MAGIC

BAKING POWDER

Stella Mordaunt;

—OR,—

The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XIX.

There was silence for a moment, then Edward said, as if to himself:

"And you never told her that you loved her, Rath?"

Rath started and looked up at him for an instant, then dropped his eyes, and his hand, that lay clasped on the table, shook.

"That—I— Did I love her—love her as you love this girl in England?" He was silent while Edward looked at him. "No; I did—did not tell her. I did not know until she had gone; how should I?"

Edward paced up and down. Here was an experience, a case, absolutely unique. This man had so loved a girl that her loss had almost deprived him of reason, had reduced him to a gaunt skeleton, had—for a time, at any rate—robbed him of youth and strength. And he did not know that he had loved her! It seemed incredible, and yet Edward could understand it.

The recital of the tragedy moved him to such an extent that for some time he could not speak, could only pace up and down.

Presently he flung himself into his chair, and leant across the table.

"Rath, my heart aches for you. I know what you feel. Great Heaven! should I not know? And you never spoke to her—told her? She never told you—let you see?"

Rath shook his head.

"I don't think she knew any more than I did," he said, with the same impressive simplicity.

Edward tried not to stare at him, but he could not keep his eyes from the face of this sorrow-stricken friend whose story was the most touching, the most tragic he had ever heard.

"What—what was her name, Rath?" he asked, presently.

"Stella—Stella Mordaunt," replied Rath, speaking her name in a kind of hushed whisper, as if it were sacred, as indeed it was to him.

"Where did she come from?"

Rath shook his head.

"I don't know—from London, England."

"Is that all you know?"

"Yes."

Rath thought of the tin box, but of course said nothing about it. That was Stella's secret, not his.

Edward got up and fell to pacing again.

"See here, Rath," he said, "God knows I don't want to raise any false hopes; but you can't be sure that she was drowned. The boat may—I say may—have been sighted and picked up by a passing vessel! She may have been saved, and may be alive now!"

Rath rose, gripping the table, his struck, and the blood rushed to his face, then it left it pale again.

"The storm was too great; no vessels have ever come within sight of this part of the island."

"Have ever—yes; but they might," said Edward. "There is just the chance. You didn't find the boat—it was not washed ashore. Rath, for all you know, she may be alive at this moment."

Rath rose, gripping the table, his breath coming painfully. The thought of Stella alive sent the blood coursing through his veins like quicksilver.

"It is impossible!" he gasped; but his eyes glowed with a light Edward had not seen in them before.

"No, not impossible—improbable, if you like; but while there is just the mere possibility there is hope. She may have been picked up, may at this moment be on her way to England. As a rich man, nothing would be easier than for you to search for her and find her—"

He stopped, for Rath's agitation, and his struggle to suppress it, were painful to witness.

"My dear old man, you have given way to despair, and it was killing you by inches. I know the meaning of the expression in your face, in your eyes. It was the look of the man who has lost all interest in life. If you had been fighting the wolves instead of me, you wouldn't have fought very long, or very hard, I'm afraid—that day you found me and saved my life."

"No, I shouldn't have cared if they had dragged me down. I didn't want to live; but now—"

He looked round with a new expression in his face, an expression of wild hope, of feverish restlessness.

"Now you've something to live for, though it may be only a chance," said Edward. "And something tells me that there is more than that in it. There have been instances on record of people who have been saved in more perilous situations than hers. And if she was saved, do you think she isn't mourning for you? Don't you think she is wearing her heart out for you, from whom she was torn?"

"Don't say any more!" he panted. "I—I can't bear to think of her suffering as I suffered. See! you have brought me to think of her as still living, and I want to find her!"

His eyes flashed towards the door as if he were about to start in quest of Stella that moment.

"When can we start? How can we go?"

Edward laid a hand upon his shoulder and soothed him.

"Easy, old man! There's only a chance, remember, and we can't go just yet. For one thing, we can't go as we are—poor and of no account. You want money for this search of yours; indeed, if you found her you might want money just as I do. We must get some of the gold, must arm ourselves in the most effectual way nowadays—by filling our pockets. With money a man can do almost anything—"

"Except bring the dead to life," said poor Rath, his despair sweeping back upon him with a rush.

Edward Bryan proved himself a good and patient friend that night; for he encouraged while he soothed Rath, loosed on a sea of conflicting emotions, tossed one moment on a wave of hope to sink the next with one of despair.

Neither man could sleep that night, and when Edward woke from an uneasy doze in the morning, he found Rath outside the hut surrounded by spades and picks and sundry other tools which he had collected. He was as grave as usual, but his feverish restlessness showed itself in his flashing eyes and his sharp and abrupt speech and movements.

"Let us begin at once," he said.

"After breakfast," said Edward; but Rath shook his head impatiently.

