

Folly and Fate.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER III.

It was absurd fooling meriting, beyond a doubt, the punishment it received.

In spite of Mrs. Willoughby's persuasions, Kain kept on his rooms at Edgcliffe, though, apparently, merely for sleeping purposes.

Having ascertained that Miss Granger was an early riser, he was, henceforth, always to be found wandering about the rocks in the neighborhood of Thurlstan by seven o'clock a. m.

Then it scarcely was worth while to walk back to Edgcliffe for breakfast; and after that sociable meal, he became so inevitably involved in the plans for the day that Edgcliffe saw him no more until it was time to dress for dinner.

Oliver put to him occasional searching questions concerning the story.

He replied with the flimsy excuse that his study of her character must be more complete before he dared venture to hope to make her live in the pages of his next book.

A week passed, and they were still enjoying their dangerous game.

To the observers of this little drama Kain's wooing and Oliver's coy fencing appeared so like reality that they never doubted it was so.

Part of the charm to the two actors lay in the fact that they had their secret to themselves.

Kain declared that to share it with others would spoil everything, and Oliver agreed with him.

So they walk blind'y on towards the brink of the precipice carefully prepared for them by Oliver Rosedale's hands with a cruelty which does occasionally mark her dealings.

Major Rosedale's leave expired during the following week.

He was fully resigned to leaving his revenge incomplete when he learned that his place at Thurlstan was to be filled by Tom Henson, who, though born and educated in England, had the good luck to be the only son of an American millionaire, whose dollars had purchased an English bride of high birth, from whom Tom inherited his good looks and air of thorough-breeding, which, taken in conjunction with his enormous annual income, made him a most desirable prize in the marriage market—a prize which, notwithstanding encouragement from a hundred different directions, persisted in laying itself, with an obstinacy not to be controlled, at the feet of Oliver Granger.

Rosedale knew this, and made use of his knowledge before his departure from Thurlstan.

Going out of his way on the last evening to accompany Kain from Edgcliffe to Thurlstan, he opened up the subject of his successor to the hospitality of the Willoughbys.

'With I could be here when Henson comes I'd like to see his face when he finds you spooning with Miss Granger.'

Kain was conscious of an unpleasant sensation within him, suggestive of an ice cold finger laid on his heart.

'Mr. Henson's imagination must equal your own, my dear Rosedale before he will be able to "find" what does not exist. Miss Granger would be the last woman in the world to allow promiscuous "spooning"—to quote your very objectionable word.'

The irritability in his voice was due to the double fact that Oliver had successfully resisted all his attempts at "spooning" on the ground of her presumed obligations to the man called Tom, to whose coming arrival she had taken care to allude in terms which satisfied Kain—or rather dissatisfied him—that Mr. Henson, millionaire, and her Tom were one and the same.

'No offence, old man,' said Rosedale equably. 'And it's very good of you to stick by for Miss Granger. Only, it doesn't alter the fact that it looks a bit queer—her open encouragement of you, when all the world is waiting to know when the wedding is coming off.'

It had gone as far as that, then? Kain groaned in spirit as he began to perceive where his love of flirtation—concealed under the useful cloak of pretended devotion to the interests of art—had landed him.

He had not anticipated becoming genuinely attached to Oliver herself.

Well, fight was left him—that refuge of cowards, as he had been wont to describe it.

He felt thankful that he had not yielded to Mrs. Willoughby's persuasions to take up his temporary abode at Thurlstan.

He was free to leave the neighborhood at any moment, without having to invent an excuse for doing so.

'I don't see that my little flirtation with Miss Granger is likely to interfere with the date of Mr. Henson's wedding,' he replied, 'especially as I am leaving Overseas almost immediately. I cannot afford to be idle any longer and it is impossible to work in this lotus-eating sort of a place.'

'Leaving are you? I had no idea of it. Does Miss Granger know?'

