

# Stella Mordant.

## The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Lisle turned his head away for a moment or two, until he could recover from the blow which Fate had dealt him. Only an hour ago and he had been, if not sanguine, at least hopeful, of winning this beautiful girl whom he loved, and now there was no hope left in his breast!

"I can walk quite well; I am not hurt," she faltered, with downcast eyes, and that sense of regret almost amounting to guilt which every true-hearted woman feels after refusing the proposal of a good and honorable man. His arm dropped to his side and he went and cleared the horse from the debris and led it beside them. They were silent for a while then he said:

"I want to say something, Stella—Miss Mordant. It is the last time I shall refer to—my love for you; and I would not speak of it again, for I see that it is quite hopeless."

"I am sorry—sorry!" said Stella with something like a sob. "If I had known! But I never guessed! I anyone had told me that you—you cared for me, I should not have believed it; I should have—yes, laughed at them! Oh! don't you believe me? Think of it, Lord Lisle! You are an English nobleman, and I am—only a waif, a nobody, quite beneath you."

"What has that to do with it?" he said, ruefully, and with an unconscious irony. "You are to me the most lovely and lovable of women, you are—but I have promised not to speak of my feelings again, and I will not. I know you too well."

"You have known me only a few weeks," said Stella, her misery almost swallowed up by her amazement at this sudden love of his.

"A few weeks, a few months, a few years, it is all one and the same to me," he said, gravely, and with his eyes bent on the ground, as if he could not trust himself to look upon her face. "Some love may need time to germinate; mine sprang full-grown within the first hour of my seeing you; it was love at first sight; but Stella, I am breaking my promise! What I want to say is that I know you too well to cherish any hope of your changing your mind."

"No, I—I could not change," said poor Stella, her face white and troubled.

He nodded, and his lips twitched as if with a spasm of physical pain.

"I am not so foolish as to cherish any such hope," he said. "But I want to tell you that I will never, by word or look, remind you of—of my love for you. You need not be afraid that I shall harass you, that I shall cause

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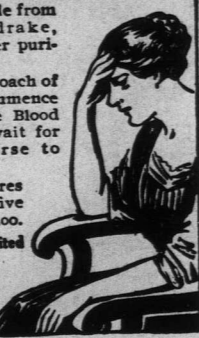
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you pain by a display of my own disappointment."

She looked at him through a mist of sudden tears.

"I know that you will be all that is kind and considerate, that you could not be otherwise, Lord Lisle," she said. "Oh, if you knew how bitterly I feel my own unworthiness, that I feel ungrateful and hard-hearted and callous."

"No, no!" he said, quickly, and with something like self-reproach. "You must not say, must not think that! It was no fault of yours, Stella; you cannot help being what you are. It is my Fate!" the cry broke from him, not loudly, but with a mingling of involuntary bitterness and despair which went straight to Stella's heart, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Now I have made you cry," he said, remorsefully. "What a brute, what a selfish brute I am. Please, don't! There isn't a man in the world worth your tears, Stella; not one, believe me! And—and for Heaven's sake, don't permit yourself to think that you are in any way to blame, because you are not, not in the very least. We won't say another word about it, not a word. Are you sure you are not hurt?" he broke off suddenly and with anxiety; for he fancied she had limped a little as they climbed the hill.

"No, no!" she said, almost impatiently, "I am not in the least hurt and if I had been I should have deserved it. Look at the damage I have done in my ignorance!"

She was thinking for the moment of the ruined dog-cart; but it will be pardoned Lisle if he applied her words to his own half-broken heart.

"Not a word of self-reproach, please!" he said. "It was all my fault. Here is the house—Hallo, Cis! It's all right!" he called out as cheerily as he could in answer to the alarmed question which sprang to Cecilia's lips as she came to the door to meet them.

"Why are you walking, and where is the dog-cart?"

"We've had a spill," he said, forcing a laugh. "Slid at a hare running across the path; off wheel caught in trunk of tree, and out we came. I'm thankful to say Miss Mordant is not hurt, but she has had a shock, and I'm going to insist upon her taking a glass of wine before she goes upstairs to dress."

