently she said:

"I want to see Mr. Jones. Can you arrange an interview for me, sir?"

"Of course. You'd better go into town with me this morning. If the examination is held, you will see Jones then. If it's postponed, you may visit him in the jail."

Maud reflected a moment.

"Very well," said she, "I'll go with you." Then, turning to her aunt, she continued: "You must make my excuses to Mr. Goldstein, Aunt Jane."

Mrs. Montrose eyed her niece critically.

"Who will accompany you, Maud?" she asked.

"Why, I'll go," said Patsy Doyle; and so it was settled, Uncle John agreeing to escort the young ladies and see them safely home again.