'Really, Rosedale, I fail to see what business it is of yours. I don't wish you to inform Miss Granger of my coming departure, if that is what you mean.' The words had no sooner escaped him than Kain realized how completely he had given himself away. Turning savagely on his torturer, he declared: 'I have been a fool in imagining she was learning to care for

me, it is my own fault. She told me of—about—Mr. Henson at the outset of our acquaintance. Now be good enough to talk of something else.'

Rosedale was nonplussed.

He could not understand why Oliver should have gone out of her way to mention Tom Henson to Kain.

He thought the latter knew that no actual engagement existed between Tom and Oliver; for Henson had been at Scarborough that summer, and he—Rosedale—had witnessed, and rejoiced over, his discomfort at being refused, for at least the third time, by Miss Granger.

Oliver little guessing that Rosedale was working against her possible happiness like a snake in the grass, was rather pleased than otherwise that Tom Henson was coming to Thurlstan.

Regarding 'Sylvia' as a solid obstacle to all possibility of her being able to regard Chandos Kain as anything more than a 'stage' lover, she persistently shut her eyes to the truth concerning her actual feeling for him, and decided that she might as well accept 'poor old Tom,' and help him spend his dollars.

The Willoughbys had lived so entirely out of the world during the last twelve months, that they knew next to nothing of what was going on, and had no idea of the tendresse cherished by Henson for Oliver Granger.

Amy secretly intended him for Lady Clevedon, whom she longed to see 'happy' again.

Kain's announcement of proposed departure on the morrow was more than startling to all, except Rosedale.

'It's no use trying to write in this place,' he declared, 'and I can't afford to be any idle any longer. I shall have to work like a nigger for weeks to come, to make up for the time I have lost.'

'But I thought you meant to take a holiday,' exclaimed Amy. 'A whole month, you told me, and you have been three weeks.'

Jack Willoughby joined his wife in abusing the man of letters for his inconsistency and Lady Clevedon had a word or two to say on the same subject.

But Oliver was mute; she could scarcely have spoken had her life depended on it.

Glancing at her, Kain reproached himself for his abruptness, though his heart throbbed with passionate joy as he saw how it was with her; a sense of triumph—sweet though guilty—filled his veins when he thought of the man called Tom.

After dinner Oliver stole away to her beloved rocks, longing to be alone that she might inquire of her heart concerning the chilly misery which filled it.

Kain followed her, and Rosedale let him go, saying to himself—

'I'll give him five minutes, poor devil! I have no grudge against him. I wonder if she really is engaged to Henson, and if that had something to do with her refusing me? But they were not engaged at Scarborough—that I'll swear to.'

'Oliver!'

She had known he would come, and she was quite ready for him.

The face she raised to his was ghastly white; but there was no moon, so she had no fear of his becoming aware of that fact.

'Well Chandos?'

Her tone was careless.

He felt as though she had slapped him in the face.

He had joined her with his heart full of pity for her suffering which he had imagined to almost equal his own, and full of determination to overcome all obstacles—in the shape of men called Tom, &c.—which she might try to raise up.

As he was silent, she continued—

'Don't you think you might have broken the terrible news of your coming absence a trifle more gently to me? I was utterly dumfounded for a moment. It has been such fun! I hate to think it all over. Of course, Tom will console with me—in a coming off.'

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measure. I must tell him all about it. You won't mind, will you? How amusing he will be! Though I daresay he will scold me for daring to call you 'Chandos,' and for allowing you to call me 'Oliver.' I must make him see that it was really necessary to the interests of art—from your point of view.

'By-the-by, what about your theory concerning the non-suddenness of things in Nature or art? We met this morning, you and I; we were together, if I remember right, for a couple of hours this afternoon. Yet you did not so much as hint at leaving the neighborhood. In fact you offered to row me over to Lone Island tomorrow or next day.'

'I—I had a letter—a telegram. No—found it all! I won't lie to you; I will tell you the truth. You are cold as ice. It will not hurt you. Why should my pain hurt you? You will tell me for my comfort that it is all my own fault.'

