



A Great Intrigue,

OR, THE Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XXXVI.
In the madman's ears the sound conveyed a kind of threat.

"The train!" he yelled. "We'll go by that train, you and me, marquis. We'll go and get the money. I'll never leave you. The money—do you hear? Marie's waiting!" and grasping the marquis convulsively, he forced him down the bank.

The two struck the metals and fell upon the line of rails. A red light—a cloud of smoke rose before them. A wild, awful cry of terror and despair rose in a shriek from the marquis' lips, echoed by the madman's laughter, and the next moment the train had passed, leaving the two men still locked face to face—and dead!

Two years after a lady walked slowly in the sunset across the park. The lights were beginning to show in the windows of the Court behind her, and as the great house burst into light a faint music, that grew louder every moment, came from the belfry of the church.

It was the village bells pealing a welcome to Harry, Marquis of Merle, who that evening was returning from a journey round the world to take possession of the place of which he had been so long robbed.

The lady stopped for a moment to listen, and as she did so one could have seen, by the light of the lanterns which had been lighted as the bells rang out, that it was Lucille. She looked so slim and girlish that one might have fancied that time had stood still, and that none of the tragic events set forth in this vicarious history had cast their shadow over her.

So slim and girlish that it was not until one saw her beautiful face one knew that it was the face of a lovely woman who had passed through a great sorrow, and not that of a maiden in her teens.

Two years is a long time, let gray-beards say what they will; but two years are not too long to efface such a sorrow as that which had fallen upon Lucille. But they had effaced it, and as she stood now and listened the old smile stole over her face.

"Five minutes more!" she murmured. "Five minutes, and I seem as if I could not wait! I who have waited two years! Oh, Harry, may Heaven send you back safe and sound to me!"

Almost as she spoke there rose upon the still air the sound of voices cheering, the bell rang out in a wild, joyous clangor, and upon her ears there smote the sound of horses' hoofs. She drew back from the road, and stood holding her hand to her heart.

The sound came nearer, and presently a carriage and four dashed along the drive.

"She would have let it pass, even then, but a lover's eyes are quick, and he saw her.

The horses were pulled upon their haunches, and a stalwart figure leaped to the ground, and, waving the carriage on, bounded to where she stood.

"Harry!"

"Lucille!"

That was all, but as they stood locked in an embrace that conveyed all the longing love of those two long years, their eyes spoke volumes.

"Oh, Harry! Oh, my darling! Let me look at you! Is it really you? Ah, how dark it is! If there was more light. Let me feel you, Harry, that I may know it is really you! Oh, my darling, at last, at last!"

And he, strong man as he was, could say nothing for a while but whisper her name. And so, arm in arm, stopping often to ask questions which they gave each other no time to answer, they made their way to the Court, where true and tried friends—Mrs. Dalton, Lady Parnley, and last, but not least, Susie—awaited them to rejoice in their joy.

It was to have been a quiet wedding; but you cannot have a quiet wedding when the happy pair are so popular as were Lucille and Harry, Marquis of Merle, and the quietest of weddings would have become hilarious if Mr. Doyle took part in them.

He it was who brought down a large box of wedding favors from London; he it was who led the cheering of the crowd at the gates, and took the head of the table at the tenants' dinner afterward; and he it was who, in a speech which was reckoned the most eloquent that had ever been heard in Darracourt, declared the marquis was sure to be happy because he was an honest man and knew a good horse when he saw one!

Long after Lucille and Harry started on their honeymoon—conveyed to the station by a pair of the handsomest grays in England, presented by Mr. Doyle—the feasting and revelry were kept up; and the huge marquee which had been erected threatened to collapse under the tremendous cheering, which rose like the roar of Jupiter, when Mr. Head proposed the health of the Lord and Lady of Darracourt.

THE END.

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CHAPTER II.

"I'm giving you a great deal of trouble," he said, as he took a glass of the brandy which Aunt Mary always kept for medicinal purposes only. "I'm awfully ashamed of myself. If I had been quite sober—I should have seen the fellow come out at me; but he was upon me before I had pulled myself together. Oh, I don't think I can let you bother any more!"

He broke off, as Diana brought a bowl of water and a sponge.

"You cannot go home like that," she said, glancing with a shudder at the blood, "I will call my aunt—"

He caught her arm with an expression of undisguised dismay.

