

CHAPTER XXI

THE END OF STELLA'S DIARY

A month or two later in the diary came the account of the shipwreck of the Trondhjem and of the writer's rescue from imminent death. "My first great adventure," the pages were headed. They told how her father, with whom ready-money was a scarce commodity, and who had a passion for small and uncomfortable economies, suddenly determined to save two or three pounds by taking a passage in a Norwegian tramp steamboat named the Trondhjem. This vessel, laden with a miscellaneous cargo, had put in at a Northumbrian port, and carried freight consisting of ready-made windows, door-frames, and other wooden house-fittings suited to the requirements of the builders of seaside villas, to be delivered at the rising watering-place of Northwold, upon her way to London. Then followed a description of the voyage, the dirt of the ship, the surpassing nastiness of the food, and the roughness of the crew, whose sailor-like qualities inspired the writer with no confidence.

Next, the diary which now had been written up by Stella in the Abbey where Morris read it, went on to tell of how she had gone to her berth one night in the cabin next to that occupied by her father, and being tired by a long day in the strong sea air had fallen instantly into a heavy sleep, which was disturbed by a nightmare-like dream of shock and noise. This imagined pandemonium, it said, was followed by a great quiet, in the midst of which she awoke to miss the sound of the thumping

screw and of the captain shouting his orders from the bridge.

For a while, the writing told, she lay still, till a sense that something was wrong awoke her thoroughly, when she lit the candle which she kept by her berth, and, rising, peeped out into the saloon to see that water was washing along its floor. Presently she made another discovery, that she was alone, utterly alone, even her father's cabin being untenanted.

The rest need not be repeated in detail. Throwing on some garments, and a red cloak of North-country frieze, she made her way to the deck to find that the ship was abandoned by every living soul, including her own father; why, or under what circumstances, remained a mystery. She retreated into the captain's cabin, which was on deck, being afraid to go below again in the darkness, and sheltered there until the light came. Then she went out, and though the dim, mist-laden dawn crept forward to the forecastle, and staring over the side discovered that the prow of the ship was fixed upon a rock, while her stern and waist, which floated clear, heaved and rolled with every sea. As she stood thus the vessel slipped back along the reef three feet or more, throwing her to the deck, and thrilling her from head to foot with the most sickening sensation she had ever experienced. Then the Trondhjem caught and hung again, but Stella, so she wrote, knew that the end must be near, as the ship would lift off with the full tide and founder, and for the first time felt afraid.

"I did not fear what might come after death," went on the diary, "but I did fear the act of death. I was so lonely, and the dim waters looked so cold; the brown shoulders of the rocks which showed now and again through the surges, so cruel. To be dashed by those cold waters upon those iron rocks till the life was slowly ground out of my body! And my father--the thought of him tormented my mind. Was he dead, or had he deserted me? The last seemed quite impossible, for it would have supposed him a coward, and I was sure that he would rather die than leave me; therefore, as I feared, the first must be true. I was afraid, and I was wretched, and I said my prayers and cried a little, while the cold struck me through the red cloak, and the damp mist made me shiver.

"Then suddenly I remembered that it had not been the custom of my ancestors and countrywomen of the old time to die weeping, and with the thought some of my courage came back. I rose from the deck and stood upon the prow of the ship, supporting myself by a rope, as many a dead woman of my race has done before me in the hour of battle and shipwreck. As I stood thus, believing that I was about to die, there floated into my mind a memory of the old Norse song that my mother had taught me as she learned it from her mother. It is called the 'Song of the Overlord,' and for generations without count on their death-beds has been sung, or if they were too weak to sing, whispered, by the women of my family. Even my mother murmured it upon the day she died, although to all appearances she had become an Englishwoman; and the first line of it,

"Hail to thee, Sky King! Hail to thee, Earth King!"

were the last words that the gentlest creature whom I ever knew, my sister Gudrun, muttered before she became unconscious. This song it has always been held unlucky to sing except upon the actual approach of death, since otherwise, so goes the old saying, 'it draws the arrow whose flight was wide,' and Death, being invoked, comes soon. Still, for me I believed there was no escape, for I was quite sure from her movements that the steamer would soon come off the rocks, and I had made my confession and said my prayers. So I began to sing, and sang my loudest, pleasing myself with the empty, foolish thought that in some such circumstance as this many a Danish sea-king's daughter had sung that song before me.