He could not see how tightly her hands were locked together, and how firmly set was her mouth, as he took his old position at her feet, and began his mad confession of weakness.

He could not see how, as words of passionate love reached her ears, the rigid lips unclosed sufficiently to frame one sentence, which they repeated over and over.

'A woman called Sylvia—Sylvia—Sylvia! A woman called Sylvia—Sylvia—Sylvia!'

'I have been no end of a fool,' Kain's voice was full of scarcely repressed anguish, which he tried to turn into self-contempt. 'I ought to have known how it would be. As you are prettier than the average woman, so are you more lovable—more thoroughly desirable. I ought to have been warned when I found how sympathetic we were—you and I; how invariably you caught my meaning—and I yours—almost before a word has been spoken by either of us. Yet why should I have been warned more than you? You have escaped scot-free; why should I suffer? Why should I be compelled to love you, while you are indifferent to me? Oliver, are you indifferent? Is it all real?'

His hand found and clasped those rigidly locked fingers of hers; they served as a revelation to him.

He reached up higher in the darkness, and took her in his arms, with an exclamation of relief which sounded strangely like a sob.

'Darling! darling! How could you be so cruel? If you only knew what torture I have suffered! Oliver—sweetheart!'

She shivered, as she yielded for a moment to the exquisite joy of feeling his arms about her.

Her head dropped on his shoulder; her quick breath fanned his cheek, and roused him to further madness.

His lips found hers, and held them prisoner in a long, close kiss.

This roused her, and she tried to free herself.

'Mr. Kain! how dare you? Have you forgotten—'

Her passionate whisper was interrupted by the sound of footsteps and voices at the little gate above.

'I shouldn't advise you to try it, Lady Clevedon. You are not so used to these rocks as Miss Granger is, and the night is so confoundingly dark.'

Oliver struggled to her feet, calling out unsteadily—

'Quite right, Major Rosedale! Even I am afraid to venture any further. Stand where you are and hold out your hand, will you? I am coming. It is too weird for anything out here to-night.'

Chandos Kain, deserted and repulsed, tried to console himself with a viciously uttered 'swear-word,' but found the comfort, to be derived therefrom not only fleeting, but very incomplete.

CHAPTER IV.

Tom Henson arrived before Kain found another opportunity of seeing Oliver alone.

The two men were introduced to each other by Jack Willoughby in that gentleman's own happy manner, which, in this particular case, led to anything but a happy result.

'Allow me, Chandos Kain, novelist—Tom Henson, millionaire. Surprised you have never met before, considering that you are both good friends of mine.'

In age they were about equal; but as Kain looked at his rival, and noted the almost perfect beauty of his face, and the easy grace with which he managed his long limbs, and as he remembered that for every pound he himself earned, Henson could put down a hundred and scarcely miss it, why then a sort of savage despair took possession of his soul, and when he left Thurlstan that night, it was with the firm determination to start for town by the first convenient train next day.

Why should he try and link Oliver's life with his?—why think of dooming her to a perpetual atmosphere of humdrum work, when so different and brilliant a career lay open to her as Henson's wife?

So he passed out of her daily life, without a word of farewell or explanation concerning the woman called Sylvia and Tom Henson, profiting by his rival's morbid generosity, offered himself yet once again to Oliver Granger, and, this time, was not refused.

Oliver frankly despised herself for her motives for accepting him.

'I should be ashamed to own publicly to one of them,' she soliloquised, turning on her finger the magnificent opal ring with which Henson had lost no time in labelling her 'appropriated.' 'To begin with, being decidedly unhappy. I consider I might as well be miserable on cake and champagne, as on dry bread and water.'

'Tom is rich enough to give his wife everything she chooses to ask for. Then he is so superlatively handsome and distinguished looking, that nine women out of ten, if not ninety-nine out of every hundred, will be ready to set me for envy. And he is certainly very fond of me; and I like to be adored and all that.'

'All the same, Oliver Granger, I am very proud of you just now. You deliberately

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let him think that you have changed your mind about not caring for him; you allow him to think that you have promised to be his wife because you like him well enough to wish to go through life with him. Therefore, I am rather ashamed of you, Oliver my dear.

