



## Stella Mordant; The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER VIII.

Every moment his confidence was growing; and as the lawyer's phaeon was brought round, Mr. Ralph Percival stood on the terrace and looked about him with a proprietary air. But he was still uncomfortably conscious of his shabby attire, and every now and then eyed the oil butler and the servants with a suspicious and ready-to-be-offended expression on his dark face.

As they drove toward Market Ration, Mr. Ralph Percival began to ask questions: How long would it be before he could take possession? Was the estate as large as the newspaper said? Was there much money, and was it available, so that he could have some at once? Whose house was that they had just passed? and so on.

Mr. Bulpit replied to the various questions with his usual gravity. The estate consisted of so many acres, yes, there was a great deal of invested money. If Mr. Percival could prove his identity as the son of Ralph Percival, he would be in immediate possession of a large sum. The house they had just passed was Hatherley, the seat of Lord Hatherley.

All the while he was satisfying the young man's curiosity, Mr. Bulpit was studying him; and though he felt assured that he was the missing heir, the old lawyer was not altogether pleased with the conviction.

Ralph Percival was on his best behaviour, but there was a something—something in the tone of the voice, in the glint of the dark eyes, the twist of the under-lip, which Mr. Bulpit did not like.

They had nearly reached Market Ration, when they met a dog-cart driven tandem.

A young girl, lovely and fresh as a summer morning, was driving, and an aristocratic-looking gentleman sat beside her.

Ralph gazed eagerly at them as they approached.

"Who is that?" he asked, almost under his breath.

"That is Lord Hatherley—the house we have just passed—"

"Yes, yes; but the girl, the lady?" interrupted Ralph, eagerly.

"Lady Mary, his daughter," said Mr. Bulpit, rather curtly.

He touched the horse with his whip as he spoke, for he had no intention of stopping and introducing this, as yet unproved, claimant; but when she saw them, Mary had said to her father:

"There is dear old Mr. Bulpit, father. Who is the young man with him?"

"A stranger," replied Lord Hatherley. "Don't know him. Good heavens!" he broke off in a low voice.

"What is the matter, father?" asked Mary.

"Why, he is the image of Lord Ration! He must be—Pull up, Mary!"

So Lady Mary, nothing loath, pulled up and looked with gentle interest and curiosity at the young man who was being driven towards them.

There was nothing for it, and Mr.

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bulpit, with a pursing of his lips, ad to stop; but he hoped to be able to get on again with a mere lifting of his hat; but Lord Hatherley, with natural curiosity, eyed the young man intently.

"Just been to the Hall, Mr. Bulpit?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Yes, my lord," said the lawyer; and he added, reluctantly: "And I'm going back with this gentleman to Market Ration on business. He informs me that his name is Ralph Percival, and that he is the heir we are looking for."

Ralph tried to force a smile; but his eyes caught his shabby coat—leave, his face flushed, and he looked covertly and sideways at the two in the dog-cart.

"God bless my heart!" exclaimed Lord Hatherley; and he was preparing to get down, when Mr. Bulpit, remarking, with a short frown, "I'm afraid I must get on, my lord," drove on.

Ralph Percival's face crimsoned, and as he raised his hat, a little too laborately, he turned, half sullenly, to Bulpit.

"Why didn't you stop? He was getting down—he wanted to know me."

"There is plenty of time—when you have proved your claim, sir," replied Mr. Bulpit, rather sternly.

Ralph twisted his lip and laughed, but not too pleasantly.

"Perhaps you're right to be cautious. But, look here, Mr. Bulpit, you'll find I'm the man right enough."

"I must wait until I do, before I introduce you."

"Oh, that's all right," assented Ralph. "I say, she's a beautiful girl, if you like."

This tribute to Lady Mary's loveliness jarred upon Mr. Bulpit, and he closed his lips firmly.

"I suppose they're my nearest neighbors, eh?" added Ralph, after a moment's consideration.

Mr. Bulpit nodded rather coldly.

"Yes. By the way, there's one question I forgot to ask you."

"Is there? I shouldn't have thought so," remarked Ralph. "You seemed to me to be about cover the bill. What was it?"

"Whether you were married or not," said Mr. Bulpit.

The moment he had asked the question he was angry with himself for having done so, for it would seem as if it had been suggested by the meeting with Lady Mary, and he was so engrossed by the reflection that he did not notice the sudden pallor of his companion's face.

The pallor was only momentary, and the reply came promptly enough:

"No, I'm not married, thank goodness! Haven't had enough money to get married on. Is there any other question—such as have I had the measles or the smallpox? If so, ask it by all means. I haven't anything to conceal."

But a moment or two afterwards he said, as if he had been considering the last assertion:

"Though, I suppose, it won't be necessary to publish the whole of my life for the amusement of the public? It won't be pleasant for me, in my position, to go about amongst my equals, if they know that I've had to rough it—that I've—Well, I don't want to be known all my life as Ralph Bannister, the strolling player, or instance."

"There will be no need for such publicity," said Bulpit. "If you establish your claim to the satisfaction of the House of Lords, that will suffice. No one need know anything of your past life."

"What, I mean is, I shouldn't like to become a newspaper sensation," explained Ralph as casually as he could.

Mr. Bulpit nodded.

"I understand. Here is your hotel. If you will allow me to offer you a word of advice, sir, I would advise you not to say too much about your affairs. There is, as you may know, a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip."

Ralph got down from the phaeton before Bulpit had finished, and stood on the pavement looking up at him with sullen and repressed anger.

"Look here! you mean well, I dare say," he said; "but don't go too far. I'm not an impostor, though you seem to treat me like one. And I'm not the sort to go gassing around. And, look here, Mr. Bulpit, if you don't care to undertake my business,

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I daresay I can find another solicitor who'd be glad to do so; at any rate, I shouldn't have any difficulty in finding one who'd be more civil."

