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Stella Mordant; —OR— The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XXI.

She went straight to her room, and when her maid had undressed her and brushed her hair, Mary took out Edward's letter. She pressed it to her lips before reading it, and she read it slowly, for it was too precious to hurry over.

It was a cheerful letter—if Edward Bryan had been writing on the eve of execution he would not have made any man; but it told no story of success, and was not by any means sanguine.

"There are no openings here," he said. "The towns are too crowded, and the opportunities of making a fortune are not so numerous as they were. Every man one meets is on the same lay—excuse the slang, mother—and there aren't fortunes enough in this part to go round. So I am going to make a move. I have bought a good horse, and am going into the wilds on a kind of solitary prospecting. Don't be alarmed if you don't hear from me as regularly as you have done; there are no post-offices where I am going, and I may not be able to send you a letter for some time. When you see Mary next, give her this letter, and—no, I mustn't send her my love. But she knows—she knows! And when you write, tell me everything you can about her. The smallest, most trifling detail—how she looks, what she wears, where she is going, what she is doing—will be precious to me. I can see her now—but when do I not see her?"

Mary's face flushed, and her heart throbbled with love as she read these simple but eloquent words. Marry Ralph the earl! She almost laughed at the idea. There was only one man in the world she would marry, and if she could not marry him, then she would die an old maid!

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If only Edward could have heard her, seen the divine light in her eyes as she murmured this vow, how light his heart would have been as he started off for his solitary expedition—the expedition on which he was fated to meet Rath, the hermit of the island.

For some time Ralph the earl kept away from Hatherley. It would be well to give Lady Mary time not only to recover from the shock of his sudden proposal, but to think it over. And his time was fully occupied; invitations poured in upon him, and he was booked for a number of dinners and entertainments, for he was now in great request. The magnificent affair at the Hall had raised him in the estimation of the county people, and they were now quite ready to welcome him as one of themselves. Here and there was a man or woman who did not quite "take to" the new earl; but they could give no reason for their distrust, and the majority voted him a good fellow, and were loud in their praises.

The sporting section grew louder still when the hunting season commenced, and Ralph, having subscribed most liberally to the hounds, put in an appearance at the first meet on a good-looking but particularly safe horse. He was not in the first flight, it is true, but he did fairly well, and carried himself modestly. He had expected and hoped to see Mary at the meet, but she was not out that day.

"Mary has been troubled with a headache lately," said Lord Hatherley, as he rode beside Ralph; "and I couldn't persuade her to ride to-day, though I'm sure it would have done her good. Oh, no; it's nothing of any moment," he said, in answer to Ralph's enquiry. "That's a good horse you've got there, Ratton!"

"Yes, and not dear, I think," remarked Ralph. "I gave five hundred for him."

Lord Hatherley whistled softly. "It's a long price; but money's of no object to you, my dear fellow."

"Oh, I don't know!" responded Ralph, modestly. "Speaking of money, did you buy those New Golcondas? I see they have risen."

Lord Hatherley nodded. "Yes, I did; and it's lucky for me that they have gone up, for I bought rather heavily, more heavily than I should like Bulpit to know. He is rather set against mining shares."

"Oh, Bulpit is too cautious!" said Ralph, with a laugh. "He's as nervous as an old woman. I've bought heavily, too, and I shall secure some more, I think. The financial papers say they are going to double their value."

Lord Hatherley looked at his eager listener.

"Really? You think so?" he said. The hounds found at that moment and the two men had to ride forward so that no more was said; but as he rode—straight as usual—Lord Hatherley pondered Ralph's words. In buying of stock as well as betting on horses, even the man who is sensible enough as regards other matters, is always tempted to place reliance on a "tip," however ill qualified to give an opinion the tipster may be.

And that night he wrote to his broker in London instructing him to buy more New Golcondas.

Mary, yielding to her father's persuasion, was present at the following meet. Ralph saw her as she rode up to the cover, and his heart beat and his face flushed; but he did not hasten to join the men who made a circle round her; an admiring circle, for Mary was one of those girls who look their best in riding habit and ball dress, and she sat her thoroughbred as a woman does who has ridden since she was a mite of a child.

She was looking rather pale, and a little graver and sadder than usual, but her colour rose for an instant, as Ralph presently rode up to her. He was careful to keep every sign of emprovement from his manner and voice as he took off his hat and greeted her; and no one seeing and hearing them would have guessed that he had proposed and been rejected.

"I hope you're better, Lady Mary," he said, "and that we shall have a good run now that you are well enough to come out."

