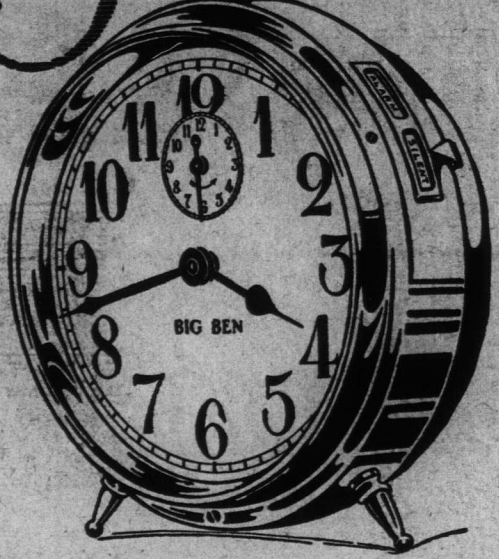


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A Great Intrigue,

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XXIII.

But having gained the shrubbery, she waited until he moved away, then followed him at a safe distance and screened by the hedges of rhododendrons.

His manner of answering her question respecting his companion had made her suspicious, and to be suspicious and not follow out her suspicions was an impossibility to Marie Verner; so she thought that she would just see the friend of her troublesome lover.

If she had found that it was a woman she would have been only too delighted, for she could have made it an excuse for breaking with Sinclair, but the sight of the old man with his ashen face and white hair amazed her.

There must be some reason besides a desire for a companion for Sinclair bringing so old a man down with him, and Marie, resolving that she would find out what the reason was, crept up close behind him.

"Well," said Sinclair, coming up to him, "are you ready? I've seen the person I came to see, and we'd better be getting back."

The old man raised himself slowly, and the two, to Marie's mortification, were stealing away, when suddenly a foot was heard on the terrace steps, and a voice said:

"I will smoke my cigar on the lawn, I think," and the marquis came down the stone steps in his slow, noiseless manner.

Sinclair drew the old man roughly

into the shadow of the shrubs so roughly that old Pollard looked up dully to see the cause, and saw the tall, thin figure of the marquis standing in the light that poured from the windows.

In a moment the old man's eyes lit up, as if a spark from memory's fires had flashed into them, and his lips opened and shut mechanically.

"It's the Marquis of Merle," he said, in a hollow whisper.

"Oh, is it?" said Sinclair, moodily. "Whoever it is, he'll see us, and there will be a pretty kettle of fish. Confound it, I wish I'd left you at home in Eden Row."

"The Marquis of Merle, of Darracourt," said the old man, nodding with a senile satisfaction. "Yes, yes," he's no more Marquis of Merle than I am!" and he stretched his mouth in a silent grin that was appalling.

"No more—" exclaimed Mr. Sinclair, while Marie clutched the seat spasmodically in her astonishment.

The old man raised his forefinger impressively. "I knew the father of that man there, who calls himself the Marquis of Merle," he said, his hollow voice vibrating with a vague pride. "He—the father—was called John Delamere Merle. He was a gay man, a spend-thrift, and a loose liver! I remember when the lights in this place," and he pointed his finger at the Court, "never went out for a week. They danced and they drank, and they played cards by candlelight for seven days together. He was a wild man."

"He was handsome, and the people loved him, though; there wasn't a girl within a score of miles but had a good word for him. There was one girl, the daughter of a farmer; her name was Richards—a fair girl, with dark eyes and yellow hair. I remember her. He went away with her when he'd lost, and drank, and squan-

dered all his money, and Darracourt saw him and her no more for years. Then he came back. There was a certain young lady, a rich heiress, his friends had found for him. He was to marry her, and restore the Court and all the estate with her money. He married her, and this man standing there smoking—is their son."

Mr. Sinclair uttered a low cry of disgust. "Is that all? What is there in all that to make a fuss about?" he exclaimed in an indignant whisper.

"The last marquis married the heiress, and there stands their son; and he is the present earl, of course! I haven't gone in for studying the aristocracy, as you have done, but I know enough to know that. You said he wasn't the right marquis, to begin with, and now you say he is!"

"No, no," said the old man, slowly and impressively. "I said he was their son! But he is not the rightful marquis!"

"Not? Why not?"

"Listen. The last marquis married the heiress, here in the village church, and all rejoiced; and the son—that man there—was born, and all rejoiced still more. But all the same he is not the Marquis of Merle!"

"Not? Why not?"

The old man stared vacantly before him. Sinclair held his breath. Marie clutched the seat as if her fingers were of steel, and both waited. Slowly his memory came back to its throne in the old man's brain.

