

'Twas in September.

(Continued.)
CHAPTER IV.
ROMEO AND JULIET.

Six weeks had elapsed since the return of Lord Lovel to Briancourt on the eventful evening of the bridal home-coming, and the threatening of a tragedy, that seemed, like a storm to have disappeared.

All that remained of it was a shadow in Magdalen's deep, serious eyes, and the cloud that brooded on Lord's brow.

And still the two persons peace and happiness were chiefly menaced saw nothing; the earl because he was accustomed to his young wife's gravity of manner and his son's alternating moods of pensive melancholy and vivacious gaiety, and Juliet because she was blinded by the dazzling glamour of first love, and, for the time being, looked out on the world through a golden haze.

As for Meredith Fane, he stood on one side, and watched the development of events with a keen and anxious interest, very much as he might have studied the working out of a subtle and complicated plot.

Being somewhat of a fatalist, like most men of imaginative temperament, he deemed it both foolish and useless to interfere, devoutly hoping, however, that matters might take such a turn as would ensure the happiness of the being he loved best in the world—his daughter Juliet.

On a certain pleasant afternoon towards the close of October, Lord Briancourt and his son were sauntering up and down the terrace, smoking. It was about half-past three. Luncheon was over, and Lady Briancourt had gone out driving. Both men were silent, and appeared preoccupied. The earl was the first to speak.

"When am I to congratulate you, my boy?" Lord Lovel started.

"Congratulate me, dad? I don't understand." "Are you quite sure of that, my son? If so, I am sorry to hear it," replied the earl, gravely. "I do not believe in preaching outside the pulpit, and I have no wish to give advice unasked, but I cannot refrain from saying, Cuthbert, that I think you are treating Juliet Fane very unfairly. On the very first evening of your arrival you devoted yourself to her exclusively, and paid her the most marked attentions. Ever since then, too, you must admit that you have spent most of your time at the Dower House."

"I went to see Mr. Fane," replied the young man, anxious to justify his conduct.

"The principal scenes of the novel he is now working at are laid in Cairo, and, as he has never visited the place, I have been giving him the clearest idea I could of the local coloring—in addition to which, as you know, he keenly enjoys a gossip about Art."

"Certainly, certainly," assented the earl; but I presume that Juliet was more often present than not at these interviews, and took part in the conversation—not that I hold you in any way responsible for that; but I believe she is sitting to you as a model for 'Marguerite'?"

"She is. But there is surely nothing compromising in that? I might ask the same favor of Lady Briancourt."

"You might; and, besides giving me great pleasure, it would not be refused. What is more, Mrs. Grundy herself could not find anything to cavil at, since Lady Briancourt is your stepmother."

"As these last words left the lips of the earl, he distinctly saw the young man wince and turned pale, and it puzzled him. Was it possible, that after all, his son secretly resented the fact of his second marriage?"

"If so, thought Lord Briancourt, perhaps the reason why Cuthbert had of late absented himself from home, and spent his days at the Dower House, was because he either did not like his stepmother, or could not reconcile himself to the relationship that had sprung up between them, and therefore avenged her as much as possible."

Had he not even expressed a wish to resume his wandering existence? The thought that such might be the case filled the earl with a keen distress; but for the moment he put it from him, and returned to the topic already started.

"I don't like interfering in a matter that is so purely personal, my dear boy; but my strong and fond affection for you gives me the privilege to do so. I am sure that you would not deliberately behave badly to any girl, and yet you are behaving badly to Juliet Fane. If you cannot see that she is most ardently in love with you, and has been so ever since the first, all I can say is that you are as modest as you are blind."

"I may be blind," replied the young man, "for certainly I should never have found out for myself that Juliet Fane had lost her heart to me, and, even now, I fancy you must be mistaken."

"But I know that I am not. Why, the girl betrays her secret every time she looks

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at you. I don't want to lecture you; but I can't bear the idea of my son's conduct being open to criticism, neither do I like to think of that dear little girl being made unhappy."

"Heaven knows I would not willingly make any woman unhappy," said Lord Lovel.

