



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

CHAPTER IX.

Day followed day, and the bargain the strange compact, was carried out with scrupulous care by both parties. Rath was patient himself, and when he found that to laugh or even smile at his companion's mistakes and failures made her angry or sorrowful, he learnt to suppress his amusement and only became more patient. A woman is quick to observe and to imitate. Stella proved an apt pupil; very soon, almost incredibly soon, she learnt to fish and shoot, to manage the boat and canoe, to milk the cow and make the butter. And with all this knowledge she was acquiring something still more valuable—health and strength.

In very truth, the change in her was extraordinary. She was thin and pale and delicate when she had drifted to the Isle of Refuge, but day by day her graceful figure filled out, and though she was still slim and lithe as a young Indian, she was strong, with a strength that surprised herself. In that glorious air fatigue seemed impossible. She could walk any distance, and stalking the deer was no exertion to her now. And with her strength her beauty grew to a more pronounced loveliness. From a slip of a girl she was developing into superb womanhood.

As a natural consequence of her splendid condition, she was always in good spirits. As she went about she sang, sometimes in an undertone, but often with full and glorious tone; and her mother, who mostly kept to the hut, or mooned about the beach, listened to her with a kind of dull wonder.

"You seem happy, Stella," she remarked, one day, as the hut rang with the girl's voice.

Stella stopped her song, and paused in the act of washing a plate. "Happy, mother, yes," she admitted. "I am so well, and—Oh! I do not know what it is, perhaps I have no time to be unhappy."

"And yet we are cast on this desert island!" said the mother, fretfully.

"Not a desert island, mother," Stella corrected her, not for the first time. "Think, what a lovely place it is, and how much it provides for us! Why, we seem to have everything we want!"

The woman looked at her impatiently.

"You forget that we are out of the world; that you are growing up wild like a savage! Your face and hands are brown, and—and—"

Stella held out her hands, and eyed them laughingly. "They are brown, mother, and my arms, too; but see how strong they are!" she said, soothingly. "Oh! it's good to be well and strong, and to be able to do things."

"Some day we may escape from this horrible place," said Mrs. Mordaunt, "and then you will be ashamed

of this life—ashamed to mix with your own kind."

Stella looked through the open doorway at the exquisite view bathed in a sunlight which made the air tingle deliciously, and she sighed; but whether at the prospect of escape or not, who shall say?

But she did not take up her song again, and her mother's words haunted her; so that afternoon when she met Rath, she said:

"Do vessels ever pass here, Rath?"

He started slightly, for he had been looking at her in a kind of brown study. He, too, had noticed the change in her, and sometimes he would lean on his rifle or stop the swing of his hoe or fishing rod, and gaze at her in a dreamy way.

"No," he said. "Why?"

She hesitated a moment, as she went on with the net she was knitting.

"If—if one came and saw us, it would take us away," she said.

He was cutting some stakes for the net, and he paused, knife in hand.

"Do you want to go?" he asked, very quietly.

She bent lower over the net.

"My mother," she said; "she—she is always longing to go. It is natural."

He made a movement of impatience.

"Yes; but you?"

"I don't know," she replied, half doubtfully, and in a still lower voice.

"I have got resigned. The Isle is so beautiful—and I am so well—" she faltered.

"But if a vessel saw us, we could all go, Rath."

He shook his head.

"No; I should not leave the island," he said.

She glanced up at him with a startled expression in her eyes, but said nothing.

"If you want to look for a vessel, you should go to the north point," he said, after a silence. "There would be more chance of sighting one from there."

"Will you come and show me this afternoon?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said, curtly. "We will go when I have finished these stakes."

She did not thank him; and, presently, when he threw down the last stake, and, closing his knife, said, "I'm ready," she looked up with innocent enquiry in her eyes.

"What for? Oh! yes, we'll go—if you like," she responded, indifferently.

He got his gun, and they started. Both were unusually silent for a time, Rath walking with his eyes downcast, instead of on the look-out for something to shoot, as they generally were. But presently Stella began to sing in a low voice; but her singing, which usually made him so happy, only increased the strange sadness which made his heart heavy.

Insensibly he had grown accustomed to the constant companionship of this boy-girl whom Providence had cast upon his care, and the prospect of losing her filled him with vague dismay. And yet he had been content enough until she came. Why was it?

They always walked quickly, and soon they came through the woods, and approached the coast-line. As they went along the edge of the cliff, Stella paused and looked down.

"How lovely those are, Rath!" she said, pointing to some blue flowers which grew on the precipitous sides of the cliff.

Her love for flowers was always a source of wonder to him, and he often gathered a bunch for her in his wanderings.

"There are more and larger ones farther on," he said.

"And look—oh! look at those lovely kind of lilies down there!" she exclaimed, nodding down at the valley beneath them. "I must go and get them. Wait for me, Rath; I'll not be long."