"Then, as I sang, a wind began to blow, and suddenly the mist was driven before it like puffs of smoke, and in the east behind me rose the red ball of the sun. Its light fell upon the rocks and upon the waters beyond them, and there to my amazement, appearing and disappearing upon the ridges and hollows of the swell, I saw a man alone in a sailing-boat, which rode at anchor within thirty yards of me. At first I thought that it must be my father, then the man caught sight of me, and I saw his face as he looked up, for the sun shone upon his dark eyes, and knew that he was a stranger.

"He lifted his anchor and called to me to come to the companion ladder, and his voice told me that he was a gentleman. I could not meet him as I was, with my hair loose, and bare-footed like some Norse Viking girl. So

I took the risk, for now, although I cannot tell why, I felt sure that no harm would come to him or me, and ran to the cabin, where also was this volume of my diary and my mother's jewels that I did not wish to lose. When at last I was ready after a fashion, I came out with my bag, and there, splashing through the water of the saloon, ran the stranger, shouting angrily to me to be quick, as the ship was lifting off the rock, which made me think how brave it was of him to come aboard to look for me. In an instant he caught me by the hand, and was dragging me up the stairs and down the companion, so that in another minute we were together in the boat, and he had told me that my father was on shore--thank God!--though with a broken thigh."

Then some pages of the diary were taken up with the description of the twenty-four hours which she had spent on the open sea with himself, of their landing, dazed and exhausted, at the Dead Church, and her strange desire to explore it, their arrival at the Abbey, and her meeting with her father. After these came a passage that may be quoted:--

"He is not handsome--I call him plain--with his projecting brow, large mouth, and untidy brown hair. But notwithstanding his stoop and his thin hands, he looks a fine man, and, when they light up, his eyes are beautiful. It was brave of him, too, very brave, although he thinks nothing of it, to come out alone to look for me like that. I wonder what brought him? I wonder if anything told his mind that I, a girl whom he had never seen, was really on the ship and in danger? Perhaps--at any rate, he came, and the odd thing is that from the moment I saw him, and

especially from the moment I heard his voice, I felt as though I had known him all my life. Probably he would think me mad if I were to say so; indeed, I am by no means sure that he does not pay me that compliment already, with some excuse, perhaps, in view of the 'Song of the Overlord' and all my wild talk. Well, after such a night as I had spent anyone might be excused for talking foolishly. It is the reaction from never expecting to talk again at all. The chief advantage of a diary is that one may indulge in the luxury of telling the actual truth. So I will say that I feel as though I had known him always; always--and as though I understood him as one understands a person one has watched for years. What is more, I think that he understands me more than most people do; not that this is wonderful, seeing how few I know. At any rate, he guesses more or less what I am thinking about, and can see that there is something in the ideas which others consider foolish, as perhaps they are.

"It is very odd that I, who had made sure that I was gone, should be still alive in this pleasant house, and saved from death by this pleasant companion, to find my father, whom I feared was dead, also living. And all this after I had sung the 'Song of the Overlord!' So much for its ill-luck. But, all the same, my father was rather upset when he heard that I had been found singing it. He is very superstitious, my dear old father; that is one of the few Norse characteristics which he has left in him. I told him that there was no use in being disturbed, since, in the end, things must go as they are fated.

