

Captain Despard's

Dilemma.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

A charming little place was Somerville, in size resembling an overgrown village more than a town, entirely surrounded by hills, with a silver stream, hardly large enough for the name of river, winding in and out, and finally encircling the whole district in a loving embrace.

Perhaps, all things considered, it was rather dull, and certainly it was very unsocialable.

Strangers from great cities who came there, either to visit or to settle, at first raved incessantly of the splendid scenery, pretty girls, excellent boating, the dolce far niente of the place, but gradually their enthusiasm waned, then died away, and after giving it six months' trial, few people remained who could conveniently avoid it.

Truth to tell, Somerville was a pronounced type of the dullest kind of town or province, not the calm, sweet repose of the country.

Society was split up into various cliques, and woe to the individual who attempted to be cosmopolitan in his friends—hatred and derision from all quarters descended upon his unlucky head, and the last state of that man was worse than the first.

The two sets which ran each other the hardest were, first, the well born private and professional families who, though not always overburdened with wealth, yet visited with the country magnates, and were included in the invitations for the county hunt ball twice a year, and all similar functions.

Following closely on the heels came the second set, who having mostly made their money in trade, were almost vulgarly rich, profusely lavish in their hospitality, less exacting in their requirements, and, if the truth must be told, perhaps more genuine in their friendship.

They ran the first set very hard, and occasionally scored a triumph.

More than one person found the awkwardness of this armed neutrality pervading Somerville; but, perhaps, it embarrassed no one quite so much as it did two families who lived in Martin Square—neighbours whose names so nearly resembled one another, that constant confusion resulted therefrom, the suffix of an 'e' being the only distinguishing mark between them. Only an 'e' did it say? Why, it proved the battle-field of the whole town many a time, and more confusion resulted from that unlucky vowel, added or omitted, than from any other name in the directory.

The Brownes—who boasted the proud distinction of the final 'e' and who made a point of declining to receive any letters or parcels bearing its magic mark—were really one of the nicest families in the place, and universal favourites.

They were four in number—Major and Mrs. Browne, and their two daughters, answering to the names of Sybil and Maud, aged respectively twenty four and twenty three.

Sybil was very handsome, and knew it, but she did not charm people quite so much as her sister did.

Maud was so sweet, so unaffected, so unconscious of her own attractions—not regularly beautiful, perhaps, but so amiable, bright, and generally pleasing in countenance—that she found favour in all eyes.

The second family named Brown—spelt without the 'e'—were two very wealthy sisters, of about twenty nine and thirty years of age, who were comparative new comers in Somerville, having only come there a year or so ago, when, on the death of their parents, they decided to retire to a quiet place until they had somewhat recovered from their loss.

Strangely enough, they took a house in the same square as their namesakes, and, as may be imagined, from the very first this caused no little confusion, and occasioned both families much annoyance.

Frequently letters and parcels fell into the wrong hands, and occasionally invitation were received and accepted by the wrong family.

Major Browne, being rather choleric, seemed inclined to regard the newcomers as intruders, and to imagine they had purposely come to the place to annoy him and from the very first desired his family to ignore them.

They obeyed him as much as possible, until one day they found themselves face to face with the Browns in Mrs. Montague's drawing room, and, perforce, had to become acquainted.

The Montagues were doubly blessed with a good position and ample means to keep it up, on which account, perhaps, not only did Mr. Montague successfully compete for a seat in Parliament, but was unanimously elected as mayor of the town.

Major Browne was one of his strongest supporters, and the two men, becoming exceedingly friendly during election-time, and finding many tastes in common with each other, tacitly arranged to improve their acquaintanceship and see more of each other in future.

'By-the-by, major, my wife is having a small 'At Home' on Saturday afternoon. She is sending your people cards, so perhaps you'll come and bear me company, and remain to dinner afterwards. We are thinking of giving a ball to the townspeople and want a few intelligent suggestions.'

'With pleasure,' replied the major promptly, with the result that on the Sat-

urday he and his wife, with their two daughters, called at The Cedars, found themselves placed near their neighbours, the two Miss Browns, and, perforce, made their acquaintanceship.

