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A Great Intrigue.

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XXIII.

With flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, Lucille had told Lady Farnley that she meant "to be gay" and at the moment she uttered the words she was, without knowing it, at the turning point of her life.

She set about being "gay" with a feverish eagerness that alarmed Mrs. Dalton and Lady Farnley, and even made Marie Verner stare.

The London season was just over, and people were looking out for invitations to visit country houses, and Lucille determined to fill the Court.

"What is the use of having a great barrack of a place if you keep it empty all the year round?" she said to Lady Farnley. "I will have a lot of people—I mean to fill it. We shall have dinner parties and picnics, and what else is there?" she broke off stopping short in her restless pacing of the room.

It was only a few days after Lady Farnley's visit since her illness, and Lucille was still pale and looked thin and transparent, but there glittered the feverish, hectic light in her eyes which Lady Farnley had noticed, and a touch of bright red shone on her cheeks.

"There is the shooting," said Lady Farnley. "Thanks to Harry Herne, you have a fine stock of game, I'm told, dear. You could ask some men down for the shooting."

"Yes, yes," assented Lucille, her restless eyes closing for a second, as she winced at the sound of Harry Herne's name. "We'll have the hall full of guns," said Lucille, with a short mirthless laugh. "What is the use of having game if you don't shoot them?"

Invitations were sent out, and as the Court woods were known to be well preserved and filled with game, and the mistress was the richest heiress in the country, the invitations were accepted with alacrity.

"The Court will be filled from cellar to garret," said Marie, who was half alarmed by the change in Lucille.

"Then put some of them in the hay loft," said Lucille.

"And the servants," murmured Mrs. Dalton. "The present staff, though sufficient for our wants, is scarcely large enough."

"Then hire others!" retorted Lucille.

So a chef from London and a dozen extra footmen and maids were engaged, and the ball was set rolling.

Lady Farnley had undertaken the selection of the guests, and, still anxious and uneasy, she acquitted herself well.

There were a countess and her daughter—no one ever saw the earl, who was supposed to be always fishing; one of Her Majesty's ministers and his wife, a couple of professional beauties, Lord and Lady Evelyn, from the other end of the county; Lord Claude Grandy, the popular sportsman, who was supposed to be the most deadly of all the lady-killers, and who had broken more feminine hearts than even Worth could mend; the Baron Goldsmid, the great financier; two or three attaches, half a dozen of the finest specimens of the masher species, a score of young men who came for the shooting and nothing else, and many other persons who were remarkable for nothing in particular, but whom, as Lady Farnley said, it was absolutely necessary to ask.

Lastly, there was the Marquis of Merle. He was so near a neighbor that it would not have appeared necessary to ask him to take up his abode at the Court; but, strange to say, the Hall happened to require some extensive repairs at this time, and the marquis, being turned out of his own house, it was, as Marie Verner said, only common charity to offer him the shelter of the Court.

Day after day fresh guests arrived, and the party at the Court became the talk of the county. The simple villagers, who had never dreamed of such things, collected in the roads to see the gay cavalcade of riders and carriages start for shooting and picnics in the morning, and clustered round the gates to stare at the gayly-lit house, and listen to the music which came floating out at night.

The guests were asked for a fortnight, and the fortnight was drawing nearly to a close, when one evening Lucille found herself alone on the terrace. She had dressed more quietly than usual, and had got down to the drawing room before the rest. Lately it had seemed impossible for her to remain in a room unless there were other people present, and with the restlessness that had come upon her since her illness, she opened the door and passed into the open air.

The evening was drawing in, but there was still enough of the sunset left to throw a warm glow upon the marble pavement and light up her marvelous beauty.

While she stood quite motionless, looking vacantly before her, she heard footsteps on the path beneath her. For a moment she paid no attention, thinking that they were those of some of the servants taking in the tennis rackets and balls; but suddenly a strange voice rose to her ear, and she bent forward and looked over.

Two men were standing well within the shadow of the wall. The one a tall, pale man, with a thick, dark mustache; the other an old man, with ashen face and long white hair.

Lucille had never seen them before, and looked at them with the faintest interest and curiosity. They were Mr. Sinclair and the old man Pollard.

"Why have you brought me here?" asked the old man, in a hollow, expressionless voice. "It's a long journey."

"I brought you here to look at the house," replied Mr. Sinclair, eying him intently and with ill-concealed eagerness. "To look at the house—Darracourt—you know?"

"Yes, yes," assented old Pollard; "I remember, I remember!"

Sinclair struck the gravel path with his heel impatiently.

"But that's just what you don't do!" he retorted, irritably. "Your memory seems going. You know I've asked you to tell me all about the Darracourts and the Merles often enough at home in Eden Row, and you can't remember! You say you've got all the papers, but you can't remember where you've put them. I've brought you down here to see if a sight of the place won't help you to recollect it."

"Yes, yes," said old Pollard, dreamily. "This is the Court, is it? The Court?"

"This is the Court, Miss Darracourt's place," said Mr. Sinclair, slowly, as if he were trying to impress it upon him; "the place you and I have talked about so much at home; the place you've promised to tell me about so often. Take a good look at it."

