



A Great Intrigue,

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XX.

"Go to the police, at once," she said, with queenly dignity. "I, myself, will tell Harry Herne what has occurred. It is right that you should think, Lord Merle, but I have better reasons for knowing him to be innocent than you have, for— she stopped. No, she would not tell them. Harry himself would be here presently, and he should tell them of the engagement. "Go to the police at once," she said, "you have already lost too much time, I think."

"That is my advice, too, if I may offer it, my lord," said Mrs. Dalton. He bowed. "Very good," he said. "Wait!" exclaimed Marie. "There is Susie. Why should we not ask her if she has told any one the secret word? I am sure she would tell us in a moment; she is such a good, truthful girl! May I send for her, Lucille?"

Lucille nodded, and Marie Verner got up and hastily left the room. The marquise crossed over to Lucille and stood with his hand resting on the table, and his eyes fixed on hers. "I am quite content to let the matter rest where it is, Miss Darracourt," he said in a low voice. Lucille shook her head. "And I am not," she said, quietly. "You forget that my servant—indeed, Marie Verner also—is concerned in this, and it must be cleared up."

Marie re-entered the room at that moment with a face of consternation. "Well!" demanded Mrs. Dalton, who was more excited than she had ever been before in her life. "Susie is not there!" exclaimed Marie in an awed whisper. "Not there!" repeated Mrs. Dalton. "No! she is not there! And no one has seen her—at least, none of the housemaids; they are all upstairs making the beds, and I have asked them."

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with a pained look on her face. "But she may have gone to her father's, or into the village."

"Oh, she would not go without permission," said Marie; "she is most particular in that way."

The marquise stood the image of respectful attention. "Certainly she is not there; the door was locked," said Mrs. Dalton; "but we found a key that unlocked it."

"Is that the key in your hand?" asked Marie. Mrs. Dalton looked at it as if she had forgotten it. "No, I found this on the carpet by the bed," she said.

The marquise took it, examined it, and handed it back, then he picked up his hat. "I will go now," he said. "I think I did wrong to terrify you. I will go to the police."

"Wait!" exclaimed Marie Verner, once more. "Why not—don't you think—suppose we send for Harry Herne!"

"Why Harry Herne?" he asked. "We do not suspect him, any of us, of knowing anything about the matter, my dear Miss Verner."

"All the same, I should like him to know, and Lucille says she will tell him." He shrugged his shoulders. "I will do anything, everything, Miss Darracourt wishes," he said, softly.

Lucille turned her face, pale and proud, toward them. "We will go to him," she said. "My dear Miss Darracourt—"

"We will go to him," repeated Lucille, haughtily. "Do you think I will permit him to be sent for as if he were a servant suspected of the crime? No!"

She rang the bell, and told the footman to send her maid; then, remembering Susie's absence, bit her lip, and went out of the room to fetch her hat and jacket for herself.

"I am sorry I came and told you," murmured the marquise, regretfully. "I should have said nothing about it, or have left it entirely in the hands of the police."

Mrs. Dalton shook her head. "We should have known it sooner or later, my lord, and I think, if you will pardon me, that you acted as a good neighbor."

"I bow to your decision," he said, suiting the action to the word. Marie had followed Lucille out, and, having returned, left Mrs. Dalton to fetch her outdoor things.

They waited some minutes for her, and when she returned she made apologies.

"I am very sorry to have kept you, Miss Darracourt, but I could not find my bonnet. It seems to have disappeared, and with it a dress and shawl," and she smiled, but in an uneasy fashion.

Lucille turned her pale face toward her. "Your dress and bonnet gone, do you say?"

"Yes," assented Mrs. Dalton; "I must have mislaid them."

They accepted this as the natural solution of the question, and the marquise opened the door for them to pass out.

They reached the clearing, and Lucille drew back a little, so that the others might get in front.

"The place seems deserted," whispered Marie. Mrs. Dalton put up her eyeglasses. "A sweetly pretty spot. Probably Harry Herne is out engaged in his usual avocations."

Lucille, with her head still erect, but with a flush upon her face, went up to the door and knocked.

"The knock reverberated in a hollow fashion through the hut; but there was no answer.

"Knock again, dear," murmured Marie. "Oh, he is sure to be out at this time. Turn the handle and see."

Lucille turned the handle, but the door remained closed. "Locked," said the marquise. Marie went to the window, exactly as she had done in the morning.

"What a state of confusion it is in!" she said, in a low voice. Lucille started, she remembered the neatness which had characterized the pretty room.

They were going, and Lucille was still lingering wistfully at the doorstep, when a man's footstep was heard behind them.

She turned her head quickly, a swift, sweet hope rising in her bosom, but it was not Harry, it was Hope, the keeper.

He touched his hat respectfully and was passing on, but Marie Verner stopped him. "Oh, Hope," she said, "Miss Darracourt wants Harry Herne."

