

THE LADY OF LYNN

By SIR WALTER BESANT

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I heard no more. I sat down on the bench. What was the meaning of this sudden change? Remember that I had left Molly only a few hours before this fully resolved that she would demand an inquiry into the statements and charges made in the letters—resolved that she would not keep the engagement, her admiration for the proud, brave, noble creature, her lover, turned into loathing. And now, now, in the early morning, with her letter in my pocket stating her change of purpose, I found her at the altar and actually married.

"Whom God hath joined together let not man put asunder."

What if the man Purden was all that he was described? The priestly office confers rights and powers which are independent of the man who holds that office. Whatever his private wickedness, Purden was a clergyman, and therefore he could marry people.

Molly stood before the altar, as had been arranged. She wore a black silk domino; she had on a pink silk cloak with a hood drawn over her head, so that she was quite covered up and concealed. But I knew her by her stature, which was taller than the common, and by her dress, which had been arranged upon.

Then the bridegroom offered his hand and led the bride into the vestry. They were to sign the marriage register.

And here I rose and slunk away. I say that I slunk away, for I was cowering, I crawled away, for I was dreading, the marriage of our two rakes and a gamester, had been actually accomplished. Misery and ruin would be her lot. And in my pocket

was her letter asking for explanation—and withdrawing her promise for the morning. Could one believe one's senses?

I crawled away, ashamed for the first time in my life of the girl I loved. Women, I said to myself, are poor, weak creatures. They believe everything. Lord Fyningdale must have been with her early. He had but to deny the whole; she accepted the denial. Despite her resolution she walked with him to the church as the lamb goes to the shambles. Oh, Molly! Who could have believed it of you?

I left the church and went away. I thought of going to the captain; of telling my father; of telling the vicar, but it seemed like treachery, and I refrained.

Instead, I walked back to the quay and paddled to the ship, where presently the barges came alongside and the day's work began. Fortunately it is for a man that at moments of great unhappiness his work has to be done and he is desirous to put aside his sorrow and to think upon his duty. But that day I was not so. Who could have believed it possible?

Well, you see, I did not follow this wedding to an end. Had I gone into the vestry I should have been witness of something very unexpected.

The clergyman had the registers lying on the table open. He took a pen and filled in the forms. He then offered the pen to the bride.

"My lady," he said, "I must ask your ladyship to sign the register—in duplicate, if you please."

The bride sat down and in a large, bold hand wrote her name—Mary Miller.

Then the bridegroom took the pen and signed "Fyningdale."

The clergyman sprinkled the pounce over the names and shut up the books, which he gave to the clerk. This officer took the books and locked them in the great trunk which held the papers and books of the church, putting the key in his pocket.

"I congratulate my noble patron and the newly made countess on this auspicious event. I have brought with me a bottle of the finest port the Crown possesses, and I venture to drink health, happiness and prosperity. So saying he produced a bottle and glasses. The bride, without saying a word, inclined her head to the bridegroom and drank off her glass. Lord Fyningdale, who looked, if one may say so of a bridegroom, peevish and ill at ease, raised his glass. "To your happiness, Molly," he said.

"So all was finished. "You are going home, Molly?" he asked. "For the present—that is to say, for a day or two—it will be best. I shall claim you very soon. There is no one but ourselves in the vestry." (For the clerk, having locked the box and accepted the guinea bestowed upon him by the bridegroom, was now tramping down the church and through the porch. No one but themselves was in the vestry of the church.) "You may therefore take off your domino."

"As your lordship pleases," Lord Fyningdale started. "What is this?" he cried, furious with certain words which were out of place in a church.

"Lady Anastasia!" cried Mr. Purden. "Good Lord! Then we are all undone!"

"What does it mean? Tell me, she devil! What does it mean? Where is Molly? But this is play acting. This is not a marriage."

"I fear, my lord," said the parson, "that this is a marriage. The registers are in the strong box. They cannot be altered."

He has seen the entry in the register. I dare not alter them or destroy a single page. I have done a great deal for your lordship, but this thing I cannot do. It is a marriage, I say. You are married to the Lady Anastasia here."

"Talk! Talk! Go after the man. Bring back the man. Tear the keys from him. Silence the man. Buy his silence. By heaven, will murder him in order to stop his tongue!"

