



A Great Intrigue, —OR, THE— Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Susie's knees trembled and gave way under her, and, overwhelmed by horror, she slipped to the ground, and, to hide her white face, bent as if to pick some flowers.

"Yes, Harry Herne," repeated the marquis, gravely. "It need be no secret, for I shall communicate to the police in an hour all I have told you. But perhaps you had better not mention the matter for a little while."

"No, no, I won't say anything," she assented, in a frightened voice. "But Harry Herne! It seems quite incredible. Such a nice young fellow—a gentleman he always seemed—"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I am bitterly grieved and shocked to think that any one who has lived in the place so long—that any one who was born here, under the shadow of the house, as it were—should have committed this crime; that is, if it should prove to be him. Of course, there is only the fact of Forbes finding him lurking about the place at present. He may be innocent. No one will be more delighted than I shall be to find that my suspicions have been misplaced and that I have wronged him."

"Yes, yes," she assented. "But—how could he get at the plate? How did he learn the secret word?"

"There was a minute's silence, during which Susie raised her white face and seemed to listen with her heart in her mouth.

"The marquis shook his head. "I cannot tell! There is only one way which I can think of."

"What is that?" she asked. "I don't like to mention it—"

"Oh, please!—I am all on fire with curiosity and interest!"

"Well," he said, slowly, reluctantly. "Mind, you force me, Miss Verne!"

"Yes; do not mind me: speak quite openly."

"He may have obtained the information from you!"

"From me!" exclaimed Marie Verne; then she dropped her head and plucked at the convolulus in her hands as if nervously.

"Yes; you say you told Miss Darracourt. Were you alone when you told her?"

"I—I don't remember," she stammered. "Were we alone? I quite forget. I'm so confused that I can't recall—why, yes, I think so. I am not sure. Oh, dear, how dreadful this is!"

"Don't let it trouble you," he said, in a kindly way, "or I shall regret having told you anything about it."

Marie drew a long breath, eying the cowering Susie at her feet.

"I wish you hadn't told me the word, then I couldn't have told it to anyone else," she said, fervently. "But there, it's too late now. Oh, dear, I feel so dreadfully upset! I shan't dare to tell Lucille!"

"Do not," he said, gravely. "Wait for a little while, at any rate. The less the matter is talked about the present the more chance we have of catching the thief, be he whom he may."

"Yes," she assented. "I must go now. My head aches terribly, and I feel as if I had stolen the plate myself! Only think if it should turn out to be my fault! I should never forgive myself!"

"And I shall never forgive myself for telling you the word, in that case," he said, gently. "Pray, think no more of it. We shall get hold of the culprit before many hours are over, and I have no doubt I shall recover my property."

"Oh, I hope so!" she exclaimed. "Good-bye. Come up and tell Miss Darracourt all about it."

"I will, after I have seen the police," he said, and raising his hat he walked quickly away.

Marie Verne gathered her flowers together, uttering little exclamations of dismay.

"Come, Susie," she said. "I am so intensely upset that I don't know what I am doing."

Susie rose white and trembling. "Oh, miss, how good of you not to tell him!" she gasped, clasping her hands.

"Tell him, the marquis, what?"

"That I was in the room when you were talking about the secret word, Miss Marie. I thought I should have died, miss, all the time. For I am the only other person who knows the word, excepting you and Miss Lucille."

"Yes," said Marie, gravely. "And you are sure that you did not tell any one, Susie?"

"Sure. Quite—quite sure," declared poor Susie. "I never mentioned it to a living soul, Miss Marie; it has never passed my lips."

"Then it is not from you that Harry Herne got the word," said Marie, thoughtfully.

Susie's face flushed and then grew pale again.

"Harry! Master Harry!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "Do you think that it's Master Harry who has done it, miss? Why, he wouldn't do it to—save his life! Master Harry steal the silver things from the marquis! Why, he'd rather die first! Oh, it's quite impossible, Miss Marie!"

"Yes, I think so, too, Susie; but you heard what Lord Marie said: Harry Herne was seen lurking about the place—close to the window of the plate-room—"

"Oh, don't say 'lurking' Miss Marie!" broke in Susie, made quite courageous in her defence of the absent man. "Master Harry never lurks anywhere; he is too much—too much like a gentleman, Miss Marie! Besides, why should he lurk? If he wanted to go to the Hall, or the Court, he could go the same as any one else. Ah! if you knew him better, miss—as we all know him—you would say it was impossible that any one should think he did it."

