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Stella Mordaunt

The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XVII.

The love of a man for woman he had never heard, never read of; therefore the agony that tortured him was, in a sense, something of a mystery; but he knew that, now Stella was gone, life had suddenly become hateful, that the solitude of which he had been scarcely conscious before she came, seemed unendurable. If he had only been with her, if he could only have died with her! But she had gone, was drowned, and he was doomed to live on here alone—how long? he asked himself.

He sat for hours in the darkness, going over the incidents of the life they had spent together, as a man counts the items of the treasure of which he has been robbed. The dog crept near him and licked his hand in dumb sympathy; but Rath, for the first time, pushed it away almost fiercely, for it reminded him of Stella. Everything reminded him of her, and as he walked past the hut he averted his eyes; he could not bear to look at it. Not a flower she had tended, not a rock upon which she had sat, but cried his loss and theirs to him. And within his heart was an aching pain, a dull, fierce longing which threatened to drive him mad.

Indeed, the wonder is that he did not become insane; for his grief and agony burnt in a bosom unused to such emotions; and he was alone, without a human voice to utter one word of consolation or sympathy. It is hard to conceive such a situation, and no description can do justice to his terrible despair. For days he scarcely ate; for nights he lay awake, his disordered mind dwelling upon her image, and calling up her face and form. In the silence of the night he would hear her voice, now soft and dreamy, now rippling with girlish merriment and innocent happiness. He did not know that he loved

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her, as we understand love, but he knew that she had taken with her all joy in life, all desire to live.

Sometimes he tried to hope, to tell himself that the boat had been blown safely out to sea, and that she had been picked up by a passing vessel; but he knew that the chances were against such a rescue, that the boat could not live in such a sea, and that any vessel would give a wide berth to the island in such a storm.

Once or twice he half resolved to put an end to the life which his great loss had made almost intolerable; but something held him back, even as he stood on the edge of the cliff and gazed down wistfully, despairingly. If she was dead, she might be somewhere where she could still see him. He knew she would be grieved if he killed himself. Only this thought kept him from suicide.

Presently, as the days wore on, the necessities of life began to take hold of him. He had neglected his work, everything, and the signs of the neglect reached him on all sides. For one thing, the flowers she had reared could not be allowed to die, the animals she had loved must be fed, if only for the sake of her memory. So he returned to his daily drudgery; but, ah! with what a different spirit to that with which, while she was by his side, he had gone about his daily work! Her presence had lightened his toil, had sweetened his existence; but now what was there to work for?

As the days passed, the sharpness of his agony grew less acute, but his longing for her never ceased to oppress him like a dull physical pain. His once quick, firm step became slow and dragging; his head drooped upon his breast; he gazed before him vacantly and absently; he did his work mechanically.

Even the sportsman's instinct, which stands so many strains, seemed to have died within him, and one day he stood in the pine wood, leaning on his gun, and watching a great bear sink past him, without the least desire to shoot it. A great part of his time he sat on the beach, his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on the sea, which now he hated with an intense and bitter hate; for had it not robbed him of all that had made life precious?

By this time the rainy season had set in; but he neglected his usual preparation and precautions, and allowed the rain to drift into his hut, and went about most of the time wet through. He grew thin and wan and haggard, and the marvellous strength which he had possessed was slowly deserting him; he felt tired after an hour's fishing, and the arm with which he used to fell trees and haul lumber so easily dropped to his side wearily if he exerted himself in the old and familiar way.

Presently outraged Nature became indignant and resentful. One day he was taken with a shaking fit, and had scarcely strength enough to walk home, and for some days he lay in a kind of fever, during which he hoped that he was going to die. Who knew? after death he might see her again. But he was too splendid a specimen of humanity to be snuffed out by a feverish cold, and he pulled through. But for some days he was too weak to walk, and one night, looking round absently, he saw the book from which Stella had taught him to read.

The pencil and paper which they had used in his schooling lay beside it, and he shook and shivered as he remembered how gentle and patient she had been with him, even while she had laughed at him; how her small hand had guided his.

With a groan he drew her letter—

the letter she had written to him—from his pocket, and gazed at it with aching, bloodshot eyes.

The sight of the writing which the little hand had formed seemed to tear his heart in twain; his bosom heaved, and suddenly his eyes were blinded by a flood of tears. A man's tears are terrible at all times; how much the more terrible in this man who had been trained to the stoicism of the Indian!

But the outburst relieved him, and left him sad enough in all conscience, but strangely calm.

And he repeated the lines of the letter which he knew by heart:

"I miss the island very much * * * * * How kind and good you were to me! * * * * * I hope you are quite well and happy, and don't miss me very much; of course I want you to miss me a little; but not to be unhappy. I hope you will remember the promise when we parted, that you won't forget me * * * * * that you won't fall over the cliff or be reckless in any way."

It was like a message from the dead; he could almost hear her speaking.

Then he was assailed by the dread that he might some time forget some word of the precious letter; and moved by that dread, he resolved to continue his lessons, to learn to write, that he might always be able to read that letter.

His fit of weeping and his resolution probably saved his reason, if no his life. He opened the book and pored over it, and fell to work at his writing with feverish eagerness.

He slept better after this; for the mind had found a distraction, some relief from the perpetual brooding over his loss. And one day, as he went towards the beach, he looked for the first time since Stella had gone, towards the hut. The storm had blown down one of the supports of rough wood of the verandah, and had torn a strip of shingle from the roof.

To him the place was a sacred temple of his lost Stella, and his heart approached her for his neglect. He went back and got his tools, and approached the hut—but very slowly and outside the door he paused trembling, as a devotee might tremble at a shrine too sacred to be entered; but at last he went in and stood still, looking round him with an aching heart.

