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A Great Intrigue,

—OR, THE— Mistress of Darracourt.

CHAPTER XVI.

He saw one or two of the men with whom he was transacting the business of the horses, and in the evening tramped back to his hut. He had taken no food all day, and was endeavoring to eat some supper, when there came a knock at the door.

He got up instantly, and opened it, and found Susie standing there.

She blushed prettily, as he smiled down at her in his kindly fashion, and said:

"Well, Susie, what do you want?"

"Oh, Master Harry!" she replied, with her little, shy pant, "I wasn't sure that you was at home, but I thought I'd just knock and see."

"Well, here I am at home," he said, trying to speak lightly. "What can I do for you? Has anything happened?" he added, quietly.

"Oh, no, no, Master Harry! but it's this: Miss Darracourt is just going to dress for a party at the Grange, and she wants some wild clematis for her hair, and I've come to get some. I knew there was a lot here, because I saw you plant it years ago—"

"She paused, breathless from her rapid speech, and Harry eyed her with grave perplexity.

"Did Miss Darracourt send you to gather wild flowers at this time of the evening, Susie?" he asked, quietly.

"Oh, no, no," replied Susie, rapidly. "It wasn't Miss Lucille at all. It was Miss Verner. I chanced to say how pretty they would look in Miss Lucille's lovely hair, and Miss Verner, who was there, beckoned me aside and asked me if I could get some. I said of course I would, and I told her that there was some growing here. She seemed quite pleased at my remembering, and told me to go at once."

"And you were not afraid?" he asked, absently.

"Afraid, no! Why, I've been thro' the woods at night hundreds of times! What is there to hurt me? Besides, if there was," she added, valiantly, "I'd go anywhere and through anything to please Miss Lucille!"

"Many of us would do that, Susie," he murmured.

"I shouldn't have taken the liberty of disturbing you, Master Harry," Susie went on, "but the very best of the bunch was above my reach, and I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind getting it down for me. Your arms are longer than mine, Master Harry."

"A little, Susie," he said, smiling. "Come along, and we will get enough"

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to make a wreath for Miss Lucille if she wants it."

He went out bareheaded—a trivial point this, but how often trivial points carry great weight in the throes of after events—and easily gathered a bunch of the clematis.

"Oh, that's lovely, Master Harry!" she exclaimed, as he handed her the long, trailing flowers. "How pleased Miss Lucille will be!"

He held a slip in his hand, and looked at it for a moment in silence, then he said:

"See here, Susie; I think this is the best piece. Keep it separate from the rest, and give it to Miss Lucille."

"So I will, Master Harry," she exclaimed, gratefully. "And I'll tell her you chose it for her."

"No, you need not—well, as you please," he said, turning his head away that she might not see the crimson flush that rose to his face.

"Picking flowers, young people?" said a voice behind them at that moment.

It was Hope, the keeper, and he stood and regarded them with a smile of approval and good-humored raillery.

"Yes," said Harry. "Susie, this is fortunate for you; you can have company home. Go with her to the house, will you, Hope?"

"Yes, Master Harry," said Hope. "My way lies here."

"Good-night, Susie," said Harry; then, as he was going, he beckoned to her. "You need not tell Hope why you came, and what you have got," he said in a low voice, obeying a momentary impulse which he could scarcely have accounted for.

"Very well, Master Harry," assented Susie, and tripped off beside Hope.

"Fine evening for a ramble, Susie," said Hope, looking down at her, with the same smile, "and just the evening for flower gathering. Ah! we all have our young days; but by George! I do envy Master Harry."

"Don't be so silly," remonstrated Susie; but she blushed, as was her wont, and Hope gave a chuckle, firmly convinced that he had caught the two sweet-hearts.

When Susie got back, Lucille was nearly dressed, for Marie Verner had offered her services during Susie's absence. Lucille was sitting with her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes fixed on the glass, but looking through it far away to that glade in the wood where she had listened to her first love avowal; but she turned as Susie entered, and uttered a low cry of admiration at sight of the clustering heap of flowers.

"Oh, Susie, what beautiful clematis! Where did you get it?"

"It is for you, miss," said Susie, blushing with delight. "You'll let me put a little in your hair, miss, won't you?"

"I will wear it all over me, if you like, Susie," said Lucille, with a smile; "let me see it. How good of"

you to get it for me. Did you get it?"

"Some of it," said Susie, and she waited until Marie had gone into the next room before she added, "Master Harry got it, miss; and, if you please, he picked out this spray for you. He said it was the best."

A rose-flush dyed Lucille's face, and she took the spray with trembling hands.

"It—it was very kind of him, Susie," she said, as carelessly as she could; "and—and I will wear it, of course. Put it in my hair—no, I will put it," she said, drawing it back as if loath to let her touch it. "When did you get it?"

