



Stella Mordant.

The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XLV.

"My dear Rath, if you cannot be quiet, hadn't you better go and play with Boy? Mary and I want to talk seriously."

"Poor Mary!" he commented, with deep sympathy. "Why don't you talk to one of your own size—to me, for instance?"

"Because I'm not fond of wasting my time. If a man has done wrong, punish him; but what wrong has Edward done, excepting in loving you?"

"That's a man's folly, not his crime," commented Rath, suavely.

"It is you who have—have—There, don't cry!"

"I'm not crying!" retorted Mary, indignantly, but with a suspicious quiver in her voice.

"At any rate, you have no cause to complain; you have nothing against him. For two years you have kept him at—at bay; have treated him as if he were a—convict, or a criminal not fit to enter your presence."

"No; it is I who am not fit," murmured Mary.

"Perhaps so," assented Lady Raton, severely. "I can't argue that."

"One moment. Permit me to make a mental note that there is one subject upon which you cannot argue," murmured Rath.

"But he doesn't argue with you. He may be right or wrong, but anyway he persists in loving you and wanting you to marry him; and I think the least you can do—whether you love him or not—"

"I say," remonstrated Rath, "Boy may understand, you know, Stella."

"—Is to marry him. I speak to you before Rath, because—"

"You're afraid to speak to her alone."

"—Because there are no secrets between us three, and I know he agrees with me."

"Here, young party, don't give me away; you speak for yourself as you are too well able to do. Mary, get up and thump her; it's the only way."

"Oh, Mary!" continued Stella, with a change in her tone and a sweet tenderness in her eyes. "Do you mean to say that after all this time, after all his patient waiting and longing, that is—if he were to come up the beach at this moment—"

It was strange, but at that moment a boat put off from the yacht and began to row to the shore.

"—You would refuse him? Would send him away with a broken heart, to drag out the rest of his life with that awful misery, that terrible misery—"

"There's a boat coming from that

yacht that anchored just now," remarked Rath, rising. "I didn't expect anyone."

"You know what it is for us women; it is worse for the man—"

"Who told you so?" from Rath, but in a low voice, for his eyes were fixed on the boat.

"—It is death in life; it is a daily, hourly torture; it is—"

Rath laid his hand upon her arm and looked significantly at the approaching boat; and she glanced up at his face, with eyes shining with suppressed excitement, and nodded.

"—Can you send him away to this life of misery, consign the man who loves you to unending unhappiness—"

"Hold on, Stella; she's crying!" whispered Rath.

Stella smiled fiercely, though the tears were in her own eyes.

"—Have pity on him, if you have none on yourself. He knows how you were driven, he has forgiven the past long, long ago. He—Mary, answer me! No, dear, not me; you shall answer him! Look, Mary! Look, dearest! He is coming—he is landing. The boat! See! Ah, Mary, have pity on both of you!"

Her voice was choked by a sob, and Rath, as he drew her inside the house, took hold of her by the arms and made her face him.

"You're a cool hand, I must say. You sent for him?"

"—Yes. It is Edward. And the Lisles have come with him."

"And you think—What do you think the answer will be?—poor dear old chap!" anxiously.

She smiled through her tears, her head on one side, listening to Edward's quick, firm steps as he came up to the quiet figure on the verandah. Stella smiled, and put up her mouth to him for answer.

"As if she could! Rath—you may kiss me, if you like!"

THE END.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"Who told you to take down that picture?" she asked, quickly.

"Mr. Dorman, miss," replied one of them, with a half-frightened bow.

"Where is it going?" she asked.

"—Into the boudoir in the western wing," was the reply.

A keen pain seized her. It was evident that, in giving orders for the removal and disposal of the pictures Sir Arthur had forgotten her mother's portrait; otherwise he would never have ordered it to be taken to the room of his new wife.

"Leave it where it is," she said. "I will speak to Mr. Dorman about it."

Only too glad to obey, the men hastened away; and then the girl's pride gave way—the dark southern eyes filled with tears. She went up to the picture; she looked long and lovingly at the fair, sad, high-bred face; and then her lips quivered, and her tears fell.

"He has put some one else in your place, mother, darling," she said; "he has forgotten you. Another wife has his heart and his love; another wife will use your rooms, sit in your place and wear your jewels; he will call another wife by the same loving names he gave you; he will kiss her face as he kissed yours. But I will

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People said at first that it was a risk to bring a handsome, talented young man like Gerald into a house with a beautiful girl like Vivien. Those who talked in that fashion did not know much of Sir Arthur's

daughter. He himself never dreamed of risk. He knew Vivien—he knew her pride, her dignity; he never thought of danger.

The only person who ever said a word to him about it was Sir Harry Lane, and old friend and neighbor. Sir Arthur listened patiently, and then he answered—

"My dear Sir Harry, if my daughter has one quality, one characteristic stronger than another, it is intense pride of race; that alone will keep her from ever doing anything a Neslie should not do. Between ourselves, I wish, she had a little less of it."

