



A Great Intrigue,

OR, THE Mistress of Darracourt.

(To be Continued.)

"Miss Darracourt, I have told you the story of this man's madness. He was a coward, you will say! Ah, yes, I know that! I have nothing but contempt for him myself. He ought to have crushed his folly under his feet—ought to have remembered that he was lower even than her servants, and stamped out the love which was an insult to her. Yes, he knew that as well as you and I do, but he could not, and so, perhaps, after all, he was not such a coward when he fled as he might have been if he had stayed. There was only one thing—" He paused, and his face darkened. "If he had stayed he would have found some joy, some hidden delight in watching over her. For this lady he loved was almost alone in the world, with no friend to guard her. And there were dangers in her path of which, though he could not tell their full extent, he knew something. There was one man, a near neighbor of hers—a nobleman—of whom he knew more than she did. This man was base and false! He might have stayed and guarded her, but he dared not! The most he could do was to utter a word of warning."

He paused and looked up at the sky; the rain was still coming down, but no longer with its former violence, and there was a rift in the clouds through which the sun was struggling bravely. "My story ends with the rain," he said. "I am afraid that it has not amused you, after all, Miss Darracourt," and he smiled with mingled sadness and bitterness. Lucille made no movement, nor said a word.

"There ought to be a sequel, I suppose," he said, slowly. "I could tell it in a few words. The lady fell in love with one of her own class, was married, and lived happy ever afterward, as she deserved to be, Heaven bless her! The man—well, he left the place which had become home to him, and turned wanderer on the face of the earth. And everywhere he went, his goddess was ever in his heart, and day and night he thought of her, and his love grew instead of diminishing, and so he lived unhappy ever afterward, as he deserved to be!"

He laughed a short laugh, and, picking up her saddle, put it on the horse. Then he approached Lucille, where she still leaned motionless. "It has nearly left off," he said;

"there will be no more. I do hope you are not wet." Still she remained, without moving a limb.

He shook the water from his arms and his hat, and passed his hand encouragingly over the mare's back.

"Are you ready, Miss Darracourt?" he said, gently. "I am anxious that you should get home now. I should not like to think that you had come to harm in my keeping! That would be a sad thought for me to take away with me."

Lucille raised her head; she was pale to the lips, almost white, but her eyes shone with unusual brilliance as she put up her hands to untie his coat; but they trembled so that even the simple knot was impossible to her.

"Undo this," she said, and her soft, clear voice was almost harsh. He came up to her, and put his hand upon the coat sleeve.

"Are you angry with me?" he murmured. "Do not be! I shall soon be gone!"

Lucille, who still fumbled at the knot, let her hands fall, and her eyes met his. Her lips opened as if she was about to speak, then closed again. "You are not wet, thank Heaven!" he said, devoutly. "I should never have forgiven myself if you had caught cold! Come now, miss."

But she hung back, her eyes fixed as if she was looking beyond him, her hands clasped nervously.

"Ah, you are angry!" he said, with a swift contraction of the brows. "Be patient with me; bear with me for a day, the last time! Don't let me go with a hard word of yours in my memory!"

Then she spoke—harshly, almost hoarsely, she murmured: "Do not go!"

He raised his eyes to hers, and started; then his face went pale, and his lips trembled, and he stood before her, silent and breathing hard.

"Do not go!" she repeated. He put out his hand, almost pleadingly, as if to stop her from saying more; but she paid no heed to the gesture, and went on, hurriedly:

"I do not wish you to go—I wish you to stay!"

Huge drops gathered on his brow, and his lips trembled. She stood before him, a vision of loveliness—more, a woman melting in the fire of a woman's passion. Something, some evil devil, whispered to him, "She is yours—take her to your heart, oh, fool!" And for a second he seemed to be yielding to the tempter's voice; then, with an effort which seemed to rive his soul, he said:

"No; I cannot stay—I must go!"

"Do not go!" she whispered again, scarcely knowing what she said, speaking just what her heart prompted. "I wish you to stay."

"You wish me to stay!" he said, slowly, huskily. "You wish, now you know, Miss Darracourt—Lucille—!" With a thrill at the sound of his voice uttering her name, she raised her eyes to his. Their glance met for a moment; then, with a cry, he sprang forward and caught her in his arms.

Upon them the sun, piercing the dark clouds at last, shone with the brightness of its summer radiance; the birds shook the raindrops from their wings, and burst into song; the river ran laughing once more toward the sea; all nature seemed to smile upon the woman's surrender and love's victory.

For while one could count twenty he held her fast locked in his embrace, his eyes looking into hers, his lips bent toward her face thirstily.

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Then, as if a thought had smitten him suddenly, he still holding her in his arms, rose to his feet and held her half fainting, from him.

"Oh, my love, my love!—what have I done?" he cried, in an agony of remorse. "What have I done?"

Lucille looked down at him, with heavily-drooped lids and tremulous lips.

"What have I done?" he repeated, like the cry of a man in the agony of despair. "Oh, my love, forgive me! I am not worthy to touch your hand, and I have dared—! Lucille, I have won your love, and I am lower than your hate! Oh, Heaven forgive me! Heaven forgive me!" and he bowed his head upon her hand.