"I know you wouldn't, Cuthbert, and that is why I ventured on a word of warning. It would be madness on your part to marry this girl if you don't care for her; but now that you are aware of the nature of her feeling for you, I do think it is your duty to discontinue your visits to the Dower House—for a time, at any rate. Perhaps it would be as well if you were to run up to London for a week or so."

The young man was about to answer, but at this moment the tete-a-tete between father and son was interrupted by the approach of the butler, who came to tell the earl that the vicar had called and would like to see him, and Lord Lovel was left alone.

Having lighted a fresh cigar, he sauntered down the terrace steps and across the lawn.

The expression of his handsome face was not a happy one, nor did he feel any happier than he looked.

The longer he thought over the matter recently discussed, the more convinced he became that his father was right. He best knew why he had spent so much time at the Dower House, conversing with Meredith Fane, or painting fair Juliet's portrait as 'Marguerite'—glad of any pretext for absenting himself as much as possible from Briancourt, where he would inevitably be brought face to face continually with the woman whom he had learned to despise, and whom it was his object to avoid.

The memory of Magdalen's great mournful eyes as he had seen them last, haunted him all the more persistently because their expression perplexed him—an expression that was neither defiant nor deprecating, but full of reproach and pain; but he hardened his heart against her, and, when forced to look at her, put into his glance all the contempt he felt.

What could an explanation avail, either, especially as he did not, and would not, believe a word she said? So he kept out of her way as much as possible, never addressing her, save in the course of commonplace conversation.

Not caring to visit, he spent an hour or so each day in the Briancourt covert with a gun at his shoulder and a dog at his heels; but, though a very fair shot, he was not a very good one.

The Dower House drawing room, talking with Meredith Fane over a cup of tea, or working at the portrait he had commenced of Juliet in the costume of 'Marguerite.'

And so it came about that Lord Lovel dropped into the habit of spending more of his time at the Dower House than at Briancourt—a habit which had naturally led the earl to the conclusion that the attraction at the Dower House must be Juliet.

"If my father thinks I have behaved badly to this girl, her father, possibly, is of the same opinion," mused the young man, moodily, as he sauntered across the park. "It certainly did strike me that he was not quite so cordial as usual yesterday; and Juliet's eyes looked suspiciously red, I fancied."

"Could it have been on my account that she was crying, and that her father looked stern? I feel like a coxcomb to even suppose such a thing, and yet—yes—and yet!"

On looking back over the past six weeks, he seemed, since the earl had opened his eyes that afternoon, to see things in quite a new light.

"The fact of it is," said Lord Lovel, to himself, ruefully, "I appear to have behaved like a brute and a cad; but now the question remains—how am I to repair the mischief? He stood still for a moment to think, then suddenly his troubled face cleared. 'I know what I'll do. I'll find out if she really does care for me as much as the dad imagines, and, if so, I will ask her to be my wife. Why not?'"

"It seems to me I cannot do better. I am not absolutely in love with her, perhaps; but then, I shall never love any woman again—the faculty of loving is dead within me. Still, I feel that I could grow very fond of her. I am that already in a cousinly sort of fashion—she is so sweet and winsome, and, in trying to make her happy, I might—who knows?—find happiness myself, or, at any rate, grow reconciled to life, which, at present, seems all out of joint. Yes, that is what I will do."

Like all men of the artistic temperament, Cuthbert Dunallen was impulsive. No sooner had he made up his mind than he prepared to act upon his decision. Mechanically—by the force of habit, as it were—his steps had turned, with his thoughts, in the direction of the Dower House, and, by the time he had made up his mind to ask Juliet Fane to be his wife, he had reached the rustic bridge that spanned the river and led to the Dower House grounds.

He was more than half way across it when he overheard a sweet voice singing. The voice, plaintive, rather than powerful, was familiar to him, and, looking in the direction whence the sound proceeded, he caught sight of Juliet seated in a boat, rowing with lazy strokes towards the bank. A minute later he was with her, and had taken the oars into his own strong hands. A few powerful strokes, and the boat shot out into the middle of the stream. The young girl watched him with tender, shining eyes. She was looking her prettiest in a pale, soft, china-blue gown and a big white pic-

ture bat covered with wild flowers and blue ribbons.

