



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

### CHAPTER I.

"Miss Darracourt is happy in the possession of a well-balanced mind," said Mrs. Dalton with solemn approbation. "To a well-balanced mind the vicissitudes of fortune are immaterial!"

"Then I must have a mind without any balance at all!" retorted Marie Verner. "For the vicissitudes of fortune—if that's what you call being left such a place as this—would send me stark, staring mad!"

Lucille went and laid her hand upon her shoulder.

"You will send Mrs. Dalton stark, staring mad if you go on in this fashion, Marie," she said, gently. "Play by all means and give your feelings vent!"

"And how are you going to give yours vent—always supposing you have any?" demanded Marie.

Lucille went to the window and opened it.

"In the fresh air," she said. "I can hear you on the terrace here."

Marie Verner plunged into an operatic overture, and the music rang through the room and floated out to the fresh evening air. Lucille stood for a few minutes listening, but after a time the music seemed too oppressive, and she walked along the terrace until she reached a small, circular space which overlooked the park.

In this nook there was a seat, and welcoming the quietude, Lucille walked to the edge of the parapet and looked over.

As she did so it was with a sudden start of surprise that she saw a young man sitting against the trunk of a tree almost immediately beneath her.

For a moment she thought that it was a gardener, but as she looked at him she saw that his dress was scarcely consistent with that of a servant. It was hardly that of a gentleman either. Lucille decided that it must be a gamekeeper; there was a dog lying beside him.

All unconsciously he had assumed an attitude of easy, almost patrician grace, his long legs outstretched, his head resting upon his hand, and there seemed something in the pose that as little suited a servant as his dress.

Scarcely knowing that she was scrutinizing him, Lucille looked down at him, the thought crossing her mind, "Even this man belongs to me!" when suddenly he raised his head. If Lucille had felt surprise and doubt before, both were redoubled now as the upraised face seemed to flash upon her. It was the face of a Greek god, beautifully molded, with dark eyes and delicately cut lips. From the sun-tanned forehead the closely-cut hair broke into ripples of light waves.

It was the handsomest face Lucille had ever seen, but something beyond its manly grace smote upon her. The eyes were beautiful, but the expression, full of an innate nobility and power, far exceeded their beauty. It was the face of a Saxon prince, full

of a dominant masterfulness, tempered by a nameless something which might be that of a great grief or a great, unsatisfied desire.

Lucille's breath came fast and her heart beat quickly, why, she knew not. She would have turned and walked away, for it seemed unfair to be standing there looking down at him while he was all unconscious of her presence, but a strange kind of fascination held her; and while she stood wrestling with the feeling, which annoyed her, a third figure came upon the scene.

The dog, which had been as fast asleep as a dog can be, suddenly raised its head, and pricking up its ears, gave a warning growl. His master turned his head, and Lucille, looking in the same direction, saw the tall, thin figure of the marquis step slowly from among the trees and standing looking up at the house.

The fading light in the sky fell full upon his pale face as he stood leaning one white hand on his stick, the other thrust in the breast of his light overcoat, and his dark eyes shone like black marble as they ranged along the house.

Lucille had scarcely time to wonder why he should be there, and why he should stand looking at the house with so strange an expression, when the dog uttered another growl, and the marquis, with the faintest possible start, turned and saw the man lying at the bottom of the tree.

Instantly the pale, cold face lit up as if a lurid light had fallen upon it, and the thin lips parted and showed the white teeth. Then the face resumed its ordinary impassiveness, and, standing motionless, he looked down upon the other man.

"So you are here still!" he said, slowly, as if he were measuring each word.

"I am here still," assented the other, and at the sound of his voice Lucille felt a thrill of satisfaction. Against the hard, measured tones of the marquis this other man's voice rang musical and sweet.

"And why?" demanded the marquis. "This is no place for you—now. Things are altered. Miss Darracourt can dispense with the attendance of a loafing pauper."

The other man leaped to his feet, his handsome face all ablaze, then he stretched out his strong arms and laughed.

"You speak for Miss Darracourt, marquis! With what authority?" The marquis smiled coldly. "The authority of a friend and neighbor, who conceives it to be his duty to protect her from the burden of an idle vagabond."

The other man held up his hand almost imploringly, while the veins on his forehead twitched and swelled under the effort of self-command.

"Don't!" he exclaimed. "Go on and leave me alone. I cannot strike you, and you know it. You are a coward, marquis, to taunt a man whose hands are bound."

The marquis smiled, and his eyes glittered.

"I've done!" he said. "Take my advice and leave the place. If you want money—"

The other man raised his hand—Lucille saw it tremble and shake like a leaf—and pointed toward the wood.

"For Heaven's sake, go!" he said. "I can give myself another moment, and that is all."

The marquis turned with a cold laugh, and moved toward the park. Having reached the trees, he paused and looked back.