"Well, you please yourself," said Sir Harry, testily; "but I have seen some very proud girls make very strange marriages."

Sir Arthur, however, was right. To Vivien Neslie the young secretary was her father's paid dependent—nothing more or less.

CHAPTER III.

How the preparations for the home-coming of Sir Arthur Neslie and his bride were ever accomplished was a mystery to Mr. Dorman. Miss Neslie spent the greater part of her time in her favorite garden; she talked little to anyone, she gave no orders, she never interfered with any of the arrangements made. Great van-loads of new and beautiful things came from London and Paris—all was activity and disorder at the Abbey; she looked on with supreme indifference, asking no questions, giving no advice.

How she passed those days was known only to herself; whatever she suffered, she made no sign, she never by look or by word betrayed it. She saw the extensive preparations—great arches of evergreens, with the word "Welcome" in crimson roses; she saw banners and flags flying from the trees in the park; she saw the stir amongst the tenantry, the subdued excitement of the household; more than once she heard the servants speak of Lady Neslie's room. But she treated all with supreme indifference.

The young secretary looked at her more than once, with wonder; anything would have been better to him than this silence. If she had complained, reproached her fate, broken out into invectives against Sir Arthur, it would have been better than the unbroken silence she maintained.

On the Tuesday that was to bring the travellers home, he felt no slight degree of agitation. What new wife would she be like—this new wife whom Sir Arthur called young and beautiful? What difference would her coming make? He felt that amount of uncertainty always produced by the introduction of a new element into one's life.

What Vivien Neslie had suffered during that interval no one ever knew. No blow so cruel had ever been dreamed of by her—no fate so bitter. She wandered listlessly through the grounds, musing no longer in the sunshine over the great good she was to do; she wandered through the long galleries, the magnificent rooms, never resting, wondering always how matters would end. She felt keenly enough that, let what might happen, she would never again be sole mistress as she had been. It was not possible she should ever again be her father's sole care and his sole love. She would never again be his only source of interest and affection. All the long happy life in which they two had been as one was ended; the loving, happy familiarity would never be again. There would be a stranger present, one whom her father loved and she disliked—a stranger who would always be a barrier between them. Her father would never be to her the father of old; the shadow now lying between them would never grow less.

"My mother is dead," thought the girl, with a bitter sigh, "and my father will be dead to me."

(To be Continued.)

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never forget you, my darling, my fair, fond, gentle mother. I will love you the more that he loves you the less; and I will hate with all my heart the insolent girl that has dared to take your place."

She swept, like an avenging queen, into Mr. Dorman's study. She stood with her hand on the open door.

"Mr. Dorman," she said, "will you be pleased to remember one thing? I forbid any one to touch my mother's picture; and, if any one dares to do it, they must take the consequences."

"You shall be obeyed, Miss Neslie," he replied. "I will see that it is not touched."

His submission disarmed her.

"After all," she thought, "it is not his fault—he is not to blame." So she added gently, "I will explain to Sir Arthur, that I do not wish my mother's portrait to be removed unless it can be taken to my rooms."

"No one shall touch it, Miss Neslie," he replied.

Vivien went away, and, as he watched her, the young secretary said to himself,—

"It is very hard for her—very hard."

And so indeed it was, harder than even he could guess. She had been, to all intents and purposes, mistress of the Abbey ever since her mother's death, which had happened in her sixth year. They were an ancient family, these Neslies of Lancewood. They had had no title. Time after time honors had been offered them and refused. "We can have no nobler title than Neslie of Lancewood," those scions of a fine old race would say. The estates were strictly entailed until the reign of George IV., when the entail was broken and it became simply a code of the family honor that, when there was a son, that son should succeed, and, when there was a daughter, the daughter should succeed, but even in marrying, should keep her name of Neslie.

The present Sir Arthur was the first baronet, and it was said that he accepted the title because it was less trouble to accept than to decline it. Early in life he married Constance Howard, one of the noblest girls in England. He dearly loved his fair, high-bred wife; and when she died, leaving him with Vivien, he said that nothing should ever induce him to marry again. People believed him. The Neslies were a constant race, faithful and loyal. They believed him, and Vivien was always looked upon as heiress of Lancewood. Sir Arthur brought her up as his heiress—he taught her all that concerned the estate. She knew the history of every wood and plantation, of every farm and homestead, of every house and cottage.

When she grew older and was able to be more of a companion to him, Sir Arthur resolved upon finding a secretary who would relieve him of some of his correspondence. He was long in pleasing himself. At length he met Gerald Dorman, and found in him the son of an old college friend. There were two brothers, Gerald and Thomas. Sir Arthur went up to London to see them. He found Gerald a quick, intelligent, honorable young man—his brother Thomas was a bookworm. He had no thought or care or interest outside his books; they were everything to him—Gerald used to say he would sit reading while the house was burning round him. Sir Arthur engaged Gerald as his secretary and general assistant.

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