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### Stella Mordant.

—OR—

### The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

#### CHAPTER XXXII.

"Come!" he pleaded, emboldened by her silence. "It's a good plan, isn't it? Dash it! It's better than finding on me and ruining us both. Just consider, Nita; we're persons of rank, with no end of money—there's no end of it, I tell you!—and we've got years before us in which to enjoy ourselves. And, by George! what a fine countess you'll make!" he threw in, looking at the tall, graceful figure and pale, handsome face. "You'll ruffle it with the best of them. God! I can see you in evening dress, and wearing the family diamonds, at the head of the table, surrounded by a host of swells, and driving through the town in a carriage and pair."

She smiled with a mixture of pity and contempt for the meanness of his nature. "Do you think I care about anything of that sort?" she said in a low voice. "You want to bribe me with money and a position which I'm not fit for. If—if—her voice quivered, for the first time and her tightly strained lips quivered—"if I found you poor and—down on your luck as you were when you left me; if you said one word of kindness, tenderness, I'd have come back to you—yes, and worked for you and shared my last crust with you."

Her voice broke, and the tears welled to her eyes.

He seized the advantage offered him by her sudden weakness—the weakness which always places the woman at man's mercy, alas! "What! don't you see that I'm longing for you to say 'yes'?" he cried, with assumed emotion. "See here, Nita; though I've come into the title and money, I'm not happy; I've not been from the first day. I've always missed something. Perhaps I didn't know it; but what I missed was you." He rose and crept near her, but she drew back.

"Yes, you looked like it when I first saw you just now!" she said. "Well, I was startled, of course. Who wouldn't be? Anyhow, I'm glad now. Yes, I'm glad you've come back, Nita. I know now—now that we've had a talk together, and the sight of you has brought back the happy old times—that it was you I wanted. Don't you believe me? Come, Nita; let's make friends. Come!"

She had loved this man, and once a woman has loved, it is hard for even a man's cruelty and perfidy to stamp out every vestige of such love from her heart. Like the root of the ground-ivy, leave but a remnant in the soil, and the plant will spring up again to grow and flourish if the sun but shine on it. He got his arm round her, and drawing her to him, kissed her on the lips. It was a Ju-

das kiss; but though she suspected its falsity, she accepted it. "God forgive you if you are deceiving me, Ralph!" she said, hoarsely.

He swore, with an oath that made her shudder.

"Deceiving you! Why should I? Aren't we one—are't we in the same boat, to swim or drown together? I am so glad to get you back, that, by George, if you like, I'll go with you up to the house and announce you as my wife. It will mean ruin, but I'll do it."

"No, no!" she said, faintly. "I did mean to denounce you; I swore to myself that I wouldn't make terms with you; that I'd ruin you; but—but I can't do it now! I'm half-suspicious that I'm a weak fool in giving way, but—"

"You're doing the right thing," he said, with a confidence which fed on her weakness. Look here; you can go back to the town. Where are you staying—at the hotel?"

"No, at lodgings," she replied, listening reluctantly, and yielding at every word.

"Go back to your lodgings, and pack up and leave for London by the morning train. I'll follow you."

She looked at him and shook her head. "I can't trust you!" she said. "No; we go together or not at all! Besides, I'm engaged to play one more night here."

He laughed impatiently. "What the devil does that matter?" he said, scornfully. "Break your engagement."

"No," she said, very quietly; "I never have, and I won't do it now. The manager has kept faith with me—has been kind to me. Come what will, I'll play for him to-morrow night. You might know me better than to think I'd break my word, Ralph."

He bit his lip and shrugged his shoulders. "A pretty thing—a countless playing at a music-hall! Well, there! have your way. I won't argue with you."

She drew away from him. Her doubts of him, a vague suspicion, rose in her mind.

"Besides, I want to think," she said. "I haven't promised to agree to your plans. No, I will not promise to-night. I want to sleep on it."

He watched her face lined with doubt and uncertainty, and knew that he might lose the advantage he had gained if he attempted to force her.

"All right," he said. "Only promise one thing: that you'll give me a day's grace if you mean to round on me—give me time to clear out and hide my head somewhere. But there; you'll do what I want, you'll fall in with my plan, Nita?"

"I don't know; I'll see," she said. "I'll meet you here to-morrow night, after the performance, at this time, and tell you what I have decided."

"Very well," he assented. "God knows if I am right in listening to you, in thinking of it at all!" she said, with suppressed bitterness.

