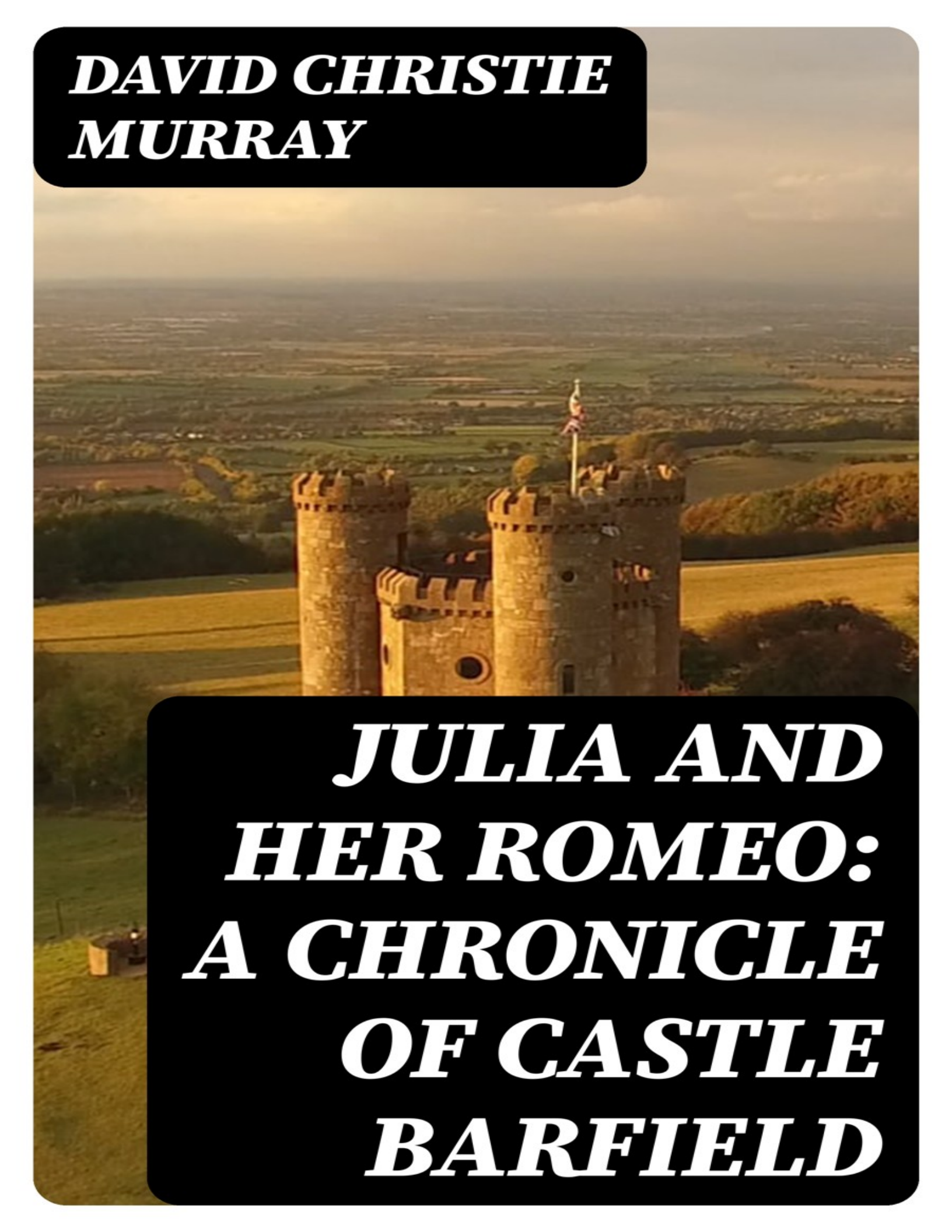




***DAVID CHRISTIE
MURRAY***

***JULIA AND
HER ROMEO:
A CHRONICLE
OF CASTLE
BARFIELD***

David Christie Murray

Julia And Her Romeo: A Chronicle Of Castle Barfield

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In the year eighteen hundred and twenty, and for many years before and after, Abel Reddy farmed his own land at Perry Hall End, on the western boundaries of Castle Barfield. He lived at Perry Hall, a ripe-coloured old tenement of Elizabethan design, which crowned a gentle eminence and looked out picturesquely on all sides from amongst its neighbouring trees. It had a sturdier aspect in its age than it could have worn when younger, for its strength had the sign-manual of time upon it, and even its hoary lichens looked as much like a prophecy as a record.