"Mr. Monk is engaged to a Miss Porson. He told me that in the boat. I asked him what he was thinking of when we nearly over-set against that dreadful rock. He answered that he could only think of the song he had heard me singing on the ship, which I considered a great compliment to my voice, quite the nicest I ever had. But he ought to have been thinking about the lady to whom he is engaged, and he understood that I thought so, which I daresay I should not have allowed him to do. However, when people believe that they are going to be drowned they grow confidential, and expose their minds freely. He exposed his when he told me that he thought I was talking egregious nonsense, and I am afraid that I laughed at him. I don't think that he really can love her--that is, as engaged people are supposed to love each other. If he did he would not have grown so angry--with himself--and then turned upon me because the recollection of my old death song had interfered with the reflections which he ought to have offered upon her altar. That is what struck me as odd; not his neglecting to remember her in a moment of danger, since then we often forget everything except some triviality of the hour. But, of course, this is all nonsense, which I oughtn't to write here even, as most people have their own ways of being fond of each other. Also, it is no affair of mine.

"I have seen Miss Porson's photograph, a large one of her in Court dress, which stands in Mr. Monk's laboratory (such a lovely place, it was an old chapel). She is a beautiful woman; large and soft and regal-looking, a very woman; it would be difficult to imagine a better

specimen of 'the eternal feminine.' Also, they say, that is, the nurse who is looking after my father says, that she is very rich and devoted to 'Mr. Morris.' So Mr. Morris is a lucky man. I wonder why he didn't save her from a shipwreck instead of me. It would have given an appropriate touch of romance to the affair, which is now entirely wasted upon a young person, if I may still call myself so, with whom it has no concern.

"What interests me more than our host's matrimonial engagements, however, are his experiments with aerophones. That is a wonderful invention if only it can be made to work without fail upon all occasions. I do wish that I could help him there. It would be some return for his great kindness, for it must be a dreadful nuisance to have an old clergyman with a broken leg and his inconvenient daughter suddenly quartered upon you for an unlimited period of time."

The record of the following weeks was very full, but almost entirely concerned--brief mention of other things, such as her father's health excepted--with full and accurate notes and descriptions of the aerophone experiments. To Morris reading them it was wonderful, especially as Stella had received no training in the science of electricity, that she could have grasped the subject thus thoroughly in so short a time. Evidently she must have had a considerable aptitude for its theory and practice, as might be seen by the study that she gave to the literature which he lent her, including some manuscript volumes of his own notes. Also there were other entries. Thus:

"To-day Mr. Stephen Layard proposed to me in the Dead Church. I had seen it coming for the last three weeks and wished to avoid it, but he would not take a hint. I am most sorry, as I really think he cares about me--for the while--which is very kind of him. But it is out of the question, and I had to say no. Indeed, he repels me. I do not even like being in the same room with him, although no doubt this is very fastidious and wrong of me. I hope that he will get over it soon; in fact, although he seemed distressed, I am not vain enough to suppose that it will be otherwise. . . .

"Of course, my father is angry, for reasons which I need not set down. This I expected, but he said some things which I wish he had left unsaid, for they made me answer him as I ought not to have done. Fathers and daughters look at marriage from such different standpoints; what is excellent in their eyes may be as bad as death, or in some cases worse to the woman who of course must pay the price. . . .

"I sang and played my best last night, my very, very best; indeed, I don't think I ever did so well before, and perhaps never shall again. He was moved--more moved than I meant him to be, and I was moved myself. I suppose that it was the surroundings; that old chapel--how well those monks understood acoustic properties--the moonlight, the upset to my nerves this afternoon, my fear that he believed that I had accepted Mr. L. (imagine his believing that! I thought better of him, and he did believe it)--everything put together.

"While I was singing he told me that he was going away--to see Miss Porson at Beaulieu, I suppose. When I had finished--oh! how tired I was after the effort was over--he asked me straight out if I intended to marry Mr. Layard, and I asked him if he was mad! Then I put another question, I don't know why; I never meant to do it, but it came up from my heart--whether he had not said that he was going away? In answer he explained that he was thinking of so doing, but had changed his mind. Oh! I was pleased when I heard that. I was never so pleased in my life before. After all, the gift of music is of some use.

