



A Great Intrigue,

**—OR, THE—
Mistress of Darracourt.**

CHAPTER XIII.

Marie Verner was still on the terrace, and seemed to be searching for something with her glass; then it appeared as if she found them, for the glass was still for a second; the next, as if moved by clockwork, so it seemed at that distance, she lowered her glass and drew back behind a pedestal.

Lucille was perplexed and vaguely troubled.

"Well?" he said, gently. "I do not know what to say, it seems—absurd. Why, suddenly and hopefully, she might as well say that we were watching her!"

"There was so much distress in her tone, such anxiety, born of sudden doubt, that he reproached himself for having spoken of the matter."

"So she might," he assented, smiling up at her, as he took the field glass. "Shall we ride on, miss, or are you tired?"

"But why did she hide behind the pedestal?" said Lucille, woman-like, ignoring the question.

"Did she do that?" he said, mechanically. "She did the same the other morning!"

He was sorry that he had said it a moment afterward, but it was too late.

Lucille pulled up her horse and looked at him, her beautiful face troubled and anxious, her dark brows drawn together.

"What does it mean?" she demanded, her lips tremulous. "What is it you think, and fear—why should she watch me—if she was watching me? Oh, I seem to be living in an atmosphere of mystery! It makes me unhappy! I, who was so happy—"

her voice faltered. "Is there no one true and to be trusted?" He looked up at her swiftly, with a fervent glance, but averted his eyes as her restless gaze fell on his face. "Why should there be any mystery and concealment? You—"

she said, addressing him suddenly, almost angrily—"you are keeping things from me! Why did Lady Farnley implore me to send you away?"

He pulled up his horse, and sat for a moment perfectly motionless, his eyes downcast, his lips set. She saw that she might as well question a statue.

"I don't believe Miss Verner was watching us," she said, pettishly, vehemently.

"Miss Darracourt!"

"Well!" said Lucille, half turning her head.

"You said just now that Lady Farnley had advised you to send me away?"

"Well!" repeated Lucille, haughtily.

He was silent a second, as if he were weighing his words; then he said:

"Perhaps Lady Farnley was right, Miss Darracourt, and I had better go."

"Oh, if you wish to go—"

"Wish!" He repeated the word, with a smile, sad and bitter. "No, Miss Darracourt, I do not wish to go! If you know how dear every inch of this ground is to me—"

He stopped abruptly. "But Lady Farnley knows best! I will go!"

Lucille looked away from him. The words seemed to ring in her ears in a senseless, meaningless fashion. "Very well!" she said, coldly, though the color rose to her face.

"When do you wish to go?"

"I will go at once," he answered, after a pause, and speaking as if the words cost him an effort. "I ought not to have stayed; and, yet—"

He stopped suddenly, and drawing back, rode behind her.

Meanwhile, unobserved by either of them, a cloud had swept from the hills, and was gathering threateningly above their heads.

By the time they had reached the valley the river was no longer running laughingly in the sun, but seemingly creeping darkly and sullenly. The horses, always keen observers of the weather, put up their ears and whispered to each other, and presently Harry Herne woke to the fact that a storm was approaching.

"We are going to have rain, miss," he said, gently; "I think we ought to get home at once."

Of course, Lucille contradicted him.

"It will only be a few drops."

"It will be a particularly heavy storm," he said, gravely. "We are some distance from shelter. I can't let you get wet through, Miss Darracourt!"

"If we are going to have a storm, I don't see how you can prevent it, clever as you are!" she retorted, with feminine aggravation.

"There it is!" he exclaimed, resignedly, as the heavens seemed to open and a deluge came.

It was, as he had prognosticated, a particularly heavy storm. The rain fell as if Jupiter Pluvius was pouring it out of a bucket; "the thunder roared, the lightning glared," hard and fierce; as hard as it did in the Bay of Biscay. The horses, frightened and restive, shook their heads and covered, and Lucille, all her pettishness vanquished by the anger of the heavens, turned pale.

Harry Herne looked round eagerly. They were on one of the byroads, bordered by broad stretching fields; there was no shelter nearer than a clump of trees in the middle of a meadow, and he was afraid of it in consequence of the lightning.

But he must not let her get wet! Seizing the bridle, he put the horses to a canter and reached the trees, the rain still coming down in torrents.

"Get down, miss," he said, respectfully enough, but in a tone which was very nearly one of command.

"I can't," said Lucille, meekly enough now.

He slung the bridle of his horse over a bough and went to her.

"Put your hands on my shoulders," he said.

She did so, and he lifted her to the ground as easily as he had lifted her into the saddle.

Then he unfastened her saddle, and turned it upside down against the trunk of the tree, hitched up her horse, and snatched off his coat.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Lucille, who had been watching him absently as she covered against the great elm.