'Oh, Major Browne, allow me to introduce to you Captain Reginald Despard!' said Mrs. Montague, pausing for a minute at their side; and the next instant a remarkably good looking young man, quite a stranger in the place, seated himself near their quarter, and remained there, chatting to one or another, until he took his leave at six o'clock.

He turned out to be visiting in the neighbourhood, and was in the same regiment as one of Mr. Montague's sons, and, at his appearance, both sets in Somerville prepared for warfare, and fought in tooth and nail for the honor of winning him for their side.

Many were the hints thrown out to him, that he was expected to attach himself exclusively to one party or the other, to which he paid not the slightest attention.

He had come to Somerville to amuse himself, and really the ridiculous airs of the inhabitants, the scorn with which one regarded another, the taint of poverty and trade fighting grimly together, struck him as being exceedingly comic, and so he went on his way, seeking pleasure, and finding far more than he had looked for.

Captain Despard was what is commonly called 'a great catch.'

Young, rich, extremely handsome, heir to a baronetcy, moving in the highest society, and possessed of unusual powers of fascination, he created quite a sensation in sleepy Somerville, where marriageable men were scarce and eligibles almost an unknown quantity.

All doors were opened to him, matrons and maidens alike smiled upon him, and it was little wonder that he voted Somerville to be an unusually jolly little place.

That afternoon at the Montagues', when he was taken up and introduced to Major Browne and his family, he very naturally assumed that all four girls were his daughters, and on that account divided his attentions equally between them.

No one guessed that, whilst lounging carelessly at one of the entrances, he had been suddenly smitten with the witchery of a girl's face, her sweet smile, her merry laugh, and that he had asked his hostess to introduce him to her.

'There are such a lot of pretty girls here,' she had replied, 'with a half laugh, "which one has especially taken your fancy?"'

'That one in white, with the poppies in her hat, and the corn colored hair,' he replied promptly.

'Oh! one of the Miss Brownes, I suppose,' replied Mrs. Montague; 'this is their first call here. My husband has taken such a fancy to their father that no doubt we shall see a good deal of them in future. Come along, I'll plant you right in the midst of them, and leave you to improve your acquaintanceship as best you can.'

She did so, and hence his natural blunder. The nearer he was to Maud, the deeper his admiration for her became.

There was something in her face and expression which charmed him, inexplicably, yet he showed no trace of it in his manner that first time. No, he divided his attentions equally between, as he thought, the entire family, meaning to cultivate a general friendship with them all, and, later on, improve a special acquaintance with Maud.

Was his fancy returned? he wondered, as he wended his way home.

Something in her look and manner seemed to tell him it was, and he felt an unusual restlessness steal over him, and a wild desire to look into her sweet violet eyes again.

It was love at first sight—sudden, swift, incomprehensible.

When he rose that morning he was light of heart and fancy free, preparing to take leave of Somerville and his host at no distant date, after an exceedingly pleasant, but uneventful holiday.

When he went to bed at night he was searching in his mind for some plausible excuse for remaining a little longer.

An invitation to a river picnic, which came by the next day's post, answered his purpose.

He bade adieu to the Hornbys, and took up his abode at an hotel "just for a few days."

He went to the picnic full of hope. In a small place like that, he thought, people couldn't afford to omit such an attraction as the youngest Miss Browne.

He was doomed to disappointment.

He did not see her, or even hear her name mentioned; but on Sunday, in church, his eyes suddenly alighted on a grave, sweet, devout face quite near to him, and his heart gave one wild throb of delight as he recognised the girl he had been searching everywhere for, ever since he met her at the Montagues' "At Home."

The days dragged slowly on. His man servant grumbled at being detained so long in so dull a place, and some of his brother officers wrote chaffing letters about the unknown "attraction" which they threatened to come and unearth for themselves.

Then he began to question himself on the point, and his heart gave the answer.

A girl's face floated before his sight, a pair of lovely violet eyes haunted him night and day, and some voice, which gained

strength every hour, seemed to whisper to him that when he left he must take her with him.

