

Stella Mordaunt:

—OR—
The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XLV.

Ralph had staggered from the bench and into the magistrate's room. From Green's significant words, "We have found the name of the deceased's husband," Ralph knew that the desperate game he was playing was finished, and that he had lost. There was nothing for it now but flight. Behind him was the hangman with hot feet and trailing rope, before him only the faintest chance of escape.

With trembling hand he seized the jug of water from the table, and pouring some into his hands, dashed it across his forehead; for he felt sick and faint with terror; then he left the room by the private door.

He was not a moment too soon, for, at a sign from the superintendent, a police officer in plain clothes had followed him; but the moment, short as it was, was of all importance to Ralph; for almost in that short space of time he found himself in the midst of a wild, excited crowd which surged against the court-house in an utterly futile attempt to enter and participate in the sensational incidents which were proceeding there.

Ralph, bending his head, skirted the howling mass and made for one of the small streets leading to the station.

As he went across the square, he heard the howls change to wild, tumultuous cheering, and guessed the cause. The prisoner was acquitted, the man he had instinctively hated was free, free to step in his—Ralph's—place. He was no longer a suspected criminal, and it was Ralph who was flying from justice.

He set his teeth hard and hurried on. At the end of the lane, which was absolutely deserted, he paused, and with his hand to his brow, strove to realize his well-nigh hopeless situation, and form some plan.

To go to the station would be madness, for the detective would have been certain to place a policeman waiting to arrest him. Besides, barring a few pounds, he had no money, and without money escape was impossible.

He must go back to the Hall. But there also he would doubtless find a detective waiting to pounce upon him. And yet, money he must have. There was about a couple of hundred pounds in the safe in his room, and his jewellery, which was worth a fairly large sum; for, like most vain men, Ralph had been liberal to himself in the matter of diamond pins and rings and similar gewgaws.

As he stood pondering, he heard the sound of horses' feet, and his heart leapt with swift terror; but, to his relief, one of his own grooms turned the corner with a couple of horses he was exercising. Ralph jumped at the chance offered him, and signing to the man to pull up, said:

"This is fortunate. I have to go to Roysdale Station. Give me your horse, and ride on the other to the court, and tell Lord Hatherley where I have gone. He will understand. Is—is anyone waiting for me at the Hall?" he asked, as he sprang into the saddle.

"No, my lord; not that I know of, and I've just come straight from home," replied the man.

Ralph nodded.

"Remember, Roysdale Station. I have to meet someone there."

The man touched his hat and rode off, and Ralph turned his horse homewards.

He entered the park by one of the side gates, tied up the horse, and keeping within the shadow of the trees as much as possible, gained the Hall by the window of his den. With

frenzied haste he unlocked the safe and took out the bundle of notes; then he went, forcing himself to walk slowly, through the hall and up to his dressing-room.

There he met Parkins face to face. The man started at the sight of his master's pallid countenance, and exclaimed:

"Anything—anything the matter, my lord? Are you ill?"

"No, no," replied Ralph. "But I've had bad news. A near relative is—is ill—dying—and I must go to London at once. Pack a portmanteau. I'll help you."

"Yes, my lord. Shall I order the carriage?"

"No, no—I mean I have ordered it. Here, I'll help you. Get a box of cigars from my room; and, Parkins, you need not say anything to the other servants."

"No, my lord. Might I venture to ask the news from the court?"

"Committed for trial," said Ralph, hurriedly. "He's guilty, of course. Look sharp!"

Parkins ran down, and Ralph quickly collected the most valuable of his jewellery and put it into his pocket. Then he went down-stairs by the back way, so as not to meet Parkins, and waited in the passage behind the hall until he heard the man ascend again.

It would take Parkins half an hour to pack. By that time, Ralph, mounted on a good horse—and the one he had left tied up at the gate was one of the best—he would be well on his way to the junction.

He was passing through his den, when a bottle of brandy caught his attention. He paused, and not seeing a glass, drank a draught from the bottle itself. The spirits added fuel to his excitement, and he laughed with a kind of hysteria as he thought that, after all, he stood a chance. How many murderers had escaped arrest during the last twelve months? He would go to London and stay there—only fools ran their necks into a noose by attempting to leave one of the ports. In that human beehive he could hide until a chance of quitting the country presented itself.

He said this to himself as he slipped a revolver into his pocket and drank some more brandy; then he opened the window—and saw Workley running across the lawn, his face white and set—a human sleuth-hound on the warm track!

(To be Continued.)

THE HEIR OF Lancewood

CHAPTER I.

She spoke to him with a kind of half-distant, half-reserved familiarity, that showed plainly enough that she did not consider him on an equality with herself. He seemed to feel and understand it, and his face flushed slightly as he replied—

"It is always a pleasure to obey you, Miss Neslie."

