A Great Intrigue,

—OR, THE—

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The marquis frowned.

"A man outside," he said, coldly. "You are quite wrong, Mr. Slake. I owe no man but yourself anything—to speak of."

"I beg your lordship's pardon most humbly," said Slake. "I thought by the look of him—but I beg pardon, my lord," and he took himself off.

The marquis rang for his man and got dressed quickly. He must pay in Lucille's check at once to meet the one he had given to Slake, and he went down the great staircase, the waiters and footmen drawing back against the wall and bowing. He had quite forgotten about the man Slake had mentioned, but suddenly he saw a man standing by the portico eying the entrance hall with a sidelong glance. The marquis looked at him with a strange feeling of having seen him before, but he could not remember where.

His glance just rested upon the sallow face and black mustache of the fellow, then he said to one of the footmen:

"Call a hansom, please."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the strange man darted forward and beckoned a cab, and then getting in front of the footman threw open the doors. The footman, thinking it might be some acquaintance of the marquis, drew back, and

the marquis got into the cab.

As he did so the remembrance of the man who got into his way as he entered the carriage on the day of the wedding flashed upon him, and he looked at the man keenly.

"Where to, my lord?" inquired Mr. Sinclair, fixing his dark eyes upon the marquis.

"Coutt's bank," he said, leaning back.

But the man still kept his hand upon the door, and thrusting his head forward, whispered:

"Can I have a word with your lordship?—name your own time."

With the head came a whiff of scented hair oil. The marquis frowned angrily.

"What the devil do you mean, and who are you?" he demanded.

"I've got business with you, marquis," said Mr. Sinclair, with a smile which would have maddened the marquis if he could have understood all the insolence meant, but which even in his ignorance made him itch to knock the man's head off.

"Business!" he said, haughtily; "I don't know you. Take your hand off the cab, and tell the man to drive on!"

"I 'ope your lordship won't be impatient with me," said Mr. Sinclair, insinuatingly, but still with a suggestion of menace in his tone. "I don't mean any harm to your lordship, far from it. What I want to say——"

The marquis eyed him with the cool, steely gaze which made his handsome face particularly unpleasant.

"I don't know who you are," he said, quietly, but sternly, "and I don't want to talk to you. Be off, my good fellow, or I shall have to call a policeman."

Mr. Sinclair's face grew red in spots.

"Call a policeman!" he said, angrily. "Very well, call him! I'll tell him the business I've got with you, marquis, and you'll be ready to give me a hundred pounds down to keep my mouth shut."

The marquis let an oath slip through his thin lips.

"What is it you know, or think you know?" he said. "You are playing a dangerous game, fellow."

"I know the game I'm playing," said Mr. Sinclair, nodding confidently. "Give me 'alf an hour, marquis."

"Very well," said the marquis, after a moment's rapid thought. "Call this evening at eight o'clock, and I will give you ten minutes; at the end of that time I shall probably give you in charge," he added with a smile.

"I'll chance that, marquis," said Mr. Sinclair, and stepping off the footboard he told the cabman to drive on.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Mr. Sinclair went home to Eden Row with visions of an immense fortune floating before his eyes; to him the air was full of castles. Being a famous tenor was a good thing, no doubt, but to have a nobleman like the Marquis of Merle under one's thumb was a great deal better.

The marquis looked at him steadily.

"You want to extort money," he said. "Take care, my friend!" and he smiled a particularly unpleasant smile. "The law has an uncomfortable knack of sending such gentlemen as you to Her Majesty's jails."

Mr. Sinclair nodded insolently.

"All right, my lord," he said, easily. "I knew you'd carry it with a 'igh hand, and was prepared for that. It ain't likely as a 'igh and noble gent like you would cave in at the first go off. But I tell you, as a true friend, you'd better give me a hinterview. As a true friend, mind you! It's better than being a henemy, my lord!"

And he had got the marquis so completely under his thumb!

"I've got him under the screw, and

I'll keep him there till he's shelled out—how much?" he exclaimed, standing before the portrait of Marie Verner in his dingy room.

"How much shall I ask him, Marie? Half his fortune, or a quarter? Perhaps I'd better be moderate, and be satisfied with less! I should like to tell her and ask her advice; but no, half the pleasure would be gone! Wait till I've got—say five and twenty thousand pounds, and then I'll go to her, and say"—he struck a theatrical attitude, with his eyes turned up to the simpering picture—"'Marie be'old your true and devoted lover! I am poor no longer! See, I pour my riches at your feet! Be mine!'" He stalked up and down the room in an ecstasy of imagination. "Yes! she won't refuse me then. I can make a lady of her in downright earnest. After all, what's a tenor at a music hall? Nothing compared to a gentleman with five and twenty thousand pounds! I'll ask that sum, and I won't take less! Why should I? They are rolling in riches! I won't take less. And I'll bring that 'igh and 'aughty marquis to my feet! I'm a 'fellow,' am I? And he'll send for the police, will he? Very well, we shall see!"