She went without another word,

and Ralph sank on to a seat and covered his face with his hands. The coldness of the night aroused him from his stupor, and he went up to the Hall. His man Parkins was waiting for him, and, like a well-trained servant, suppressed all signs of the astonishment and curiosity which his master's white face and confused air produced in him.

"Been drinking worse than usual," thought Parkins. "I'm going to have a pipe," said Ralph. "Don't you wait."

Parkins followed Ralph to his den and took off his boots, stirred up the fire, and placed the whiskey decanter and soda-water bottle on the table by his side. But Ralph did not want any soda water. He tossed down a glass of neat spirit, then began to pace the room with jerky, uncertain steps, his hand up to his head, his under-lip, twisted and awry. He went over the whole scene again and again, and as he mentally repeated and reacted it, the bitterness of detection, the rage of balked passion grew more intense. The woman who was his wife had turned up, and to save himself from exposure, from the shame and disgrace which her denouncement of his desertion of her would bring, he must go away with her and return to Ration with her as his newly made wife. It was the only way out of the dilemma. But what a way! He must seem to have jilted Lady Mary. Well, he could manage to avoid the scandal which would cling to such a charge. She would give him up all too readily—he knew that. He would resign her to-morrow morning. Resign her! the beautiful girl for whom his ignoble passion burnt like molten lead! Resign her, this lady, this daughter of a peer, his equal, for a deserted wife, a music-hall singer!

The blood rushed to his head at the thought, and he was deafened by a singing in his ears. To lose Lady Mary! His hand shook as he lit his pipe, and his breath came with so painful and laboured an effort that the smoke burnt his parched throat. To lose her! And she would be glad—would marry that beast, Edward Bryan!

A string of oaths escaped his hot lips, and his hands closed spasmodically and so tightly that the nails pierced his palms.

He had told Nita that he thought she was dead. Why hadn't she died? Why had Fortune given him rank and wealth if she had saddled him with a low-born, vulgar wife, a woman at whom these friends of his would turn up their noses? Why wasn't she dead? If she were only dead!

At the thought, the mere mental formation of the wish, something sturdied within him, something that made him grow hot and cold, that half-blinded him by intensity of the emotion which it aroused. It was the spirit of murder.

People died of all sorts of things—heart disease, scarlet fever, accidents; why hadn't something of the kind happened to her? Why should she have lived to blight his life, to come between him and the beautiful young girl he had won? Yes, won by his own cleverness and tact.

If he had sprung at her and choked her as she stood there taunting him! He shuddered and stopped short in his feverish pacing, and looked from side to side, as if he feared that some one might hear the horrid thought, that the very walls might catch it and echo it.

He resumed his pacing up and down stopping now and again at the small table to drink, and filling his pipe after pipe with the strong tobacco; and at last physical and mental exhaustion set in, and he stumbled up the broad stairs to his room.

As he did so, he looked over at the historic Hall with a half-stupefied air. He was the Earl of Ration, and he was married to a common music-hall girl who wouldn't die. Curse her!

Meanwhile, Nita wearily made her way to the lodgings. She too was torn by conflicting

emotions. She had intended to denounce Ralph, to claim her rights, to exact her revenge; but the sight of him, the sound of his voice, his insidious pleading, had weakened her resolve. Should she yield to him? Better, if she meant to relinquish her revenge, to go away, to leave him in peace, to do what he would, to commit bigamy even. Better to sheer off from him altogether.

She went up the stairs wearily, but as quietly as she could; but Stella, who was lying awake, heard her.

"Is that you, Nita?" she asked as Nita paused at the bedroom door. Nita went in and stood beside the bed, looking down in a kind of dream at Stella's beautiful face, framed in the now long and luxurious hair.

"Where have you been? You are very late," said Stella. "And how—how tired and worn you look! Has anything happened?"

Nita seemed to awaken from her dream, and bent and kissed the red, half-parted lips.

"Yes, something has happened—I think," she said. "I—don't know yet. Good-night."

Stella raised herself on her elbow and returned the kiss.

"You look so tired, so worn out," she said. "Has the performance been very hard work to-night?"

"Yes—very hard," replied Nita, with a strange smile; then, as she gently forced Stella down to the pillow again, she said: "You are very pretty, my dear. God grant you may never have cause to be sorry for it!" Then she went away quickly.

(To be Continued.)

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