Cecilia was full of tender anxiety on Stella's account; but Stella, though pale, declared that there was not the least thing the matter with her. But her hand shook as she took the wine from Lisle, and Lady Cecilia insisted upon her drinking it quickly and going upstairs at once to rest.

When Stella had gone, Cecilia turned to her brother.

"What has happened?" she asked, with the quick intuition of the strange sympathy which existed between them.

He did not blink the question. "I told her," he said, simply, "and she has said 'No.'"

"Cecilia!"

She stretched out her hand to him as if she shared the pain with which his heart ached.

"It's all right, Cis!" he said, almost as if it were she who needed sympathy. "I had no right to think I should win her. All along I have felt that I was going to fail; just as I felt that day I rode in the Point to Point. It is a strange feeling, and there is no accounting for it; but

sometimes I feel it strongly. Of course I've had a bad fall, it is a regular crumpler; but I shall get over it, though just at this moment I feel as if I never should!" he added, ruefully. "But, Cis, there is one thing you and I have got to do."

"Yes?" she asked, sorrowfully. "If there were only something I could do or say!"

"To help me? There isn't. The rest is silence, as Hamlet says; but, Cis, we have to think of her. This—this refusal must make no difference between us and Stella; you will not let it, will you Cis? I rely on you! I know how she is feeling at this very moment. She spoke of ingratitude—as if it were her duty to love me because we had rescued and helped her. I poor girl—and she will feel that she has brought trouble on me—and on you, too. She will need all your tenderness and consideration; and I know she will have it. You will be very gentle with her, for my sake—ah, but you will for your own, for I know that you love her, Cis!"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I share your disappointment—my poor Cecilia!"

"Then share my care of her!" he said, quietly but earnestly. "Perhaps it will be better not to let her know that I have told you. Let things go on just as usual. I'm not going to wear the willow; she shall see that I can bear my fate like a man, and that if I cannot have her love I am willing to be content with her friendship. Better keep away from her for a little while; she will want to be alone, I fancy. Yes; we came a complete spill, and for the moment I thought she was hurt; the shock made her faint, and—and—I was while I held her in my arms that I lost control of myself and told her. Then, for a moment, he broke down.

"Oh, my God! what shall I do with the rest of my life!" he cried in a low hoarse voice.

When Stella had got to her room, she threw herself down beside the bed and hid her face in her hands. Lord Lisle's declaration had come so suddenly, so unexpectedly that she was still confused and unnerved by it. But presently she began to realize all that it meant. She had brought trouble and sorrow to the brother and sister who had rescued and befriended her; all unwittingly she had returned evil for good; and the very sight of her must be painful not only to Lord Lisle, but to Lady Cecilia.

She rose, her face pale and set, her mind possessed of a sudden resolution. It was impossible for her to remain at the Abbey; she must go at once. Notwithstanding her few weeks of civilisation—or perhaps because they were so few—Stella was still the impulsive child of the island; and her old habit of carrying out a resolution at once had been strengthened by the influence of Rath, to whom she conceived an idea and act on it were as second nature.

She felt as if she could not meet the sadness in Lord Lisle's eyes, the pain which would be there and in Cecilia's, try as they might to conceal it from her. She had learnt some thing of love's anguish—for was she not separated from Rath?—and she knew that though Lord Lisle had told her that he would never address another word of love to her, that his presence would be a cause of distress to him.

"No, I must go!" she said to herself, and she paced up and down in a tumult of emotion; but presently she felt a slight pain in her ankle and sank into a chair. But it was only to rise again and begin to change her dress for the plain blue serge which Lady Cecilia had lent her on board the "Kingfisher."

"I must take her clothes. I must even take the money they have lent me," she said to herself, with a choking sensation in her throat. "It would only give them more pain if I left the house penniless. But some

day I will pay it back; but I can never undo the harm I have wrought, never atone for the pain I have caused them. Oh, why couldn't I say 'Yes'? He is good and noble in more than rank, and—he loves me! But I could not!"—she stretched out her arms to her reflection in the glass—"I could not!"

While her trembling fingers were fastening the dress, there came a knock at the door, and Susy's voice asking is she could come in.