Long before eight o'clock he had dressed himself in his best clothes, consisting of a hideously light pair of lilac trousers with a black stripe down the side, a cutaway coat of dark claret, patent leather boots, and a silk hat with a broad turn-up brim. This attire, aided by a bright blue necktie, with a large brass pin, a thick chain of the same material, an unreal diamond ring, and a silver-top walking stick, completed what Mr. Sinclair considered a remarkably neat and effective "get up."

It was effective, certainly, for it nearly gave the porter at Meurice's a fit when Mr. Sinclair walked into the hall and demanded to be taken to the Marquis of Merle.

"The Marquis of Merle!" repeated the porter, staring vacantly at the vulgar apparition, and his dismay was echoed by a couple of footmen and a waiter who stood near. "You want to see the Marquis of Merle! Good heavens! my man, the marquis can't see such as you at this hour. If you have got a bill or anything, send it in in the usual way."

Mr. Sinclair got red and drew himself up.

"It's the chap who talked to the marquis this morning, as he was getting into the cab," remarked one of the footmen; "I saw him."

"Yes, you saw me talkin' to my friend, the marquis, my good man," said Mr. Sinclair, pompously. "And you'll hear more than you care to do if you don't take my card up," and he handed it to the man.

The footman took it gingerly, and glanced from one to the other of his fellows dubiously.

"Perhaps it's some racing man," said one of them, struck with a bright idea. "Take his card up, Jeames. If it ain't right, the marquis will soon have him kicked out."

This was not pleasant for Mr. Sinclair to hear, but he bore it as well as he could.

"I don't think the marquis will have me kicked out, young man," he said. "Just you take my card up, and I'll teach you better manners than to insult a friend of the Marquis of Merle."

Too astounded to argue any longer, the footman ascended the stairs slowly with the card.

The marquis was dressed for dinner, and seated in a small room which had been set aside as his writing room, study, or private room. In his well-cut evening dress, his snowy shirt-front, with his single diamond glittering in it, with his pale, clear face, he looked the model of an aristocrat from the white, shapely hand to the smooth, close-cut hair.

There was not a line upon his face, not a tremor upon his lips, although since the time he had driven away from the man, he had looked forward to this interview and wondered what evil it boded him.

He took the card, glanced at it, and nodded carelessly.

"Show the man up."

The footman went downstairs with a grin.

"The marquis will see you, my man," he said, condescendingly.

Mr. Sinclair reddened furiously.

"Don't you call me 'my man!'" he said, passionately. "I'll teach you; but wait—only wait!" and he clinched his hat in his hand and walked upstairs.

The marquis was reading the evening paper, and lowered it to his knees as Mr. Sinclair entered. A faint smile of amusement and disgust played in his eyes as they rested on the extraordinary "get up" of his visitor; and with almost good-natured contempt—if good nature could possibly be attributed to the marquis—he said:

"Now, my man, I have kept my promise. I will give you ten minutes—quite long enough for you to tell any reasonable number of lies in—at the end of that time I shall ring the bell, and hand you over to the police!"

He did not ask Mr. Sinclair to sit down, so that gentleman, putting his hat on the ground, took a chair and wiped his forehead. The marquis leaned back in an attitude of perfect indolence, and eyed him with a smiling contempt.

"Now, sir, begin, if you please," he said.

Mr. Sinclair polished his face and pulled down his cuffs.

"I've got a story to tell you, my lord, that will astonish you," he commenced.

"No doubt," assented the marquis; "but, please remember, I allow you ten minutes only to astonish me in. I dine at half-past eight."

"All right, marquis," said Mr. Sinclair, with a nod. "Ten minutes will do—less, a minute, would do it, but I'm not going to hurry. Now, first of all, perhaps yu'll be good enough to tell me your name?"

The marquis was now convinced that he had a lunatic to deal with, and glanced towards the bell. Mr. Sinclair read the glance, and nodded, reassuringly.

"Oh, it's all right, my lord. I'm sane enough, as I'll prove to you directly. Perhaps you will oblige by answering my question."

"You are an impertinent rascal, my friend," he said. "My name is Vyvian Bertrand Devigne, but I am usually called Marquis of Merle."

"Ah!" said Mr. Sinclair. "Called Marquis of Merle. Nicely put——"

The marquis half rose, but leaned back, with an air of resignation. He had brought this upon himself. He ought to have given the man in charge in the morning! Well, he would hear what the fellow had to say.

"And as Marquis of Merle, you inherited the Hall and the late marquis' money—there wasn't much of it, though."

The marquis stared at him haughtily under his half-closed eyelids.

"You father was bit by the same mad dog as yourself, wasn't he, my lord? Fond of shuffling the cards, eh?"

The marquis eyed him in silence.

"I'm only stating the truth, marquis when I say that he'd have been ruined before you was born if it hadn't been for your mother being an heiress. She was a Miss De Vere, marquis?"

The marquis rose, and laid his hand upon the bell.

(To be Continued.)

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