"And yet the marquis thinks he did it," said Marie, watching her closely.

"The marquis. Yes, miss," assented Susie, hesitatingly; "but the marquis is no friend of Master Harry's, miss. He—he struck him with a whip, Miss Marie; and there's ill blood between them in other ways. It isn't for me to say so, Miss Marie, but I think—her voice trembled and dropped—"the marquis would do him an injury if he could."

"Wait a minute," said Marie; "I have never been inside the hut, let me see if he is at home."

She went to the window—as she spoke, and looked in.

"Come here, Susie," she said. "This is very strange; the whole place is in disorder as if—"

"Oh, no, I won't come, miss," said Susie, quite upset. "If Master Harry was to come and find us! Oh, please let us go!"

"Nonsense!" Marie said, sharply. "I am going in to see what this means."

And before Susie could utter another word she put the key in the door and unlocked it, and went in.

"He is not here," she said. "Come in—you need not be afraid. What a state the place is in. A pretty room, though," looking round.

"Yes, yes; let us go now, Miss Marie!" prayed Susie.

"In a minute. Books and drawings, and everything upset. I wonder where he can be? It looks as if he had been packing up—see how all the things are tumbled about. He has been packing, too; there's string and paper all over the chair there. Susie I don't like the look of this."

"Don't like the look of it, miss? What do you mean?"

Marie Verne looked at her with a troubled look in her eyes, and shook her head.

"Your friend Master Harry has gone," she said, darkly.

"Gone, miss?"

"Yes, gone!" She went to the door of the inner room and pushed it open with her foot as she spoke, and uttered a low exclamation. "Look, Susie. It is too true. The bed has not been slept in. He has flown!"

Susie went and stared, pale and troubled. The bed had not been slept in, as Marie Verne had said, and there were, too, palpable evidence of packing in this as in the other room.

"I don't like the look of it, Susie," said Marie Verne, shaking her head. "Let us go! We must say nothing about it—"

"Oh, you are quite, quite wrong, miss!" broke in Susie, in a state of agitation. "Master Harry may have gone on a visit—he often goes to the town—"

"What, in the middle of the night, without a word to any one!" exclaimed Marie Verne. "Remember, he was seen in the Hall grounds last night—looking at the plate!" She walked round the room as she spoke, and stopping suddenly, uttered a cry of alarm. "Look, Susie! Oh, dear, dear!"

Susie dragged herself to her side and following the pointed finger with frightened eyes, saw an antique silver vase glittering under the table.

(To be Continued.)

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"You think so, do you?" said Marie, in a voice of pretended concern.

"Yes, miss," said Susie, wiping her eyes; "I do believe he would. And Master Harry's one that never did him any harm, too."

Marie Verne seemed to consider a little while, then she stopped short, as if an idea had struck her.

"Susie, if what you think is true, and the marquis is so great an enemy of Harry Herne's, he would not have much mercy upon him if he had him in his power."

"Mercy! No, Miss Marie," said Susie, with an air of troubled conviction. "The marquis wouldn't have much mercy on any one he didn't like; but, thank Heaven, he can't do Master Harry any harm. And as to his stealing this plate, why, miss, I'd as soon think it was the mistress herself. Which way are you going, miss?"

Marie Verne had struck into the woods.

"I was just thinking of going and telling Harry Herne," she said.

Susie stopped short with an exclamation of alarm.

"Tell Master Harry what the marquis said?" she almost screamed.

"Why, miss, he'd kill us both; he'd be certain to go and kill the marquis. Oh, I wouldn't dare to, Miss Marie."

"But I dare," said Marie, with an air of virtuous indignation. "If what you say is true, Harry Herne ought to be warned, and I shall warn him."

"Then, may I go back home, please, miss?" implored Susie.

"No!" said Marie, sharply. "You will come with me; I cannot go alone. Don't be so stupid, Susie, he will not hurt us, and we may be doing him a service."

Trembling, her timid soul shrinking from the ordeal, Susie crept after her. Presently they came within sight of the hut. It looked strangely desolate, and a dog of Harry's came fawning and whining to them.

"Why, the place is shut up!" exclaimed Marie, with an air of surprise.

"He's out, miss," said Susie, with devout thankfulness. "Let us go, Miss Marie!"

"And here is the key on the door-step," said Marie, picking it up; "that is strange."

"It may have fallen out of the lock, miss. Please let us go."

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