Fate had brought him to Somerville, and what seemed but a strong fancy grew into passionate love; yet, in his case, as in all others, the path of true love ran anything but smoothly.

It would have been laughable, if not so very exasperating, to find the number of small obstacles which blocked the way towards improving his acquaintanceship with the Browne family.

He very rarely met them anywhere, and when he did come across them at any mutual friends house, never once did he succeed in attaching himself to their side.

His hostess would politely but firmly contrive to call his services into requisition for one of her own daughters or some favored guest, and, once borne away, his vacant seat was all too quickly filled by some other person.

Every time he saw Maud, however, his attachment to her grew stronger.

The tacit opposition to his wishes only seemed to increase his ardor, and he told himself stubbornly that, sooner or later, he would succeed. Spurred on by this thought he dropped in at a fashionable florist's and ordered an exquisite bouquet of white roses, mignonette and stephanotis, paying the exorbitant price demanded for it very cheerfully, and saying carelessly, as he handed his card to the assistant—

'Please put this in the box, which is to go to Miss M. Brown, Martin Square. You know the number, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes, sir; know the family well—very good customers of ours—very fine-looking young ladies, and very fond of flowers.'

'Of course,' assented the captain hastily. 'Send them on at once, please. Good morning, to you,' saying which he left the shop and sauntered slowly down the street.

'What confounded bad luck I've had!' he muttered to himself. 'I've been deluged with invitations from nearly every family but hers, and try as I will, I can't secure an entree to their house. I was fairly ashamed of the way I fished for one with that sister of hers the other day, but it was no good—she couldn't or wouldn't take the hint.'

'By Jove! who could imagine those four girls could possibly be sisters, they are quite unlike one another—speech, appearance, style; all agreeable, and one divine. Oh, good-morning, Mrs. Montague!' suddenly recalled to every-day life by finding himself face to face with that lady. 'You have returned to Somerville, then?'

'Yes; two days ago,' she replied with a smile; 'and very glad to find you are still here.'

'Ah! you flatter me, Mrs. Montague,' he said laughingly. 'Not at all; but I mean to utilize your services for myself if possible. It is about that ball you have heard us speak of. Well the invitations are being sent out today, and you have no idea how useful you can be to us in helping to draw up the programmes, music, etcetera.'

'M. C., in fact,' he said merrily, 'his spirits suddenly rising at the prospect of certain contingencies which might mark the occasion of the unexpected festivity. 'Pray make as much use of me as possible. I adore dancing. I have a genius for introducing the right people to each other.'

'And for flirtations galore,' she supplemented. 'Well, at a ball, a flirt is really an acquisition. Men are so scarce here, that the more they divide their attentions the better. I've just been calling at the Brownes', in Martin Square—you remember those pretty girls? archly.

'Certainly I do,' he said, 'I hope they are all quite well, I never seem to see them anywhere.'

'No, poor girls, they have not been out much—even less than usual. The major has not been well—influenza, or something of the kind, and has been ordered off to Ventnor or Mentone for a change. He started this morning with his wife, and I ran in with some fruit for them to eat on their journey. He certainly looked ill, poor fellow. I hope he will find the change does him good.'

Reginald's heart suddenly stood still: his interest in the ball had faded to nothing.

Two minutes back he had been of hope at what it might bring forth.

Mrs. Montague noticed his sudden gravity, and, guessing at the cause, said mischievously—

'But the girls are still at home, and they have permission to come to our ball, unless anything unexpected occurs, such as a sudden relapse. I made a particular point of obtaining their parents' permission. I'll chaperon them,' I said. I have lots of pretty girls coming, to whom I have promised to be a duenna for the evening so you must not put any veto on them. And I'll find them plenty of partners, and try to let them have a really good time.'

The captain's face cleared again, as if by magic.

'Please let me share the task with you,' he said significantly, 'especially as far as filling their programmes goes. I feel sure I—'

Now I must run off,' interrupted Mrs. Montague with a laugh, 'for I see the brougham patiently awaiting me. All I ask is, don't make yourself too conspicuous. I can see quite plainly you have a slight tendresse in a certain quarter, but remember how hideously short we are of men in this remote quarter of the globe, and be a good natured angel for once, and consider my position. We have scores of very pretty damsels coming, and must find partners for all of them. Good bye, don't forget about the programmes; give us plenty of waltzes, and a country dance, or two.'

