

Stella Mordaunt: The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XLIV.
"But, Stella, dearest!" she stammered, as a sense of Stella's equivocal position flashed upon her, "you were with him alone on the island. It is quite evident that he is madly in love with you, and that you—Forgive me, dear, if I speak plainly, but—" she laughed softly, "everyone can see that you are just dying of love for each other, and that there is no question—And what is there to prevent it? I think you must be very rich—you are a Rattion. I'm not sure that we shall not have to call you Lady Stella—and there can be no doubt that he is the real Earl of Rattion, and master of the Hall. There couldn't be a more suitable match. Besides," she laughed softly again and put her arm round Stella, "it is almost as if you were married already; why, you neither of you could marry anyone else. It is most splendid!"

She meant well, her words were prompted by the truest friendship and affection; but in speaking thus plainly, she had not allowed for that maidenly pride which was one of Stella's chief characteristics; and the effect of her speech upon Stella simply appalled her; for Stella's face went pale, and, withdrawing herself from Cecilia's arms, she stood at a little distance, looking straight before her, as if she were realizing the full significance of her friend's words.

"You think that—that he is bound to marry me?" she said at last, very slowly. "That because we were together on the island, the world will think that it is his duty to do so? No, no; don't speak! I know what you said; I can see by your face what you think—that he is bound to me—that he is not free to choose—that the world will think—"

She flung up her hands before her, suddenly hot face and stood as if overwhelmed with shame.

Cecilia was silent and aghast at what she had done.

"Oh, forgive me—forgive me, Stella!" she exclaimed, "I never meant—"

Stella held out both hands to her with a smile full of tenderness.

"There is nothing to forgive," she said. "You have told me the truth; and it is not better that I should hear it from you, who love me, than from others? I must think over what you have said. Rath is a great man now; he must be free to take his own way in life, to choose—to choose—" She nearly broke down, but mastered her emotion with a great effort. "How selfish I am to think of anything but his escape from the peril in which he was placed, and the good fortune which has come to him! I think I will lie down, for I feel suddenly tired. I will come down presently. Thank Lord Lisle for me for all his goodness to me and his kindness to Rath. I won't attempt to thank you—why should I? You know how grateful I am, how my heart—yes, I will lie down—and rest."

Cecilia was almost in tears; but she kissed Stella and left her without a word.

Meanwhile, Rath had been taken home to Bryan Court, where, it is needless to say, he was at once surrounded by hero-worshippers of the most pronounced type. Lady Bryan regarded him as the man who had saved Edward's life and given him a fortune, and Sir Gilbert was full of admiration for the heroic qualities and patriotic bearing of this young man who had spent the whole of his life in an island solitude.

In scriptural language, they set food before him and tended on him as if he had come through some terrible danger, some fight against overwhelming odds—as indeed he had. Edward could scarcely keep his hand off Rath's shoulder, and hovered about him as if he were afraid that Rath might be snatched from his side again, and the younger members of the family gazed at him with awe and admiration, as they might have gazed at a particularly young and gallant Robinson Crusoe or modern Bayard. Before many minutes, Rath had got one of the little Bryan girls on his

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knee; and she nestled against him, simply "blown out with pride," as one of her brothers candidly informed her afterwards.

"Of course you will stay here, Rath," said Sir Gilbert, who had caught the "Rath" from Edward, and, indeed, would have found it difficult to present to call him "Rattion." "You will make this, Edward's home, your home, until—until your affairs are settled. We won't speak of that wretched, unfortunate man."

Rath looked up and nodded. Then he looked round shyly, and with a boyish blush, asked in a low voice:

"Where is Stella?"

"The Lisles took her home," said Edward. "We thought it better that she should rest."

"Yes," assented Rath, quietly, and as if he understood. "I will go to her presently. She will want me," he added, with a simplicity which touched Lady Bryan.

While they were talking, Mr. Bulpit was announced. After greeting the Bryans he went up to Edward and held out a hand.

"I must beg your pardon for troubling you so soon, Lord Rattion—they all started at the 'Lord Rattion'—but I am sorry to say it is necessary. The suddenness with which the truth has been flashed upon us, the terrible discovery that the criminal is in possession of your title and estates, the fact that he is my client—and, though I would give ten years of my life to range myself on this gentleman's side, I cannot do so. I am a



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lawyer; the traditions of my profession—" He paused for a moment, then went on grimly: "I may or may not be convinced of the justness of your claims; but I have come to tell you that while my client, the present holder of the title, is capable of defending its possession, I shall fight against you. I shall defend him at the Criminal Court to the best of my poor ability as I should defend the poorest and humblest of my clients, and I shall, on his behalf, contest your claim." The old man's voice was broken with emotion, as he continued: "But—but, in spite of this attitude which, as a lawyer, I am compelled to adopt, I will be glad if you will permit me to shake hands with you and to express my sympathy with you. If my client, the present holder of the title, be acquitted of the crime of which he is charged, he may succeed in keeping you out of the estates and title for years; and I have to beg that when you think of me, you will regard me as a lawyer who is endeavoring to do his duty according to the lights which guide the profession to which he has the honor to belong."