Bulpit coloured, with something like self-reproach mixed with the anger roused by this speech.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no intention of offending you. At the same time, sir, I must remind you that I am at present the solicitor to the Ration estate. When you have proved your claim to the title and estates, and not till then, shall I become your legal adviser; and whether I do so then will rest with myself, as well as you."

Ralph Percival's eyes dropped, and he forced an apologetic smile.

"Oh, we don't want to quarrel," he said. "You don't make allowances. Just put yourself in my place."

The old lawyer relented, and he took the hand the young man held up to him.

"No apology is needed. You are right; I did not make allowance for the circumstances in which you find yourself, sir," he said, with the readiness of a gentleman to own his shortcoming. "As you say, yours is a difficult place. But, all the same," he added, "I should not talk too freely."

Ralph nodded.

"You'll find me here when you want me," he said as pleasantly as he could, "and I hope it will be soon."

Mr. Bulpit drove away to pack a bag and take the next train to town, and Ralph Percival entered the hotel. For the life of him he could not suppress a certain amount of swagger, and he enjoyed the start of amazement and curiosity which the land-

lord gave when the young man wrote his name, "Ralph Percival," in the visitors' book.

He engaged the best suite of rooms, called for a brandy and soda, and then fingering the bank-notes in his trousers pockets, went into the town. As he strolled down the street, one or two persons who met him looked after him curiously and earnestly, and he enjoyed the interest he was creating; enjoyed the start of surprise with which the tailor greeted the—"My name's Percival"—he longed to say "Lord Ration," but was afraid of Mr. Bulpit—"Ralph Percival; send them to the Bull. I'll pay for these now, please."

He purchased a ready-made suit at another shop, a watch and gold Albert—it was the first gold Albert he had ever worn—and sundry other things more or less necessary, and returned to the hotel in time for the dinner—duck and green peas, and gooseberry tart with cream—which he had ordered, together with a bottle of one of the best brands of champagne. He ate this—to him luxurious—meal in solitary grandeur; but later in the evening he sauntered downstairs and into the billiard room.

It was full, and there was something like a crowd at the bar; for the news that a gentleman had been brought to the Bull by Mr. Bulpit, that he had given his name as Percival, the family name of the Rations, and that he bore an extraordinary resemblance to the late earl, had spread through the town.

Ralph swaggered to a seat, and as he watched the play drank a glass of whiskey and soda; but he kept his mouth shut. The old lawyer's caution, "There's many a slip," haunted him. And, besides, he had a great deal to think about. The vision of the lovely girl whom he had met in the road rose before him as he sipped his whiskey and smoked the Bull's best cigar.

It floated pleasantly before him as the landlord, obsequiously carrying a plated candelabra, preceded him up the stairs; but as he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, another vision rose: the picture of a squalid room, lit by a dim and evil-smelling lamp, the radius of which showed the wan face and worn figure of Nita, his wife.

It haunted him even in his sleep; and he woke in the middle of the night bathed in sweat and shivering. But he thrust the vision from him, and muttered:

"It's all right. She'll never know!"

He turned over and fell asleep again.

It would be impossible to describe the state of suspense in which he spent the week that followed, or to tell what it cost him to refrain from standing in the High Street of the town and crying out: "I am the Earl of Ration!" but the fear of Mr. Bulpit was before his eyes, and he did restrain himself. Every day he walked or drove out to Ration Hall, and stood gazing at the house in a kind of fever. Now and again he met the steward, and learnt from him the extent of the estates; and as he listened, the blood ran like quicksilver in his veins.

At last, on a Tuesday night, Mr. Bulpit entered the Bull. He had driven straight from the station, and looked graver and grimmer than usual.

Ralph happened to be standing at the bar, a glass of whiskey and water before him, and Mr. Bulpit went straight up to him.

"How do you do, my lord?" he said, raising his hat.

Ralph gasped, set down the glass which he had clutched, and gazed at him eagerly.

"My lord?" he said, eagerly. "Then—"

Mr. Bulpit turned to the landlord who was looking with breathless interest from the lawyer to the young man.

"This gentleman is the Earl of Ration, Mr. Brown," he said, gravely. "Shall we go up to your room, my lord?"

With a white face, his knees knocking together, the young man preceded him.

The Earl of Ration! The Earl of Ration!

(To be continued.)

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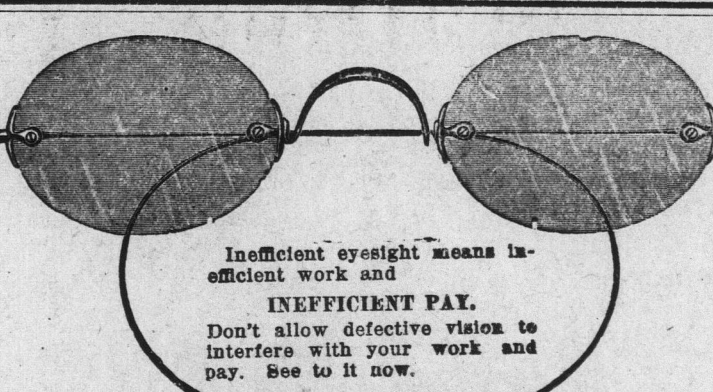
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OFFICIATING CLERICS.—Rev. Canon White will preach at the induction service of Rev. Dr. Jones, at St. Thomas's Church on Sunday next. Rev. Canon Colley, R.D., will officiate at the induction of the new Rector.

VICTIM OF DISASTER.—Mr. Thos. Dawson, who went to the ice as master watch last year in the s.s. Newfoundland was released from the General Hospital yesterday afternoon and left by the 6 o'clock train for his home in Bay Roberts.

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