"Your lordship forgets your bride—your happy, smiling, innocent bride."

He cursed her. He raised his hand as if to strike her down, but forbore.

"I told you," she continued, "that in everything I was at your service—except in one thing. Tear the registers—murder the clerk—but the bride will be left. And if you murder her as well you will be no nearer the possession of the lovely Molly."

The bridegroom sank into a chair. He was terrible to look at, for his wrath and disappointment deprived him of the power of speech. Where was now the cold and haughty front? It was gone. He sat in the chair, upright, his face pale, his eyes staring from his head, as one who hath some kind of fit.

The clergyman, still in his white surplice, looked on and trembled, for his pupil was a murderous frame of mind. There was no knowing whom he might murder. Besides, he had before this divined the true meaning of the visit to Lynn, and he foresaw ruin to himself as well as his patron.

Lord Fyningdale turned upon him suddenly and cursed him for a fool, an ass, a villain, a traitor. "You are in the plot," he said. "You knew all along. You have been suborned."

"My lord, my lord, have patience. What could I know? I was bidden to be here at 10 o'clock. I supposed that the bride was the fair Miss Molly. I could not tell. I know nothing. The lady was in a domino. It is irregular to be married in a domino, but your lordship wished it. What could I do?"

"Send for the key, then, and destroy the registers!"

"Alas, my lord, it is now, you may be sure, all over the town that you have been married, and to Miss Molly."

"Where is the key? Where is Molly then? Why did she keep away?"

The bride looked on with her mocking smile of triumph. "You may murder me," she said, "but you will not undo the marriage. I have been married to a man whose name, but I am married none the less."

"You have brought ruin upon us all," her husband said, "ruin, headlong ruin. I am at my last guinea. I can raise no more money. I have no more credit. You yourself are as much distressed as I."

"If you are ruined," the lady replied, "you are rightly punished. How many have you made to me? How many have you invented to keep me quiet?"

"With submission, my lord," Mr. Purden stammered, for terror and bewilderment held him. "This is a bad morning's work. Let me advise that before the town is awake we leave the church and talk over the business in her ladyship's rooms or elsewhere. We must be private. To curse and to swear helps nothing, nor does it help to talk of a jealous revenge. Let us go."

She was with a tottering step, as if he were smitten with palsy, that the bridegroom walked down the aisle. The bride put up her domino and threw her hood over her head and so, with the parson, in silence, walked away from the church to her lodging, leaving the bridegroom to follow by himself. As yet the market people had not heard the news.

But the news spread. The clerk told his wife. "I come from the church," he said. "I have witnessed the marriage of Miss Molly—Captain Purden's Molly—with the noble lord, who wears the star and looks so grand. A private wedding it was. I know not why. The parson was the Rev. Mr. Purden, he was reading the morning prayers and—"

"On Sunday?"

"Yes, on Sunday's wife, slipping on her apron for such folk find the shelter of the apron for their hands necessary in conversation—ran round to the pump-room. No one was there as yet but the two dippers. To them she communicated the news."

Then she went on to the market and told all the people of the town who were chattering there.

At 10 o'clock, the captain, walking in his garden, was surprised by the arrival of the horns, who stood before the house and performed a noble flourish. "What the devil is that for?" said the captain. Then there arrived the butchers with their marrowbones and cleavers and began to make their music with zeal. The captain went out to them. Up went their hats.

"Huzza for Miss Molly and her husband!"

"Her husband? What do you mean?"

"Her husband, his lordship; married this morning."

"What?" The captain stared in amazement. Then he rushed into the house. Molly was in the kitchen. "What is this?" he asked. "The butchers are here and the horns are here and they swear you were married this morning, Molly."

"Why, captain, I have not been outside the door. I am not married. I assure you, and I begin to think now that I never shall be married."

The captain went out and dismissed the musicians, but the thing troubled him, and he was already sick at heart on account of the last night's discourse and its discoveries.

CHAPTER XV.
A NEW CONTACT.

HAT followed, by invention and design of the pious ecclesiastic Mr. Purden, was a villainy even greater than that at first designed, more daring, more cruel. The bride, accompanied by the minister officiating in the late ceremony, walked back to her lodging. She was still exultant in the first glow and triumph of her revenge. He, on the other hand, walked downcast, stealthily glancing at his companion, his big head moving sideways like the head of a bear, his sallow cheeks paler than was customary. The bridegroom, for his part, hung himself into his chair and was carried to the lady's lodging. A strange wedding procession!

