

Sworn Foes.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER IV.

But he passed her without so much as another glance, when the concert was over; though Mrs. Mainwaring and several of her guests went out of their way to speak to her, the former giving her an informal invitation to dinner for the following evening.

Eileen was about to refuse, shrinking involuntarily from a personal encounter with the man who had, seven years before, aroused such a tumultuous scorn in her young heart.

But she met his eyes again as she was about to decline and, fancying she read some sort of challenge in them, she changed her mind and, smilingly accepted.

She told herself she must have been mistaken, when in the Manor drawing-room, she stood face to face with Lord Serge, while Dame Mainwaring introduced them, and told them they were to go into dinner together.

In spite of his extreme languor this man could wake up on occasions, as Eileen had learned on the previous evening.

While under the influence of any mastering passion, he forgot his role of languid indifference and became a living thing.

But he did not wake up that evening. From the moment when he acknowledged his introduction to Miss O'Halloran until he said good-night when the carriage came for her, he was the Diamond St. Clair she had known at the Glencarty ball—courteous, and occasionally an using, but coolly indifferent, and apparently tired to death.

Not once did he refer to that almost tragic occasion.

But for knowing certainly that he was St. Clair himself, Eileen would have doubted and doubted until she persuaded herself that he must be somebody else.

Either he did not recognize, or he was determined to ignore the past, and this suited her so well that she took her cue from him very readily, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the moment.

'You live in this neighborhood?' asked the baron, when dinner was in full swing.

'For the present, yes.'

She did not mean to be beguiled into giving him information concerning herself.

'I see. You vegetate here during the autumn months; but how do you survive it?' They tell me there is no hunting, very little shooting, and not even a golf club within twelve miles.'

'That is so,' assented Eileen, cheerfully 'and yet we do survive it.'

'You have a hobby, perhaps?'

'Ever so many, four legged and otherwise.' It is this speech did not serve as a reminder of Mrs. Sullivan, nothing would.

Apparently it did not, a very small and slow smile being his only acknowledgement of it.

Eileen gave her attention to the mystery on her plate; it had a French name, and it was supposed to be an entree of some sort but it tasted as no other entree had ever tasted to her before.

'This alone,' observed Lord Serge, following her train of thought in the uncanny way he had of doing, 'this alone would tell me that the Manor cuisine is in French hands. I have tasted nothing like this since I left Paris.'

Here was an opportunity to ask him some questions.

She opened fire at once.

'Have you lived much in Paris?'

'Paris, or rather the neighbourhood, has been my headquarters for the last three years, ever since I left the Service and came into the title. Fortunately for me, no estate accompanied it; the property was unentailed, and my uncle, the last baron, left it to his daughter.'

'It is not many men who would consider themselves fortunate in similar case.'

'You think not? Just consider for a moment what I escape. Property has to be managed, you know.'

The utter laziness in his drawl made Eileen long to shake him.

'Of course, property—wealth of all sorts—brings responsibilities which it is not well to shirk. No doubt you help your cousin?'

'I do not. I hate my cousin. I once committed a crime to avoid being pettered into marrying her.'

The words were vigorous enough to have warranted a different setting than the languid tone in which they were uttered.

'I should have thought it would have been too much trouble for you to hate anybody.'

Eileen's eyes had their old 'wicked look' as she said this.

'You are quite mistaken. I find hating very easy at times. In addition to my cousin, I hated the person I injured by my crime.'

She had been right, then. He had meant to challenge her—but to what?

Eileen drew a deep breath, and braced herself for battle.

Her lips curved into the smile which

had brought more than one man to her feet as she turned and looked him full in the face.

'You and I are akin in so much, Lord Serge. I learnt so thoroughly to hate somebody several years ago that it has become second nature to do so still.'

'Was it someone you had injured?' he drawled, meeting her eyes with a smile in his own.

'No; someone who had injured me.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Quite sure.'

'It is well to make sure. I once knew a man who was judged and condemned unheard. He was not a bad sort of man, take him all in all, but that piece of injustice aroused a demon in his heart.'

Something in the quietly spoken words made Eileen vaguely uneasy.

Could he possibly have had any excuse for what he had done?

She was silent for a moment, and, before she could make her mind to speak again, Dame Mainwaring had given the signal for the women folk to march.

