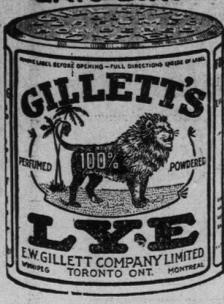


**GILLETT'S LYE EATS DIRT**



**Stella Mordaunt:**

**The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."**

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I understand," he said, shaking Hatherley's trembling hand. "Don't think I want to marry Lady Mary because—against her will. Don't you say anything about these shares or the I O U's; just leave me to take my chance. I—I hope I've got a chance. There's no one else, is there?"

Lord Hatherley winced at the vulgarity, the coarseness of the question. Had Ralph changed of late in his manner, or was it only his—Hatherley's—fancy?

"No, there is no one else," he said in a low voice. "I am sure of that. There used to be—a kind of boy-and-girl flirtation with Bryan's second boy, Edward; but I am sure that it was only a childish fancy."

Ralph's face darkened, and his teeth closed over his big cigar.

"Only that," continued Lord Hatherley. "Indeed, it was impossible that there should be anything more serious between them. Edward—he is a thoroughly good fellow and a great favourite of mine, poor boy;—is absolutely without means. And, as you know, he has gone abroad."

Ralph nodded.

"And they don't write?" he said, suspiciously.

Lord Hatherley winced at the suggestion.

"My dear Ralph, if they had, I should have known it. Mary is incapable of a clandestine correspondence," he explained.

Ralph coloured.

"Of course—of course!" he said. "Well, that's all right. As you say, a match between Lady Mary and that beggarly Edward Bryan would be out of the question; and there's no one else. Well, I shall hope for the best. Faint heart never won fair lady, you know. There's the second bell; I'll be off. No, I can't stay; thanks, all the same; I'll come over presently and try my luck. I've got your promise not to tell her of those I O U's?" he added, keenly, with his hand upon the door.

"Certainly," said Hatherley. "She must not know."

"Oh, mustn't she? We'll see!" muttered Ralph, as he sauntered up the drive.

As he crossed to the Hall, he tasted in anticipation the success which his scheme would bring him, and smiled to himself with cynical complacency. It had been so easy to lure the simple-minded old man, ignorant of the value of the A B C of the Stock Exchange, in-

to a ruinous speculation; so simple that Ralph had sometimes felt amazed at the blind confidence which had led his victim into the trap. But he was in it fast enough; and Mary was helpless, Ralph told himself, as he patted the pocket in which he had placed Lord Hatherley's I O U's. If she refused him again, he would be able to put on a pressure which she could not resist. To save her father from being turned out of the Manor and doomed to the exile of a cheap continental watering-place, with all its miseries and degradations, she would marry Ralph—or anyone.

"I've got her fast enough!" he muttered, as he entered his "den," and went straight for the cellaret in the sideboard. His steps tended towards that cellaret quite mechanically now. "I've got her. God! how lovely she looked as she came in, with that dash of colour in her cheeks! It soon went, though, when she caught sight of me, confound her! She doesn't like me, I'm afraid; but that does not matter. It makes my triumph all the sweeter. I'll teach her to be civil and pleasant when I marry her!"

He mixed himself a tall glass of whiskey and soda, and lying back with half-closed eyes in his chair, gave himself up to the delightful vision which opened before him.

"My wife!" he murmured. "The loveliest girl in the county—my wife! When that Bryan comes back, he'll be rather surprised, I fancy. I shall have the laugh on him then, d—n him!"

His dream of future joys and triumphs was rudely dispelled by a knock at the door.

It was Parkins. He held a long paper, something like a play-bill in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," he said, in his quiet, irrefragable manner. "A person called this afternoon to ask if you would patronize some kind of a show he is bringing to Market Ratton."

Ralph was in an amiable frame of mind, and nodded pleasantly.

"What kind of a show is it, Parkins?" he asked.

Parkins glanced at the bill in his hand. It was the usual sort of thing; and stated that, at immense expense, a company of London artists would appear for 'one night only in their tremendously successful entertainment at Market Ratton; and in the centre of the bill the name of the star performer, "Nita," was printed in double capitals.

"Seems a kind of music-hall affair, my lord," said Parkins in a non-committal way. "The party left this. Perhaps your lordship would like to see it?"