CHAPTER XVI.
A DAY OF FATE.

HIS was the day when the villainy came to a head and the worst and the first installment of exposure. I have told you what was done at the church and what was our own bewilderment, not knowing what to believe or how to explain things. For my own part, though I might have guessed before, I had discovered the jealousy of Lady Anastasia, yet the truth, even the possibility of the truth, never came into my mind. I had no manner of doubt in my own mind but it was Molly herself

and none other whom I saw standing as a bride at the altar, all with Lord Fyningdale for a bridegroom. The fact, I say, admitted of no dispute. Yet why should Molly change her mind? And why should she deny the fact?

She was at the house. I begged her to come into the garden and to talk with me privately. Then I asked those two questions. Her answer to both of them was most amazing.

"Jack," she said, "I know not what you mean. I have not changed my mind. It is impossible that a woman can be in whom such things can be said unless he can prove that they are false. How can you think that I have changed my mind? As regards this talk about an early wedding, what do I know about it? At 6 o'clock I was with the vicar with my mother and Nigra. I have not been out of the house at all."

Then I persisted. I asked her if she could have gone out and had perhaps forgotten.

"Forgotten!" she repeated scornfully. "Do you suppose that a woman could by any possibility forget her own wedding? But what is it, Jack? What is in your mind?"

"Then I told her, 'Molly,' I said, 'I must tell you that I have not forgotten your letter. There was so much to think and talk about with these disclosures that I forgot. This morning I remembered. I hurried ashore. I ran to the Crown. It was just upon 6. I was too late. His lordship had gone out in a chair. I was just after. It was just after 6. The doors were open. I heard voices. I went in, Molly. Do not say that I am dreaming. I saw you—you, I say—youself, with your pink silk cloak, the hood pulled over your eyes. I saw you, Molly, as you face, just as had been arranged."

"You saw me, Jack? You saw me? How could you see me?"

"And your hand was in Lord Fyningdale's, and Mr. Purden was pronouncing the words which made you his wife, 'Whom God hath joined together let not man put asunder.'"

She stared at me with blank amazement.

"In my pink silk cloak? Jack, are you sure of the right man, or is it I myself who am now distraught?"

"Indeed I know not which."

"Did you speak to me? Did you congratulate the bride, Jack?"

"No! I was sick and sorry, Molly. I was out of the church. I had seen enough. The clerk, however, has been telling the story of this private marriage all over the town. Everybody knows it. The marriage is duly entered in the registers. It was a marriage by the archbishop's license. The man who married me is the vicar, the vicar I expect, but the marriage was in order."

Molly said nothing for awhile; then she said gently: "The letter from the bookseller, your cousin, spoke of Lord Fyningdale as being in the habit of marrying a woman with money, it would be his—"

"I believe that there are sometimes letters—bills of lading or whatever they are called—which give the wife the right to her own property; otherwise everything becomes her husband's."

"Why did he wish to marry me? There was never a gleam of love in his eye nor a note of love in his voice. Why, except that he might get me?"

"That is, I am convinced, the reason."

"Villainy, villainy, villainy! Jack, this is a conspiracy, some woman was behind it all. I am sure of it. He will claim me as his wife and lay hands upon all that I have."

"No, Molly; he shall not while you have friends."

"You cannot help where the law orders otherwise. So much I know, Jack. Yet you can do one thing for me. You can protect me from the man. He must not take me away."

"All Lynn will fight for you."

"Jack, I want more. I want all Lynn to believe me. You have known me my life. Am I capable of such a change of mind? Am I capable of so monstrous a falsehood as to steal out to marry the man and then to declare that I have never left the house? Oh, the villain, the villain! Her cheek was aflame; her eyes flashed.

"I seized her hand, 'Molly,' I cried, 'they shall all believe you. I will tell the truth everywhere.'"

Just then the garden door was thrown open, and Sam Semple appeared. With open, and Sam Semple appeared. With a smiling face and a bending knee he advanced, bowing low.

"Permit me to offer congratulations to the Countess of Fyningdale."

"I am a countess. I am plain Molly Miller."

"I have nothing to do with his lordship."