Stella went to the door, and at sight of her white face and swollen eyes—for half unconsciously Stella had been crying—the girl uttered a cry of dismay. Stella drew her into the room and shut the door quickly.

"Oh, miss! what is the matter? I heard that there had been an accident. Are you hurt?" exclaimed Susy, all in a flutter of anxiety and alarm, for Stella's sympathy with the girl's love trouble had won her heart.

"Yes, I upset the dog-cart, and Lord Lisle and I were turfed out; but no one is hurt, Susy."

"Oh, are you sure, miss? You look so white."

"I am quite sure I am not hurt; but I have been shaken, and I've a bad headache, Susy, and I don't think I'll come down again this evening."

"No, no, miss," said Susy, full of affectionate pity and sympathy. "I'll tell her ladyship, and I'll bring you up something. You'll go to bed at once, miss, won't you?"

"Yes, perhaps; I'll see. I'm a bad one to go to bed unless I'm obliged, Susy," said Stella, colouring, for her heart reproached her for deceiving this girl. "You shall bring me up a cup of tea—in—yes, in half an hour, if you please."

"Yes, miss," assented Susy, eagerly; "and you'll try to go to sleep? I'll take care you're not disturbed."

Stella turned away. The girl was, all unconsciously, helping her in the plan which was forming in her mind. Directly she had gone, Stella went to the inlaid writing-table—the daintiest in the house, and chosen for her by Lord Lisle himself—and hastily wrote a few lines.

She wrote and re-wrote them; it was so difficult, such heart-breaking work, to say a farewell which should not seem callous and ungrateful! But at last, though unsatisfied with it, she enclosed the following note in an envelope and addressed it to Lady Cecilia:

"Dear Lady Cecilia,—I am leaving the Abbey because—ah, because I must go! To stay would only make you and Lord Lisle sad and unhappy. I am very wretched, and all the more so because I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for all your goodness to me. I know you will not feel sorry for having picked me up on the sea that day, but just now, while I am writing this, I could almost wish that you had left me to

perish. I can only wish you goodbye with all my love and gratitude, and I beg and pray that you will let me go, and will not attempt to follow me, or persuade me to return. I could not come back. Tell Lord Lisle—no, there is no need to tell him; he will understand that I shall never cease to think of his goodness and nobleness."

"Stella."

Susy brought up the tea, just as Stella had finished this, as she deemed it, poor and inadequate letter of farewell.

"Shall I help you undress, miss?" asked Susy, anxiously. "Let me bathe your head with eau-de-Cologne. I will sit by you, miss, until you go to sleep."

Stella forced a laugh, and taking the girl by the shoulders, gently pushed her towards the door.

"You silly girl!" she said. "I am all right, shall be all right when—when I have rested!" Then she almost broke down, and half hysterically drew the girl towards her and kissed her. "Susy, you are a tender-hearted little thing! I don't wonder at Tom falling in love with you. There! go away and leave me. And be sure you don't let anyone—mind, anyone!—come to me till the morning!"

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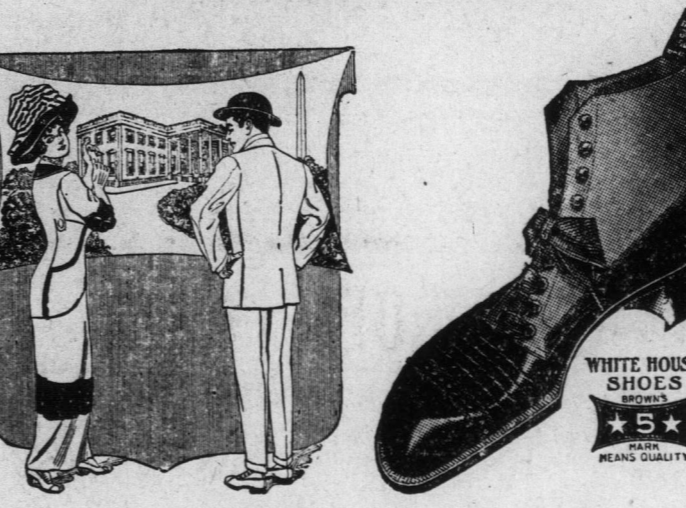
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