"Oh, don't bother," said Ralph, with a yawn. "Throw it in the waste-paper basket. You can take half a dozen seats if you like. Hi! put some more whiskey in this decanter, will you?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

As he had done coming, Lisle contrived to keep his horse at a slow trot, so that Cecilia and the groom got on well ahead. To Lisle this drive alone with Stella was too precious to be cut short, and he grudged every minute as it fled past. To be alone with this beautiful girl, so close to him, was a joy unspeakable. He wondered how she could sit so still and unconscious of the love which he felt radiating from himself; and now and again he glanced at her face half apprehensively, half longingly. Her unconsciousness of his great passion almost awed him; he wondered whether he should ever find the courage to tell her that he loved her. If she



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had shown the least consciousness of his condition, if she had blushed when she met the ardent which sometimes notwithstanding his caution, he could not prevent from shining in his eyes if she had even shrunk from the touch of his hand, his heart would have been relieved from the dread that possessed him. It seemed to him that anything would have been better than her profound ignorance of his devotion.

He asked himself what she was thinking of, as she sat looking straight before her, with the half-sad half-wistful expression in her lovely eyes, whose every light and shadow was known to him. Was there—was there any other man figuring in the past of hers whose mystery only added a piquant charm to her personality? His heart misgave him some times when he asked himself the question; but he reassured himself with the hopefulness of the lover. Surely if there had been any other man, she would have confided in Cecilia.

"Might one offer the large sum of one penny for your thoughts, Miss Mordaunt?" he said, with a smile that was rather wistful.

Stella started and blushed.

"I was thinking of Lady Mary," she said, and with some truth; for though her thoughts as usual had been of Rath and the island, Lady Mary had traversed them. "I was thinking she was one of the prettiest, most beautiful women I have ever seen—but then I have seen so few!—and I was wondering why she looked so sad. She did look sad; it was not my fancy?"

"No," he said; "I noticed the change in her. When I left home, saw her last, she was a light-hearted girl; now she is a grave and rather melancholy woman. Yes, she is beautiful; she was pretty as a child. But I don't think her the most beautiful woman I have seen," he said in parenthesis, as he glanced at the lovely girl beside him. "Perhaps her father's health—she said that she was not well—troubles her; or there may be something else. She hinted that she was worried."

Stella received the suggested explanation doubtfully.

"I think it is something more than her father's health," she said, with the shrewdness and insight which even the youngest and least experienced of girls will sometimes display. "It is some secret sorrow which concerns herself personally."

Lisle laughed softly.

"Where did you learn such perspicacity?" he asked. "Mary can have no personal trouble; she is the only child of Lord Hatherley, and is watched over and guarded as if she were something too precious for the winds to visit too harshly. She may be in love," he added, after a pause.

"Yes," said Stella, dreamily.

He looked before him thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is it," he said, as if he had suddenly hit the heart of the mystery. "And I can give a shrewd guess as to who it is. Did you hear her speak of a certain Edward Bry-

an? And did you notice how the colour rushed to her face, though it had gone again in a moment, when we spoke of him? But perhaps you did not notice?"

"Yes, I did," admitted Stella. "Where is he? Does he—care for her?"

"I think so. Yes, I am sure of it," said Lisle, thoughtfully. "Your question calls up to my mind all sorts of little incidents. She and Edward were always together when we were all playmates, and he used to call her his 'little wife'—yes, that is it."

"Where is he, then, and—does he not care for her?" asked Stella. "But of course he does. Lady Mary is not the girl to give her heart unasked."

"No; you're right," he said. "But if Edward Bryan loves her, that wouldn't make her much the happier. He is the second son. He went out to make his fortune in the colonies somewhere, and I'm afraid that he has not done it."

Stella nodded and sighed.

"You have explained it," she said in her innocently frank way. "It is because she is separated from him, and because there is little hope of his winning her that she looks so sad. I can understand it—to be separated by thousands of miles!"

Her face grew pale, and the long ashes veiled her eyes.

"How completely and definitely you have settled the case," he said, with an uneasy smile. "Where did you gather this experience of life and its troubles, Miss Mordaunt? You are young to possess such knowledge of the human heart."

"I am not too young to know what separation means, Lord Lisle," she said. "Sorrow is not reserved for old age."

"No; that's true," he assented, almost bitterly. "Youth has its griefs and disappointments. But it is a hard saying on such a lovely evening as this. Do you see the sunset behind the pines?"

"I was looking at it," said Stella.

She did not add that it had recalled, with a poignant longing, the sunset behind the firs on the island—the sunset at which she and Rath had so often gazed; but she shivered under her memory.

"You are not cold?" he asked, anxiously, as he felt the tremor of her arm, so close to his.

"Oh, no!"

"But I'm afraid you are. The evenings are growing chilly. Let me put his wrap more closely round you. Stay! Perhaps you'd be warmer if you had something to do. You have over driven, have you? I think you said you had not. Take the reins for a little while. It will warm you."

(To be Continued.)

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