The room seemed to cry out to him: "Stella! Stella!" He could almost fancy that he saw her standing by the table, or sitting in the chair though he had never thus seen her in life.

Presently his eyes fell on the bed and his trembling increased. He went up to it slowly, and sinking on his knees beside it, let his head fall upon the coverlet, which his lips kissed as one kisses the face of the beloved dead. The caress—the act of worship, if you will—calmed him, and he rose from his knees soothed and comforted.

With loving care he touched some articles belonging to her—a half-finished skirt upon which she had been at work; the needle and thread were still in it, as she had left them; the wide-brimmed hat she had made out of leaves, the book lying open on the table. He touched and kissed them and other relics; and presently he came across a small, flat tin box lying under the pillow at the head of the bed.

As he took this in his hand he remembered the last words of Stella's mother. He examined it with intense interest, but with nothing of vulgar curiosity. It was tied round with a thick piece of tape or braid and sealed at each side. It did not occur to him for a moment to break the seal. Of all the things belonging to her this was in his eyes the most sacred, and he would keep it intact while he lived. He looked round for some place in which to put it, and, seeing none to his liking, dug a small hole in a corner of the flooring of the hut and buried it there. If the box contained a secret, it belonged to the dead girl, and no one but she should ever learn it.

Then he went outside and set to work repairing the damage done by the storm, and it was the first work he had done, since his loss, with any heart in it. When it was finished he felt reluctant to leave the hut, for it seemed to him that the spirit of Stella

lingered there; so he brought his blankets and other things from his own den in the tree and returned to his old quarters, and all that night he lay awake communing with the vision of the boy-girl who had gone and taken his heart with her.

From this time he worked hard at his reading and writing, and though he made slow progress compared with that which is made under a tutor, he learnt to read with comparative ease, and to write in a stiff and boyish fashion; and the day he was able to read Stella's letter was almost a happy one for him. But "happy" is too big a word to use, for he never ceased to mourn and long for her.

The time was now approaching for the visit of the Indians who came to trade; but Rath, who had hitherto looked forward to their coming with the pleasant anticipation of a break in the monotonous life, now felt neither interest nor excitement, though, in an apathetic way, he overhauled his stock of skins and other articles of barter; but the time passed over and the Indians did not come. He was surprised, as they were usually punctual to their season; but he was indifferent. He grew nearly all the necessities of life, and had a fairly good stock of ammunition, which was the principal thing he required of them.

Once or twice he had asked himself whether he should dig up any of the gold Stella and he had discovered; but, remembering what she had said, her warning that the island would be thronged with fortune-hunters if the presence of gold were known, he decided to keep the secret, especially as his pelts and seal-oil would get him all he required in exchange.

Winter was very near at hand; indeed, there had been a light fall of snow when, one day as he was tramping through the wood in search of buck, he heard the distant sound of a gun. Concluding that the Indians were approaching, he went home and got his barter-stock ready and killed a goat for food for them; but the day passed and they did not put in an appearance. He lit a fire outside the hut—his father had never permitted the Indians to enter it—and sat up for them late into the night; but still they did not come, and, somewhat puzzled, he next morning took his gun and went to meet them.

The snow had fallen again during the night, and as he looked round, he thought how Stella would have admired the white tracery with which the scene was covered; for at all times his mind dwelt upon her.

(To be Continued.)

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P. J. O'Reilly, Long Pond Road, F. Perry, 258 Hamilton Avenue.

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J. J. Killeen, 49 Monkstown Road.
S. White, 5 Freshwater Road.

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P. J. O'Reilly, Long Pond Road.

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PHOTOGRAPH

'PHONE 76

War News

Messages Received Previous to 9

OFFICIAL.

LONDON, May 12. The Governor, Newfoundland, General French reports that Germans attacked east of Ypres a very heavy bombardment of poisonous gases. The attack on our sharpshooters moving down the line in massed formation.

The French Government has ordered large German works and a system of trenches across Loos and the Ypres road captured in a desperate fight. These trenches were partially captured by the Germans last night. The fort and Chapel of Notre Dame de Lorette were assaulted, and the counter-attack failing, the German position was more seriously invested, rendering the communication more difficult.

The Russian Government has announced further retirement in Galicia.

FRENCH WAR OFFICE REPORT.

PARIS, May 12. The French War Office this afternoon, issued the following: In section to the north of Arras have maintained our gains, except front of Loos, where a night attack resulted in taking us a part of Lerrain. We captured in daytime the rest of the front, today saw artillery engagement.

OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION.

LONDON, May 12. An official communication, the report of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, issued May 12, was issued to the East of Ypres last night we repulsed another German attack south of this road. This was the third experienced by the Germans this place yesterday. Elsewhere along the front there is no change in the situation.

FRENCH OFFICIAL REPORT.

PARIS, May 12. The following official communication was issued to-night: From north of Arras continues with success. During last night the line reinforced, delivered several counter-attacks, which were without result in that direction against Neuve-Vaast, our opponents suffered losses. We found in one company alone more than 200 bodies, took 100 prisoners. A second attack between Carency and Ablain, likewise repulsed. A third from direction of Ablain was also checked. This morning we made progress to the Wood east of Carency, taking prisoners. Progress continued afternoon. We have taken lines of trenches bordering on wood north of Carency, after we penetrated the wood, through very closely the last line of communication which remains open to the defenders of that position. We have taken a new part

I'M SURE I'VE THAT MOVIE AND SOMETHING SO

BUT THIS IS