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35



A Great Intrigue,

—OR, THE—

Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XX.

"In that case, my lord, whom do you suspect?"

He raised his eyes, but remained silent.

"Dear me!" she went on; "remember distinctly your telling us about the secret word which unlocked the panel! How glad I am that you did not tell us the word! I am sure, Miss Verner, that you must feel grateful that your lordship did not accede to your request, and tell you the secret."

Marie Verner looked down with a very fine imitation of dismay. The marquis turned to the window. It was Lucille that spoke.

"Lord Merle did tell Marie the word!" she said.

Mrs. Dalton jumped—there is no other word for it.

"He did? You did, my lord?"

He turned his face to them with a smile.

"Yes, I did, madam," he said. "But I do not see what that has to do with the robbery."

"Mrs. Dalton thinks I committed it!" exclaimed Marie Verner, with a pout.

The marquis laughed politely. "If I thought so, I should have said nothing about it, but have sent you the remainder of the plate, so that your collection might be complete," he said, gallantly. "But, seriously, I do not think the fact that I told Miss Verner the word which opened the lock can have anything to do with my loss; she is not likely to have mentioned it to anyone else."

"No," said Mrs. Dalton, solemnly;

"then Miss Verner would not be guilty of such an indiscretion."

"Just so," he said, lightly. Lucille raised her head.

"Marie, tell Lord Merle that you did mention it," she said, slowly.

Marie Verner looked up with an air of dismay and contrition finely blended.

"Oh, Lucille, as if—Lord Merle, I ought to tell you—I hope you won't think too badly of me, but—but I did mention it."

He smiled, but rather gravely. "To whom, Miss Verner?"

"To—Lucille."

"No," he answered gently, though her tone might have justified some irritation on his side. "No, I do not think so; but I think that it is possible she might have told to some one else the word which is the open sesame to the plate-closet."

There was a silence.

"Whom could she have told?" asked Mrs. Dalton.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Half a hundred people!" he said.

"One would be enough, providing that that one was dishonest!" remarked Mrs. Dalton.

"Exactly!" he said.

Silence again, then Lucille said, gravely:

"Lord Merle, you have not told us all yet, I think."

"Ah, how quick you are to read me!" he murmured gently. "No, I

have not. I have kept back the most painful part; but I fear that I must tell you, now that the thing has gone thus far."

"You should have told me at first," she said, gravely.

"It is this," he said. "I spoke of foot-marks outside the conservatory. They were a man's, and I might have tried to guess whose they were in vain, but by chance I happened to know."

Yesterday evening I was in my room, at the window which stands just over the conservatory, and I heard my butler Forbes talking to a man just below me. Strange to say—or not strange, just as you like—it—

they were talking about the plate. It seems Forbes came upon the man lurking—well, not lurking, but standing or lounging near the door, and looking through the window at the sideboard, and the man called Forbes' attention to the fact that any tramp might walk off with the silver.

He appeared to be quite indignant that such a temptation should be permitted to exist, and I resolved at the moment that I would have the plate removed, but it escaped my mind afterward. The man and Forbes talked for some minutes, then he—the man, I mean—went off."

"That is the thief!" exclaimed Mrs. Dalton. "I fear his indignation was only assumed as a blind."

He looked at her with knitted brows, and glanced at Lucille.

"Who was the man? Do you know him?" asked Marie.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "I know him, and I do not think that it is possible that he can have been the thief. I would, indeed, never consent to believe it unless the evidence against him were irrefutable. It is improbable, impossible, and there is, therefore, no good to be served in mentioning his name."

Lucille looked at him. Again the vague fear crept about her heart.

"Pray, tell me his name," said Marie.

"You must admit that I have reason to take a great, a dreadful interest in this robbery! Please tell us, Lord Merle!"

"Well, I will tell you," he said gravely.

"It may have been Susie's sweetheart or brother," said Mrs. Dalton.

"The man was Harry Heine!" he said, after a pause.

Lucille rose, her face white as death; then she sank into the chair again and laughed softly. All the others stared at her.

"You are right," she said at last, and the words came slowly, ringing yet low, full of an intense mockery and pride. "He is not the thief!"

"Just so!" assented the marquis, instantly. "I say I could answer for him with all I possess if it were necessary; but it is not. No one accuses him. You understand, however, how reluctant I was to mention his name. You know that we were not friendly—we are now, though, I am glad to think—and you might have supposed that I was prejudiced."

Lucille looked him full in the face. "I should," she said; "if you had not said that you knew him incapable of such a crime."

He inclined his head gravely.

"And now you know why I have not gone to the police," he said; "I must have told them—and if I had not, my butler would have done—about Harry Heine, and they might have been suspicious."

Lucille rose.

(To be Continued.)

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