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

CHAPTER XXIII.

"You'll like the Abbey—or I hope you will. It's an old place, but it's pretty and picturesque, and—let me put that wrap round you; the evenings are growing cool."

He drew the wrap round her, and as she sank back and closed her eyes, he went down to his cabin. Lady Cecilia was there writing letters, and she looked up at him and was struck by something in his face, his eyes.

"Cis, she's coming to the Abbey," he said in a low voice.

She balanced the pen on her taper fingers.

"She is coming to the Abbey?" she said. "You have asked her?"

"Yes," he said, fidgeting about the cabin.

"I'm very glad," said Lady Cecilia. "Are you, Cecil?"

"Glad!" he echoed, with a flash of his bright eyes. "What do you think? Glad! Why, Cis, I love her!"

Stella had no sooner consented to go home with the Lisles than she, of course, regretted it. Lisle Abbey was not the way back to Rath and the island; and it was to the island she wanted to go with all the longing of her heart, now awakened to a sense of her overwhelming love.

But what could she do? Being absolutely penniless, she could not pay her fare out to Vancouver; and even if she were able to reach it, she could not make her way alone across the land to Rath. Besides, she felt too grateful to the brother and sister who had rescued her to pain them by a refusal. And, indeed, where else could she go? As she had said so pathetically to Lord Lisle, she knew no one, there was no place in which she could find asylum.

As the yacht sailed swiftly towards port, she reflected on her strange and singular position. She knew abso-

lutely nothing of her belongings. She and her mother had always lived together; and her mother had told her nothing of her history, or even mentioned a relative. That seemed natural enough and in no way extraordinary until now; but during these latter days Stella pondered over her curious ignorance, and asked herself what was to become of her. Of course she could not remain a burden on the hands of these kind friends for long, and she formed some vague idea of earning her own living, though how she was to accomplish that seemingly commonplace achievement she did not know. It is a problem which presents many difficulties even to those who are better equipped for its solution than poor Stella was.

As they neared port and she more fully realized her position, her distress increased, and Lady Cecilia, coming upon her suddenly, found her sitting with her face buried in her hands.

"What is it, dear?" she murmured, seating beside Stella and gently drawing her hands down. "You mustn't fret like this, for our sakes, for it makes me—to say nothing of Cecil—so unhappy. Is there anything we can do to help you?"

"Help me!" echoed Stella, almost desperately, "as if you were not helping me enough. I am homeless and penniless, and you are taking me to your home, and—The very clothes I wear are yours, and—and—I have not got any money to buy others."

Cecilia listened, almost shocked.

"My dear Stella, one does not expect to pick up shipwrecked people with a complete wardrobe in tow, and, of course, you have had to wear mine. Why should you mind? Just reverse our cases, and suppose that it was you who had found me in an open boat; would you object to lending me a few frocks and so on, and do you think I should mind accepting them?"

"Ah! that is very different," said Stella; "you—you are rich, and have friends and relations and some place to go to, while I—Why, you do not even know who I am!"

"Yes; you are Stella Mordaunt, a very sweet and charming girl of whom I have grown very fond," said Lady Cecilia. "And you are alone and helpless, and that is as much as I want to know, dear. Some day, perhaps, you will tell me more about yourself—"

"But I don't know anything!" interrupted poor Stella; and then she confessed her ignorance of her history. Lady Cecilia concealed her surprise, and soothed her newly found friend.

"It is very romantic, dear," she said in her sweet, low-pitched voice; "but I am sure your loneliness is no fault of yours, and it only increases my interest in you. Now, see, Stella, you have consented to come to the Abbey, and you must make us both happier—my brother and me—by permitting us to be of some real use to you. To speak plainly, you must let us lend you some money."

Stella winced.

"But—but I shall never be able to pay you back," she faltered.

Lady Cecilia laughed.

"How tragically you said that! My dear Stella, you can't tell. Perhaps you will find your relations; perhaps they may turn up and claim you, and tear you away from us—but you won't desert us, Stella?—sooner than you expect. The world is a small place, after all, and it is wonderful how one runs across people. But even if you must repay us—Why, Stella, an idea has occurred to me! Why

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shouldn't you be a companion to me?"

She laughed and blushed as she made the suggestion prompted by her desire to save the lonely girl's pride.