It is needless to say that half of this was Greek to Rath, but he understood the purport of the whole, and holding his hand to the old man said:

"That's all right. I think I understand. You stand by a man when he is down—as you stood by me just now. Isn't that so?"

"That is it, exactly," assented Mr. Bulpit, huskily, as, with another shake of the hand, he left the room.

"Poor Bulpit, I am sorry for him," said Edward. "You can see that he believes, that he is convinced of the justness of your claim, of the guilt of that wretched man; but he is the best type of an honourable lawyer, and he'll stand by Rattion—I beg your pardon, Rath—he'll stand by his client to the last."

Of course there was a great deal of rapid and excited talk. The life on the island; the discovery of the gold; the murder; Rath's strange and exalted position were all discussed; but Rath listened rather than talked; and presently he grew restless and absent-minded, and suddenly he said:

"I will go to Stella now. She will be expecting me."

Edward nodded.

"I'll drive you over," he said.

It was only natural that he should be compelled to suppress a sigh when he spoke. For the happiness which awaited Rath contrasted strongly with his, Edward's unhappiness.

Rath was going to the girl he loved, the girl who loved him; but Edward could not go to Mary, though his heart was full of her. What must she be suffering at this moment! The man she had promised to marry was accused of a cruel and cowardly murder, was in danger of losing his title and estates, was, as Edward thought, lying in Rattion gaol.

Edward would have given all the wealth he possessed to have been able to go to her and comfort her; yes, though he could not have permitted himself to have spoken a word of love. To have taken her hand, to have whispered, "Mary, whatever happens, I am still your friend, trust to me, lean on me," would have been some consolation in his present condition; but he knew that he could not go to her. Like a true friend, he put self behind him as he drove Rath to the Abbey, and talked of nothing but Rath's affairs.

But Rath listened absently to the references to his new and enviable position. To him it did not seem of any consequence whether he remained simply "a Rath Rayne" of the island, or became "Earl of Rattion," and master of Rattion Hall. All his thoughts were of Stella, and as they approached the Abbey, he was possessed by a feverish impatience which rendered him deaf to every word Edward said.

When they reached the house, Lisle came forward to meet them, and grasped Rath's hand. Lisle had spent a quiet hour in his own room, and, with the inherent nobility of his class, had schooled himself to meet this lover of the girl he himself loved; and there was no reserve in the friendliness in which he greeted Rath.

"You want to see Miss Mordaunt—I beg her pardon, Miss Rattion, or is it Lady Rattion?" he said, with a smile. "She has just gone into the garden with my sister. You will find them in

the arbour." He laid his hand on Rath's shoulder. "You will want to go to them at once. Come into the house when you have seen them; my sister, all of us, want to tell you how glad we are, how we sympathize—"

Rath, with a nod, strode away towards the arbour.

At his approach, Cecilia, who had been sitting in the sheltered summer-house with Stella—and almost in silence—rose, and, with a murmured word, made her escape by a side path. Stella sat, her heart beating fast, the colour coming and going in her face. Every step of his echoed in her heart, and in the few seconds which intervened before he stood before her, all her life on the island passed across her brain.

He paused for a moment at the entrance, then came in, his arms extended, and with her name on his lips.

But Stella remained seated, her eyes downcast, her face pale.

"Stella!" he cried, not loudly, but with all his love in his voice. "I have come."

"How do you do, Lord Rattion?" she said.

He stared at her, his hands fell to his sides, and he looked at her with amazed, bewildered eyes.

"Stella," he said, reproachfully, "are you not glad to see me?"—for the change in her manner, the white face, and tightly set lips, daunted him. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," she said, with unnatural calm, though her heart was beating wildly. "I am glad you have come. I wanted to tell you—to congratulate you. You are the Earl of Rattion—I am—all your friends are so glad."

He looked at her in amazement.

"The Earl of Rattion? Am I? They say so. I don't understand—yet. What does it matter? Nothing matters but that you and I are together again. Think of it, Stella! Together! never to part any more—never!"

She could scarcely breathe; the longing to cast herself upon his breast, to feel his arms round her, nearly thrust maidenly pride itself from its place.

"Yes," she faltered. "But—but I am going away. I have just been telling Lady Cecilia that—that I—I want to go away; that—"

"Very well," he said, cheerfully; "we'll go anywhere you like, Stella!"—as if smitten by a sudden idea—"let us go back to the island! Yes, that's what we'll do!"

She caught her breath and tried to smile; but it was a wavering, uncertain smile; for oh! how she longed to be there with him alone!

Alone!

"You—you can scarcely do that. You are a great man now, Rath—a very great man, here in England, and you will have to stay and—and—"

"Shall we?" he said, with a short laugh. "Who says so? I don't think I care much for England. I like the island best—that is, when you are there."

"But I shall not be there," she faltered. "I shall be here."

"Then I won't go," he said, simply. "I'll stay here with you, of course. How pale you look! Different to what you did on the island. Better let us go back there, Stella. We—were happy there!"

At this, poor Stella's breath failed her for a moment.

(To be Continued.)

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