"Surely, madam; surely, my lady, there is some misunderstanding. I am sent by his lordship with his compliments and to tell you that he will be convenient for the countess to receive him."

"You have been informed, I suppose, that I was married to him this morning."

"Certainly, my lady."

"I have been back to Lord Fyningdale and told him that he is a villain and a liar, that I have learned his true character, that I am not married to him and that if he ventures to molest me my friends will protect me. Give him my regards, Sam, word for word."

"I believe, Sam, word for word."

"I believe, Sam, word for word," said the countess, for his discomfiture and bewilderment made her reel and stagger, "that you have no hand in this villainy. It was you, however, who brought that man to me, knowing his true character and his antecedents. Let us never see your face here again. Go. If I thought you were in the plot, I would serve you again as the captain served you three years ago."

He went away without another word. Then the captain came home, his face troubled.

"I know not," he said, "what has happened in this place. I have seen Lord Fyningdale. I told him of the matter and he said, 'My dear, I have heard nothing. He says that he married me this morning, Molly.'"

"I know. He has sent Sam Semple here with the same story. Captain, you believe me, do you not?"

"Believe you, Molly? Why, if I did believe you, I should believe nothing. Believe you? My dear, I would not doubt the prayer book, and the fact that he has been married to me, I have seen an old fool. But I did it for the best. He says that you are his wife. Let him come and take you—if he can!"

"It is not Molly that he would take; it is Molly's fortune."

"Why, sir," she said, "if he takes the whole and wastes and dissipates it, so long as he does not take me, what does it matter?"

Then the vicar came again, and the whole of the business had to be dis-

gussed again. At first he adhered to his theory of unconscious action, because a scholar always likes to explain every theory by examples chosen from Latin and Greek authors. He had looked up several more stories of the kind from his library and sent proposals to defend his opinion. But the absolute certainty of Molly's assertion, the evidence of her mother, who declared that Molly had been working with her since half past 5, the firm belief of the captain and my own change of opinion and the possibility of deception shook him.

Finally he abandoned his learned view and adopted our more modern explanations of the case—viz, that the marriage was a sham and that the woman was some creature suborned to personate Molly.

"But what woman can she be?" asked the vicar. "She can write. I have seen the registers. She has signed in a

round hand without bad spelling. The woman, therefore, is educated. My dear, we may perhaps find the woman. My worthy and pious brother in orders is most certainly in the conspiracy. When there are three, one is generally a traitor. To begin with, the scheme is both bold and dangerous. It is the first step toward obtaining a large sum of money under false pretences. Their necks are in danger, even the neck of a noble earl."

"It is inconceivable," he went on after a little reflection, "how a woman could be found to play such a part. She must be the mistress of the earl. No other could be trusted."

"What should be done meantime?"

"We must meet the enemy on his own ground. He spreads abroad the report that he married Molly this morning. We must publicly and openly deny the fact. Captain, there will be a large company at the assembly this evening. You will take Molly. I will go with you. Jack shall put on his Sunday best and shall also go with you. We must be prepared for an impudent claim, and we must be ready with prompt denial. Let us court publicity."

This was clearly the best advice possible. We were left unmolested all the afternoon, though the captain made me stay as a kind of garrison in case of any attempt at abduction being made.

In the evening Molly in her chair and dressed in her finery was carried to the gardens, while the captain, the vicar and myself formed a bodyguard.

We arrived after the dancing had begun. Lady Anastasia was looking on, but her court of ladies and young men for some reason seemed to have melted away. She stood alone, save for a paper for the old lady, Sir Harry. The colonel was also with her, the Rev. Benjamin Purden stood behind her.

The music was in the gallery at the end of the long room. The dancing was carried on in the middle. Lady Anastasia was standing on the right of the gallery, most of the company on the left. Molly, with the captain and followed by the vicar and myself, turned to the left.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Successful Doctor.

The king of purgatory sent his letters to earth to bring back some skillful Chinese physician. "You must look for one," said the king, "at whose door there are no aggrieved spirits of disembodied patients. The doctor must not, but at the house of every doctor they visited there were crowds of wailing ghosts hanging about. At last they found a doctor at whose door there was only a single shade and cried out, 'This man is evidently the skillful one we are in search of.' On inquiry, however, they discovered that he had only started practice the day before—Giles' 'History of Chinese Literature.'"

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