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Stella Mordaunt:
The Cruise of the "Kingfisher."

CHAPTER XXIII.

It seemed only the other day that she was running about the island like a boy, and here she was in an English mansion, surrounded by luxury, the guest of an English nobleman and his sister! It was so strange, so sudden a change that she felt confused; but Stella was not lacking in common sense and will-power, and she resolved that the arrangement she had made with Lady Cecilia should be carried out.

She was a companion, a dependant and she could at least endeavour to earn the money with which she would make her way back to Rath.

Meanwhile, Cecilia was lecturing to her brother in his own room. "You really must be careful, Cecil," she said, half laughingly. "The way in which you said, 'Welcome to the Abbey,' the expression of your face, were too plain."

"I know," he said, penitently. "I know I gave myself away. I could not help it. To see her here, under my roof, see her with the innocent wonder in her olive eyes as she looked round— But she did not notice?"

Lady Cecilia shook her head thoughtfully. "No, she did not notice your tone and manner, Cecil. She is quite innocent and blind, at present. I wonder what it is that so completely occupies her mind, that keeps her so ignorant of your infatuation for her?"

"Don't call it infatuation," he said. "It is an ignoble word for such a love as mine. But I will be careful, Cis."

"You must, if—if you hope to win her," she said. "I have a feeling, a presentiment, that if she knew you loved her, she would—"

"What?"

"Take flight," said his sister, gravely; "so be cautious for my sake, for I have grown very fond of her, and I don't want to lose her."

"To lose her!" he echoed, with dismay.

CHAPTER XXIV.
 Amongst the dresses which Lady Cecilia had lent to Stella was an evening one. It was a simple affair of black silk and lace, and the maid, who, notwithstanding Stella's protest, appeared when the dressing-bell rang selected it for Stella's wear, and helped her on with it.

Stella and Lady Cecilia were of the same height, and the dress fitted remarkably well; and Lord Lisle, as he waited for her at the bottom of the stairs, had hard work to keep his admiration from revealing itself in his eyes.

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"You are not looking a bit tired," he said, as if by not doing so she had deserved well of the State. "This is the drawing-room. Wants doing up—redecorating—doesn't it?"

But Stella stood enraptured by the beauty of the room with its panelled ceiling, and ivory and gold walls, its ormolu furniture, and costly pictures.

"Why, it's perfect!" she said. "Then I hope you will like the dining-room," he said, with half-concealed eagerness. "It is in better order than this. It was restored, refurbished, by my uncle, the late owner of the Abbey. He spent some pains and money over the picture-gallery and music-room; he was an enthusiast on music."

"Now, your promise, Cecil!" exclaimed Lady Cecilia, entering at that moment.

He laughed. "Pardon, Miss Mordaunt! I forgot my promise. Come along. You ought to be hungry, if you are not."

He gave Stella his arm and led her into the dining-room. It was a magnificent apartment, panelled with oak, and lightened by modern pictures of famous artists. The butler and a couple of footmen waited at the table, and Stella noticed the magnificent array of heavy plate. Only a few weeks ago she had eaten her meals in the open, under a tree, or on the beach, and the strange and sudden contrast might well have confused and embarrassed her; but, to Lady Cecilia's satisfaction and delight, Stella was perfectly self-possessed and free from any appearance of gaucherie. She accepted the service of the stately butler and his satellites, the footmen, as if she had been accustomed to them all her life, and Lady Cecilia unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction.

She, like her brother Cecil, had been fascinated by Stella's beauty and the nameless charm which she wielded so unconsciously. But Lady Cecilia was, of course, alive to the objections which might be urged against a marriage between a Lisle of Lisle Abbey and a waif of the sea. She brushed aside her own aristocratic prejudices and was willing, indeed anxious, that he should win Stella, and admitted she herself was not proof against the charm which Stella so unconsciously wielded.

And this charm, this fascination, was intensified when they went into the drawing-room after dinner, and Lord Lisle, quite by chance, said: "Do you play, Miss Mordaunt?"