'But all the same, I really don't see that you are entirely to blame. You would have been content to marry him, if it had been possible; and he is neither particularly handsome nor particularly rich—probably he has nothing but what he earns.'

'Fate has denied him to you, and so you have a right to do the next best thing for yourself; only, you might have been honest about it. Tom's conceit, would you say? No; that won't do. He is not a bit conceited, and you know it. Does he know that opals are considered to be unlucky, I wonder?'

And so her musing ceased, as it had begun, in contemplation of her betrothal ring.

Her visit to Thurlstan having expired, she made her fine happy by consenting to accompanying him to the fine old place in Sussex, which had been a present to him from his father.

Tom had had the good taste to have things within and without just as he found them, and to keep as many of the servants as chose to take service with a new master.

A favorite cousin—pure American—who had married an English viscount, consented to act as hostess during Miss Granger's stay, though she secretly thought that Tom might have done much better for himself than to marry merely for love.

But Oliver's piquante beauty and perfect manner soon vanquished her, and the two became excellent friends.

Tom was as amiable as he was handsome, so it was not surprising if his betrothed gradually became something more than reconciled to the prospect of being his wife.

She believed Chandos Kain to be another woman's husband, and, in spite of occasional fits of folly, she was too good and too sensible to let herself dwell on his memory.

Her love for him did not die, it fell into a trance, and she buried it deep down in her heart, and made up her mind not to visit its grave oftener than she could help.

By the time her visit to Tom's place was over she was ready to return to town, where she had a temporary home with one of her half-brothers—an unmarried M. D. and heart specialist—who was very glad to welcome her back after her prolonged wanderings.

'When you marry I shall follow your example,' he announced on the morning after her arrival. 'I think I have found my ideal at last Oliver.'

'No! Really, Cyril? Tell me about her. Who is she?'

'Her name is Sylvia—Sylvia Barrington. She is good to look at without being beautiful. She is gentle in thought word, and deed. There are only two obstacles in the way—one is her youth—she is only just eighteen—the other, that she is devoted to another man, he being no less a personage than Chandos Kain, the rising novelist of the day, according to my ideas.'

Oliver started perceptibly.

A woman called Sylvia, and Chandos Kain!

Without thinking she exclaimed—

'But, Cyril dear, he is married.' Then remembering that this was perhaps Kain's secret, she added stammeringly: 'At least, I have heard so.'

'Have you? Whom did he marry, and when?'

'I don't know when, but she is a woman called—I mean her name is Sylvia.'

Dr. Marsh—he and Oliver had owned the same mother, but not the same father—leaned back in his chair and laughed.

'So that little fiction has reached your ears also? I wonder from whence? She is so genuinely distressed about it, poor child now that she is a young lady. But let me tell you how I came to know her, Oliver. I have been pining for a confidante.'

'It was a month ago to-day that I found her in the surgery when I came home to dinner. She had waited over an hour, refusing to be sent away, though Marks assured her that my consulting hours were over for the day, and declining to give an address to which I might call.'

'I felt a vexation at being kept from my well earned dinner, it vanished the moment my eyes rested on the anxious little face upturned to me so eagerly in the soft twilight.'

'Without waiting for me to speak, she began in the sweetest of low voices—

'Oh, Doctor Marsh, could you possibly come this evening to see my poor cousin? You are the great heart specialist, I know; and he is, I fear, suffering terribly from some form of heart complaint. I only found it out to-day; he has kept it quite to himself, foolish fellow. Three weeks ago he broke his leg. A very clever surgeon is attending to that—at least I hope he is clever—it is Mr. Stoneman.'

'She paused and looked at me questioningly.'

'I nodded reassuringly; but I suppose I frowned too—you know my habit when feeling a bit bothered; you see, I saw the impossibility of meddling with another man's patient. My little Sylvia is quick to read one's thoughts. She said at once—

'I know what you are thinking, but if I arrange with him for you to come in consultation, how would that do?'

