

A Great Intrigue,

OR, THE Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER III.

"Oh, soon, please," she murmured. "They can be harnessed in ten minutes," he said, almost persuasively. "A run would do them good. If you like—they can be put to now." "But I am not dressed—I mean I have no outdoor things on, and—" "You can drive over the park, inside your own gates," he said, quietly. "Very well," said Lucille, without looking at him. "Now, please." His eyes flashed as he turned and gave his directions, and as he led her to the next stable three grooms went at the ponies as if they were harnessing them for a fire-engine and hadn't a minute to spare.

As they turned into the courtyard again, Lucille saw a delicious little phaeton with the ponies attached. It was an admirable turn-out, and Harry Herne had bought it, though he didn't say so. It was all newly new, and the carriage, the harness, the silver mounts, glittered in the June sunlight.

Perhaps nothing she had yet seen of all her vast wealth had roused so keen a sensation of pleasure in Lucille's bosom.

With his hat in his hand, Harry Herne stood to help her in; but she did not touch his hand, and got into the low phaeton without his assistance. He got in and took the reins. "I'll start with them, if you please, miss," he said. "Let them go, William."

The groom "let them go" literally, for they were off and out of the yard like black arrows from a bow. "Oh, dear!" said Lucille, as they dashed round the corner of the terrace and along the park road, "they seem rather wild."

"It is life, and youth, and fun," he said, with a short laugh. "There is no vice in them, miss. You shall take them directly, if you please, when they have settled down."

They drove on in silence for a time, and Lucille thought his attention was taken up by the ponies, but his eye seemed like a hawk's—not the slightest or the most trivial thing escaped it.

Life took a new interest for her. In all her young days she had never spent such a quarter-hour—such a half hour!—It was nearly half an hour since they started, and she had forgotten time and circumstance, forgotten almost that the man beside her was her servant!

"Now, miss," he said; "they have settled down now. Will you take them?" He got out and gave her the reins, and standing by the ponies' heads, altered the curb reins so that the lively little animals should be more easily checked.

Lucille took the white reins, then made a grimace.

"Oh, dear; they cut my fingers. It's because I haven't any gloves. And I can't hold them properly!" and she drew her gloves down.

He looked unduly distressed; then his eyes fell upon his own gloves.

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which he had thrown on the seat. Her eyes followed his, and she smiled. "Oh, they are too large!" she said, without thinking; then she looked at them again. They were too large, of course; but his hand was small and shapely for a man's.

"Perhaps you could hold one in your hand," he suggested.

"Give them to me, please?" she said, imperiously.

With downcast eyes, and something like a flush mantling on his cheek, he gave them to her, and, with a pout and a smile of impatience, Lucille drew one on.

"Ridiculous!" she exclaimed, holding up her hand, upon the fingers of which the gloves stood like terriers' ears. "But it is better than nothing."

"If you will take it off again for a moment," he said. And when she had done so, he took out his knife and cut an inch off the fingers at a stroke.

Lucille put the glove on again, inwardly wondering at his readiness.

"I am very clumsy, I am afraid," said Lucille.

"No, no," he responded, hurriedly. "Gracious, how they pull at me! They will pull me out of the carriage! How delicious it is! What is that?" and she nodded to a small cottage—a small, thatched hut, rather—standing in a little clearing among the trees.

"That is my cottage," he replied; "I mean, that is where I used to live," he corrected himself, quickly and in a low voice. "The squire gave—lent it to me; but Mr. Head took the key and turned me out—as he had a right to do."

Lucille looked straight in front of her.

"It was cruel!" she said, incautiously. "You shall have the cottage back again."

He was silent for a moment; then, without looking at her, he murmured something that sounded like "Thank you," and glancing at him, she saw his face was pale and working.

"It is only just," she said, trying to speak coldly. "You were turned out for no reason, and I am only doing what my uncle did, in restoring you."

"Thank you, miss," he said and his voice was husky. "You are kinder to me, ah, very much kinder than I deserve."

"Please say no more," she said, haughtily. "Oh, what made them start like that?"

What made them start like that was the tall figure of the marquis, standing beside a tree, and waiting for them, with his dark eyes gleaming from his pale face.

A fire shot into Harry Herne's eyes for a second, then left it calm and set.

"It is the Marquis of Merle, miss!" he said.

CHAPTER IV.

Lucille flushed; then she bowed, and was driving on, but the marquis stood, with his hat in his hand in such a manner that she felt compelled to stop.

Harry Herne got out, raised his hat, and stood by the ponies' heads, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"Good-morning, Miss Darracourt," said the marquis. "I was going up to the Court to ask if I could be of any

service to you. I am glad to find you out on this beautiful morning."

"I was driving," said Lucille, rather lamely, and a little nervously.

"Well, I mustn't keep you," he said; "unless, perhaps—but it is a great thing to ask!"