A mile away, but also within the boundaries of Castle Barfield parish, there stood another house upon another eminence: a house of older date than Perry Hall, though of less pleasing and picturesque an air. The long low building was of a darkish stone, and had been altered and added to so often that it had at last arrived at a complex ugliness which was not altogether displeasing. The materials for its structure had all been drawn at different periods from the same stone quarry, and the chequered look of new bits and old bits had a hint of the chess-board. Here Samson Mountain dwelt on his own land in the midst of his own people.

The Mountain Farm, as it was called, and had been called time out of mind, was separated from the Perry Hall Farm by a very shallow and narrow brook. The two houses were built as far apart from each other as they could be, whilst remaining in their own boundaries, as if the builder of the

later one had determined to set as great a distance as he could between his neighbour and himself. And as a matter of fact the Reddys and the Mountains were a sort of Capulets and Montagues, and had hated each other for generations. Samson and Abel kept up the ancient grudge in all its ancient force. They were of the same age within a week or two, had studied at the same school, and had fought there; had at one time courted the same girl, had sat within sight of each other Sunday after Sunday and year after year in the parish church, had each buried father and mother in the parish churchyard, and in the mind of each the thought of the other rankled like a sore.

The manner of their surrendering their common courtship was characteristic of their common hatred. Somewhere about the beginning of this century a certain Miss Jenny Rusker, of Castle Barfield, was surrounded by quite a swarm of lovers. She was pretty, she was well-to-do, for her time and station, she was accomplished—playing the harp (execrably), working samplers in silk and wool with great diligence and exactitude, and having read a prodigious number of plays, poems, and romances. What this lady's heart forged that her mouth did vent, but no pretty young woman ever looked or sounded foolish to the eyes or ears of her lovers. Mountain and Eddy were among her solicitors. She liked them both, and had not quite made up her mind as to which, if either of them, she would choose, when suddenly the knowledge of the other's occasional presence in her sitting-room made the house odious to each, and they surrendered the chase almost at the same hour. Miss Jenny satisfied herself with a cousin of her own, married without

changing her name, had children, was passably happy, as the world goes, and lived to be a profoundly sentimental but inveterate widow. Mountain and Eddy married girls they would not otherwise have chosen, and were passably happy also, except when the sore of ancient hatred was inflamed by a chance meeting on the corn exchange or an accidental passage of the eyes at church. They had no better authority for hating each other than that their fathers had hated each other before them. The fathers had the authority of the grandfathers, and they, that of the greatgrandfathers.

It was Saturday afternoon. There was a bleak frost abroad, and even the waters of the brook which divided the two farms were hard frozen. The sun hung low in the western sky, lustreless as a wafer, but ruddy. The fields were powdered with thin snow, and the earth was black by contrast with it. Now and then a shot sounded far away, but clear and sharp, from where the guests of my lord of Barfield were killing time in the warren.

A labouring man, smock-frocked, billy-cocked, gaitered, and hob-nailed, was clamping down the frozen lane, the earth ringing like iron under iron as he walked. By his side was a fair-haired lad of nine or ten years of age, a boy of frank and engaging countenance, carefully and even daintily dressed, and holding up his head as if he were a lord of the soil and knew it. The boy and the labourer were talking, and on the frosty silence of the fields the clear treble of the boy's speech rang out clearly and carried far. A burly man, with a surly red face, who had stooped to button a gaiter, in a meadow just beyond the brook, and had laid down his gun

beside him the while, heard both voice and words whilst the speaker was a hundred yards away.

‘But don’t you think it’s very wicked, Ichabod?’

The labourer’s voice only reached the listener in the meadow. He spoke with the Barfield drawl, and his features, which were stiffened by the frozen wind, were twisted into a look of habitual waggery.

‘Well,’ said he, in answer to his young companion, ‘maybe, Master Richard, it might be wicked, but it’s main like natur.’

‘I shan’t hate Joe Mountain when I’m a man,’ said the boy.

The surly man in the field, hearing these words, looked on a sudden surlier still, and throwing up his head with a listening air, and holding his ankle with both hands, crouched and craned his neck to listen.

‘May’st have to change thy mind, Master Richard,’ said the labourer.

‘Why should I change my mind, Ichabod?’ asked the boy, looking up at him.

‘Why?’ answered Ichabod, ‘thee’lt niver have it said as thee wast afraid of any o’ the Mountain lot.’

‘I’m not afraid of him,’ piped the engaging young cockerel ‘We had a fight in the coppice last holidays, and I beat him. The squire caught us, and we were going to stop, but he made us go on, and he saw fair. Then he made us shake hands after. Joe Mountain wouldn’t say he’d had enough, but the squire threw up the sponge for him. And he gave us two half-crowns apiece, and said we were both good plucked uns.’