Eileen avoided Serge's glance as he drew aside her chair, but she felt that the smile had extended to his lips.

He joined her in the drawing room in a matter of course sort of way, as she had guessed he would.

There was a current of electric affinity running ever between them, against which they might struggle in vain.

Eileen had been dimly conscious of it since their mutual avowal of hatred for each other, and she fancied he, too, felt it to be existent.

But there was no more talk of olden days.

He had challenged her, she had accepted his challenge, and now they buckled on their armour and fought with the best weapons at their disposal.

Baron Serge was asked to play his violin almost directly he appeared in the drawing room.

Give me half an hour to think it over,' he pleaded, languidly. 'It is impossible to do justice to one's instrument directly after dinner. I am sure Miss O'Halloran will back me up in this.'

Miss O'Halloran's dazzling smile testified to her willingness to do so.

'All the same,' she added, 'I hope the spirit will move you to play before it is time for me to leave.'

'When do you propose going?' he asked.

'Not later than eleven, I think.'

He glanced at a clock on a bracket near them.

'The spirit will move me precisely at half past ten, Miss O'Halloran.'

'You have the spirit of melody well under control?'

'I have several spirits well under control—when it suits me to order them.'

'You are indeed fortunate, and—forgive me!—a trifle uncanny.'

'There is Scottish blood in my veins, you know. To this I owe my power of second sight.'

'She started slightly, remembering how he had appeared, more than once, to read her thoughts.'

'I don't think I have ever quite believed in second sight, Lord Serge.'

'I will make you believe in it. Look at me a moment, will you? Thanks. (Please keep your eyes fixed on mine. This day twelve months you will no longer be Eileen O'Halloran. You will have given your heart into the keeping of a man who may make what he will of the gift, so that he give his own in exchange. Remember my words, and confess, when the time comes, that I have been a true prophet.'

As she withdrew her eyes, a blush—the first for seven long years—crept into her face, suffusing it with a rich carmine which added temporarily to her beauty.

The consciousness that he might have read her thought at the moment had brought it there.

She was planning his complete surrender as the price of the wrong he had done her seven years ago.

'I have not annoyed you?' he queried, softly.

'Oh, no!'

Up came her eyes, with the 'wicked look' in them.

It would be difficult for you to annoy me, I think. Amiability is one of my many virtues.'

'I should not have thought so—pardon me for saying as much.'

'Then I have no high opinion of your boasted power of second sight?'

'No? Yet it exists, as you will be compelled to admit this day twelvemonth. Now I will play to you.'

'I am in the mood to listen.'

'I know you are. You love music; I saw that last night. Are you equally fond of dancing?'

She laughed out at this thrust.

'I am madly fond of it.'

'Good!—a peculiar smile played round his mouth—I will ask Mrs. Mainwaring to give a dance while I am here.'

'This weather?'

'Why not? May and June are frequently as hot yet I darsay you have danced contently through them.'

'Not contently, Lord Serge.'

'Your partners were to blame for that. Give me permission to try, and I will teach you something better than contentment during a waltz, even though the thermometer should rise still higher before I get a chance. Is it a promise?'

'Yes.'

A sort of dreamy content was on her

already as she remembered those waltzes at Glencarty.

She had never enjoyed any so much since, for which as he had said, her partners were to blame.

She watched him as he lounged across the room and took up his violin, which lay in readiness on the piano.

His face looked unutterably weary, and his manner was more than usually listless, as he began to tune his strings in response to a suggestive 'A' struck by somebody on the piano.

He played a clever piece of composition—not his own—which required all his skill of fingering and bowing.

It was interlarded with chords and this gave him an opportunity of excelling in his double-stopping.

Altogether his execution was wonderful, and the applause it evoked should have satisfied him thoroughly.

He looked across at Eileen O'Halloran, and laughed as he saw her disappointment.

Without a word, and independent of accompaniment, he began again—a very different style of thing to the last.

Now his audience forgot to admire his skill, technique was exchanged for 'soul,' and every heart in the room was filled with restful peace according to the need of each.

Then the theme changed; a sob upset the peace, and there was a sound of bitter wailing in the air.

Again Serge looked at Eileen. She was leaning forward slightly, her hands tightly clasped on her knee; her lips quivering piteously, her eyes full of tears.

He revelled in his power over her: the others were as though they did not exist, yet nearly everyone present was equally moved.

