

THE LADY OF LYNN

By SIR WALTER BESANT

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CONTINUED

"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 discredited."

"If you are ruined," the lady replied, "you are rightly punished. How many vows have you made to me? How many lies 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."

It was with a tottering step, as if he was 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 Crowle'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 who reads the morning prayers and preaches on Sunday."

Then the clerk'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 7 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, 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 COMPACT.

W 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, swung himself into his chair and was carried to the lady's lodging. A strange wedding procession!

She threw off her cloak and her domino and stood before her newly made lord, her eyes bright, her face flushed, her lips quivering. She was filled with revenge half satiated, but revenge can never be wholly satisfied, and with the triumph of victory.

"I have won," she said. "You tried to deceive me again, Ludovic, but I have won. You have been caught in your own toils."

He took the nearest chair, sitting down in silence, but his face was dark. As she looked upon him some of the triumph died out of her eyes; her cheek lost its glow; she began to be frightened. What would he say or do next? As for his reverence, he stood within the door as if ready for instant flight. Indeed there was cause for uncertainty because the man was desperate, and his sword was at his side.

"Silence," he said, "or I may kill you!"

Then there was silence. The other two did not speak. The lady threw herself upon the sofa, twisting her fingers nervously.

"You have married me, you say. You

shall be a happy wife. You cannot imagine how happy you will be."

In a contest of tongues the woman has the best of it.

"So long as you, my lord, enjoy the same happiness or even greater I shall not repine. You intended my happiness in another way."

"You have destroyed my last chance. It is a good beginning."

"And ending, my lord. The fond mistress whom you have fooled so long becomes the wife. It is not the duty of a wife to provide for her husband. Nor will the Countess of Fylingdale allow the earl to enter her house. She will want the proceeds of her bank herself. In a word, my lord, you are not only my husband, but you are now privileged to provide for yourself."

He sprang to his feet and fell to common and violent cursing, invoking the immediate and miraculous intervention of that Power which he had all his life insulted and defied. The lady received the torrent without a word. What can one say in reply to a man who only curses? But she was afraid of him; his words were like blows. The headlong rage of the man cooled her; she bent her head and covered her face with her hands.

Then Mr. Purden ventured to interfere. "Let me speak," he said. "The thing is done. It cannot be undone. Would it not be better to make the best of it? Does it help any of us does it help your lordship—to revile and to threaten?"

The bridegroom turned upon him savagely. "You to speak!" he said. "You are too mealy mouthed and too virtuous even to tear up a page from a register."

"I do not wish to be unfrocked or to be sent to the plantations, my lord. Meantime it would be doing you the worst service in the world if I were to tear out that page."

"Oh, you talk! You always talk!"

"Of old, my lord. I have sometimes talked to some purpose."

"Talk again then. What do you mean by disservice? You will say next, I suppose, that this play acting was fortunate for me."

"We may sometimes turn disasters into victories. If your lordship will listen."

His patron sat down again, the late storm leaving its trace in a scowling face and twitching lips.

"Why the dickens wasn't Molly there? How did this woman find out? How did she know that Molly was not coming?"

"I can answer these questions," said the lady. "Molly would not come because she learned last night, just in time, certain facts in the private life of the bridegroom."

"What?" Lord Fylingdale betrayed his terror. "She has heard? What has she heard?"

He had not received Molly's letter nor had he opened the captain's.

"More than enough. You have lost your bride and her fortune. I might have warned you, but I preferred to take her place."

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speaking. Merely things of public notoriety. That you are a gambler and a rake; that you have ruined many; that you are ruined yourself—quite enough for a girl of her class to learn. In our rank we want much more before we turn our back upon a man. I myself know much more. Yet I have married you."

"She has heard," Lord Fylingdale repeated.

"Dear, dear!" said the parson. "All this is most unfortunate—most unfortunate. Your lordship had already lost your bride—lost her," he repeated. "Lost her and her fortune. Is there no way out?"

"Who brought these reports? Show me the man!"

"Ta-ta-ta! You need not bluster, Ludovic. Reports of this kind are in the air; they cling to your name; they travel with you. What? The notorious Lord Fylingdale? They have come, you see, at last, even to this unfashionable corner of the island. They are here, although we have done so much to declare your virtues. Acknowledge that you have been fortunate so far."

"Are these reports your doing, madam? Is this a part of your infernal jealousy?"

"I do not know who put them about. It is not likely that I should start such reports, especially after the scandal at Bath. I am, in fact, like his reverence here, too much involved myself. Oh, we have beautiful characters—all three of us."

"Who told Molly?"

"I say that I know nothing. She has been warned. That is all I can tell you, and she has been advised to take no further steps until full explanations have been made in answer to these rumors."

"Full explanations," repeated Mr. Purden. "Dear, dear! Most unfortunate—most unfortunate."

"Your lordship can refer to his reverence here, or to the admirable Semple, or to the immaculate Sir Harry, or to the colonel, that man of nice and well known honor, for your character. But who will give them a character? Understand," she said, facing him, "you had lost your bride before you got out of bed this morning. Your only chance is to imitate the example of Tom Rising and to carry her off, and she will then stick a knife between your ribs, as she intended to do to that worthy gentleman. But, no; I forgot. You cannot do that. You are already married."