And Mary having thanked him and said something appropriate about the

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weather, he left her side at once. But his heart was still beating fiercely, and he watched her from the corners of his eyes, drinking in the beauty and unconscious grace of her presence. When the hounds found, he was inspired by a desire to attract her attention and distinguish himself, and with a spurious kind of courage he let his horse have its head, and rode as straight as the straightest of them. The horse, amazed and delighted at its owner's unexpected display of pluck, took advantage of it and went at hedge and rail eagerly, clearing everything like a bird and carrying Ralph in at the death. He had simply stuck on and let the horse go its own way—it was the best thing he could have done—and he received the congratulations of his friends with a modest smile.

"You ride well, Ratton, very well!" said Lord Hatherley, as he came up with Mary by his side; "that last ditch was a stiff one, and most of us funked it—eh, Mary?"

"Oh! all the credit's due to my horse," said Ralph, with a laugh; but Lord Hatherley shook his head. "No, no! I saw you clear the last two fences, and—well, I couldn't have done it better myself—ten years ago."

Still Mary said nothing, but in silence turned her horse's head homeward. Ralph longed to turn aside and ride beside her, but he was too wary. He would give her time. So he kept with the men, who were trying for another fox, and let her go home alone with her father.

They found again; but the fox, after affording them a good run, gave them the slip and ran to earth. They were a long way from home; some of the men made for a way-side inn to rest their horses and get a drink, and Ralph went with them. He was excited by the praise bestowed upon his lucky ride, and, as was usual with him when he was a little "above himself," he drank freely. It is surprising how much liquor a man can take after a couple of runs; but Ralph was soon affected by whiskey—and this was by no means of the best—and as he rode homeward he was flushed of face and more talkative than ordinary.

"Ratton seems to have enjoyed him self," said Lord Parodel, with a laugh, as Ralph waved his hand to them at parting. "Didn't think he could ride as he has done to-day."

"No, I don't, my man," he said, brusquely; "but whoever you are, you are trespassing. This is not a tea-garden, and I don't allow men to lie about smoking. Be off with you, or I'll summons you!"

The small, neatly made man smiled as he stopped his pipe with his little finger.

"You've got a bad memory, my ord," he said, slowly, but with a pleasant ease which was anything but pleasant to Ralph. "Now, I've a remarkably good one. Once I see a face I never forget it. I had the honour of being introduced to you at the bar of the Columbine, Drury Lane. My name's Workley."

Ralph started, and the colour left his face, and he stared in silence at the man for a moment or two. At the man's words, with the remembrance of his face, back came the squalid, miserable Past. He saw the lanky bar, the dyed and oily fellow-actor, the smirking barmaid; saw the wretched room over Waterloo Bridge, the worn and patient wife he had deserted. The sight of this close-shaven man, with the keen eyes and sinister, smiling lips, recalled it all, and he quailed before the vision.

Then he tried to conceal his discomfort, and with an effort said, haughtily:

"Yes; I remember you. But I don't acknowledge that the fact of—of your being introduced to me gives you the right to trespass, Mr. Workley."

"He's mighty pleased with himself," assented the man he addressed. "Never knew him talk so much."

"Or drink," remarked Lord Parodel, musingly. He was one of those who didn't "take to" Ralph. "Ratton is rather a puzzle to me; always doing the unexpected, you know."

"Oh, well, he acquitted himself very well to-day, anyhow," rejoined the other.

Of this fact Ralph was fully sensible as he rode home. He had shown Lady Mary that he could not only stop a runaway horse, but ride straight to hounds; she had heard the praise bestowed upon him, and must have been favourably impressed.

He hummed a tune as he rode up the avenue, his face still flushed, his seat by no means close on his saddle. Then suddenly the tune ceased, and his smile of self-satisfaction gave place to one of amazement and injured dignity; for he saw a man lying at the foot of one of the elms near the railings, his hands in his pockets, a short pipe in his mouth.

Ralph pulled up and eyed the man angrily, then he said in the curt, overbearing way in which a man of his kind always addresses an inferior with whom he is not pleased:

"Here you, sir; do you know you're trespassing?"

The man looked up, and without taking his pipe from his mouth, said, coolly:

"How do you do, Lord Ratton?"

Ralph stared as if he could not believe his ears. That an ordinary-looking man should dare, not only to trespass upon the park, but to address him, the earl, without rising or taking his pipe from his mouth, seemed incredible.

"What the devil are you doing there, and who are you?" he demanded, haughtily.

The man rose slowly, and leisurely approached the railings.

"You don't remember me, Lord Ratton?" he said, as quietly as before, but with a curious smile about his thin lips and in his keen, bird-like eyes.

Ralph did not remember him in the east; a great deal had happened to the Earl of Ratton since they had met, and the calm, curt manner of the man roused him to fury.

"No, I don't, my man," he said, brusquely; "but whoever you are, you are trespassing. This is not a tea-garden, and I don't allow men to lie about smoking. Be off with you, or I'll summons you!"

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(To be Continued.)

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