"Why not?" he repeated. "Because the last marquis married Bessie Richards, and a son was born."

Mr. Sinclair almost jumped into the air and his teeth clicked. "Can you prove—how do you know"—he gasped.

Mr. Pollard smiled, a ghastly smile of superiority.

"How do I know? Because I know all their secrets. They had a son, a fine boy with yellow hair and dark eyes, like his mother. They called him Harry—Harry Herne. She brought him back here and was content to live and die here, letting it be thought that she was not married and her son illegitimate. But I know better. They were married at the church of St. Angelo in Paris on August the twenty-fourth."

Sinclair sprang up trembling. Even to his narrow, shallow mind it was evident that the knowledge, if properly worked, would be worth a fortune to him.

"How—how do you know?" he gasped.

"Because I saw the ceremony!" replied the old man, gradually sinking back into his usual state of coma. "I saw the ceremony, and I have the copy of the register in the left hand drawer of my bureau. That man there, who calls himself the Marquis of Merle, is a nameless nothing, and the rightful marquis is Harry Herne!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

Mr. Sinclair sat staring stupidly at the old man, too amazed to utter a word.

As for Marie Verner, the revelation fell upon her like a thunderbolt. She clutched the edge of the seat as she crouched in her hiding place, and literally panted for breath.

The discovery was a stupendous one, and meant for her, if she used it properly, a magnificent future, a fortune, a position which she had never dreamed of.

For some minutes, ages it seemed to her, the two men sat in silence; then Mr. Sinclair recovered a little from his amazement, and, with a gasp, exclaimed in a meager whisper:

"Then—then you mean to say that this Harry Herne, who has been looked upon as the illegitimate son of the last marquis, is the real marquis, and that that gentleman standing there is the illegitimate son, and no more a marquis than I am?"

Mr. Pollard inclined his white head with a solemn gravity befitting the occasion.

"That is so," he assented.

"Then—then—phew! you have taken my breath away—then why on earth didn't this Harry Herne get up and say so? Why has he remained a gamekeeper, or whatever he is, and let this man walk about with his title and estates?"

Mr. Pollard shook his head. "He did not know of it. I conclude that must be the reason. His mother sacrificed her good name, concealed her marriage from him and the



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world, permitted herself to be regarded as the last marquis' mistress and her son illegitimate, so that her lover, her husband, might retrieve the family fortunes by marrying a rich heiress.

"It—it's incredible!" gasped Sinclair, and Marie Verner almost echoed the words.

"Nothing is stranger than truth," said Mr. Pollard, dully. "Some women are capable of such self-sacrifice. There have been many cases on record; Bessie Richards' is one of them, but she sacrificed herself in vain."

"How's that?" demanded Mr. Sinclair.

Mr. Pollard put his hand to his brow. "Nothing could save a Merle," he said. "They have got the gambler's taint in their blood. The last marquis did with his rich wife's money what he had done with his own. Spent, gambled, flung it away! He had to sell the Court."

"The Court! This place?" exclaimed Sinclair, hurriedly.

Marie Verner held her breath. She knew what was coming, but wanted to hear every word of it.

"Yes, this place. He sold it to Mr. Darracourt, who had held some small property here, whose name was connected with the place, and he was anxious to get the principal estate. He bought it."

"But—but—" queried Sinclair "how could this Lord Merle sell it? Wasn't it entailed?"

"Yes; he cut off the entail with the consent of that man there, his son."

"But he wasn't his son—at least, not his heir, and—therefore the marquis had no right to sell it!"

"No," said Mr. Pollard, and a ghastly smile lit up his cadaverous face. "No, he ought to have got the permission of Harry Herne, the real heir."

"But he didn't!" said Sinclair, "and therefore the Court, and all the property, the land and the farms, don't belong to this Miss Darracourt at all, but to Harry Herne!"

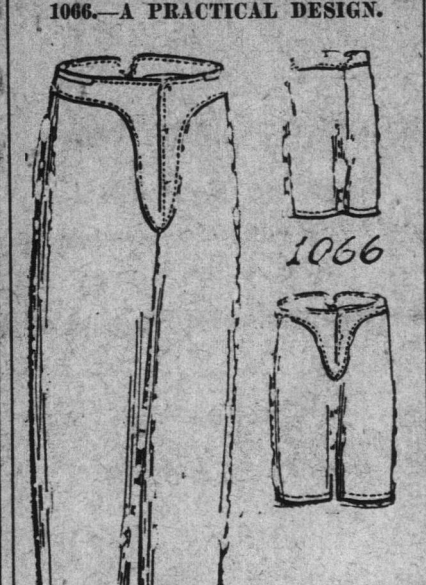
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