"A companion?" said Stella, vaguely.

Lady Cecilia nodded brightly.

"Yes. It is not an uncommon thing for a solitary girl like myself to have a companion; and I am very solitary, dear. I have no one but Cecil, who is, so to speak, a part of myself, and therefore does not count; and if you will accept the position, I should be delighted, and everything will be easy."

"What shall I have to do?" asked Stella, gravely. "I am afraid—There are so few things I can do"—a faint smile crossed her sad face—"except milk cows and catch trout and snare wild duck."

Lady Cecilia stared at her laughingly.

"Why, what an accomplished person you must be! My dear girl, I am ashamed of offering you such a poor place. A lady with such a variety of accomplishments ought to look for something ever so much higher."

Stella tried to laugh, but her lips quivered.

"I learnt to do these things on—the island," she said; and Lady Cecilia, seeing her eyes filling with tears, hastened to change the subject.

"You can be just what you have been since we picked—since I knew you, dear—just the sweetest and nicest companion to a lonely girl. We can go out calling and do needlework and read together; and of course you will have a salary, and you shall pay me back out of it any money you want now. Is it agreed, dear?" she wound up gently.

Stella nodded. She was too moved to speak.

"I know you are only proposing this to help me," she said. "But perhaps I can be of some little use to you, and—and so repay you."

Then she grew thoughtful for a moment, for she remembered that if she could get back to the island there was gold enough there, not to repay Lady Cecilia for her infinite kindness and affection—but for her more material assistance. It struck Stella even at the moment as strangely curious that she should be sitting there penniless and a recipient of charity, while she and Rath were, as a matter of fact, immensely rich! The reflection comforted and cheered her, because it restored her self-respect, and she smiled pensively as Lord Lisle came up, singing as usual, and his sister explained the arrangement.

"It was a happy idea, Cecil," she said, when they were alone shortly afterwards. "She was fretting over

her position, and would have made herself ill again. And when one thinks of it, it is a trying situation for her—to be absolutely penniless and friendless."

"Not friendless, Cis," he put in quickly. "She has us, she will always have you."

"Yes, Cecil," she assented, gravely. She was silent for a moment or two. When he had made the startling announcement that he loved Stella, he had left the cabin abruptly, and neither he nor Cecilia had referred to his avowal since; but now, after the pause, she said in a low voice:

"Cecil, that was a very serious thing you said the other evening."

He coloured, but met her grave, anxious gaze steadily.

"I know it is. But though I am sorry I spoke out so plainly, I've no intention of taking it back. I do love her, Cis."

"It is so soon!" she murmured.

"And yet I am not surprised. She is so beautiful—I don't think I have ever seen a lovelier face, or one with a greater charm—and she is altogether so fascinating."

He nodded eagerly.

"Yes; that is it. She is unlike any other girl I have met. She is a woman, and yet she is like a child, so simple, so natural, so fearless. Oh, I can't explain!"

"I think I know, dear," she said, her eyes following him lovingly, as he paced up and down the narrow saloon. "Have I not also felt the peculiar charm she exercises? Think of it! She has been with us only short time, and yet I have grown so fond of her that the mere thought of parting with her is painful to me. I thought at first that I was drawn to her because we had rescued her and befriended her; but that is not the only reason; it is something in herself. But then we know nothing about her! Cecil, isn't that also a reason why you should—should be careful? Remember, dear, that though we like her so much, are so drawn towards her, that we know absolutely nothing about her. Why, she knows nothing of her own history!"

She told him so much of Stella's story as Stella had told her.

"It is strange!" he said; then he sighed. "I've stated to myself all the objections you could put before me, Cis; but it is of no use! Love and prudence have nothing to say to each other; and—I love her! It came upon me suddenly, as I saw her lying in your arms on the deck; and it has grown and grown each day until it has taken complete possession of me. I am glad she is coming to the Abbey. I am glad you have hit upon this 'companion' idea as an excuse for helping her; for, to speak plainly, Cis, if she had gone, I should have had to follow her! Yes; it is madness, if you like, but it is a madness from which I shall not recover; it will last me my life. We know nothing about her—"

"Except that she is good and pure," said his sister, softly. "I am quite sure, quite sure of that!"

He laughed, as if the assertion were superfluous.

(To be Continued.)

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