Stella hesitated. She had a sweet voice, a voice which had been made strong by singing to Rath in the open air on the island; but she was reluctant to trying it here, in the magnificent drawing-room of the Abbey; but Lady Cecilia drew Stella's arm within hers and led her to the piano.

"I have not sung for— for so long!"

Stella said. "I don't know whether I can or not."

"Let us see, dear," said Lady Cecilia; and she sat down and struck some chords.

"I must play for myself, I am afraid," said Stella. "But it is so long since I saw a piano."

Lady Cecilia rose, and Stella seated herself at the piano. It was, as she had said, so long since she had played, and sung to, an instrument, that she felt strange; but after a moment or two she remembered the notes, and played and sang that melody which no one can sing fairly well without bringing tears into the eyes of the listeners, "Eily Mavourneen."

As she sang it, she thought of the island, and of Rath, and the last notes of the song—the sweetest, the saddest, ever written—were tremulous with her emotion.

Lisle stood near the piano, a smile on his face, but an aching pain in his heart. If he should lose her! He was so agitated by the longing, the desire that possessed him that he left the room.

Stella slept little that night. The present, the actual, were mixed inextricably with the past, and she dreamt that she was back in the island, singing to Rath as he felled a tree, or made snares for the wild duck, or that he was carrying her in his arms across the beach, and her head was lying on his shoulder.

Next morning the late autumn sun filled her bedroom with light, and as she woke from a dream of the island and of Rath, the maid came in with a cup of tea.

"My lady said I was not to wake you, miss," she said, shyly, for she was a country-girl just promoted to the position of lady's-maid; "but I heard you sigh as I opened the door, and I knew you were awake."

Stella raised herself on her elbow and looked at the girl dreamily. "You must have sharp ears," she said.

The girl blushed, and looked down. "I sleep in the little room next yours, miss," she said, as if in explanation, "and I—I heard you crying in the night— Oh! I beg your pardon, miss! I didn't mean to be disrespectful!"

Stella motioned to her to come nearer to her, and looked at her. The girl was pretty, but rather pale and sad-looking.

"What is your name?" asked Stella.

"Bligh, miss—Susy Bligh," replied the girl.

"But, Susy, you must have been awake to have heard me crying—if I did cry," said Stella, shrewdly. The girl's face flushed, then grew pale again.

"I—I didn't sleep very well, miss," she said.

"What is the matter?" asked Stella, pushing the falling hair from her face and regarding the girl with gentle curiosity.

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girl. "But—but something may happen to him."

"Nothing will happen to him," said Stella, cheerfully. "He will come back safe and sound, and you will be married and happy ever afterwards, Susy."

The girl's smile broke through her tears, and she edged nearer to Stella, and looked at her gratefully.

"Thank you, miss," she faltered. "You are very kind to overlook my foolishness, and—and, oh, do you think you'd like me for your maid? If you would, I should be so glad; and, indeed, I'd do my best, miss."

"If I have a maid, you shall be the one, Susy," said Stella. "But, Susy, you—you must not tell anyone you heard me crying in the night."

The girl looked shocked by the injunction.

"Oh, no, no, miss! Why, miss, how do I know that you haven't some trouble like mine—begging your pardon, miss, for presuming."

"There is no need to beg my pardon, Susy," said Stella. "We all have our troubles, and—and I have mine."

Stella mentioned the girl to Lady Cecilia at breakfast that morning.

"May you have her? Certainly, my dear Stella," said Lady Cecilia, at once. "She is a very nice girl, I believe. She was in the laundry, but Mrs. Hopkins has taken her in hand lately, and trained her for a visitors' maid. Why, have you taken a fancy to her? She is rather a pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Stella; but she did not add that her reason for taking to the girl was because Susy was separated from her sweetheart.

After breakfast, Lisle took the two girls over the Abbey and the grounds. He played the part of cicero with a modest pride, and was delighted with Stella's appreciation and admiration, which she could not find words to express.

"It isn't a bad old place," he said, with the modest kind of apology proper to the owner. "And when I've restored the east wing and— Who's this, Cis?" he broke off to ask.

(To be Continued.)

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 (By Sir Edwin Pears in the Manchester Guardian.)
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