"I could not eat," he said.

But Edward, with a laugh, dragged him into the hut and forced him into a chair.

"My dear Rath, take a tip from a man who has played the game before, though unsuccessfully. Gold-digging can't be done on an empty stomach, believe me. It's the sternest, grimmest work in the world; it tries a man's muscles, and his hand and his heart; there's no part of him that it doesn't take toil of, and only the man who feeds well can hope to stand the strain. Didn't you see how the mere discovery played the devil with me yesterday? Very well, then, you can imagine what the actual digging for the stuff means. Eat your breakfast, for, by the living jingo! I won't move a stey until you have."

Rath, in his new frenzy, glared at him, then with a sigh of resignation made some kind of a breakfast. Then Edward selected the most useful of the tools, slung a canvas bag over his shoulder, and they set forth in quest of the bright yellow metal for which men every day, and all day long, willingly sacrifice their honour, their happiness, their lives.

On their way, Rath told Edward of the finding of the skeleton, and Edward grew grave and thoughtful.

"That might have been my fate, even if I had escaped the wolves, if you had not been here, Rath," he said. "Whatever happens, I can never forget that you saved my life, that but for you I should never have had the chance of winning the girl I love. They say, nowadays, that there is no such thing as Providence; but when you come to think of the way you and I have been brought together, neither of us, I fancy, would like to go as far as that. Here is the place where I found the nugget," he broke off, eagerly.

Rath, scarcely less eager himself now, nodded.

"Wait," he said, as Edward began picking at the gravel furiously, and Rath dug up the nuggets he had buried the day Stella and he were on the spot.

Edward watched him turn the great nuggets out, watched him with scarcely suppressed excitement.

"My dear Rath, there's a small fortune there already!" he exclaimed. "Hurrah! It's an El Dorado, that's what it is!" he shouted, as he collected the nuggets into a little, but precious heap. "Now, let us pick out the old bed of the stream, for that is exactly what it is. In all my experience, I have never seen easier gold digging. It is a veritable Tom Tiddler's ground. Good Heaven! if the news of this find were to get abroad, we should have the population of an English town here in a week's time!"

Rath, who was already hard at work dragging down the auriferous gravel with his pick, looked over his shoulder with a gleam of ferocity in his eyes.

"This is ours, he muttered, with a new note in his voice. "Ours! And if any man—"

He did not finish the sentence; but, as if ashamed of his sudden fury, fell to work again.

They toiled like men working against time, like men working for their lives, for their souls' salvation. Cold as it was, the fever in their veins made their blood hot, and presently they slipped off their shirts, and though they were naked to their waists. They perspired like stokers on an Atlantic liner.

Edward Bryan had brought some dinner in the bottom of his sack, but they felt neither hunger nor thirst until the light began to fail and set that day's limit to their feverish toil. Then they straightened their aching backs, and, sweating and panting, looked down at the nuggets and dust at their feet. And as they ate the cold goat and bread, and drank from the mountain rill, their eyes still dwelt fondly upon the pile; for upon the best of men, the noblest, the gentlest, the yellow metal asserts its fatal fascination and influence. And yet each man was working, not for the ease and luxury which the gold could purchase, but for that against which ease and luxury count as nothing—the girl he loved. Rath, with every stroke of the pick, every lift of the spade, thought of Stella, who might be living, whom he might find; and Edward's arm was strengthened by the hope of winning Mary.

Both men worked their hardest, but Rath's energy and strength amazed Bryan.

"You work like a Trojan, and yet you're nothing but skin and bone, Rath," he said. "You must have been as strong as a giant when you were fit."

Rath smiled grimly.

"I could have pulled up that tree by the roots," he said, glancing at a sapling. "But that was when—when Stella was here. Now!" and he looked at his wasted arm upon which the muscles stood out upon the bone like those of a greyhound.

"Courage!" said Edward cheerily. "I will come back now that you have something to work for. But you mustn't overdo it, Rath."

There was good cause for the sensible caution; for when they had buried that day's treasure and dragged themselves home, Rath was too overtired to sleep; and in the middle of the night, Edward, waking, found his companion's bed empty. Much alarmed, he went out into the night, and discovered Rath standing on the beach, his arms stretched out towards the sea, his eyes wide open like those of a somnambulist.

"Stella! Stella!" Edward heard him cry in an agony of entreaty. "Stella, I am coming!"

With difficulty Edward drew him back to the hut, and induced him to lie down again.

(To be Continued.)

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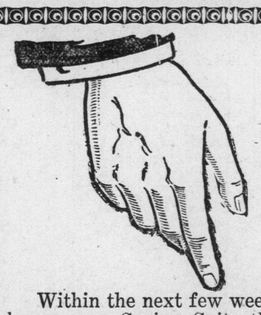

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