The next minute she was gone, and he was alone.

'This is my opportunity,' he murmured, 'and upon the events of this ball hang my father up to the present, I have only thought on my own feelings in the matter, and have not even dreamt of hers.'

Suppose she is quite indifferent to me, or possibly attached or engaged to some other fellow, I'm afraid it would be an awful blow. What a fool I was for not ascertaining that before letting my own feelings run away with me so far. Heigho! for the little god of love!

CHAPTER II.

'Well, really, I do not understand it,' exclaimed Mary Brown, in tones of profound amazement; 'it is the most mysterious affair I have ever heard of in my life.'

'I see nothing so very remarkable in it myself,' replied Lucy, her sister, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if she were discussing an utterly unimportant subject; 'it is evident that Captain Despard has taken a great fancy to you—fallen in love—and, unlike most of the men in these parts, sees no reason for concealing his feelings.'

Mary Brown gazed earnestly and critically at her own reflection in the mirror.

She saw the face of a young looking woman who might be any age between twenty five and thirty, with large, dark brown eyes, set in an oval face, on which lay the shadow of deep sorrow in the past, with an infinitely sweet, womanly expression, and undoubted good looks; but the inspection did not satisfy her, for she said rather pathetically—

'I repeat I do not understand it, Lucy. I shall be thirty next birthday, and what good looks I ever had are on the wane. This face,' pointing to her mirrored portrait, 'is not the one to attract a young man's fancy, when there are so many prettier and younger ones all eager to smile upon him. My love affairs lie in the past; his in the future. He cannot be much over twenty five, and is as eager and impulsive as a boy. I am grave beyond my years, and cannot flatter myself that he could ever regard me with other than as an agreeable member of society, an elder sister, or—or—'

'Then why does he send you two bouquets, with his card enclosed? This one—holding up a mass of orchids and other rare exotics—must have cost a small fortune. There will not be another in the room to touch it. You always underrated yourself, Mary. You are still young, still beautiful enough to attract many suitors, and I see no reason on earth why Captain Despard should not ask you to marry him.'

'I hope to Heaven he won't,' exclaimed the other with unusual vehemence of tone and manner.

'Mary,' replied her sister, suddenly turning her keen, clever eyes upon her, and speaking in a slightly lower tone, as if struck by some unwelcome thought, 'don't tell me that you are still thinking of—of one who has no longer any remembrance of you, and the remembrance of whom has poisoned your best years. Oh, I thought you had more self respect, more common-sense—'

'Don't reproach me, Lucy, and don't spoil the evening by recriminations which can do no good, only harm,' said Mary hurriedly. 'I have done my best to put him out of my life. I—I had almost forgotten him, but these flowers somehow brought him so vividly to my mind.'

'He always sent me flowers, and I love every green thing under Heaven for his sake. There! now I have shocked you, but he was my life. I only exist now; I do not really live. I am slowly but surely drifting into an old maid.'

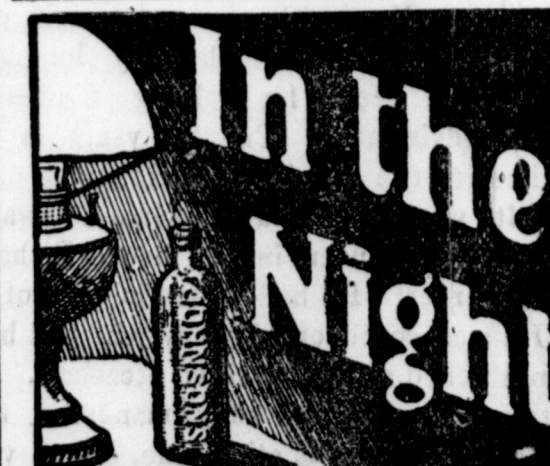
'The operation was becoming painless until these flowers brought everything so vividly before me again. Now I have finished, with an attempt at a gay smile, which, however, was only deeply pathetic, and we will not refer to the forbidden topic any more.'