He disregarded them all, and played only to Eileen O'Halloran.

A slowing of the theme; a touch of hope a note of re-awakened joy; then a burst of merriness; and then?

Then he stopped abruptly and laughed; for Eileen O'Halloran was smiling jocosely and her eyes were dancing with fun.

While renewed applause was showered on him, Serge returned to her side.

'The carriage has come for you. Say good-night to Dame Mainwaring, and I will take you down.'

'She obeyed, contentedly, feeling she owed him something for the pleasure he had given her.'

As he closed the carriage door on her, five minutes later, he asked mockingly: 'Which am I to-night? Demon or man?'

'Something of both, I fancy. To put it very mildly indeed, you are certainly uncanny.'

'Let it rest at that for the present. You see I read your thought last night when you refused to applaud my playing. You are better pleased tonight.'

'I have enjoyed your music very much, Lord Serge.'

'That is how it should be. I played to you and for you. Good-night. Don't forget we are sworn foes.'

'I am not likely to forget. I mistrust you entirely. Good night.'

Mistrust him she might, but that did not prevent her thrilling at his glance, and at the close pressure of his fingers on hers.

'It is because I hate him so!' she murmured, as she bent back, and went over the events of the evening once again in thought, one figure standing out in undue prominence, so dwarfing the rest that she forgot to remember that anyone had been present save Serge and herself in Dame Mainwaring's drawing room.

CHAPTER V.

'It is a pity you cannot turn your thoughts to more serious things, my dear,' observed Mrs. Porce. 'Dances, picnics, and dinner-parties are all very well for the worldly-minded, but I would have my niece pass such frivolities by.'

'Your niece, dear Aunt Rachel, is the most worldly-minded person within a radius of five miles, or five-and-twenty for the matter of that. But we are not dealing with plurals. It is one dance only that is spoken of—one picnic only—and if you call the other evening's mild dissipation at the Manor a dinner-party, why, what do you call those solemn functions at the Rectory which you condescend to grace with your presence?'

'The rector would not like to hear the word "dissipation" applied to anything that took place in his house, Mrs. Porce refused to call her niece anything but "Mara".'

'I should never think of accusing the rector of permitting any sort of dissipation to go on under his roof, you dear old aunt.'

Her eyes flashed when she saw that he meant, it possible, to overtake her.

'He shall not, Saladin, shall he? Not if we know it, my lord Baron!'

Faster and faster went Saladin, so that the pursuing horseman could not doubt Miss O'Halloran's purpose.

A flash came into his eyes, and a look of determination into his face.

He would overtake her, or die in the attempt.

Both horses entered into the spirit of the chase.

On flew Saladin, and on came the Flying Scud, who had been entered for the Derby that year, and was within half a neck of winning it.

The Mainwaring stables had always been noted for their race horses, and though the present owner was a minor-grandson to the dame—the reputation was well maintained.

Saladin had fully two hundred yards start, and his staying powers were excellent; so his rider audibly defied even the Flying Scud to better him in this race.

'He shall not, shall he, my beauty? He must not be permitted to overtake us, Saladin dear; you understand?'

Saladin understood perfectly, and though he presently had to exchange the springy turf of the common for the hard high road, he slackened not at all, knowing well that the pursuing horse would be in the same hard case.

But Eileen had pity on her favourite,

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ie; but we get a little at the Manor now and again when the Dame is in good hands as at present. What shall I wear at the dance?'

'I beg you will not consult me on this matter. You know how highly I disapprove of dancing. What is it Rebecca? A person from the tract society? Certainly; I will come at once.'

'Poor Aunt Rachel! What she has missed by being so "unco" guid! Thank goodness, I was not built on such superior lines. Now, what shall I wear? Shall I duplicate, as far as present fashion will allow, that dress I wore seven years ago at the Glencarty ball? No; he might think—all sorts of things. Besides, it would be too much of it for this informal little hop. I think my ivory silk will do; that is almost plain—moreover, it is very becoming.'

Dame Mainwaring had sent out invitations for a dance to take place in a week's time.

While Eileen pondered over the question of flowers to go with her ivory silk, Baron Serge was announced.

'I ventured to take the liberty of calling, Miss O'Halloran.'

'So I see. Do you expect me to say you are welcome?'