"Yes, yes, I have," said Mr. Pollard, wearily. "I know all about it. I know the whole story; but—but—he put his hand to his head and kept it there for a moment—"but it's gone, gone! My papers—"

Mr. Sinclair struck his stick against the seat impatiently.

"Look here!" he said, half instigmatically, half threateningly; "have you been playing the fool with me? Do you know anything that's worth knowing, or don't you? Are you a regular old fraud, or is it only because you can't remember?"

The old man looked up at him with an utterly blank face, upon which there was not the slightest trace of anger.

"I am no fraud," he said, dully.

"What I said I knew, I know. There is scarcely a house among them whose secret history is not written on this brain—" He stopped and his hand wandered to his brow again.

Mr. Sinclair uttered an impatient grunt.

"You did know, but you've forgotten!" he said, angrily. "Well, it's well I didn't come down on this cock-and-bull story of yours alone. I've got other business here. You sit here and wait. I want to see some one. Do you understand? You are to wait here."

The old man leaned back and nodded.

"I will wait," he said, apathetically, and his eyes grew vacant and expressionless.

Lucille had listened in a mechanical, uninterested manner, and when the younger of the two men walked away she turned and, descending the steps, went up to the stone seat upon which the old man sat.

He sat so motionless, with a face so ashen and utterly expressionless, that she stood and looked at him for a moment half frightened; then recovering herself, she went and touched his arm.

"Will you not go inside the house and rest?" she said, in a gentler voice than she had used for weeks past.

He turned his eyes upon her and regarded her silently for a moment, then he said:

"No, Lady Merle, no. I will sit here as I have promised."

Lucille started and her face flushed at the name he had called her, and resolving to send one of the servants round to him, she went up the steps quickly.

But a number of people had gathered on the terrace and were waiting for her; the dinner bell rang a moment or two afterwards, and the incident slipped her memory.

"Where is Miss Verner?" inquired Mrs. Dalton, as they filed into the banquetting room.

A servant slipped up to her and murmured in her ear:

"Miss Verner has a bad headache, ma'am."

Mrs. Dalton told Lucille, and the dinner proceeded.

But at that moment Miss Verner was standing in the shrubbery with Mr. Sinclair.

"How reckless, how foolish you are!" she murmured, leaning against his arm and looking up at his black mustache as if she worshipped him.

"Why can you not be patient, dear?" "Patient!" he retorted, devouring her with his eyes. "Haven't I been patient? Haven't I done what you told me and kept away; and haven't I given up writing to you because you asked me to?"

"What a hot, headstrong boy it is!" she murmured, carelessly. "Why, I do believe he'd run away with me and marry me by force—if I'd let him. There," and she stroked his face with her cat-like paw; "be patient for a few months longer, Sinclair, dear; and then—well, I won't say what then. But you mustn't stay any longer; the house is full of people."

"I know," he said, moodily. "Swells, all of them; dangling at your heels, I dare say. Oh, Marie, how can you be so heartless?"

"Nonsense! they don't give a thought to a poor companion. It is the great Miss Darracourt they pay all the attention to. But do go now, dear; it is getting late, and you may be seen."

"I don't care if I am. There is only one man I am afraid of," he said, morosely; "a big gamekeeper fellow. He and me had a row the last time I was here. I don't want to meet him."

"Harry Herne," she said, quietly.

"He has gone for good. You needn't fear meeting him. But the place is full of keepers and servants, and you must go, dear."

"Very well," he assented, kissing her, sullenly; then he seemed to remember his companion.

"I didn't come alone," he said.

"Not alone," and her eyes flashed angrily. "Do you mean to say that you have told anyone that—that you and I—"

"Are to be man and wife? No," he replied, doggedly. "I've not."

"Who is it then?" she demanded.

"Oh, only an old man," he answered, with an affected carelessness that did not escape her. "He lives in the same house with me, and—"

She smiled up at him, eying him keenly.

"And you brought him for companionship? That's just like you, dear—always so thoughtful for others. And now I must go; there is a great dinner party on to-night, and I have told them that I have a headache, but some of the servants might see me. There," and she suffered him to take her in his arms and press the greasy moustache on her lips. "Remember! Wait patiently a little longer, and—"

and, with a nod and a smile, she disappeared.

(To be continued.)

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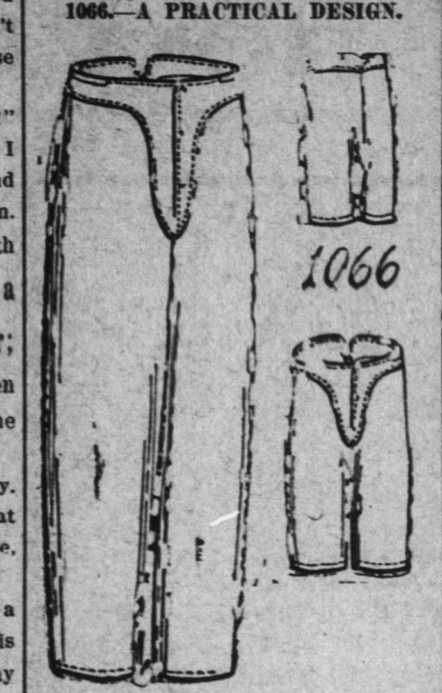
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