Most girls would have considered the distance a pretty considerable one, but to Stella it was as nothing;

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and she half ran, half walked down the hill, and in a few minutes had gathered a bunch of the white lilies. Then she looked up for the easiest way of ascending, and began to climb up again. There was a kind of path through the bracken, and she was following this when suddenly she saw an object lying in her way which caused her to stop and stare with amazement; for it was a pick such as miners use. It was rusty, its handle was broken and worm-eaten, and it was half hidden by the bracken which had grown up round it. She took it up, then dropped it, as if smitten by a vague dread, and hurried on to tell Rath; but she had not gone a dozen steps before she saw something that changed the vague dread to a very actual one.

Not a dozen yards from the rusty and mouldering pick lay a human skeleton.

She did not shriek, but she stood for a moment as if chained to the spot, her face white, her eyes staring. Then the spell of horror relaxed, and, crying, "Rath! Rath!" she bounded away and up the hill.

Breathless with fear, she reached the top, and, shaking in every limb, looked round for Rath; but he was nowhere to be seen. She ran along, calling to him as one calls for protection from a nameless horror. But there came no answer; and suddenly, exhausted by her emotion, she flung herself down on the ground and covered her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out the sight that haunted her. She lay like this for a moment or so, then Rath's absence smote on her consciousness.

She rose and ran again, still calling, and presently found the Winchester lying on the edge of the cliff. She went down on her hands and knees and peered over; and as she did so there rose from her lips a cry which would have pierced a heart of flint—a cry of terror keener and more intense than that which the sight of the skeleton had evoked—a cry of infinite horror and bereavement.

For, lying on the beach below, his arms stretched out, his upturned face white and death-like, was Rath.

CHAPTER X.

Stella remained motionless for a moment or two, clutching the grass that grew on the edge of the cliff, and gazing down, with white and horror-stricken face, at the figure stretched out on the beach below.

The air was so fine and clear that, great as the distance was, she could see his face distinctly, and her heart stood still; for his face was like that of a dead man, and he lay without life or motion. She was paralyzed with terror and grief for a while, then she leant still further, and perilously, over the edge, to see whether she could get down.

He rose and stretched himself slowly, and she watched him in breathless suspense.

"I've broken nothing, I think," he said. "But I feel stiff and giddy. I must have fallen on the back of my head and stunned myself. I remember my father falling from a rock and fainting. Yes, that was it."

She began to breathe again, and was about to utter her satisfaction,

There was a narrow ledge running slantingly some distance down the steep side; but she knew that she would not be able to keep her footing on it for a single minute; the only way of reaching him was to go down the valley, and she set off running as even she had never run before. It seemed to her ages before she got to the sea level and the opening on to the beach, and having gained that, she had, of course, to get back to the spot on which Rath had fallen. The part of the beach she first traversed was broken by boulders and large pebbles; but she sprang from one to the other almost unconsciously, and at the imminent peril of her neck, and presently, panting and breathless, was kneeling beside Rath.

"Rath! Rath!" she called to him, not loudly, but in an agony which almost choked her. She drew her head against her heaving bosom, and fearfully, tremblingly, felt for his heart. At first she could detect no pulsation, and a cry broke from her—the woman's cry when something more precious than her own life has been torn from her. But presently the change of position sent the blood back to his heart, and she felt it flutter under her hand, and the cry of bereavement gave place to one of almost delirious joy. She lowered him gently and ran at racing speed to one of the pools in the rocks, and dipping her handkerchief into the water, took back, took his head on its palpitating pillow again, and bathed his forehead, her great eyes devouring his face with anxiety and eagerness, her quivering lips murmuring anxiously:

"Oh, Rath! Rath! Don't die, Rath! Don't die!"

She wet the handkerchief thrice, and after a time her efforts were rewarded; his heart gave a kind of bound, he moved slowly, painfully, as if he were being drawn back to life reluctantly, and opened his eyes.

She drew him closer to her, and in gratitude for his goodness in coming back to her, put her lips to his forehead. It was well for her that he was still unconscious.

But presently he came to, and, with a sigh, opened his lips.

"How did you come down?" was his first faltering question.

"Oh, Rath! Rath!" she panted, "how did it happen? I—I thought you were killed! How did you fall over? You who can walk on a couple of inches of rock without swerving. Tell me!"

"How did you come down—not down the cliff?" he asked, almost sternly. "It was dangerous—foolish!"

At that moment of excitement and joy and relief, she did not notice that his first thought on recovering had been of her; but it came upon her afterwards.

"No, no; I came round. But, Rath, how did you fall? And are you very much hurt?" anxiously.

"I don't know; I don't think so. I'm glad you didn't try and climb down; it's very steep," he said, gravely. "I don't know whether I've broken any of my bones. I'll stand up and see."