Lucille looked up at him inquiringly, wishing to Heaven he would go. Harry Herne stood like a statue, a statue of Saxon comeliness, at the ponies' heads.

"I was going to ask you to be so gracious as to take me to the Court," said the marquis.

Lucille inclined her head. "Certainly!" she said.

The marquis got in, taking the only vacant place, Harry Herne's.

"How kind and gracious of you!" Lucille looked from him to Harry Herne; the marquis leaned back as if it were merely a groom standing there. What was Lucille to do?

"Let them go, please," she said, trying to speak carelessly.

Harry Herne released the ponies, and came up to her side.

"Do not touch them with the whip," he said, in a low voice, "and do not turn sharply, miss."

Lucille flushed, and inclined her head.

"Very well," she said, and the next moment the ponies shot off.

Harry Herne stood, and looked after them, with a pale, set face, and folded arms; then, without a word, he struck across the park for the Court, with lowered head and constrained lips.

"So lovely a morning as this is a fitting welcome to you, Miss Darracourt," said the marquis. "I hope you are satisfied with your inheritance?"

"Oh, yes," said Lucille, hurriedly. "It is beautiful and grand, and almost too wonderful."

She did not look at him; his presence made her uncomfortable and nervous. She had felt no fear of the ponies while Harry Herne was by her side, but now she got confused, and jumbled up the reins, and pulled at them awkwardly.

"A beautiful pair of ponies," said the marquis. "Rather badly broken, I am afraid. They are making you tired. Will you let me drive?"

"Oh, thanks, will you?" responded Lucille, with a sigh of relief, as she held out the reins to him.

"I shall be delighted," he said. "They would go much quieter if they were not so tightly reined up. I will alter the bearing reins. There, it is all right now," he added, as he unfastened the bearing reins and got in.

As a matter of fact the spirit of mischief which lies just under a pony's skin, always ready to break out, was now up and rising, and having been given their heads by the kind-hearted marquis, they played up the stereotyped tricks to their fullest satisfaction.

"Very badly broken indeed!" said the marquis; "that man should never be allowed to break a horse, Miss Darracourt, believe me."

As he spoke he took the dainty whip.

"Oh, don't whip them!" said Lucille, quickly. "He specially cautioned me not to—!" The marquis' lips compressed, and with a pleasant

laugh he gave the ponies a cut which looked playful, but was vicious and hurt them.

It hurts their hides and their feelings, too. With a start and a toss of their heads they stopped short, then dashed off at full speed. The marquis had no gloves on, and he had lost his temper, for all his beautiful smiling. He tried to stop them, and finding he could not, tried to turn them.

They turned, but instead of stopping, ran up the low bank and got on to the short, smooth grass; and when their heels felt the welcome footing they whispered wickedly to each other and bolted in right good earnest.

Before them, to her horror, Lucille saw the edge of a plantation. If the ponies reached that in their wild stampede, she, ignorant as she was, knew that the carriage must be dashed to pieces and themselves—!

Lucille put up her hands in a wild appeal to Heaven; but the words that left her white lips were: "Harry! Harry!"

Another moment would have meant destruction; but before the moment came a man sprang from the plantation—from the sky, it seemed!—and hurled himself upon the ponies.

There was a shock—a wild confusion; a plunging of the forelegs, snorts of terror and rage, and then the carriage was brought to a standstill.

Lucille rose and looked, and the first thing she saw was Harry Herne, half lying on the ground with the reins, close to the bit, grasped in his hands, the reins starting on his forehead, from which the blood was running in a small rivulet. The next second he was up, tall and straight, with his face turned towards the marquis with a look upon it she would never forget.

She got out and staggered rather than walked up to him, uttering a series of faint "oh's!" her eyes fixed on his bleeding face.

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" he asked brokenly, perceptibly.

"No, no!" she uttered, impatiently. "But you! Look!" and she pointed to his face.

He put up his hand and brought it down stinging red.

"It is nothing; nothing, miss!" he said, quietly.

(To be Continued.)

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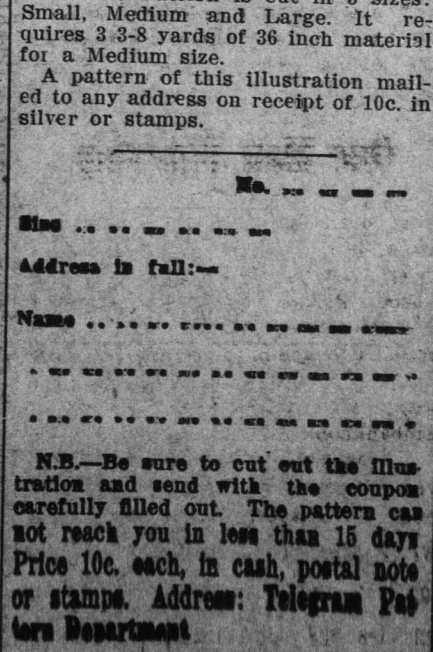


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