"Oh, Lord, please don't disturb her!" he said. "The whole thing isn't worth making a fuss about. I've had as bad a knock as this at football, and infinitely worse out on the frontier—India. I'm all right, I assure you. I'll just sponge. Thank you!"

He bent over the bowl, but did the sponging so clumsily, sending the water down his neck and over his shirt-front—not that the latter mattered, for its once immaculate breasted was irretrievably ruined—that, half impatiently, Diana took the sponge from him and continued the operation deftly.

In doing so she parted the thick chestnut hair and disclosed an ugly wound, the result of a blow which would have knocked most men out of time.

"It's an awful wound!" she muttered, between her teeth. "I wonder it did not kill you—or stun you, at any rate."

"Got a thick head," he said. "It runs in the family. We're the biggest stupid and dunces in the country; always were. It would take a poleax, at the very least, to down me. How pleasant the cold water feels."

"I will get some fresh," said Diana, in the low voice in which they had all along spoken, least they should wake "Aunt Mary."

While she was gone he sat up and looked around him. He was in great pain still, and still saw through a kind of mist—he had not yet seen Diana distinctly—but his narrowed eyes took in the tone of the room, its neatness and obvious refinement.

"You are still very pale," said Diana. "Drink some more brandy while I try to bind this round your head. I have been thinking, trying to remember exactly what happened."

He smiled. "Oh, Jess? She's all right; she'll stay outside nibbling the grass until I go to her. I've trained her well, and she is rather fond of me. I was half or quite asleep, I fancy. But he woke me up pretty quickly," he added, with a grim smile.

"You saw him, saw his face?" asked Diana. "You would recognize him?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, no, I saw him for a moment or two—the whole thing was crowded into just a moment or two—but I don't think I should recognize him."

"Nor I, I fear," said Diana. "One thing struck me: he did not look quite like a tramp. Pahaw! how awkward I am. This stupid bandage will slip off as soon as I tie it."

"That's all right," he said, with polite indifference. "Not like a tramp? How so?"

"Well," hesitated Diana, for nothing is more difficult than an accurate description of a person seen momentarily and under such circumstances. "he was better dressed than a tramp. I think, I am not sure, that he wore a blue serge suit, with a dark, thin overcoat. It came open in the struggle. The coat collar was turned up, and I did not see his face until he turned on me—"

"Ah, yes!" he said quickly, and with a frown. "I think I caught sight of him at that moment. I got upon him just in time."

Diana looked at him with her brows drawn.

"Yes. If you had not—" She left the sentence unfinished. "It is a pity you did not ride after him."

"Well, no," he said quietly. "I could not have left you."

"But when you saw I was not hurt—but you felt faint—"

He nodded and shrugged his shoulders. "And if I hadn't, if I had been all right, I should not have gone after him. Why should I? It was, so to speak, a fair game. And he won. And I've an idea that he did not get off scot-free. My hunting-crop is a heavy one, and I felt it hit something once or twice."

"But the man ought to be caught and punished," urged Diana, to whom this easy-go-lucky philosophy did not commend itself. "Your true woman can forgive a thief—'poor man, he must have been starving!'—but finds it difficult to extend the same mercy to a man guilty of a murderous assault such as that which Diana had interrupted. "He was a dark man with a mustache—"

"There are one or two dark men with mustaches in the world," he said easily. "Pray don't trouble yourself any more about him. A man who plays that kind of game always comes to grief—in the end. Some night he'll be laid by the heels and meet with his deserts. Besides—well, frankly, I should hate the fuss of a prosecution and all the rest of it. If I had caught him I should have thrashed him and let him go. It's the easiest way of settling such matters. And now"—he rose and took up his hat and hunting-crop—"I have only to try and thank you—"

He stopped with a significant gesture. "No, I'd better not make so utterly futile an attempt. But I can express my regret that you should have suffered so much anxiety, should have run such a risk and been put to so much trouble, on my account. And I do that with all my heart."

"The pluckiest thing—! But I will not try to tell you what I think of you," he broke off. "Good-night—and thank you!"

He held out his hand, and it closed over her small white one with a grasp that made his assertion that his assailant had not got off quite scot-free quite credible.

Diana drew her hand away and stepped back into the shadow. At the door he paused and looked over his shoulder at her with a smile grave and grateful, then went out very quietly, with an upward glance at the window above the porch.

(To be Continued.)

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