

A Great Intrigue,

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XXVII.
"Wait a minute," said Mr. Sinclair, coolly, though the perspiration stood upon his brow. "Don't be offended; I'm obliged to touch on family matters. Give me the rest of the ten minutes, marquis—you won't be sorry for it afterward."
The marquis sank back into his seat and took out his watch.
"I will give you the rest of your time," he said, quietly.
"Miss De Vere, an heiress. Her money tided your father over a year or two, but then he went wrong again, and sold the Court, didn't he?"
The marquis, of course, made no reply.
"Then he died, and you became the Marquis of Merle, and then you married Miss Darracourt, and got the Court back, and no end of thousands, and it's all very jolly."
The marquis glanced at his watch, but Mr. Sinclair took no heed of the warning.
"Now, marquis, suppose I had a secret which might be worth every penny you've got, what would you give me for it?"
The marquis eyed him with genuine curiosity. Of course, the man was mad.
"It all depends upon the secret," he said.
"Just so!" assented Mr. Sinclair. "It all depends upon the secret! Now, suppose it was a secret that took not only all your money, but your title—your name itself—how then?"
The marquis smiled.
"Do you think you have got such a secret, my friend?" he said. He was beginning to feel almost amused.
"I don't think; I know I have!" said Mr. Sinclair, and his tone of confidence and exultation struck the marquis as most interesting. It proved how thoroughly mad the fellow was. But how had he got the information respecting his father's marriage? From the "Peerage," doubtless.
"Oh, you have a secret, have you?" he said. "Well, out with it, my man! Time grows short! Interesting as you are, I cannot afford to rob the asylum for more than five minutes longer."
"Oh, you can't, can't you?" said Mr. Sinclair, with a sneer. "You think I'm mad! Perhaps your lordship never heard of Bessie Richards?"
The marquis gave a little start. Then he rose and looked down at the living statue of vulgarity, with a smile that was almost indulgent and pitying.
"My friend, I'm sorry for you," he said. "If you think that you can extort money by threatening to disclose any of the late marquis's irregularities you are mistaken. My poor fellow, every man and woman knows the story of Bessie Richards!"
"Oh, they do, do they? I don't think they do," said Mr. Sinclair.
The marquis stroked his mustache. "Everybody knows that my father took a fancy to the girl and ran away with her. Ah! I see; you are a relative of hers! That's your game, my friend, is it?"
"No; I'm no relative," said Mr. Sinclair; "I never saw the person—I beg her pardon—the lady. So, you admit

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"I can prove it easily enough!" said Mr. Sinclair, rising in his excitement. "Don't you hear? Your father ran away with Bessie Richards, and—married her!"
The marquis's face never altered a line, but smiled down scornfully superior upon the red-spotted face.
"Married her!" repeated Mr. Sinclair, maddened by the calm, impassive face and silence of his foe.
"Married her! Made her the Marchioness of Merle, and the boy, Harry Herne, is the present real marquis, and you are—Heaven knows what!"
The marquis never moved a muscle; smile and sneer seemed cast in bronze.
"You are an impertinent lunatic!" he said. "Get out of my sight, or I will have you thrown into the street! You have sense enough to understand that, I suppose? Go, do you hear?" and he pointed to the door.
Mr. Sinclair dropped into his seat noisily.
"Ring the bell, mister!" he said, insolently. "Ring the bell, and call the servants. Send for the lady you've married, and I'll tell them, all I've told you, and prove it to them!"
The marquis laid his hand upon the bell, then dropped it once again.
"Come!" he said, taking a sovereign from his pocket. "I don't want a scandal and a scene, and you know it. You are trading upon that, I suppose? Here is a sovereign for you. Take it, and thank your stars I don't send you to jail, my friend. Be off!"
Sinclair took the coin and flung it through the open window.
"You think I'm mad—that I can't prove what I say!" he exclaimed, purple with rage. "You think a sovereign will buy me off, eh? I'll prove it! I'll prove that your father married Bessie Richards at the Church of St. Angelo at Paris, on August twenty fourth, 1856!"
The marquis started, and the blood rushed to his face and back again, leaving it white as marble.
"You lie!" he said.
"It's the solemn truth," said Mr. Sinclair, "and here is a copy of the register!" and he pulled the slip of discolored paper from his waistcoat pocket and waved it before the marquis's face.
There was silence for a moment or two; the great clock ticked its way through time with a mocking sound, while the two men, the one aristocrat to his finger tips, the other plebeian from head to foot, regarded each other.
Then the marquis opened his lips.
"You have played your part very cleverly, my friend," he said, with a sneer. "I beg your pardon! I see you are not mad; you are only a clever and rather daring scoundrel. Of course, that paper is a forgery."
Mr. Sinclair rose and extended the slip.
"A forgery? No, it's genuine! Take it! Oh, I am not afraid. Take it, examine it! Send for the police! Give me in charge, and then telegraph to Paris! You'll soon find whether it's a forgery or not!"
The marquis took the paper between his white finger and thumb, and examined it.
It was a copy of the certificate. It was genuine. Why he knew and felt convinced of this, he could not have said, but perhaps the man's last words had helped to convince him. He took the paper to the light, turned it over once or twice, then threw it to Sinclair.
Then he went to the window, and stood looking out for quite three minutes; at the end of that time he came back, white to the lips, but calm and cool as ice.
"Who told you this—how do you know it?" he demanded.
Mr. Sinclair was clever enough to know that nothing but truth would serve his purpose—a lie might ruin him.
"An old man—an antiquarian," he replied.
"Ah!" said the marquis, and his nostrils dilated. "Then there are two!"
"No," said Mr. Sinclair, quietly; "there's only one to deal with, marquis. The old man died three days ago; I walked until then."
The marquis stood with folded arms.
"Only you. You forget; there is the register at the church."
"Who ever opens it, or examines

it?" he said. "Thirty years ago! Besides, it can be 'got at!' There is only one!"
The marquis raised his head.
"How much do you want?" he asked, calmly, quietly, with nothing of what he felt showing, save in the dilation of his nostrils and the extreme pallor of his face.
Mr. Sinclair opened his lips.
"Five and twenty thousand pounds," he said.
The marquis emitted a hollow laugh.
"Five and twenty—it is ridiculous—madness!"
"When you have hundreds of thousands!" said Mr. Sinclair.
The marquis shook his head.
"I have nothing," he said; "almost nothing!"
"Well, the marchioness—at least, your wife has—it is all the same!"
The marquis shook his head again.
"Oh, yes it is!" repeated Mr. Sinclair. "What's five and twenty thousand to her? Why, I might have asked for half your fortune! You couldn't refuse."
"Could I not?" said the marquis, with an icy smile. "Suppose I refuse to give you anything?"
Mr. Sinclair reached for his hat.
"Then I go to the Marquis of Merle," he said. "If it's worth five and twenty thousand to you; it's worth that and more to him. I mean the Marquis of Merle—Harry Herne—mister."
A tremor ran through the marquis's frame, and a gleam of hate shone in his eyes. He was about to speak when the door opened and a vision, as it seemed to Mr. Sinclair, stood in the opening. It was Lucille.
"Dinner has been announced!" she said; then, as she saw the strange figure, she broke off. "I beg your pardon; I thought you were alone."
"Yes; it is of no consequence," said the marquis. "A man of business—"
Mr. Sinclair plucked up courage, and, rising, made a theatrical bow to Lucille.
"An old friend of your husband's, my lady," he said, with an insinuating smile.
(To be Continued.)

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