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**A Great Intrigue,**  
—OR, THE—  
**Mistress of Darracourt.**

CHAPTER I.

Mr. Head was an honest lawyer and a good fellow, and he did not rest contented with performing his legal duties. To begin with, the owner of all this wealth was virtually alone in the world. She could not go and live in that huge place which had fallen to her without a companion. He advertised for a middle-aged lady, and secured that pink of perfection and propriety—Mrs. Dalton. Then he thought that Lucille would need a companion of younger years and brighter mood, and he asked Lucille if there was any among the girls at the school whom she would like to take with her in that capacity.

There was one girl, as it chanced, with whom Lucille had been more intimate than the rest. This girl, Marie Verner, was like Lucille, an orphan. She was the very opposite of Lucille, and perhaps for that reason, as opposites attract each other, Lucille and she had maintained a friendship.

"If Marie Verner will come, I will take her," said Lucille, and Marie Verner had jumped at the offer.

In a week the preparations were complete, and now Lucille sat at the window of Darracourt—her Darracourt—looking out upon the park—her park, as it lay bathed in the bright June sun.

It was strange and wonderful, and with the novelty and interest of the thing was mingled another sensation; a feeling of loneliness and isolation.

A man placed in her position might have been pardoned for feeling lonely, how much more then a young girl, with all a young girl's tender craving for love and sympathy?

They had all been glad to see her—the tenants had cheered, the servants had prostrated themselves, her nearest neighbor, the marquis, had come to welcome her; yet, as she stepped out on to the balcony, and leaning over looked along the wide-reaching

terrace, a feeling of loneliness, a yearning for something she could not put into words, smote upon her as distinctly as if the wind had suddenly chopped from south to east and chilled her.

An instant after she felt ashamed of the thought, and turning from the window went quickly across the room and rang the bell.

"I have everything I could desire," she murmured with a half laugh of vexation, "and, like the child with two many toys, I'm inclined to cry for the moon! If Marie were in my place, now, how contented and happy she would be! While I—now what is it I do want?" and she stretched out her arms and laughed again.

Susie came in response to the bell; she had been waiting on the stairs, as a matter of fact, and with all a girl's delight in the task, spread out the dresses which had been purchased in Paris, under Mrs. Dalton's guidance.

There was a plain white muslin with a black sash among them, and Lucille chose that, principally because it was the simplest. With the exception of the sash the dress was without ornament, and Lucille shook her head when Susie unlocked the brand new jewel casket, with its brand new suites of pearls and diamonds, also bought in Paris under Mrs. Dalton's directions; and Susie, although she would have liked to have decked her young mistress in all the glories of the Orient, and was a little disappointed, could not repress a little smothered cry of wonder and delight, as her eyes rested upon her handiwork. In all her life Susie had not seen anything—not even a picture in the Illustrated London News—so beautiful as her young mistress with the thick, golden-brown hair and lustrous, hazel eyes.

A great bell startled Lucille by its sudden clangor, and a moment or two afterward Marie Verner knocked at the door.

"That's the dinner bell, Lucille," she said. "Are you dressed? Oh, my dear, that muslin suits you!" and her keen eyes roved over Lucille's slim figure. "I thought I looked rather nice, but you—" and she made a little moue.

Lucille smiled. "I have got a very good little maid," she said. Susie blushed with pleasure and courtesy.

"Oh, miss," she murmured, "it's you, who are so beautiful, not the dress or me who put it on!"

"There!" exclaimed Marie Verner. "As a specimen of rustic compliment, that's unique."

They went down into the hall, where Mr. Head, in evening dress, stood waiting for them, and he gave Lucille his arm and led her into the dining room.

It was a large room, and the light from what seemed a forest of candles, for the heavy curtains had been drawn to exclude the sunset, shone upon carved oak and Venetian glass, upon the table glittering with some of the famous Darracourt plate, relieved by flowers in vases and plateaux.

Fresh from the bare dining room of the St. Malo school, Lucille felt awed, and stood motionless for a moment, looking round her; then the lawyer led her to the head of the table, the others took their places and the dinner commenced.

With grave faces and noiseless steps, the trained servants, presided over by the dignified butler, served the meal with the precision of machines. Marie Verner, upon whom the novel magnificence acted like champagne, talked and laughed with Mr. Head, and Mrs. Dalton occasionally put in a slow, grave word or two, but Lucille sat almost silent.

She was in dreamland still! Was this splendid room, these masses of gold and silver plate, these servants, really hers, Lucille Darracourt's, or would it all fade away presently, and give place to the bare schoolroom, with its dingy forms and soiled table-cloth?

