



Stella Mordaunt:
—OR—
The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XXXIX.
"Rayne—Rath Rayne."
Mr. Bulpit murmured it several times.
"I've a kind of notion that I've heard it before; but I may be mistaken. It is a strange story—well-nigh incredible, as you say. And you and he are millionaires, Mr. Edward?"
"About that," replied Edward, moodily. "But money will not help either of us, as I said. What a crowd! Whoa! whoa!"

He had to check the horses, for the High Street was thronged with people, standing and moving about with the air of curiosity which proclaims that something far and away beyond the ordinary is happening. The mob parted, and made a lane for them to pass through, but pressed after them; and Edward pulled up the steaming horses at the court-house door.

For nearly four hours the excitement had been fermenting, and a spirit of feverish unrest had agitated Market Ration; it reached a head as the crowd fought its way into the pokey and inconvenient court, which was too small to hold a tenth of the people clamouring for admission.

CHAPTER XL.
To Ralph the hours passed in a kind of demonic dance, treading on his guilty soul "with burning feet." Everybody about him was thinking and talking of nothing but the murder in the wood, and he had to listen and join in the conversation with an assumption of grave regret, and yet with that ease which belongs to a clear conscience. He kept to his den as much as he could the day before the examination, and scores of times he found himself wandering to the seaside in search of the drunkard's consolation; but he had to restrain himself. He knew that a chance word might betray him, and he could not trust himself when the drink was in him.

This effort at self-restraint increased the horror and dread of his situation, and once or twice he felt as if he were breaking down under the awful weight which pressed upon him; but he encouraged himself by mentally going over the evidence against the suspected man, and assuring himself that it was more than sufficient to convict him.
In the course of the day he walked over to Hatherley, but he did not see Mary. She was too ill to leave her room. Ralph was relieved by her en-

forced absence, for he shrank from meeting her. He could play his part fairly well before her father and the rest, but he was conscious of a vague dread of Mary's clear eyes.

"What is the matter? Has she seen a doctor?" he asked.

Lord Hatherley shook his head and sighed.

"No. I begged her to let me send for him; but she will not do so; and yet she seems quite prostrated."

"It may be only a cold," said Ralph, absently. "Has—has she heard about this murder?" he asked, his eyes wandering from Lord Hatherley's face and looking beyond him shiftingly.

"No—oh, no!" replied Lord Hatherley. "I have given strict orders that no one is to mention it to her. It would only make her worse."

"Quite right," assented Ralph. "Keep it from her as long as you can! It's almost a good thing she can't leave her room, or she'd be pestered to death with this business, like the rest of us. I'm sure I'm sick of the subject! Every man and woman I've met has talked of nothing else."

"That is not surprising," said Lord Hatherley, with a sigh. "No such terrible crime has been perpetrated in this county since I can remember, and it is only natural that it should haunt one's mind to the exclusion of other things."

"I have refused to talk about it," said Ralph, with a fine air of impartiality. "I—I suppose I shall have to sit on the bench to-morrow; I should like to get off it, if I could; and I'm rather seedy."

"You are not looking at all well," said Lord Hatherley, regarding Ralph's pale and haggard face and its still blood-shot eyes, with their dull marks beneath them; "but I think you ought to sit, if you can. We should all like to avoid so painful a duty, of course; but, after all, it is a duty, and we cannot shirk it."

"Just so," said Ralph, reluctantly. "We'll go together; I'll drive over for you. Has—has anything further been discovered?"

"No," replied Lord Hatherley. "Green, the detective, from Watlington, is here, I am told. He is a very clever man, and, no doubt, will make an exhaustive investigation. I hear that he is going to examine the wood—the spot where the murder was committed—this morning."

"Why is he doing that?" asked Ralph, sharply, and with a twitch of the pale and swollen lips. "There is nothing more to be discovered there, I should think."

Lord Hatherley shook his head. "One would think not; but Green is a man of great experience and knows his business."

"He'll find the evidence against this fellow quite sufficient," remarked Ralph, rising and moving to the window, and back again, restlessly and uncertainly. "We shall have no difficulty in committing the prisoner for trial."

Lord Hatherley frowned. He had sat upon the bench for many years, and had always endeavoured to administer justice fairly and impartially. "I cannot say," he said. "I always carefully guard against forming an opinion until I have heard the evidence in court."

"Just so—just so!" assented Ralph, hurriedly. "Of course the fellow will get justice. Well, I'll call for you to-morrow morning. Give—give my love to Mary, and tell her how sorry I am that she is ill, and how—how much I miss not seeing her."



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On his way back to the Hall he met a quiet-looking man, who was pacing thoughtfully across the avenue; he stopped and raised his hat to Ralph, and Ralph's heart rose to his mouth; for he guessed who the man was.

"My name is Green, my lord," said the detective. "I'm about to examine the ground round the scene of the murder."