"That is all very well," laughed Juliet, "but it does not seem to occur to you that I might possibly wish to go home."

"Are you in any particular hurry?" "No," replied the young lady, with a lazy smile, as she leaned back against the crimson cushion and watched her companion's handsome face, lighted up by the afternoon sunshine. "I had a couple of letters to write, but they can wait. Have you been out with your gun today?"

"No; I have been thinking." "Ah! I thought you looked tired."

"Do you wish to insinuate that such exertion is unusual on my part?" he demanded, in a tone of mock indignation. "Now as a punishment for your impertinence, miss, I have a very great mind not to tell you what my thoughts were about."

"Oh! don't say that. I'm willing to offer you a penny for them."

"Not one of the Briancourts has ever been in trade—please to remember that. But to return to my thoughts," he added, with sudden gravity, as he left the boat drift slowly under the shadow of the overhanging trees, and lowered his voice almost to a whisper: "I've been thinking that, as I spend so much of my time at the Dower House, I might as well take up my abode there altogether."

"What would your father say to that?" retorted the young girl with a merry laugh, taking the words in their literal sense.

"What would your father say, I wonder? Would he accept me as a son-in-law, do you think?"

She lifted two bewildering and bewildered blue eyes to his as she answered, falteringly—

"I don't quite understand," and her eyelids drooped till the soft silken lashes rested like a fringe on her crimson cheek.

"Don't you?" Then bending lower, he whispered— "Will you let me be Romeo to your Juliet? Will you be my wife?"

One startled, shy glance she gave him, half happy, half afraid.

Her small white hands were clasped tightly in her lap, and the colour in her cheeks came and went with every breath she drew.

"Lord Lovel," she began, at length, "I—had no idea you—"

"Never mind your idea just now. Please to answer my plain question. Will you be my wife?"

"But you are sure you—you want me?" she persisted pathetically. "I really can hardly believe it."

"Little sceptic! Should I give you the chance of accepting me if I didn't?"

Tois argument seemed to convince her. She said no more for the moment, and he looked at her with all an artist's delight in the dainty perfection of her form and the exquisite colouring of the lovely little face, framed in with its frolicsome pale-gold curls.

"That, instead of pulling that very fine and inoffensive clove pink to pieces, you were to answer my question. Will you be my wife, Juliet Fane?"

"I—that is—yes," was the stammering reply, and the next moment the young girl hid her blushing face on her companion's shoulder.

"So far so good," said he putting his left arm round her and drawing him closer to him, "but now say—Cuthbert, I love you! give me a kiss."

Some minutes elapsed, and a good deal of coaxing and 'coaching' was required before Juliet could summon up courage to comply with this request, but the feat was accomplished at last, and even repeated several times—just for practice the young man suggested—and then five o'clock struck, and Juliet remembered that not only was there such a thing as tea but that her father would be waiting it.

"Do you think you could spare me a cup?" whispered the young man, in a tone of mock humility.

"Possibly, your lordship. Will you come and see?"

A very shy and blushing Juliet indeed it was that entered the Dower House drawing-room.

The novelist, of course, noticed the change at once.

"How guilty you look, Juliet!" he said, laughing. "If you were ten years younger I should suspect you of stealing plums."

"She has stolen something of much more value, Mr. Fane," said Lord Lovel. "And what is that?" asked Juliet's father though he guessed the answer before it came.

"The heart of your humble servant!"

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"And may I ask if your lordship intends to prosecute?" inquired the novelist, with a fine air of mock anxiety.

"Taking the tender age of the culprit into consideration, which brings her under the 'First Offenders Act,' I am willing to compromise, and except her hand in exchange."

"Am I to understand that you wish me to pronounce the verdict?" demanded Meredith Fane in a solemn falsetto; and the young man having bowed his head, the novelist continued, turning to the culprit, who was convulsed with laughter behind her handkerchief, "Prisoner!"

"As a penalty for the theft which you have perpetrated you are hereby sentenced to love, honour, and obey the plaintiff, whose heart you have so feloniously and wickedly appropriated."

"Thank you, your worship," was Juliet's saucy answer; and the next moment, her arms were round the judge's neck and "judge" and "prisoner" were hugging each other in a most undignified fashion, while the plaintiff looked on.