'You—you will carry the bouquet?' pleaded Lucy, almost humbly. 'It—it seems so unkind to reject it, and he is such a nice young fellow, I should not like to hurt his feelings.'

'Nor should I,' replied Mary, with a slight blush, as she delicately selected a few blossoms from the profusion before her; 'so I will wear these, and you shall have a precisely similar bunch. I don't feel up to carrying the bouquet, so adopt this compromise. People here are so curious, you know; if I did as you desire it would be all over the room by ten o'clock.'

Captain Despard was one of the first to arrive at the Hall where the ball was to be held, and his spirits were exceedingly high.

Delight and cleverly did he enact the role set him by his hostess, and many a real encomium was showered on his head for his pleasant tact and charming manners.



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MONTREAL.

He was a perfect god-send to the wall-flowers, and it mattered not one jot to him who his partners were, or what they looked like, with one exception—Maud.

She was to be his 'evening,' and he asked for nothing else.

When he first saw her, she was seated near Mrs. Montague, with several other girls, and that lady beckoned him towards her with rather an arch smile and whispered—

'You will attend to the Miss Brownes. Poor things! They know so few people, and have no parents here to forage for them. Don't they look sweet? Quite the belles of the room. Now remember what I said—you are at liberty to please yourself if you please me too. Do your best, persuasively, as she turned to go away.'

'Can you spare me two dances?' he murmured in Mary Brown's ear, as he sank into the vacant seat beside her; and, with a slight accession of color, she smiled an assent.

Suppose Lucy was right, after all. Suppose—only suppose—this good-looking young man, with whom half the girls in Somerville were smitten, really had singled her out for especial attention.

It almost looked like it, for he had made quite a rush for her side, and was begging for two dances.

She would not have been a woman if a touch of gratified vanity had not made her smile her sweetest, and infuse some extra touch of pleasure into her manner.

In the case of Lucy and Sybil, he put down his name for one dance each, and, trembling with expectation, then ventured to ask Maud how many she could spare him.

'I'm afraid I've only two left,' she replied falteringly; and eagerly he scribbled his initials against both, vowing to have some extras put on immediately for his own especial benefit.

'I've really done my duty,' he mused as he walked away, 'for I asked them all, dividing my attentions, as Mrs. Montague requested. The eldest and the youngest for two, the second and third for one. Miss Brown is very nice, I like her exceedingly, and to-night she is really splendidly handsome—wasted in a place like this; whilst, as for Maud she is divine. I wonder if she guesses anything of what lies in my heart, and what has kept me in Somerville so long. Those are my favourites, the eldest and the youngest; they are also the best-looking, and their beauty is not only physical, there is also the reflex of a pure, true soul shining from out their eyes. The other two are pretty in a commonplace way. Now for my 'duty' dances. This ball reminds me of when I had to take a horrid powder when a child—first the bitter, then the sweet. I'm glad Maud's dances come last, for I shall look forward to them the whole evening.'

But when his first dance with Mary arrived, he was charmed in spite of himself. She waltzed perfectly, she was one of the belles of the room, and an exceedingly good conversationalist.

Putting in a word here, or a question there, she contrived to make him talk of himself and his aspirations in life. Naturally the topic turned upon his mother, his home, his childhood; and, with a quick start of astonishment, he realized, as they rose to return to the ball room, that he had spoken more freely to this sweet, rather sad-eyed partner than he had done to any other person in the whole course of his life; not only that, but he had really enjoyed the tete a tete, and was quite sorry when it was over.

'We have another dance later on,' he said, as he passed on to his next partner, Lucy, 'and I am quite looking forward to it.'

Lucy smiled meaningfully at her sister as she went away on his arm, and a sudden blush sprang into Mary's face as she caught her sister's eyes.

Until that moment, she really had forgotten Captain Despard's supposed fancy for herself. There had been no touch of the lover or of sentiment in his manner, only of friendship.

'How exquisitely your sister dances,' observed Reginald, as he strolled across the room with Lucy. 'I quite congratulate myself upon securing her for a second'

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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