His reverence again interposed. "With submission, my lord, some explanations will be asked. It will not certainly be convenient to offer any. There is, however, one way, and only one, that I can suggest." He looked at the lady Anastasia. "It will be perhaps at first distasteful to her ladyship. It has, however, the very great advantage of securing the fortune, which, I take it, is what your lordship chiefly desires. As regards the girl, she is, in point of manners and appearance, so far beneath your lordship's notice that we need not consider her in the matter."

"I care nothing about the girl. But hang me if I understand one single syllable of what you mean—or how you can secure the fortune without the girl."

"A moment. Madam saw her way to the revenge of jealousy. She took the place of the bride, and she was married as Miss Molly. She signed the name of Molly Miller; the license was in that name. The clerk who was present has, I am sure, already carried the news all over the place. We have the evidence, therefore, of the bridegroom, the parson, the clerk, the license and the registers. Who is to prove that the real Molly was at home all the time? Captain Crowle, perhaps, though I doubt. The girl herself—But who will believe her? My lord, you have married Miss Molly and not the Lady Anastasia."

"What then?"

"You have only to claim your bride."

"Sir, you forget that I am the bride," Lady Anastasia interposed quickly.

Mr. Purden bowed and smiled, rubbing his hands softly. "With submission, madam. I do not advise that his lordship should carry her off nor that he should claim her ad mensam et thorum, as we scholars say. His principles would not, I am sure, allow that he should carry off an unmarried woman. Not at all. He will leave her with her friends. Indeed he would prefer to do so. I suggest only that we should proclaim the marriage and lay hands upon the fortune."

"And what am I to be?"

"His lordship's best friend. You will rescue him in his deepest need; you will restore him to affluence. It will be a service, madam, of the purest and most disinterested affection, instead of an ugly and ruinous revenge. Heavens, can you hesitate?"

They both looked at Anastasia, who made no response, her eyes in her lap.

"The trick will lie with us three," the tempter went on. "Neither of us will reveal it."

"As regards jealousy, Anastasia," said Fylingdale, "the girl will be here, and everything will continue just as before."

She threw up her arms and sprang to her feet. "Oh," she cried, "it is the most monstrous villainy!"

"We need not think of the girl. We must think of ourselves."

"The fortune is immense, Anastasia. It is ridiculous that the girl should have so much. We will leave her a competence, and there are the jewels."

Lady Anastasia gasped, and Fylingdale continued:

"You yourself will adorn these jewels. It will be my greatest pleasure to atone for my ill judged deception by giving you all those jewels—the diamonds, the rubies, the chains of pearls and all the rest of the pretty, glittering things." He took her hands, the parson looking on all the time as a phys-

cian looks on at a bloodletting or an operation. "What can that girl do with the jewels? They shall all be yours. Forgive me, Anastasia, and let us again work together, as we have already done, you and I, with no more jealousy and no more suspicions."

He kissed her hand. His manner was changed almost suddenly; he became soft, caressing and persuasive. It was the old charm, which the poor lady could never resist. She suffered him to hold her hand; she allowed him to kiss her; her eyes grew humid.

"Oh," she murmured, "I must do everything you ask, Ludovic, if you are only kind!"

"How can I be anything but kind?" he replied, with a smile. "You must forget and forgive. The thought that all I had schemed and planned for was torn from me, and by you—Anastasia, by you—was too much. My mind was upset; I knew not what I said. Forgive me."

"Oh, Ludovic, I forgive!"

"And the jewels shall atone, the lovely jewels. You shall have them all."

"You will truly give me the jewels?"

"Truly, my Anastasia. After all, we are man and wife. Henceforth we shall only live for each other. Your happiness shall be mine. The jewels shall be yours."

She yielded. She fell into his arms. There was a complete, a touching, reconciliation.

Lord Fylingdale was going to declare that it was Molly and none other who was married that morning at 6 o'clock and to assume the rights and powers of a husband. So that the news of his evil reputation came, after all, too late to be of any use. And as for explanations, who would have the right to ask any explanations of a married man on behalf of his wife?

The counsel learned in the law gave his written opinion that, considering that the marriage ceremony was fixed for 6 a. m., the bridegroom had no knowledge of the bride's intention not to present herself; that he left his lodgings a few minutes before 6; that a few minutes after 6 one Pentecrosse, well known to the lady, witnessed the marriage ceremony and believed the bride to be the lady in question, dressed as she was accustomed to dress, although he did not see her face; that the parish clerk also recognized the lady; that the clergyman was ready to swear that the bride was the lady, and that the registers showed her signature, there could be no chance whatever of success in disputing or denying the marriage.

CHAPTER XVI. A DAY OF FATE.

THIS was the day when all the villainy came to a head and did its worst and met with 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 because I had discovered the jealousy of Lady Anastasia, yet the truth, even the possibility of the truth, never came into my head. 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 rail with Lord Fylingdale 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?

I sought her 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 for me to marry a man of 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 in the garden 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, "last night I forgot your letter. There was so much to think and talk about with these disclosures that I forgot. This morning I remembered. Then 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 ran to the church. 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—you yourself, with your pink silk cloak, the hood pulled over your head, a domino to hide your face, just as had been arranged."

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

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