

A Great Intrigue, OR, THE Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XVI.

Once or twice she managed to escape from the circle of courtiers who attended her every movement, and got, for a little rest and coolness, into a conservatory; and there she let her thoughts fly back like a homeward-bound dove, to the man who had told her of his love, the love he deemed so hopeless; but the marquise was near her in a minute or two; now with an ice, and again with a prayer for another—just one more—dance.

"We may as well pack up our traps and leave the field," remarked one of her most ardent admirers, a certain dashing young artillery officer, who had come home from the last war, covered with fame and glory, which he was dying to lay at her feet. "Merle is making all the running, and means to win her, and, by George! he will do it, to, whether she likes him or not. Look at him now; he scarcely left her a moment for the whole of the evening."

It was not the first time the remark had been made, and such remarks tell. One by one the men seemed to acknowledge the greater perseverance or claims of the marquise, and dropped away from her, until, when her carriage was announced, she stood alone beside her, with her cloak on his arm, her fan and bouquet in his hand.

"Good-night, dear," said Lady Farnley. "I'm awfully tired. Very rude of me to say so, ain't it? But I'm very proud and satisfied."

"You ought to be," said Lucille; "we have had a very pleasant evening."

Lady Farnley laughed.

"Quite the proper sort of speech," she said. "Thank you, my dear; but I wasn't thinking of my little dance, but of you. I feel as if you belonged to me sometimes, and triumph in your triumphs. There, go home and sleep soundly, and keep your roses. Give me another kiss."

As Lucille bent forward, the old lady whispered in her ear:

"I'm glad you have taken my advice, dear," she said.

"Your advice?" said Lucille, smiling. "What advice was that, dear Lady Farnley?"

"Go down and see if they have got the carriage windows shut, marquise," said the old lady. "Then, when he had got out of hearing, 'I am glad you have decided to send that poor boy away, dear.'"

"Send him away—what poor boy?" asked Lucille, but the color rose gradually to her face.

Lady Farnley made a little grimace.

"How uncompromising you are, my dear," she exclaimed. "Why, Harry Herne, of course. I didn't advise you to send any one else away, did I?"

"Harry Herne!" repeated Lucille, the color fading slowly from her face, her voice sounding like a stifled, meaningless echo in her ears.

"Yes, they tell me that he is making preparations for immediate departure. My maid got it from her sweetheart, one of your grooms. I am glad of it; depend upon it, you have done right. I can't tell you why," she went on hurriedly, "but you were right. I should have liked to have seen him once more before he went, but he's gone by this time, I



dare say. Never mind," and she sighed. "Poor Harry! There, here's the marquise. Well, are they closed? That's right. I want to take care of our beautiful rose. Good-night."

Lucille put her arm in the marquise's, but scarcely knew whether she was being led.

"Harry Herne gone! Gone to-night!" The words rang in her ears, the stars seemed to dance in a mist. Gone! Gone! She would never see him again! Oh, what had she done to leave him without a word, without making a sign to keep him.

"So ends a happy, a very happy evening, alas!" murmured the marquise, his glittering eyes fixed on her pale, disturbed face; but Lucille scarcely heard him, and, murmuring something unintelligible, drew back into the corner of the carriage, the word, "Gone!" ringing in her ears like a knell.

The Marquis stood looking after the carriage until the lamps had grown into stars along the road, with a strange smile on his lips. It was a smile that just matched the glitter in his eyes, and spoke of his confidence and coming victory.

CHAPTER XVII.

Lucille's heart ached, and her head felt like lead. She had been conning over the words she would murmur in Harry's ears as she hid her face against his heart. She had imagined their meeting and all that he would say a hundred times. She had intended going to him, sending for him to-morrow, or, at farthest, the next day, and now—now he might be gone!

There are two kinds of hunger in this life which assail us, I mean of the mental kind; gold hunger and love hunger. Men will risk their honor, their limbs, their lives for gold, and women will risk all these at once for love.

Lucille thought, as she crouched in the carriage that rolled smoothly along the drive, that she would give all she possessed, ten years, half of her life, to hear her lover's voice, feel his arms round her, to hold him in her own and whisper, "Harry, I love you! I cannot let you go! I care not what you say; I will be your wife!"

If he were gone, what would become of her! She knew him well enough intuitively to feel sure that if he had gone he would make no sign, send her no word. The years would roll by in dreary weariness, and all the brightness would go out of her life, and—she could not think any longer in silence. Putting her hands up to her face, she uttered a low moan of distress.

"My dear Miss Darracourt!" exclaimed the horrified Mrs. Dalton. "Do you feel ill? Are you going to faint? I will let down this window—my smelling bottle—"

Lucille put it aside with a hysterical laugh.

"It is nothing," she said. "The room was hot and—yet, put down the window; thanks!"

The carriage reached the door as she spoke, and she got out and walked quickly, feverishly up the steps, the footmen standing by to assist her.