"But why should I have been pleased? Mr. Monk's comings or goings are nothing to me; I have no right to interfere with them, even indirectly, or to concern myself about them. Yet I cried when I heard those words, but I suppose it was the music that made me cry; it has that inconvenient effect sometimes. Well, I have no doubt that he will see plenty of Miss Porson, and it would have been a great pity to break off the experiments just now."

One more extract from the very last entry in the series of books. It was written at the Rectory on Christmas Eve, just before Stella started out to meet Morris at the Dead Church:

"He--Colonel M.--asked me and I told him the truth straight out. I could not help myself; it burst from my lips, although the strange thing is that until he put it into my mind with the question, I knew nothing.

Then of a sudden, in an instant; in a flash; I understood and I knew that my whole being belonged to this man, his son Morris. What is love? Once I remember hearing a clever cynic argue that between men and women no such thing exists. He called their affection by other names, and said that for true love to be present the influence of sex must be absent. This he proved by declaring that this marvellous passion of love about which people talk and write is never heard of where its object is old or deformed, or even very ugly, although such accidents of chance and time are no bar to the true love of--let us say--the child and the parent, or the friend and the friend.

"Well, the argument seemed difficult to answer, although at the time I knew that it must be wrong, but how could I, who was utterly without experience, talk of such a hard matter? Now I understand that love; the real love between a man and a woman, if it be real, embraces all the other sorts of love. More--whether the key be physical or spiritual, it unlocks a window in our hearts through which we see a different world from the world that we have known. Also with this new vision come memories and foresights. This man whom I love--three months ago I had never seen his face--and now I feel as though I had known him not only all my life, but from the beginning of time--as though we never could be parted any more.

"And I talk thus about one who has never said a tender word to me. Why? Because my thought, is his thought, and my mind his mind. How am I sure of that? Because it came upon me at the moment when I learned the truth

about myself. He and I are one, therefore I learned the truth about him also.

"I was like Eve when she left the Tree; knowledge was mine, only I had eaten of the fruit of Life. Yet the taste of it must be bitter in my mouth. What have I done? I have given my spirit into the keeping of a man who is pledged to another woman, and, as I think, have taken his from her keeping to my own. What then? Is this other woman, who is so good and kind, to be robbed of all that is left to her in the world? Am I to take from her him who is almost her husband? Never. If his heart has come to me I cannot help it--for the rest, no. So what is left to me? His spirit and all the future when the flesh is done with; that is heritage enough. How the philosopher who argued about the love of men and women would laugh and mock if he could see these words. Supposing that he could say, 'Stella Fregelius, I am in a position to offer you a choice. Will you have this man for your husband and live out your natural lives upon the strict stipulation that your relationship ends absolutely and forever with your last breaths? Or will you let him go to the other woman for their natural lives with the prospect of that heritage which your imagination has fashioned; that dim eternity of double joy where, hand in hand, twain and yet one, you will fulfil the secret purpose of your destinies?'

"What should I answer then?

"Before Heaven I would answer that I would not sell myself to the devil

of the flesh and of this present world. What! Barter my birthright of immortality for the mess of pottage of a few brief years of union? Pay out my high hopes to their last bright coin for this dinner of mingled herbs? Drain the well of faith dug with so many prayers and labours, that its waters may suffice to nourish a rose planted in the sand, whose blooms must die at the first touch of creeping earthly frost?

"The philosopher would say that I was mad; that the linnet in the hand is better than all the birds of paradise which ever flew in fabled tropic seas.

"I reply that I am content to wait till upon some glorious morning my ship breaks into the silence of those seas, and, watching from her battered bulwarks, I behold the islands of the Blest and catch the scent of heavenly flowers, and see the jewelled birds, whereof I dream floating from palm to palm.

"'But if there are no such isles?' he would answer; 'If, with their magic birds and flowers, they are indeed but the baseless fabric of a dream? If your ship, amidst the ravings of the storm and the darkness of the tortured night, should founder once and for ever in the dark strait which leads to the gateways of that Dawn--those gateways through which no traveller returns to lay his fellows' course for the harbours of your perfect sea; what then?'

