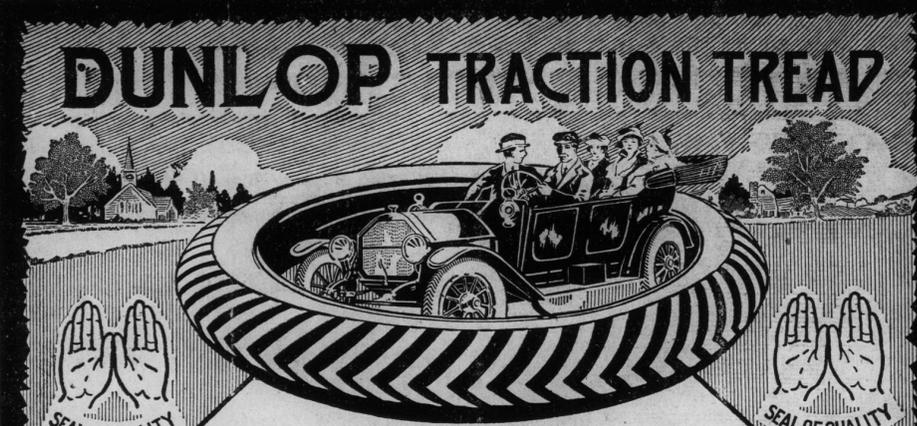


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Stella Mordaunt: —OR— The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XXV.

She stopped for lack of breath; then her eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered; but suddenly she recovered her self-control, and with a laugh that was broken by something like a sigh, said, apologetically: "I've quite startled you with my socialistic outburst, haven't I, Cis? But don't mind me. I—I have been thinking over things lately, and—and what you said about Lord Lisle and that beautiful girl set me off. Wasn't that the luncheon bell I heard?"

"They went down-stairs and found Lisle and Stella awaiting them; and perhaps because her outburst had done her good, Mary was more like her old self.

When two women, who are bosom friends get together after a long absence, Miss Mordaunt, you can scarcely expect them to have any consideration for their starving fellow-creatures!" said Lisle. His face was aglow with happiness, his blue eyes sparkling. "Just as you came down, Mary, Miss Mordaunt and I were meditating an attack upon our pieces of bread. Seafaring people are hungry folk. Has Cis been giving you a true and particular account of our wanderings? I've brought you a case of shells, Mary. Do you remember how we used to hunt for them, in the old days, and how Ned Bryan fell off the rock into the pool?"

Cecilia saw Mary wince, and adroitly switched her brother on to another subject; a safe one, as she thought. "Cecilia, you must call on Lord Ration, to-morrow," she said.

"Very well, mum," he said, touching his forehead.

"You see what an obedient brother I am, Miss Mordaunt. What's he like Mary? You must know that we have quite a romance of the peerage in our

country," he went on, addressing Stella, and so saving Mary from the necessity of a reply. "The late Earl of Ration died without kith or kin, as it was thought, but a young nephew sprang up from no one knows where, and claimed the title and estates—and got 'em, which is quite another thing. You remember I mentioned Ration Hall last night? You'd like to see it, wouldn't you? Suppose we all drive over to-morrow, Cis?"

Cecilia laughed.

"Isn't that like a man! If he can't get out of a morning call, he will contrive to get some one to bear him company."

"And share his misery," put in Lisle. "Quite so. Did you ever hear the story of the man who went to pay a call, and said to the servant who opened the door, 'Is Lady So-and-So in? I'll give you half a crown my man, if you say she isn't.' But seriously, I shall be happy to make Lord Ration's acquaintance. I liked his uncle, the late earl, poor fellow!"

"Why do you pity him—because he is dead?" asked Stella.

She had scarcely spoken as yet, and Mary was struck by the sweetness and tone of the voice.

"No; because he lived," said Lisle, with momentary gravity. "The fact is, there is a tragedy connected with the House of Ration. The late earl and his elder brother quarrelled, and the brother disappeared suddenly with his little boy—who would be the heir if he had lived."

"My dear Cecil, what a muddle you are making of it; isn't he, Molly? How can you expect Stella to understand?"

Lisle laughed.

"Let me give you a piece of fowl to sustain you while I try and explain, Miss Mordaunt. No? You'd better; you'll need some sustenance. In two words, then, there were three brothers, and this young man—what is his name, Mary?"

"Ralph," she said, looking straight before her, and speaking in a voice absolutely without expression.

"Thanks. This young man inherits because one of the brothers and his little boy disappeared. Were drowned."

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ed. Oh, yes, we must call and pay our respects. Ration is the oldest peerage in the country."

"Older than the Lisle's?" put in Mary, with a spark of mischief in her eyes.

"My dear Mary, the Lisles only came over here with that charming but somewhat unscrupulous robber, William of Normandy, while the Rations—oh, I believe they spring from one of the earliest Saxon earls—no pun intended, Miss Mordaunt. So we will drive over to-morrow and pay tribute."

"I see by the papers that Lord Ration is a liberal supporter of the hounds and all the local charities; and by the tone of the paragraph I should think he is rather a good fellow, and will be an acquisition to the county. Does your father like him, Mary?"

"Very much indeed—they are great friends," said Mary, very quietly.

"Then he's bound to be all right," said Lisle, cheerfully. "Come and see our trophies, the spoils of foreign glimes, Mary. They are all of a heap in the billiard-room at present."

As he led the way, Stella lingered behind, intending to go to her room; but he looked round, and said quickly, though casually:

"You must come, too, Miss Mordaunt. Miss Mordaunt is an authority on sea-birds—quite an ornithologist, I assure you; isn't she, Cis?—and I sha'n't remember their names."