The two regarded each other for the space of a moment, then, with a smile full of cold, calculating hate, the marquis walked away.

Lucille stood white as death. Every instant she had expected the insulted man would spring upon his tormentor. In the grasp of those strong arms she felt that the marquis would have been as powerless as a bundle of straw, and her heart leaped with a sense of relief as the tall, thin figure disappeared.

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The man who had been left flung himself down upon the grass and hid his face in his hands for a moment, then he dashed them away with a wild, impetuous grace.

"The marquis was right after all, Gip," he said to the dog. "I am a pauper and a vagabond, and I'd better cut it. But—and he raised his eyes and looked round with a sudden wistful tenderness—"but it is hard! To leave it all! Heigho! Yes, Gip, we'll go!"

He strode off in the direction of the lawn, and Lucille, waiting until he had disappeared, descended the steps from the terrace, and obeying an impulse of the moment, went and stood where he had stood as he confronted the marquis.

She had scarcely reached the tree when she heard a step behind her, and, turning, found herself face to face with him.

He was as much startled as herself; then he took off his hat, murmured something of an apology, and calling the dog, who had run up to Lucille and was making overtures of friendship, was strolling away, when suddenly he stopped, and, with a flush upon his sunburned face, said, in a voice that trembled slightly:

"I beg your pardon, miss! Are you one of the ladies who came down with Miss Darracourt to-day?"

Something prompted Lucille to answer "Yes," instead of "I am Miss Darracourt!"

"I thought so," he said, his hat grasped in his hand. "I—no, I will not say it. Forgive me for speaking to you! Good-night!"

Lucille raised her beautiful eyes with grave regard.

"What is it you wished to say to me?" she said, "and why are you afraid?"

He bit his lip, and his hands, tightened on his hat, but his eyes met hers steadily; and when he answered, his voice had lost its tremor and rang clear and musical.

"I was going to ask you a favor, miss," he said. "You are a friend of Miss Darracourt—you can see her when you please—you will see her to-night. You look kind and gentle," he drew a short breath, and Lucille's face flushed, "will you speak a word for a hard-pressed man?"

"For you, do you mean?" said Lucille, trying to speak coldly.

"Yes, for me!" he said.

"What is it you want?" she asked.

"I want her permission to remain here—at Darracourt!" he said, as if he were trying to speak calmly and found it hard to succeed. "I will be her servant—I will do anything. I have been here since—since I was born." His voice grew hoarse for a moment and rang with a dull pain. There is not a tree, not a horse, or a hound that I do not know and love. And they tell me that—that I must go—that things are changed! The squire knew me, and allowed me to live upon this place; but now—the lawyer—Mr. Head, tells me I must go, and I feel that I cannot!" He looked round with a wild gesture of despair. "I've no claim upon this lady—God bless her!—no, no claim; I only ask to be her servant. For God's sake, plead for me, miss! Forgive me for seeming so wild and fierce; my heart's in this—I might say my life! Plead for me!"

The voice, the man's handsome face, touched Lucille to the heart; the color came and went in her cheeks.

"Tell me your name?" she murmured.

He raised his eyes to hers.

"Harry Herne," he said in a low voice.

"I will remember it," said Lucille. "And I can answer for Miss Darracourt; you shall stay."

His face lit up and his dark eyes flashed upon her with a strong man's gratitude.

"How can I thank you?" he said, with a catch in his breath. "It may seem a light matter this, but to me—"

He stopped abruptly. "Thank you! Thank you! Will you tell me your name?" he added, his voice dropping to a grave respect that was as full of dignity as his suppressed passion.

Lucille crimsoned, then she raised her eyes and looked at him.

"My name is Lucille Darracourt," she said.

He did not start or utter a word, but he stood regarding her with a rapt look, "before" which Lucille's eyes dropped.

"I might have known," he breathed. "I might have known." There was a pause, then he went on in a very low, grave voice: "Miss Darracourt, there is no servant of them all who shall serve you more devotedly than I will do—no, not one! Till I die I will never forget what I owe you for those words; 'You shall stay.' God bless you and watch over you, Miss Darracourt!"

As he spoke he raised his strong, shapely hand, and then, bending down, he took the edge of her white muslin dress, and raising it reverently to his lips, kissed it once, twice.

The next moment he had gone, and Lucille was left leaning against the tree.

She stood while one could have counted twenty, until the sound of his footsteps had died out among the bracken, then, with a sudden quiver, she covered her eyes with her hands, and, woman-like, burst into a quiet cry.

And if Miss Verner had seen her then, she would not have had to complain of her coolness. The ice had melted; the kiss young Harry Herne had pressed upon her dress seemed to have reached as high as her lips, and it burned there like a live coal as she turned and fled toward the house.

(To be Continued.)

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