"Just now, please miss."

Lucille turned her head and looked at her.

"Now! so late in the evening?" she said, with a smile.

"Oh, yes, miss. That's what Master Harry said, 'late in the evening.' But I'm not afraid. Oh, how beautiful you do look with it lying there in your lovely hair! Oh, I wish Master Harry could only see it!"

Lucille put up her hands to fix the spray so that they hid her face.

"It was very kind of him, Susie," she said, in a low voice; "and when you see him next you must tell him—now will you remember?" she asked in a low, tremulous voice.

"Oh, yes, miss, every word."

"Well, but I haven't told you. Tell him that I wore the spray he chose, and that it was the best of them all for many reasons. Can you remember that?"

"Yes, miss. Lor', how pleased he will be!"

Lucille drew a heavy sigh, and as Susie turned she took the spray from her hair again and kissed it quickly, passionately.

Marie Verner stood at the door unobserved, watching her, and her lips curved.

"Run down and tell them your mistress is ready, Susie," she said. "You are ready, ain't you, dear? What lovely clematis! That is Susie's work. She is a good girl—so quick and thoughtful! Though I suspect," she added, with a little laugh, "that Miss Susie's anxiety to get it sprang from another source as well as her desire to please you."

"What do you mean?" asked Lucille, drawing her Indian shawl round her.

"Oh, she and Harry Herne got it together," she tells me," she replied, with a smile. "Trust the most innocent of girls, dear, to seize an opportunity of snatching a few minutes with her sweetheart."

Lucille's face flushed, then grew pale.

"Marie," she said; "that is unjust to Susie and Harry Herne. This is not the first time; the other night you—"

She stopped and drew her brows together, and her hand went up to the spray. But it dropped again, and with a smile she went out of the room.

Mrs. Dalton was all ready and waiting in the hall. Marie was not going, for the best of all reasons—she had not been invited.

"This is a little party, as you know, my dear," Lady Farnley had said to Lucille; "and I don't want you to bring that pert minx with you. I like that stiff old woman, Mrs. Dalton, well enough; but I can't stand that Frenchy girl with the thin lips."

It was a special little party—select and limited to those friends whom Lady Farnley considered the elite of the county.

Lucille was late, and Lady Farnley was getting irritable and impatient; but her painted and powdered old face wrinkled into a smile as Lucille entered the room. The little indefinite buzz or murmur, which always announces the important guest, arose as Lady Farnley bent forward and kissed her, saying, half chidingly:

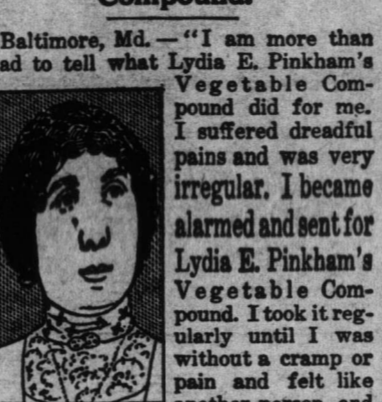
"You're so late, my dear, that we thought you were not coming. In that case I should have sent all these people home, had a basin of gruel, and gone to bed."

"That is all very well," said a low, soft voice at her elbow; "but gruel would not have consoled us for our loss, Lady Farnley. If Miss Darracourt had not come, some of us would probably have taken to poison."

It was the Marquis of Merle. He was pale, and composed, and impassive as usual; but there was a strange light in his eyes, which Lucille noticed in a vague way as he took her hand and bent over it.

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It was the light of victory and triumph, or the anticipation of both, and as it flashed upon her, Lucille recoiled instinctively. He was dressed with more than his usual care, and wore diamonds in his shirt front and at his wrists. The diamonds seemed to glitter in harmony with his eyes, and Lucille stood for a second as if transfixed by them; then she made some commonplace response to his high-flown compliment, and passed on. It was a brilliant party, and it was a brilliant success for her. She had never, so the men said, and the least ill-natured of the women admitted, looked more beautiful. The half-suggested radiance which Mrs. Dalton and Marie Verner had noticed seemed set like a halo about her; and the look of happiness which dwelt for a moment in her eyes, and lingered about her lips, rendered her charm simply irresistible. There were men there of rank and influence who would have been glad to marry her if she had been a Mary Smith and lacked a penny; conceive how close was the attention, how keen the competition to win a smile or a word from her.

To-night she danced only twice, once with the old Earl of Towerford, and once with the marquis; but though she danced with him but once, his presence seemed to haunt her. Wherever she went, the glittering eyes, the glittering diamonds, seemed fixed upon her. His low, soft, insinuating voice was always about her, if not addressing her, then in conversation with some one near her.

(To be Continued.)

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