Stella hesitated a moment, then she followed the others. Lord Lisle was in a sense her employer, and it was her duty to obey. They spent some time examining the curios; indeed, tea was brought into the billiard-room; and when Mary declared that she must go, Lisle said, as if he had arranged it all, that Cis should ride part of the way with her, and that he would drive.

"We'll have the dog-cart. It will be a good opportunity of showing Miss Mordaunt a little of the immediate neighbourhood," he added, as if he took it for granted that Stella would accompany them; and when she said she thought she would stay at home, he waved her objection aside in his boyish way.

"Oh, but you must! Who is to keep me company if you don't come? Those two will ride close together and talk to each other all the time, and quite forget me."

"Yes, come, Stella, dear," said Cecilia; and Stella yielded, as a matter of course. Lord Lisle wore his heart so plainly on his sleeve that Mary had discovered his secret within the first half hour of her visit; but Stella was still in complete ignorance of his love for her, and attributed his expressed desire for her society, his close but respectful attention, to the good nature which was so characteristic of these two friends whom Heaven had sent to her aid.

As she and Mary were waiting in the hall for Cecilia, Mary said, with her winning smile, and with the gentle little timidity, which made her so irresistible:

"Cecilia has promised to bring you over to see us, Miss Mordaunt. My father will be so glad to see you! The Lisles and we are old friends, and you must let us claim you for a friend also."

Stella's colour came and went, but she looked at Mary courageously.

"Has Lady Cecilia told you, Lady Mary, that—that though she is good enough to call me her friend, I am in reality her companion, her servant?"

Mary blushed.

"She would not like to hear you say that," she said, quickly but gently.

"No; she is all that is good and kind. Perhaps you don't know, Lady Mary, that I was—homeless and friendless until Lord and Lady Lisle found me; that but for them I should be still homeless and friendless."

Her lovely eyes grew moist, and her voice shook a little, but she went on bravely:

"I want you to know it. It is right that everybody should know it. Oh! it is not because I am proud—oh, no, no! but because no one should be deceived."

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Mary was touched by the sweet humility in the lovely eyes, and the soft, musical voice, and her own eyes were moist as she impulsively held out her hand.

"I know; oh, yes, I understand!" she said, quickly, for Cecilia was coming down the stairs. "But—but Cecilia would be hurt if you set up any difference between you."

"I know," said Stella, quickly and in a low voice. "But is it not right that I should tell you? Would it be honest for me to take advantage of her kindness—"

"Here we are!" cried Lisle, springing down the stairs as the dog-cart and the horses came to the door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was a lovely evening, and Lord Lisle's light-heartedness seemed infectious.

"You two ride in front," he said, as he put Mary and Cecilia into their saddles, "and we will drive behind, like royalty with a couple of outriders in advance."

"Is that the young mare, Cecil?" asked his sister, glancing at the horse in the dog-cart. "It seems rather fidgety and restless."

"Yes. It only wants to take the lead, like the rest of its sex. It's all right. You don't suppose I'd run any risks with Miss Mordaunt in the cart? You are not nervous, I know, Miss Mordaunt."

Stella laughed. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed with the prospect of the drive.

"No, I don't think I'm nervous," she said. "What a beautiful creature it is!"

"Isn't she? She'd make a splendid lady's hack, and I'm going to try her with a side-saddle to-morrow; then, if she turns out satisfactorily, you shall try her."

"I?" said Stella. "But I can't ride."

"Really!" he exclaimed, with pleasant mockery. "It is quite a relief to hear of something that you can't do. Were there no horses in that mysterious island?"

It was an unfortunate question, for it brought back the past to Stella. Her eyes grew sad, and the brightness fled from her face.

"No," she said in a low voice.

"Then I shall have the delight of teaching you," he said.

He helped her up into the high cart and carefully arranged the wrap round her, holding the young horse well in hand as he did so. It made a little fuss at starting, and attempted to rear; but Lisle was a capital whip, and he coaxed it on to its forefeet, and presently it went off quietly enough. Though the two in front did not ride very fast, he contrived to keep some way behind them, and so had Stella all to himself. The cart was by no means a wide one, and they had to sit close to each other, and every time her arm touched his heart leapt, and he was obliged to turn his head aside lest she should see the love-light glowing in his eyes. Now and again he readjusted the wrap as it slipped down after the manner of wraps, and if Stella had not been so absorbed, she must have noticed how his hand trembled. But he talked lightly and cheerfully, pointing out the places of interest which they passed on their way, and planning all sorts of excursions.

"We'll have a picnic; it isn't too late for that sort of thing, is it? Look at those ruins, Miss Mordaunt; you'll be rather interested in them," he remarked, as they came to the remains of an old castle. "And there's the river. I'm afraid it's too late for trout; but we'll have some fishing there next spring. I'll have the river restocked, and put a water ballist on to it, so that you may get some sport. Cis tells me that you are a skilled angler."

"But—but I may not be here next spring, Lord Lisle," she said, roused from her reverie, and somewhat startled by his disposal of the future.

He glanced at her quickly, as if her words had filled him with dismay.

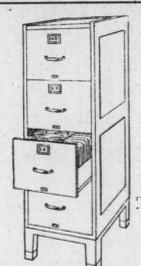
"Oh, I—I hope so!" he said, as lightly as he could. "Why, what plans have you? You must not dream of leaving us. What should we—what would Cis—do without you? You see how lonely we are, how much we treasure your society."

(To be Continued.)

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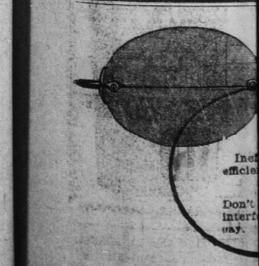
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