

NO ALUM



A Great Intrigue,

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XI.

"You shall try," he said, handing it back to her.

She took it, and shifted the teeth to and fro.

"Oh, I can't make any sense of it!" she said, petulantly, after a moment or two. "I don't believe there is anything in it!"

"My dear Miss Verner, really!" murmured Mrs. Dalton.

"It is very simple," said the marquis, taking the key back into his own hands. "You arrange the wards so that they make the one word—"

"Oh, stay!" said Lucille, with a smile. "Please do not tell us. Remember that you have just told us that you, and you alone, are the only person who knows the open sesame to your treasures, and that it is not wise to intrust so important a secret to three daughters of Eve, who, you know, are by nature incapable of keeping it!"

They all laughed, as in duty bound; and as Lucille turned away with a smile, the marquis put the key in the lock.

"In deference to Miss Darracourt's injunction, ladies," he said, "I shall not disclose the secret. 'See!' he added, as he turned the key and the panel slid smoothly back into its place and hid the glittering treasures, "one word does the whole business."

"And we don't know what that word is! Isn't it too provoking?" said Marie Verner, as Lucille turned to leave.

"You shall know whenever you please," said the marquis, putting the key in his pocket, and preparing to accompany them.

"Really?" said Marie Verner, looking back at him over her shoulder.

"Really and truly," he replied, as she went out, laughing in her light and careless fashion.

Lucille treated the whole matter as an amusing incident, with no serious meaning; but in the aftertime every word that was spoken came back to her with the vividness of lightning.

CHAPTER XII.

The marquis accompanied, escorted them as far as the entrance to the Court, but would not accept Lucille's invitation to go and get some tea. He was too wise to force his advantage or to make the running too quickly. He had done well that day, had got her forgiveness, and had actually enticed her within his house. He would be satisfied for the present. But before the six months were past he would have her in his grasp! And so he betook himself to the lonely Hall, leaving the ladies to talk over their visit. Marie Verner declared that she had not enjoyed herself so much in her life, and that she should never forget the plate in that mysterious closet if she lived to be a hundred.

Lucille had scarcely reached the

corridor on her way to her own rooms when Susie ran up after her.

"Oh, if you please, miss," she said, panting, "can Master Harry see you?"

"Harry Herne?" said Lucille, turning with her hand upon the balustrade, and she looked down into the hall and saw the tall, stalwart figure standing there. She saw that he was dressed with greater care than he had been when she and Lady Farnley had met him in the park, or than he had been in the morning, and that in his hand he held a riding whip, with which she cut softly at his legs in their light riding gaiters.

"Yes," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "Ask him to go into the library."

"I ought to have sent a message by Susie, your maid," he explained.

"You shall give it to me, instead," said Lucille, gently. "What is it?"

"I have tried the Empress, miss—the horse I said would do for you to ride. I tried her this morning for the third time, and she is ready whenever you like to try her, miss."

"Thank you," said Lucille. "It was very kind of you. I suppose you want me to try the horse this afternoon?"

It was evidently what he did want, for his steady gaze faltered under the slight smile in her eyes, and he stooped and picked up his whip.

"It is not too hot now," he said, "and as I have been exercising the Empress, she is particularly quiet."

"Oh, if my neck is safer this afternoon than it would be at any other

time, I suppose I had better go," said Lucille, with affected indifference.

She went up to her room and summoned Susie, and with her assistance, got into her habit. She was glad that the quadrangle was at the back of the house, and that she could reach it unscanned by Marie or Mrs. Dalton, and she went down the second staircase quite gingerly for fear of meeting either of them.

At the bottom of the steps she saw the tall, stalwart figure, standing beside the horses, and, strange to say—why, she could not have told—her courage came back to her, and she walked towards him as if she had been in the habit of riding in the Row every day, since she was fourteen.

He looked up, and a light crossed his face swiftly at sight of her, and with the bridle of his horse slung over his left arm he held her stirrup.

"But how am I to get up there?" she demanded, pointing to the stirrup.

"I shall have to have a—a chair, or something."

He shook his head and smiled.

"Put your foot in my hand, if you please," he said.

Lucille made a grimace, but standing on the step rather shyly placed her tiny foot in his palm, and before she knew how she came there, she found his other hand under her elbow and herself raised, as if she were a feather, into the saddle.

It rather took her breath away, and she was silent and downcast while he put the reins in her hand and arranged her habit.

They went a walk, side by side, and after a few moments Lucille began to feel a little less as if she were going to pitch head foremost at every movement of the gentle Empress. The color came to her cheeks, the light to her eyes, and suddenly she said:

"I don't think I am so afraid as I fancied I should be. Can we not captor, as you call it?"

"No, not yet," he replied. "It is too soon! I want you to learn without feeling a moment of fear, miss."

Lucille felt inclined to pout, but remembered fortunately that it was her servant.

"Very well," she said; "I will do as you tell me, because I am anxious to learn."

"Yes, miss," he said; "it is better so. We must all learn at times, and some of us of our inferiors, and it's always best to do as one is told."

"Especially when one doesn't want an accident," said Lucille. "I hope there will not be one this afternoon!"

His face reddened over its tan, and he glanced at her.

"Did you think the last was my fault, miss?" he asked, in what would have been a tone of reproach but for its deep respectfulness.

"No, no!" she said, quickly, ashamed of referring to the past. "I did not mean that! I—the marquis apologized this morning, and I hope you have forgiven him."

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He almost pulled his horse up, and looked at her, a glance of surprise and sadness in his face.

"Apologized!" he said, in a low voice. "Do you think he meant it? The marquis apologise to me! Beg my pardon!" He laughed a short, bitter laugh of incredulity. "Rather than do that of his own free will, he

would have cut off his right hand!

No! Would to Heaven it were so! I would have taken the peace offering; yes, I would have taken it! But the apology, the gracious words, were not meant for me, but for you! It was to gain your good will that he humbled himself in the dust before me—Harry Herne!"

He stopped abruptly, arrested by the look of anxious interest and curiosity on Lucille's face.

"Why should he feel so bitterly toward you?" she said, gravely, coldly.

"The marquis is a gentleman—"

"And I am only a servant! No," he broke off, quickly, with swift intensity, "not that. I do not mean that, for I would rather be your servant than a prince of the blood. Ah, do not let us talk of him, Miss Darracourt! It is too beautiful an evening to talk of men's quarrels and strifes! The world was made for better uses. Are you comfortable?" He bent forward and drew the reins tighter through her fingers. "That's better! See, now; we are at Observation Point," he said, pulling up his horse.

Lucille did the same, and looked around. They had reached a slight elevation above the woods, which commanded a view of the Court Park and the Court House and Hall.

She uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight.

"I call it Observation Point," he said, "because I often come here when the poachers are about. They will smoke, poor fellows, and sometimes, risky as it is, they light fires, and from this point, with a glass, I can trace all their movements. I keep my glass hidden away, so that I may not have the trouble of carrying it."

He laughed and dismounting, went to a stone, and raising it, took a field glass from the hollow.

He stood by her horse, and was adjusting the glass, a powerful one, for her, when he uttered an exclamation, and, lowering the glass, turned to her with a strange expression on his face.

Lucille looked down at him in surprise.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

He was silent a moment, a dark shadow of angry thoughtfulness and perplexity crossing his face.

"Do you remember the morning you drove the ponies?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Am I likely to forget it, seeing what happened?"

"I mean, do you remember my saying that a young lady was watching you from behind an urn?"

Lucille laughed.

"Miss Verner! That was ridiculous."

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