"No, no; rest for a moment or two." Unconsciously she drew him still closer. "I'm—I'm afraid to let you see, in case you are hurt! And there is no doctor, no one but me, and I'm such a helpless, ignorant girl—I mean boy!"

He looked up at her strangely, curiously, even in this moment of weakness.

"Why are you so distressed?" he asked.

Stella gazed at him as if perplexed by the question.

"I—I thought you were dead—" "All men must die some time," he said, with unconscious philosophy.

"—And now that you're alive, I don't know that you haven't broken a leg or an arm. And what shall I do if you have? Isn't it enough to upset me?" she added, glad at having found a reason.

He rose and stretched himself slowly, and she watched him in breathless suspense.

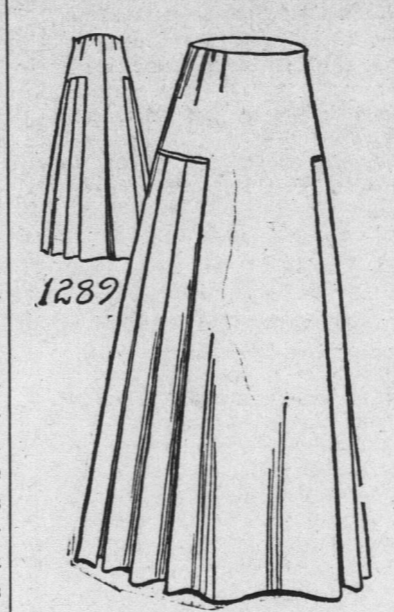
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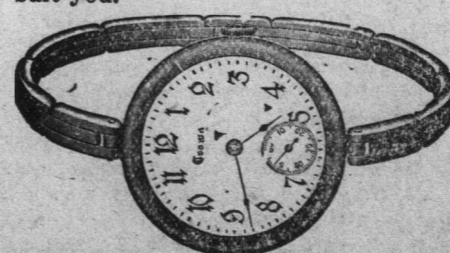
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PHOTOGRAPHS

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War News

Messages Received
Previous to 9 A.M.

GERMAN CASUALTIES

PARIS, April 24

Heavy losses already have been inflicted upon the Germans in fighting about Ypres. Rescued from points south of the salient, state that fighting continues over front of about eleven miles. But the German attacks seem to be waning under the fire of the shells massed against them, and that they are being forced back. 238 soldiers from St. Omar estimate the German casualties at more than 9,000 in attacks that resulted in their losing a passage of the Ypres canal, a hamlet of Poelcapelle, which was captured by advance guards. Germans in their first platoon ward, has been recaptured by British troops. The Germans were driven out early this morning after they had fought hand to hand with the British soldiers for several hours.

FRENCH WAR OFFICE REPORT

PARIS, April 24

The War Office statement of the afternoon follows: In Belgium counter-attacks continued successfully in close co-operation with the Allies. The Germans, who attacked us with two army corps, continued to employ asphyxiating gases. During the day some of their projectiles which did not explode, were found to contain a large quantity of asphyxiating gases. We have made sensible progress towards the north, on the bank of the Yser canal. The troops, notwithstanding the attacks of the Germans, of which we spoke last night, have, on our side, maintained all their positions; in Argonne we took a German trench, captured 2 machine guns and made some prisoners. The was a local one, although it was a most violent character.

On the heights on Mont, at the front of the Yser canal, the Germans made an attack with an entire division front of one kilometre, about thirds of a mile. At first they pelted our first line to right; we quickly regained this position after a counter-attack.

FAVORABLE TO ALLIES.

PARIS, April 24 (Contd.)

To the north of Ypres the continues under conditions favorable to the troops of the Allies. The Germans have attacked at several points along the British front from various directions in the north, east and southwest, but they were able to gain ground. On our side have progressed on the right of the canal, and delivered successful counter-attacks. On the of the front there is nothing to report.

FRANCO-BELGIAN TROOPS

LONDON, April 24

Official statement by the Legation says: Lizee (Belgium) west of Ypres canal, which was taken by the enemy on Friday night, been re-taken to-day by the Belgian troops. Our artillery piled successfully to the front of the whole length of our by the German batteries. Standing very strong wind, our forces have been able to make reconnaissance.

PAYING THE PRICE.

OTTAWA, April 24

Over 80 officers of the First Canadian Expeditionary Force, and in the list of killed and wounded a result of the titanic struggle at Langemarck, and there are fear the number may be augmented. The list of losses among the has not been called, and it is expected for several days.

"ONLY THEIR DUTY."

OTTAWA, April 24

"They would never leave guns in the hands of the Germans," said Major Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia, regarding the Canadian story, when shown the British Office statement. "They have what was expected of them, and was their duty. Yes, this makes us prouder than ever of I am sorry that the despatch there were many casualties, but

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