Then Meredith Fane, grown serious, turned, holding out his hand to Lord Lovel said with that simple dignity which was one of his most charming characteristics—

"The world will say that Juliet is a very fortunate girl, and that you are conferring upon her a very great honour. I grant that it is so, Lord Lovel, for socially I am not your equal. At the same time I must say that I think the luck is not all on her side."

"It is all on mine, I consider, Mr. Fane, and I will do my best to prove myself worthy of my good fortune."

"Make her happy, Cuthbert, that is all I ask, for my daughter is the dearest treasure on earth."

An hour later, Lord Lovel walked back, in the deepening dusk, to Briancourt. On the lawn he met his father and told him the news.

Nothing could exceed the earl's delight, unless perhaps it was his surprise, at this very unexpected announcement.

"But—but—I didn't know," he began in an elythy bewildered tone, "that you—"

"That I loved Juliet Fane? Nor did I, dad till you opened my eyes. You told me I was blind, you remember, and I think I was."

"Well, well, well, to be sure!" exclaimed the Lord Briancourt, "you couldn't have told me anything that would have pleased me better. I must go and tell Magdalen, he added as they entered the hall. "How delighted she will be!"

Whether delighted or not, Lady Briancourt offered her congratulations most graciously in the presence of her 'lord and master,' as the three stood in front of the drawing-room fire, and only she detected the look of satirical contempt in Cuthbert Dunallen's fine eyes as he bowed in acknowledgment.

CHAPTER V.
The drawing-room at Briancourt was a very spacious apartment, subdivided by several lofty Japanese screens, one of which was placed in front of the door so as to exclude all possible draught.

As the earl, who had dressed for dinner earlier than usual this evening, entered the room through the door left ajar, his foot-steps rendered noiseless by the thickness of the carpet, he was startled by the sound of voices talking in low, but animated, tones on the other side of the screen, and involuntarily he played the part of eavesdropper.

The voices were those of Lady Briancourt and her step-son.

Distinctly he heard his wife say, in passionate protest—

"This sort of thing cannot go on, Cuthbert—it is intolerable! You dispise me, and I do not deserve your contempt. All I ask is, that you will listen to my justification. I want to explain—"

"It seems to me so very unnecessary, besides being painful to us both. Why seek to rake up smouldering ashes? What can my contempt matter to you, the Countess of Briancourt? Or, if you have something to say, why not say it now, and get it over?" replied Lord Lovel, coldly.

"Because it would take too long, and we might be overheard," objected Magdalen, speaking, as she had done throughout, in a rapid manner. "I have something to tell you which you ought to know—something also to explain. You cannot refuse me, in common courtesy, if not for the sake of the past. If you will go into the pavilion after dinner, about half-past nine, I will join you there, and we shall not be disturbed. The steward is coming to see your father about mine, and their interview is sure, to be a long one. I must see you—and alone."

"Very well then, since you insist," was the young man's rather ungracious answer, "but I warn you that nothing you can say will alter my opinion of your conduct."

At this moment dinner was announced, and Lord Briancourt, gliding rapidly upstairs, came down again, appearing as if for the first time, on the scene.

What his feelings were the reader may imagine, yet on one, looking at his calm, smiling face as he took his seat at the dinner-table, could have guessed what a storm was raging in his angry and anguished heart.

The 'Pavilion' at Briancourt was a sort of greenhouse, constructed in the form of a Chinese pagoda, and filled with palms and giant ferns, and such exotic plants as require artificial heat but not an excessively high temperature.

Artistically arranged baskets, from which trailed long green tendrils, were suspended here and there from the roof.

Rustic seats stood around a table in the centre, and the floor was paved with black and white lozenge-shaped tiles.

It was a favourite resort of Magdalen's who, since her return from the honeymoon had spent many pleasant hours there with her husband, and oftener still with Juliet, working, or chattering, or reading aloud.

Lord Lovel, too, when at home made a

habit of smoking his cigar and perusing the daily papers in the 'Pavilion' every morning, and as a passage covered over with glass, led to it from the billiard-room it was easy to access, and at the same time a quiet retreat.