'I said I would think about it if she would detail her cousin's symptoms.'

'He did not describe them very clearly,' she replied. 'In fact, I only found him out by accident. He is a sort of guardian to me—not legally; only, when my father died he took possession of mother and me, and promised to manage all our money matters. That was ten years ago. He doesn't live with us, because he prefers living in rooms; but he comes to see us very, very often—that is, he did so until he broke his leg, and since then I have been to see him every day. Mother cannot walk, or she would go too.'

'I read to him, and this afternoon I had just read out an announcement about some wedding that is to come off soon, when I heard a sharp sound like a groan. I looked up and saw that he was quite white. I asked him if he felt faint, and he murmured that it was a sudden pain just here—putting her hand on her heart—and I felt frightened when he confessed that he had had it more than once lately.'

'I have lingered over my little story for the pleasure of trying to remember word for word what that darling child said to me; but now I can get on faster. To please her I saw Stoneman, and asked his opinion as to Mr. Kain's heart. He seemed astounded at the idea of any mischief going on without his suspecting it, and next day he made a thorough examination—much he declared, to his patient's astonishment. He found the heart, and, indeed, all the vital organs, as sound as a bell; but, being a cautious fellow, he begged me to give an opinion on the subject.'

'I made my examination, and came to the same conclusion as his; whereupon Mr. Kain insisted on knowing our reason for what we had done.'

'I referred him to his cousin, and took my leave, accompanied by Stoneman.'

'Since then I have dropped into a habit of calling every other day or so to chat with the poor beggar, for he feels his imprisonment keenly.'

'I need not say that I time my visit, when possible to coincide with Miss Barrington's but the other day, when I got there too late for any chance of seeing her, Kain took occasion of her absence to allude to his supposed heart trouble, saying he had no idea she would go and do what she had done, but explaining her anxiety by hinting at the great affection existing between them.'

'In fact,' he concluded laughingly, 'Sylvia proposed marriage to me eight years ago, and, for a long time afterwards, always called herself my little wife.'

'I used to think we might some day bit it off and settle down together; but somehow I don't feel very keen about marrying now. I am rather inclined to hug my freedom.'

'I shrewdly suspect some woman—not my Sylvia, thank Heaven!—to be at the bottom of his disinclination to take a wife, some woman who is the sole cause of his "heart trouble".'

I questioned Sylvia as to whose wedding she had been reading about, when he interrupted her with that groan. But she could not remember, and the paper she had been reading from had got mislaid! But how queer you look, little woman! Have I bothered you with my long—Oliver, my dear girl, don't tell me—you mentioned Kain in one or two of your letters. I remember, when you were staying at Thurlstan.'

'Never mind, Cyril, it's all over now; and I am going to marry Tom, you know. So much better for all of us, isn't it? You see, he is so immensely rich, and you boys can all do with a helping hand. While, as for myself, I shall be the most envied woman in London. Only think of it, Cyril!'

'Don't, dear! I can't bear it. Tell me how the mistake arose; perhaps it can be put straight.'

'No, never; but I'll tell you all about it. It will be a relief, for I have not said a word to anybody, and we women sadly need a confidante at times. You and I always told each other our secrets, didn't we? So now, in return for your story about your little Sylvia, I'll give you mine about Chandos Kain. But what is the time? Can you wait now?'

'Yes, I am in no hurry this morning. Fire away dear.'

Oliver obeyed, and laid bare her heart to her half-brother, between whom and her self perfect sympathy had existed almost ever since the day, twenty-two years ago, when Cyril had taken the new baby from the nurse's arms, and had shown it proudly to his brothers as 'really and truly a girl, you fellows, so don't be rough, or you'll break her, perhaps.'

He refrained from chiding the folly which had been the original cause of the trouble now grievous trouble, surely, to know that her own hand had dashed the cup of happiness from her lips.

'I am rightly punished, Cyril,' she concluded.

(CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE.)

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