"I am going to put it round you, miss!" he said.

"You will do no such thing!" she said.

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responded, haughtily. "You will catch your death."

He advanced towards her, and with a calm air of authority put the coat round her and tied it by the arms.

Lucille immediately put up her hands to undo it.

"Don't do that," he said, gravely. "It will rain for a quarter of an hour yet, and your habit is a thin one—I have felt it."

"It is thicker than your shirt sleeves!" replied Lucille. "You will be wet through, and catch your death of cold."

"I have been rained and snowed upon, man and boy, since I can remember, and I never had a cold in my life," he said, decisively. "Don't thwart me, Miss Darracourt; just this once."

"It seems to me that you like having your own way," she said, as coldly as she could. "You are very determined, and—obstinate, Harry."

"I am determined you shan't get wet through, if I can help it," he said, in a low voice, "while you are in my charge, miss."

"I give you a great deal of trouble," said Lucille. "I am not surprised that you should be anxious to leave me."

She uttered this little bit of spite in the most natural and careless manner, and glanced at him to see its effect.

He winced, and turned his head aside, but bore it like a man, in silence, standing with the rain dripping from his folded arms.

The best of women are merciless, and will inflict torture so long as the victim remains passive at the stake, and Lucille, piqued by his silence, must needs go on.

"I suppose men are restless, and cannot exist without change. Perhaps, you are desirous to go to Australia or somewhere? You don't deserve it, but if I can help you, Harry—"

He turned his face toward her. It was very pale, and there was a strange light in his eyes; his lips opened, but he closed them again without retorting; and Lucille, who appeared not to notice his effort at restraint, went on in the same careless voice:

"You had better sell the ponies for me before you go. I don't know how to drive them, and there will be no one to teach me—"

He took a step or two from her, his face working.

"And this horse, too. I don't care to keep it. But, perhaps, I had better not trouble you, as you seem anxious to go at once—"

He swung round, his hands extended to her, half in entreaty, half in command.

"Don't!" he said, and the word burst from him, indeed, like the cry of a man tortured beyond endurance.

"Don't! Every word you say cuts—like a knife! Ah, miss, how can you have the heart to torture a man so? Why, it is only the other night that I knelt at your feet and begged for permission to stay, as a man begs for his life! Do you think it costs me nothing, this resolution? Do you think—ah, you don't know! How should you? Don't let me go carrying the bitter thought that you think me changeable—and ungrateful! If you knew why I go—"

He stopped, his face working, his eyes glowing with the keenness and depth of his emotion, and Lucille looked at him, and then, half frightened, glanced away.

"I suppose you are going because I was foolish enough to tell you what Lady Farnley said," she answered, with affected indifference.

"No!" he responded. "I am going not only because Lady Farnley said I should, but because my heart says so!" He stopped again, and wiped the huge drops, not of rain only, from his tanned forehead.

"Oh, if you are unhappy," said Lucille, coldly.

He turned upon her, almost fiercely.

"Unhappy! Yes, I am unhappy! and yet, I have never known happiness until now! I seem to have been living at the bottom of a great pit, down which the sun never shone. All my life seems a great, dreary blank until now! And the very depth of my happiness makes me unhappy. Go! I should be mad to stay—mad!"

"I don't understand you in the least," she said. "If you are in any trouble, and I can help you—"

He paced to and fro, his arms clinched together like a man fighting against himself.

"You cannot help me—no one can help me!" he said, almost hoarsely.

"I have been a mad fool. I am like a man bewitched and under a spell! There come such times to men, and one such has come to me. I must cast it off, or go mad in real earnest!" He seemed to have forgotten to whom he was speaking, and to be uttering aloud thoughts over which he had brooded in solitude. "Miss Darracourt, there are times when an honest man's only course is flight—I am in such a plight now. I've fought against it for days past—I've struggled with it by night and day—I have told myself that it's my secret, and that I can keep it under lock and key; but—he paused and glanced at her, his breath coming quick and fast—"but I am afraid of myself! and so, like a wise man, I run away to hide it."

Lucille listened, her face averted, a strange warning throb at her heart responding to the deep music of his voice.

"Miss Darracourt, will you think me presumptuous if I tell you a short story?"

"It will pass the time away," she said, with a show of indifference and toleration.

"Yes," he said, slowly; "it will pass the time away, and may—amuse you. It is the story of a man with a shadow upon his life! It fell across his path even when he was a child—a shadow that set him apart and separated him from his fellow children, that must set him apart and separate him when he grew to manhood, from his fellow-men."

Lucille glanced at the grave, handsome face, then turned and leaned against the tree, so that her face would be hidden from him if he should chance to look her way.

(To be continued.)

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