"Then pray let me have Browning at once. I have but an hour's leisure; I must not lose it in talking."

Again his face flushed. He waited until he could speak plainly, and then, producing a letter, he said—

"The post-bag was delayed this morning; I have only just opened it. Sir Arthur has written to me—and this is for you."

She fancied there was something strange in his manner—something of hesitation and uncertainty. Then she took from his hands the letter which was to change the whole course of her life.

"It is from Sir Arthur," she said, quickly—"a letter from my father! How cruel of the post to delay this morning, above all others!"

She opened the envelope with im-

patient fingers, wondering why the young secretary lingered there, looking at her with such strange eyes.

"What a long letter," she said, laughing. "This extends to over a page; Sir Arthur seldom writes more than four lines."

"Let me find you a seat," he proposed, "while you read it. You will be tired of standing."

Still with the same strange expression on his face, he brought one of the little garden-chairs to her, and she sat down.

"Why do you not go for my book?" she asked, with laughing impatience. "There may be a message for me in that letter, Miss Neslie," he replied. "Permit me to remain while you read it."

She sat down where the faint, sweet odor of the lilies floated round her, where the cooling of the white doves reached her, and read the words that darkened her whole life.

"My Dearest Vivien.—Writing, as you know, always fatigues me; I detest it. But I have something to tell you which will astonish you greatly—perhaps even anger you.

"It will be foolish of you, Vivien, to be angry, for I have perfect and undisputed right to please myself; no one else has any right to take umbrage or offense at what I do.

"I feel a certain degree of reluctance in making my announcement—why, I cannot tell. You would wish me to be happy, and I have sought happiness after my own fashion. Vivien, I have married again. My wife is a beautiful young French girl—her name was Valerie d'Este; she is very piquant, attractive, graceful. You will be sure to admire her. We were married in Paris, and intend returning home next Tuesday.

"Now, Vivien, remember that being angry and vexed about it is simply a waste of time; I had a right to please myself, and I have done so. If this wife were to die, it would be no one's affair should I marry a third. Tell Mr. Spenser to have the rooms in the western wing set in order and prepared for Lady Neslie. Tell all the household of the change, and see that my wife is received with due honor and respect.

"One word to yourself, Vivien. What is done is done. If you are wise, instead of battling with the tide of events, you will swim with it. From you, my daughter, I shall expect love, kindness, affection, attention and consideration for my wife. If you show all this, well and good; if you refuse it, you will see the result. Meet me with a smile, Vivien; let me hear no reproaches.

"I had a right to please myself. Your whole future will depend on your treatment of Lady Neslie.

"My fondly-loved daughter, adieu. We shall be with you on Tuesday, and hope to find all things well.

"ARTHUR NESLIE."

She read the letter slowly, and then turned back and read it again. The young secretary watched her intently. He saw the color fade from her face, the light die from her eyes; he saw her lips grow white, as they had never been before; he watched her curiously, keenly, for he would have given his life to save her from pain.

Suddenly, with an angry gesture, she rose from her seat, a crimson flush spreading over her face; she flung the letter on the ground at her feet.

"I will not believe it!" she cried. "It is a forgery! My father never wrote that."

He made no reply; his pity and his love were so great that they made him speechless.

"Read it!" she commanded. "Read it, Gerald Dorman, and tell me if I am mad or sane!"

He took up the letter.

"Do you really wish me to read this, Miss Neslie?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, slowly. "I cannot believe it. My eyes, my senses must have deceived me; the words I have seen cannot possibly be written

there. Read it, and tell me if the news be true."

He read the letter. She stood watching him with a bewildered, dazed look, with white parted lips and darkened eyes. Then he laid it down on the sun-dial, and turning to her, said—

"It is quite true, Miss Neslie. I knew it when I brought this letter to you."

"You knew it?" she cried. How?"

"Sir Arthur wrote to tell me. I received his letter this morning, and I felt sure that yours contained the same intelligence. It was for that reason I ventured to disobey you and remain here instead of looking for the book."

"Then it is true," she moaned; "my father has a wife—some one in my mother's place. I—I cannot believe it, Mr. Dorman. Why, only ten minutes since I was thinking of all I would persuade him to do—and now I find he has a wife. He has been all the world to me—as I have been to him; and now he has a wife. The love and the home that have been mine so long will be mine no more."

"Nay, Miss Neslie," said the calm, pitying voice, "it will not be so bad as that. You are, and always will be, heiress of Lancewood. The Abbey will always be your home, unless—"

Then he stopped and hesitated.

"Unless my father should have a son to succeed him, in which case Lancewood would never be mine," she said, slowly. "Half an hour since, Mr. Dorman, I thought myself as certainly heiress of Lancewood as that the sun shone in the sky."

(To be Continued.)

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