She put forth her other hand and laid it upon his head with the slight, fluttering touch of a bird, while her glorious eyes shone upon him with the effulgence of a woman's first love.

"Harry! Harry!" she murmured. "No, no! Don't speak to me!" he groaned. "Lucille!—Miss Darracourt!—Oh, Heaven! how shall I tell you? I am not worthy even to kneel at your feet! I love you! I love you! But you—you must not look at me—touch me! There is a gulf between us that even such love as mine cannot cross! Lucille, I am lower than the lowest of your servants—there is a stain upon my life—"

He broke off, panting and breathless, and for all response she murmured once more: "Harry!"

"A stain which death cannot wipe out!" he went on, hurriedly, almost fiercely. "Don't tempt me, Lucille, or I shall forget that I am an outcast—and—nameless!"

She shrank back, more from the vehemence of the words than any significance which they conveyed.

"Do you hear?" he cried, hoarsely. "Nameless! Do you know what that means? Do you know the depth of degradation in which I am sunk? And do you think I will drag you down into it? No! Rather than that I would bear your scorn and contempt! Lucille, have pity on me! Send me away in anger, with the contempt I deserve! Don't tempt me!"

The sight of his anguish unnerved her.

With a low cry, she shrank still further from him and leaned against the tree, almost in her old attitude.

He rose, white and exhausted.

"Lucille—for I will call you so for this once—listen to me. Don't speak to me, don't look at me, or I am lost! Lucille, I did not know, I did not dream—that that you loved me! If I had I would have cut out my tongue

before it should have uttered a word to betray you. Lucille—oh, my darling, how can I tell you? Ah, I cannot! I can only tell you that we must part! A cruel fate divides us! I love you! In those words all my wretched story is told! I love you, so truly, so deeply, that even though I have won your love, I will not drag you down to my level! No; there is enough of manhood left in me still for that! What! drag my goddess to the level of my mire! No, Lucille! Others will tell you what I am. Spare me the story from my own lips. Enough that any love between you and me is impossible. Oh, Heaven! how hard it is! but, hard as it is, I will save you against myself—yourself! I will go at once—to-morrow—the day afterward. You will see me no more. Dearest, let this day be blotted out from your memory; let it be as if it had not been! You will never see me again. Forget that ever such a man as Harry Herne existed. Be happy, dearest, and I shall be happy! Ah, though thousands of miles divide us, though we shall never look into each other's eyes again, I shall be content. For I have this to comfort me, Lucille—that if Fate had been less cruel to me, I might have won you!"

He stopped, heartbroken and crushed by the struggle.

"Come!" he said at last, pale and trembling still, but firm and inflexible in his noble resolve to save her from herself. "Come! This shall be as if it had never been. You—you are the Lady of Darracourt, and I am your servant, the vagabond and ne'er-do-well, Harry Herne."

He stood by her horse, his head erect, his face illumined by his heroic purpose, and waited for her.

Lucille, with an effort, came toward him. He trembled as she approached, for the longing to take her in his arms, and hold her against all the world and his conscience high overmastered him; but he fought against it and conquered.

She came and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Is that the last word?" she whispered, tremulously.

"The last!" he said, hoarsely. "There is no help for it!" But as he took her in his arms, he bent his head and kissed the fold of her habit as it touched his face.

"The last?" she repeated, and her face went white as death, as she looked heavily, vacantly before her. "Then you have broken my heart!"

(To be Continued.)

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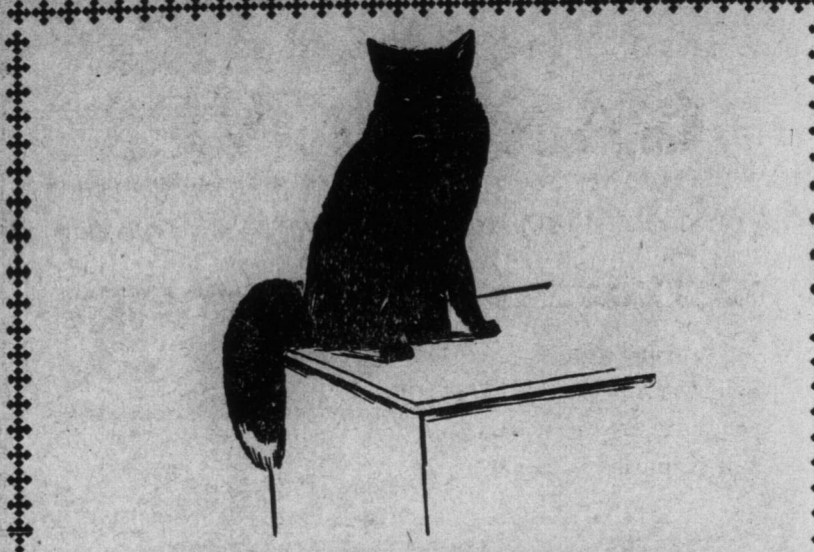
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