"Certainly—certainly!" responded Ralph, promptly. "Terrible business, Mr. Green—terrible! I need scarcely say that if I can render you any assistance, if there is anything anyone at the Hall can do, we are, all of us, at your disposal."

"Thank you, my lord," said Mr. Green.

"I should like to ask you if you have discovered anything fresh; but I shall be on the bench to-morrow, and I don't like to discuss the matter with anyone."

"Quite right and proper feeling, my lord," said Mr. Green. "No, my lord, there is nothing fresh—as yet."

Ralph nodded, and walked on with an impassive face; but the cool, grave "as yet" haunted him.

Was it possible for this sleuth-hound—who looked like a banker's clerk—to discover any clue which should lead him to suspect?

With a shudder, he went straight to his den, and sinking into a chair, wiped the sweat from his brow as he pictured the silent, self-contained man peering and poking about the horrid spot which never for a moment faded from Ralph's mental vision.

He took a sleeping draught that night, and fell into the heavy slumber which a soporific produces, and he woke the next morning with so parched a tongue and such ragged nerves, that he found it absolutely necessary to take some brandy before his pretence of a breakfast.

As his hand shook too much to permit him to drive, he ordered the close carriage.

Lord Hatherley and he drove through the crowd to the court-house just before Edward and Mr. Bulpit, and they went by the side door to the magistrate's room. There was a very full bench, and the small room was inconveniently crowded.

"This is an awful business, Hatherley," said Lord Parodel. "How do you do, Ration? Most unfortunate that it should have occurred in your park," he added, as he looked at Ralph's haggard face.

"Oh, yes; very unfortunate, of course," assented Ralph. "Can't get it off my mind!"

Sir Gilbert came up to greet them. "I shall not sit to-day," he said, gravely. "The prisoner is a friend and partner of my son's, and I think it better to take no part in the examination."

Lord Hatherley, who was the chairman, inclined his head.

"You know best, Bryan," he said. "Is Edward here?"
"He has gone for Mr. Bulpit, who

will conduct the defence," replied Sir Gilbert.

Ralph turned quickly. "Old Bulpit!" he said, with an attempt at a sneer. "What does he know of criminal law? It would have been better for him to keep clear of this, I should have thought."

His fellow-magistrates regarded him with faint surprise; but no one said anything, and Ralph, seeing that he had created an unpleasant impression, hurried on.

"Tremendous lot of people here. Morbid curiosity in the lower orders, eh?"

"Yes; but natural enough. The poor woman had been performing in the town, and was a favourite, and the murder"—Lord Parodel corrected himself quickly—"the affair is so horrible that it is bound to cause a great deal of excitement. I'm told that there are special reporters down for the London papers."

The magistrate's clerk came in to arrange the order of business; for there was the usual number of small and unimportant cases, and then the magistrates filed into the court and took their seats on the bench.

The place was crammed, and the buzz of conversation was with difficulty suppressed by the clerk and the usher's peremptory:

"Silence!"

When the cases of petty larceny and "drunks and disorderlies" were gone into and the small fines imposed, or discharges pronounced, Mr. Bulpit and Edward remained in one of the outer corridors, saying the last few words in comparative quietude.

"I should like to have seen the prisoner—your friend—before the examination; but it cannot be helped. I shall have plenty of opportunity afterwards. He will be sure to be re-nanded or committed."

"I'm afraid so," Edward agreed, with a sigh. "Are all the magistrates here?"

"All except Lisle—and here he is—just driven up."

Lisle got out of his dog-cart, and entered the corridor a moment later. "Bryan!" he exclaimed, in evident agitation. "What on earth is this I hear? I have only just come back from town. It can't be true?"

"That my friend Rayne is charged with murder? Yes, it is. You have heard the account?"

"Yes. It is impossible, incredulous!" said Lisle, quickly. "I haven't been able to understand all the details; but I'll answer for it—Oh, I'm not going to sit on the bench, Mr. Bulpit; so you need not look so shocked. I'm here as a witness, if necessary."

"A witness?" said Bulpit. "Yes, this gentleman who is accused of this awful and brutal murder saved my life the other night, and I say that he is incapable of such a crime as this."

Edward seized his hand and wrung it. "Thanks, Lisle!" he said. "I don't know what you are alluding to—oh, I'm not surprised at my ignorance. Rayne is the last man to talk of his own good deeds; but you have come to the right conclusion."
(To be Continued.)

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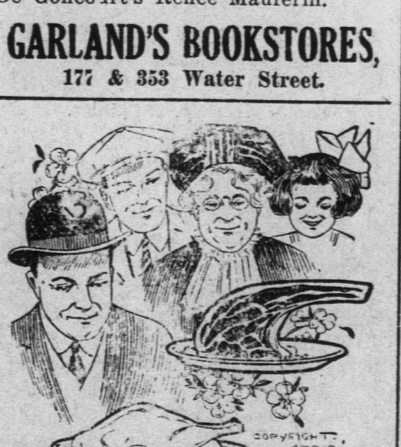
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