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**Stella Mordant.**  
—OR—  
**The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."**

CHAPTER XXI  
"You appreciate my difficulty, your worships?" he said. "I am defending a man who is not only innocent, but completely fails to understand his position! It is obvious that if I am to fulfil my duty efficiently, I must have an interview with him. I do not ask for—I still oppose—a remand, at present; but I will ask for an adjournment of the court that I may confer with my client."

Lord Hatherley and the other magistrates looked relieved; the strain of so unusually grave a case was telling upon them.  
"Certainly, Mr. Bulpit," he said; "the court will adjourn for an hour."  
Rath was taken from the dock, some of the people in the court rushed out into the open air to breathe and chatter excitedly, some remained, fearful that they should be unable to re-enter. The bench rose and filed into the magistrates' room; and Lord Hatherley sank into a chair and wiped his face with his handkerchief, while the rest discussed the case in eager undertones.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" exclaimed Lord Parodel. "Several times I was wondering whether we were in Ration Court-House or a theatre! Wrecked on an unknown island; saved by a modern Robinson Crusoe; alone with him—for how long?—swept away in a boat; saved by a yacht—and then meets him face to face as a witness against him in a charge of murder!"  
"A romance of life!" said the young duke.

"Romance—yes; that's just what I should call it!" said a husky voice; and all turned to where Ralph was leaning against the mantel-shelf, was a sneer on his lips, his eyes were thrust deep in his pockets, his head was bent forward in a half-sullen, half-contemptuous fashion.

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"You don't believe her, Lord Ration?" said Lord Parodel.  
Ralph shrugged his shoulders.  
"That's strange!" commented Parodel. "To me, every word she uttered had the impress of truth."  
"And to me!" exclaimed the duke, "I'd swear to the truth of every word."  
Ralph laughed shortly.  
"Nothing so convincing as a young and prett' witness," he said, sneeringly. "If she'd been old and ugly—"  
"You're right, she's pretty enough—"  
"By George, lovely!" broke in Parodel.  
"And innocent," said the duke, warmly.  
Ralph shrugged his shoulders.  
"Who knows?" he said. They looked at him with surprise, and he went on more guardedly: "I mean, is there anyone who knows her, can speak as to her—credibility—respectability? She was found in this—this woman's lodgings—a strolling player."

"I don't understand you, Ration," said Parodel. "If that girl—that young lady, for she is a lady, as any fool could see—no offense, Ration!—isn't innocent and trustworthy, then my experience of the world—pretty extensive, more's the pity!—goes for nothing!"  
"Well—well!" said Ralph, impatiently. "Admit that it's true—which I don't, if it's all the same to you—how does it help the prisoner? Her evidence isn't in his favour—"

"This proves that the prisoner is not the poor woman's husband, anyhow!" retorted Lord Parodel.  
"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" interposed Lord Hatherley, with obvious distress. "Surely we ought not to discuss the evidence—the witnesses—at this point. We should wait until we have to decide on the whole case."  
"Certainly. I beg your pardon, Hatherley!" said Lord Parodel, promptly. "It was my fault."  
"And mine," said Ralph. "How beastly hot it is in here. I'll step outside and get a breath of fresh air, I think."

Though it was not usual for a magistrate to leave the court in the middle of so serious a case, no one stayed him, and Ralph went out by the magistrate's door. There was a momentary silence after he had gone, then Parodel said:  
"What ails Ration, I wonder? Looks bad, too, doesn't he?"  
"He is very much distressed by this awful crime; it was perpetrated in his own wood—quite near the house," said Lord Hatherley, apologetically.  
"Quite so!" Parodel said, quickly, as if the explanation accounted for Ralph's appearance and manner, and his animus against the accused. Then he added in a low voice, to the duke:  
"Did you notice the singular resemblance, duke?"  
The duke nodded.  
"Yes. It was striking! They are strangely alike; not only in face, but in voice; but I am constrained to admit that the prisoner has the best of it. Now, that's what I call a handsome face, if you like; and he's a model of what a man ought to be in cheeks and muscle. He must be six feet one or two. I should have liked to see the fight between him and the keeper! Will I have a sandwich and a glass of sherry? Won't it! Feel as if I had had nothing to eat for a month. Thank God we fellows don't get a murder case often!"  
As Lisle led Stella from the court to one of the small rooms in the corridor, she turned to him with outstretched hands.  
"Lord Lisle, I would ask you to forgive me—"  
"I have forgiven you long since, though the only thing I had to forgive was your leaving us," he said.  
"That pained and hurt us! But we won't say another word about it, now or in the future. Indeed, we have all too much on our minds, more grave and serious matters. Sit down! Ah, yes; but you must! You must let me take care of you, until—"

He stopped, but Stella could finish the sentence for him, and her face flushed for a moment. But it was no time for blushing. She was all of a shake with agitation, with the mingling of surprise and joy, dread and pity.  
"Is—Is there any danger, Lord Lisle?" she asked in a breathless

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whisper. "You will tell me the truth. I know you will not keep anything from me. See, I am quite calm and strong. I can bear anything, everything, if you will only let me see him. You will help me, Lord Lisle. Will help us?"  
"I will for—yes, I will say it—your sake and his," said Lisle, very gently and gravely. "This is not the first time I've seen and met your—your friend, Mr. Rayne."  
Stella stared at him with surprise. "You! Why, where?"  
He met the sweet, innocent eyes with a regard from which was crushed out, by a good man's strong will, all traces of his hopeless passion, and even touched her hand with a calm, confiding contact.

"In London. It is one of the strangest incidents of this strange history," he said; and he proceeded to tell her of his meeting with Rath and Edward at the hotel, and the way in which Rath had saved his life on the Embankment.  
She listened with tears of pride, with her bosom heaving.  
"Yes! It is like Rath!" she murmured, almost using Edward's words. "And they think him capable of murdering poor Nita! Lord Lisle, who did kill her? Was it her—her husband? Did she really see him that afternoon at the window?"  
Lord Lisle shook his head slowly.  
"I can't say. It is that which we have to discover. And now, you will go home to the Abbey—you will let us make it your home until—"  
"I have sent for Cecilia," and the carriage should be here by this time."  
"No, no!" she said. "I cannot leave him; I must stay."  
"But think of the pain you will endure. Ah! here is Cecilia. She will be able to persuade you—"  
Cecilia uttered a cry of surprise and joy at sight of Stella, and caught her in her arms.

"You wicked, wicked girl! Where have you been? And why are you here? What is the matter?"  
She looked from one to the other, and Lisle whispered:  
"Take her home, Cis."  
But Stella heard him, and clung to Lady Cecilia imploringly.  
"No, no; don't ask me! He is in there, being tried—and I could not leave him. Let me stay, pray let me stay! I will be quite quiet. I will not let him speak to me. I will only look at him, and sit quite, quite still!"

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