Hope looked surprised. "Master Harry, miss?" he said, touching his hat again to Lucille. "He's gone, miss."

"But how do you mean—has he gone to the village or where?" "No, miss, he's gone for good, so they say. I thought, begging my lady's pardon, looking at Lucille, "that you knew it. Leastways we all know days ago that he was going."

Lucille put her hand against the lintel of the door, and her face paled, but she smiled. "That is nonsense," she said. "Master Harry has not gone. Hope. He is about the farm or the park somewhere. Will you find him, please, and tell him—ask him—if he will be so good as to come to me?"

Hope touched his hat in a miserable kind of way at being obliged to contradict his adored young mistress. "Begging your pardon, miss, but Master Harry has gone. Loveday saw him go by the mail train this morning. He has just come back, and told me himself, and that Master Harry had waved his hand to him."

"We will go back," said Lucille. "and wait. He has not gone—"

"But the man saw him, dear," murmured Marie. Lucille turned on her with a haughty look which would have been fierce but for its coldness.

"I say that he has not gone!" she said. "The room is all in disorder," ventured Marie. Lucille went to the door impulsively.

"We will wait here," she said, touching the handle; then she remembered that the door was locked, and let her hand fall to her side.

"Here is a key," said the marquise, smilingly; "perhaps that will fit it." And he pointed to the one Mrs. Dalton still absently held.

Lucille took it from her and inserted it in the lock. "My dear Miss Darracourt," murmured Mrs. Dalton. Lucille turned her pale face upon her.

"I have a right!" she cried, almost fiercely. "This house is mine; I have a greater right than that, if you know all!"

As she spoke the door opened. "Remarkable!" murmured the marquise; "the key fits. Where did it come from?"

There was a moment of intense silence. Mrs. Dalton's face grew pale, and her lips opened and shut.

"It is the key I picked up in Susie's bedroom!" she said, in a frightened whisper.

CHAPTER XXI.

"It is the key I found in Susie's bedroom!" Mrs. Dalton repeated the words almost inaudibly.

Marie Verner started and uttered an exclamation, keeping her eyes fixed watchfully upon Lucille. Her face went pale, then she smiled.

"What of that?" she said, quietly. "A key may fit two locks."

"Of course!" exclaimed Marie Verner, with a laugh. "How ridiculously suspicious we are, Mrs. Dalton, if you were fault!"

Mrs. Dalton was about to retort when the marquise spoke. "I wish you would let the matter drop, Miss Darracourt," he said, in a low, earnest voice. "As I have said, so I repeat, I do not suspect Harry Herne for a moment. And—forgive me—but I put myself in his place. I should not like, if I were he, to have my cottage opened by any one in my absence."

Lucille turned her face to him haughtily. "The cottage is mine," she said. "If I open it and enter it, it is for his sake, to prove at once that he knows nothing of this robbery."

As she spoke she threw the door open and crossed the threshold, and the two other ladies followed her; the marquise, with an affected delicacy, remained standing on the step.

As she saw the confusion that reigned in the once neat and pretty room, a vague chill smote upon Lucille's heart, and she stood looking round her, pale and troubled for the first time.

"He is not here," whispered Marie Verner, at her elbow. "Lucille, I don't like the look of it!"

Lucille turned her head and looked at her vaguely. "What is it you don't like the look of? He will be here presently. We will wait. Hope will meet him and send him to us."

"Y—es," assented Marie. "Of course." Then she began to take up the things on the table in an apparently careless fashion, and suddenly she uttered an exclamation, and made as if to conceal something in her hand.

"What is it?" asked Lucille. "Oh, nothing—nothing," replied Marie, with affected embarrassment. "What have you got in your hand?" demanded Lucille.

Marie opened it slowly, and lying in the palm was a piece of pink ribbon. Poor Susie was fond of a little ribbon, and pink was her favorite color. Lucille recognized it at once and stared at it with vacant eyes.

Mrs. Dalton looked grim and stern, the marquise at his post outside watched Lucille's face covertly. "Where did you find that?" asked Lucille, slowly.

"Here—on the table," replied Marie. "It—it is Susie's ribbon!"

Lucille sank into a chair and averted her face from the rest, and her eyes sought the floor.

As she sat, those watching her saw a strange expression creep into her face, a look of dread, of horror, of agony beyond description. The color left her cheeks, her lips even, and her eyes seemed fixed in a fascinated glare.

Mrs. Dalton hurried to her side. "My dear Miss Darracourt! The excitement has been too much for you—ah!" she broke off with a frightened cry, for following Lucille's eyes she saw what it was that had robbed her face of its color.

It was the silver vase. (To be Continued.)

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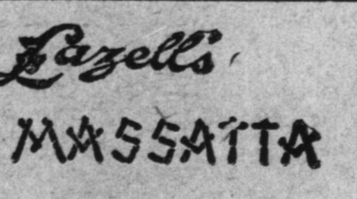
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