"Then I would say, let me forswear God Who has suffered me to be

deceived with false spirits, and sink to depths where no light breaks, where no memories stir, where no hopes torment. Yes, then let me deny Him and die, who am of all women the most miserable. But it is not so, for to me a messenger has come; at my prayer once the Gates were opened, and now I know quite surely that it was permitted to me to see within them that I might find strength in this the bitter hour of my trial.

"Yet how can I choke the truth and tread down the human heart within me? Oh! the road which my naked feet must tread is full of thorns, and heavy the cross that I must bear. I go now, in a few minutes' time, to bid him farewell. If I can help it I shall never see him again. No, not even after many years, since it is better not. Also, perhaps this is weakness, but I should wish him to remember me wearing such beauty as I have and still young, before time and grief and labour have marked me with their ugly scars. It is the Stella whom he found singing at the daybreak on the ship which brought her to him, for whom I desire that he should seek in the hour of a different dawn.

"I go presently, to my marriage, as it were; a cold and pitiful feast, many would think it--these nuptials of life-long renunciation. The philosopher would say, Why renounce? You have some advantages, some powers, use them. The man loves you, play upon his natural weakness. Help yourself to the thing that chances to be desirable in your eyes. Three years hence who will blame you, who will even remember? His father? Well, he likes you already, and in time a man of the world

accepts accomplished facts, especially if things go well, as they will do, for that invention must succeed. No one else? Yes; three others. He would remember, however much he loved me, for I should have brought him to do a shameful act. And she would remember, whom I had robbed of her husband, coming into his life after he had promised himself to her. Last of all--most of all, perhaps--I myself should remember, day by day, and hour by hour, that I was nothing more than one of the family of thieves.

"No; I will have none of such philosophy; at least I, Stella Fregelius, will live and die among the upright. So I go to my cold marriage, such as it is; so I bend my back to the burden, so I bow my head to the storm; and throughout it all I thank God for what he has been pleased to send me. I may seem poor, but how rich I am who have been dowered with a love that I know to be eternal as my eternal soul. I go, and my husband shall receive me, not with a lover's kiss and tenderness, but with words few and sad, with greetings that, almost before their echoes die, must fade into farewells. I wrap no veil about my head, he will set no ring upon my hand, perchance we shall plight no troth. So be it; our hour of harvest is not yet.

"Yesterday was very sharp and bleak, with scuds of sleet and snow driven by the wind, but as I drove here with my father I saw a man and a woman in the midst of an empty, lifeless field, planting some winter seed. Who, looking at them, who that did not know, could foretell the fruits of their miserable, unhopeful labour? Yet the summer will come and the sweet smell of the flowering beans, and the song of the nesting birds,

and the plentiful reward of the year crowned with fatness. It is a symbol of this marriage of mine. To-day we sow the seed; next, after a space of raving rains and winds, will follow the long, white winter of death, then some dim, sweet spring of awakening, and beyond it the fulness of all joy.

"What is there about me that it would make me ashamed that he should know; this husband to whom I must tell nothing? I cannot think. No other man has been anything to me. I can remember no great sin. I have worked, making the best of such gifts as I possess. I have tried to do my duty, and I will do it to the end. Surely my heart is whole and my hands are clean. Perhaps it is a sin that I should have learned to love him; that I should look to a far future where I may be with him. If so, am I to blame, who ask nothing here? Can I conquer destiny who am its child? Can I read or shape the purpose of my Maker?"

"And so I go. O God, I pray Thee of Thy mercy, give me strength to bear my temptations and my trials; and to him, also, give every strength and blessing. O Father, I pray Thee of Thy mercy, shorten these the days of my tribulation upon earth. Accept and sanctify this my sacrifice of denial; grant me pardon here, and hereafter through all the abyss of time in Thy knowledge and presence, that perfect peace which I desire with him to whom I am appointed. Amen."