There was a second entrance to it from the shrubbery, but this was never used except by the gardeners, who alone knew where the key was kept, and, indeed, so completely hidden was the door by the palms and shrubs that screened it from view that even Magdalen was unaware of its existence, and Lord Lovel had forgotten it.

At a quarter-past nine the door leading to the billiard-room was noiselessly opened, and a woman entered in evening dress, with a black lace mantilla thrown over her head and shoulders.

This she loosened and presently threw aside.

In the subdued light of the suspended lamp she looked very pale and troubled.

The stormy Irish eyes were full of pain, and the lips tightly pressed together, as if with the effort to keep back rising tears.

Her grandly handsome, melancholy face was indeed a tragedy in itself.

Once or twice she paced the length of pavilion, the heavy train of her purple velvet dinner-gown sweeping the marble floor as she moved to and fro with that stately, majestic grace that was so peculiarly her own, while the soft light falling on her caught the gleam of the diamonds in her hair.

For a moment she stood quite still, as if lost in thought—then, with a long quivering, deep-drawn sigh, she sank into a chair, murmuring—

He must be told—I cannot go on like this.

A table stood near her. She leaned one beautiful bare arm upon it, and remained thus, with eyes downcast, motionless as a statue among the palms.

Suddenly, a footstep beside her roused her from her reverie, and, looking up she saw Lord Lovel.

"I began to think you were not coming. I told you I should come," he replied in a tone not less cold than his glance; "but kindly remember that I came at your request, not by my own inclination. Of what use is it to rake up the ashes of the past?"

"I want to explain to you," began Lady Briancourt, but her companion interrupted her, impatiently, with a mocking laugh.

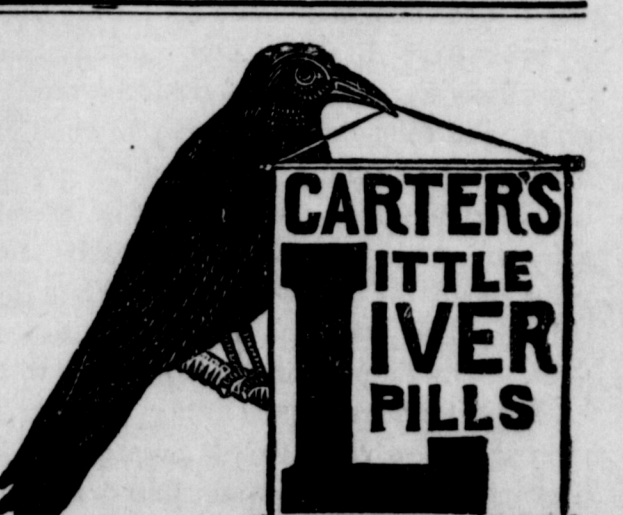
"Why you married my father? That surely requires no explanation. It seems to me as simple as ABC. In September of last year you and I happened to meet, under somewhat romantic circumstances, among the mountains that surrounds your father's Castle of Killaleen, in Killarney. I introduced myself to you as 'Claude Reynolds,' a struggling, ambitious artist, and I fell in love with you. You allowed me to think that the sentiments you had inspired were reciprocated. We saw a great deal of each other. No: a day passed but we met and spent hours together—the happiest hours of my life—rowing on the glorious Killarney lakes, or wandering through the grand old woods that clothed the mountain sides, and while I sketched, you would sit beside me, watching me work, and sing to me sweet Irish ballads, and that song—my favorite—'Do you Remember?' by Philip Yorke, the one I always asked you for, and which you were cruel enough to sing the first evening we met again so unexpectedly."

"I thought you might have spared me that, when you must have known the memories it would awaken in my mind, still sore with the shock I had received; but it is over now, and perhaps it was as well you acted as you did. Your callousness helped to cure me as no kindness would have done. It cauterised the wound."

"You misjudge me, Cuthbert. If I seemed cruel, it was not my fault. That song, 'Do you Remember?' happens to be a favorite with your father also; had I refused to sing it when he asked me to do so, my refusal would have excited comment."

"Well, anyhow, it doesn't matter now," replied the young man in the same tone of quiet bitterness. "It is all over. The past is a grave in which we shall do well to bury

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)



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