"Oh, the house seems as hot as fire," she murmured, with an impatient sigh. "I will stay on the terrace a little while and get cool."

"Do you not think—" began Mrs. Dalton, anxiously, but Lucille stopped her quickly, almost haughtily.

"I cannot go into the house yet. Please leave me alone."

Poor Mrs. Dalton bowed her head before the stately young beauty in her ballroom magnificence.

"I may send you a shawl!" she murmured meekly.

"Thanks—stay, give me yours," said Lucille, and she took it and flung it round her. The action tore the clematis from her hair, but she disentangled it from the fringe and thrust it quickly, but carefully, within the bosom of her dress.

Then she walked quickly to the end of the terrace, away from the windows, and leaned over the balustrade, looking in the direction of the hut.

If there had been a light burning in it she could not have seen it from where she stood, but she tormented herself by thinking that she could, and by imagining the pretty room she had seen bare and desolate, and Harry—gone!

The word seemed to echo through an aching void in her heart and sink into silence, leaving her desolate. She stood for some time silent and motionless, then gradually a great craving fell upon her—a craving to go to the hut.

A swift blush mantled in her cheeks at the idea, but she began to argue against her conscience. If he had gone, there would be no harm in going to the empty cottage; it would be some comfort to her in her present state to see it, and if he had not gone—well, then he would never know that she had been near him.

She was all alone in the world. If she had had a mother she would have gone to her, and kneeling at her feet, have told her everything, and get comfort and guidance; but there was absolutely no one to whom she could go with her full and aching, yearning heart. She was "lord of herself, that heritage of woe!" and a law to herself.

The craving, the impulse, grew upon her so strongly that it could not be resisted.

Half fearfully she went down the steps, and crossing the lawn, entered the park preserves, and was gathered up in its shadows. Five minutes afterwards a thin, girlish figure, wrapped in a black cloak, darted into the woods on her track. It was that of Marie Verner.

All unconscious that she was followed, Lucille, lighted by the flecks of moonlight which came through the trees, made her way along the path to the hut, and presently she saw it standing out keen and distinct in the little clearing. There was no light in the window, and an air of desolation seemed to pervade the spot. With sinking heart she stopped short and leaned one hand against the trunk of a tree, while the other was pressed to her bosom. Yes, he had gone, and she was left with her sad heart full of love for him. She could never see him again.

Almost as the thought ran through her, she saw his stalwart form come from among the trees. He stopped for a moment and raised his head, as if he were listening, then, hearing nothing, he went toward the door of the hut. Another moment and she knew that she should lose him, for she could not enter the cottage. Scarcely knowing what she did, she took a step forward.

His quick, keen ears heard her in a moment, and he stopped short.

"Is that you, Susie?" he asked. She scarcely distinguished the words—oh, Heaven! how well she remembered them afterwards—but went towards him.

As she crossed the patch of moonlight, in which her jewels shone and flashed, he saw her and started.

"Heavens! is it a dream?" he murmured, turning his pale face towards her.

She stopped and held out her hand. Still he stood for a second as he were not sure that it was not a vision and strode towards her and caught her hand, breathing her name in a wild rapture:

"Lucille!"

"Harry!" she murmured, her glorious eyes raised to his, and burning with a maiden's first passion.

He stood, holding her hand pressed to his heart, for a moment, looking into her eyes, his breath coming thick and fast.

"Is it really you? Oh, my angel, my queen!" he murmured, his voice ringing with music. "Why, I was



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dreaming of you, dreaming of you even in the stillness, and thinking I should never see you again—never again. And you are here!"

"Then—then it is true," she said, almost inaudibly, reproachfully, "you were going?"

"Yes, yes," he said, speaking like one in a dream, his eyes fixed hungrily upon her face—"yes, I was going. I shall soon be gone. I—oh, my queen, how beautiful you look tonight! Even yet I cannot think that it is you, really you, and not some vision! See what a pass I have come to that I cannot trust my own eyesight!"

Every word was the sweetest that she had ever heard.

"Are you so glad to see me, then?" she murmured.

"Glad!"

"Why then, will you go, and never see me again?" she demanded, with all a woman's logic.

"Why? Because—" He put his hands to his brow, and then looked round him, as if he were indeed awaking. "Lucille," he said, almost fiercely; "what are you doing here—alone!—at night? Why did you come? You must not stay a moment!—half a moment!"

"Not in my own park?" she murmured.

"No! Not here!" he said, desperately. "Oh, my pure, innocent angel, that I should have to speak to you like this! But, dearest!—Ah, why did you come? It makes it all the harder for me; all the harder to tear myself away," and he hung his head, clinging still to her hand.

"If it is so hard, why go?" she whispered. "Listen, Harry," she went on piteously, for he had turned his face away, as from some temptress. "Don't be angry with me. Don't—don't—think lightly of me—"

"Lightly of you, my queen!" he broke in.

(To be Continued.)

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