The voices of the others seemed to come from a distance, and to be as impalpable as the rest, and it was not until the butler had left the room, and Mr. Head addressed her by name, that, with a slight start, she awoke to the fact that all she saw was real, and not a vision of the imagination.

"Lucille," said Marie Verner, "that is the third time Mr. Head has spoken to you! Come back from dream-

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T. 103



**FRED. V. CHESMAN,**  
AGENT, ST. JOHN'S.

land—just for a minute or two.

"I beg your pardon," said Lucille, with a faint blush. "I think I was dreaming."

Mr. Head bowed respectfully. "I hope I have not disturbed you," he said; "but Miss Verner insists that I should communicate a piece of family history."

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Marie. "Pray don't begin in that way, or we shall all go asleep at the commencement. Let me tell Miss Darracourt, and if I go astray you can correct me."

Mr. Head bowed. "You will tell it much better than I shall, Miss Verner."

"At any rate I shan't put in any 'fore-saids,' as you would probably do," she retorted. "Lucille, we were talking of the marquis. I can't talk or think of anything else! That's because I've never seen a real live marquis before."

"My dear Miss Verner," murmured Mrs. Dalton, rebukingly. "If you will permit me, I really think that such terms are scarcely fitting."

"Well, you wouldn't have me say an artificial marquis!" retorted Marie Verner. "Having never seen one, alive or dead, before, I am quite absorbed!" she went on. "And such a marquis, too! If I had met him walking in Regent street I should have known him to be a nobleman of high degree. No one but a marquis at least could have such eyes and such hands! Darracourt is beautiful and wonderful enough, but to have such a marquis as next door neighbor is too delicious!" and her lips went into a curved thin line of red.

Lucille smiled. "worsnip," she said, in her musical voice.

"Wouldn't he? But I haven't finished with him yet! There is just one noble qualification lacking in him; he is very poor—"

"For a marquis," murmured Mr. Head, fingering his wineglass.

"For a marquis, of course," assented Marie Verner. "And now for the history. You remember my telling you that Darracourt once belonged to the Merles?"

"Yes," said Lucille.

"Well, it seems that the late marquis, this one's father, was one of those gentlemen who enjoy spending money, and that, like most men gifted in that direction, he spent too much. And so he sold Darracourt to your uncle, sold it with all the plate and the furniture and all the 'fore-said.' There, Mr. Head, I've got the word in, and you ought to be satisfied. Wasn't that an awful sacrifice? Fancy having to part with this lovely place. No wonder the present marquis looks so melancholy. If Mrs. Dalton would not be shocked I could shed tears of sympathy!"

Mrs. Dalton ignored this appeal with a dignified sniff.

"I was under the impression that such properties were entailed," she said, addressing Mr. Head, "and that they could not be sold."

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"Only with the permission of the eldest son," explained the lawyer. "The late marquis had to get his son's permission before he could sell it. But as there was nothing but a sale or ruin, of course, he consented, especially as a portion of the money went to purchase the hall where the present marquis now lives."

"And is the present marquis the only son?" asked Mrs. Dalton.

Mr. Head had his wineglass to his lips at the moment, and he paused a second before replying, while a very faint line wrinkled his forehead. "The present marquis was the next in succession," he said, slowly, and with a certain gravity.

Lucille, who was listening intently, noticed the hesitation and the tone of the reply; and Marie Verner's sharp eyes glanced at the lawyer's face.

"There is something behind; tell us the whole of the story, Mr. Head." He looked toward Lucille.

"There is something behind," he said, gravely—"a dark shadow which rests upon the house of Merle. Some other time," he said, biting his lips.

"Well, as it is beyond the power of mortal man, to say nothing of three poor women, to force anything from a lawyer, I suppose we must possess our souls in patience," said Marie Verner, lightly. "But you have succeeded in throwing a still more romantic halo round the interesting marquis, Mr. Head. I'm more entirely lost than ever."

"I think we had better leave Mr. Head to the enjoyment of his wine," said Mrs. Dalton, primly, and Lucille rose and led the way into the drawing room.

Marie Verner ran to the piano and struck a chord. "You don't mind my playing?" she asked. "Music is the only possible vent for my suffocating emotions! This lovely place, this dark and melancholy marquis with a shadow over his house, the excitement and the brass band have turned my head! And you—" pointing to Lucille, as she stood like a lovely statue in the centre of the splendid room—"you can be cool and collected! It passes my comprehension!"

(To be Continued.)

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