'No, I expect nothing, except to be told what you purpose wearing at the dance.'

'Blue,' was the unhesitating reply, followed by the mental comment: 'Ten to one he'll send white flowers. I shall want pink or red ones.'

'Blue? Well—yes—there is a shade of blue which would become you splendidly.'

'That is, of course, the shade I shall wear. My worst enemy cannot say that I ever dress unbecomingly.'

'No, I should not think you would. You will give me at least three waltzes?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you. I will not detain you any longer.'

He bowed himself out, before Eileen had recovered from her astonishment at the brevity of his visit.

She determined to retaliate by openly avoiding him if she got the chance of doing so before the dance advanced their 'hatred' another stage.

Three days passed without the sight of her 'foe,' but on the fourth her opportunity arrived.

She rode nearly every day, and on this particular afternoon she took advantage of Aunt Rachel's 'man' being absent, to enjoy a canter unattended.

Ash Cottage—Mrs. Porce's residence—was quite half a mile out of Littleton, lying slightly back from the high road which led to many places, notably to the Manor and a wide stretch of common.

Eileen turned her horse's head in the direction of the common, and let him choose his own pace until, on reaching a spot where two roads forked, the sound of another horse's hoofs made her glance up the road to the Manor to see who approached.

It was Baron Serge—there was no mistaking him, though he was at some distance.

'Now, my beauty, go your swiftest,' she said to her horse, as she started him to a gallop.

He responded willingly, turning on to the common with a little neigh of pleasure.

Eileen patted him and murmured words of approval, then glanced back to see if Serge had chosen the same route as herself.

Her eyes flashed when she saw that he meant, it possible, to overtake her.

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But Eileen had pity on her favourite,

and directly she found herself nearing passable fields, she lifted Saladin neatly over a gate, and told him to go for the opposite hedge.

'It's going to be a steeplechase, dear old boy! We must leave the second hay-crops alone, and skirt the corn fields, if we come to any, but for the rest we don't care, do we? We haven't a notion where we are, Saladin, but we are just going on and on until we have tired out that horrid man and his horse behind us, aren't we?'

After clearing a second hedge, Eileen glanced back, to satisfy herself that she was not steeplechasing for nothing.

Baron Serge waved his hand as though encouraging her to go ahead.

'The colour flooded her cheeks.'

'Insolent!' she murmured; but she smiled as she said it.

A little way in front she noticed that a field sloped downward at a very steep angle.

She tried to check her horse's speed slightly, not knowing what might be at the bottom of the field; but Saladin was too excited to listen to reason.

Down he went at a stretch-gallop, and a shout from a man who was at work on the hedge only excited him the more.

Eileen scented danger, recognising a warning note in the man's voice, though his words did not reach her.

Loosing the skirt of her habit, to leave her more free, she set her mouth firmly, and prepared for the worst.

The river!

That was what awaited her.

She and Saladin caught sight of it at the same moment, through a gap in the trees below.

Some instinct prompted her to warn Serge, if possible.

She turned as well as she was able, and pointed downwards; that was all she could do.

A few seconds later, with a snort of fear, Saladin leaped the low hedge in the gap between the trees, and plunged into the water.

Eileen had hardly dared to hope she would keep her seat, so she was not greatly dismayed when she found that she and her horse had parted company, her chief anxiety being the distance between herself and his heels when he should rise to the surface, but this anxiety was quickly followed by another—what if Saladin had rolled over on his side after taking his plunge?

But the instinct of self-preservation prompted the poor animal to do the best he could for himself, and this took the shape of a sensible conviction that, disagreeable as it was to have the water close over his head, he had better keep perfectly still.

In his early youth he had been trained to ford rivers; so he was not without some knowledge of what he ought to do when his hoofs touched the ground.

Thanks to the hot weather—of which there had been a long spell—the river was unusually low; so that from a looker-on's point of view, Saladin had scarcely disappeared before he reappeared, head uppermost and apparently, none the worse for his ducking, as he struck out for the opposite bank where he spied an easy landing place, which he quickly reached; then, bethinking himself of his mistress, he looked round with an anxious little neigh.

Eileen was all right; following her favorite as rapidly as might be in order to get out of the way before Lord Serge and his horse took the water.

But the flying Scud had no fancy for a plunge; he refused to leap, consequently rolled over ignominiously,