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Phyllis Dearborn

OR, THE

Countess of Basingwlle

CHAPTER IX.

Lionel, Earl of Basingwell, left Basingwell Castle early in the morning, saying something about business.

"I'll be back to the funeral, of course," he said to William. "In fact I shall return to-night. Let the carriage be at the station for the eight o'clock."

"Yes, your lordship," said William, following the retreating figure of the new lord with great admiration. "No wonder they call you handsome! The finest picture of a lord I ever set eyes on! But, ah! if the stories they tell be true, you will be making ducks and drakes of the property in a little while."

And while he was admiring and prophesying, the new earl was saying to himself:

"I must keep my word to the little thing. She must think me as unstable as water. But I will be a fairy prince to her—that is, so far as opening the door of plenty to her, and letting her realize her innocent dream of studying art."

He might have gone to see Phyllis right from the train, but he said he would treat her as respectfully as he would any other lady; and so he went home first, and dressed himself as if going to call upon the Duchess of Saddoset, and she was the most particular of ladies.

"The famous Sir Lionel must go in character," he said to himself, with the pleased smile that always broke over his face at the thought of his friends in the attic.

There was something of a sensation when he drove up in his own carriage to the door of the house where Miss Phyllis lived. A great many windows were filled with frowsy heads and curious eyes; but such things never had disturbed the magnificent sang froid of Lionel, and he rapped at the door as coolly as if not an eye saw him, or a voice inquired audibly who the swell was.

"Who do you wish to see?" asked the astounded landlady, who had opened the door in person, to the everlasting indignation of the little serving maid, who had opened it scores upon scores of times when she didn't wish to, but who had been arrested on this occasion in a headlong flight down the baluster in her haste to come face to face with the apparition from the West End.

Whom did he wish to see? What on earth was her other name? If he had heard it he had forgitten it. To him she had been Miss Phyllis, or, in honesty, little Phyllis, and that was all.

"Oh-er," he said, with a drawl that was all affected to gain time, "you have a crippled girl up stairs—Miss Carrie, yes, Miss Carrie. I wish to see her. I have some flowers."

"I'll take them to her," said the landlady, severely.

"Oh, Sir Lionel! is that you?" cried a voice from up stairs—a voice that fell very pleasantly on his ears.

"Is that you, Miss Phyllis? Yes, it is I. With you permission, madam," he said, politely pushing past her. "I am so glad to have met you. I am sure my young friends up stairs are safe in such care as yours. I hope I may see you on my way down."

His politeness was far too overwhelming for the good woman, who had been inclined to play the dragon.

"Honored, I'm sure," she said, with a courtesy, which was just so much lower because she had just caught sight of the coat-of-arms on the panel of the carriage door.

If his intentions were evil at least he was noble, and had such manners!

Lionel hurried up the stairs, and was greeted by Miss Phyllis.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," she said. "Why, there have been such strange reports!"

"That confounded supper!" thought Lionel.

"It was even said that you intended——"

"Now, what nonsense that would have been, my dear Miss Phyllis. How is Miss Carrie?"

"I think she is better. I am so glad it isn't true about you. You seemed so nice!"

"And I am just as nice as I seem," he laughed.

"I am beginning to doubt that," she answered.

"Why?"

"You said you were coming to see Carrie yesterday, and you didn't come."

"A death in the family," he said, apologetically.

"Oh," she said, sympathetically, and then, as they had reached the top of the house, where she could see him, she looked at his clothes.

Then, for the first time, he remembered he had forgotten to put mourning on.

"Oh, confound it! I beg your pardon, but the truth is, I never thought of the mourning. Oh, don't look shocked; he was ever so distantly related. I'd never think of putting on crape if I wasn't to gain by his death. That's worse yet, isn't it? But those big eyes of yours do confuse a fellow so!"

He looked so perfectly at ease, and so gay and happy that the inquiring eyes suddenly lighted with as merry a smile as ever Lionel had seen.

"You look terribly confused," she said. "Did you bring those flowers for Carrie?"

"I did."

"Well, don't let us stand out here talking. Go into my room—you know the way, and I will go tell Carrie. If you hear a scream you will know it is from her. She is just child enough to scream when she is pleased, and these flowers will please her."

"To say nothing," suggested Lionel, "of the opportunity to look at the famous Sir Lionel Warne."

Miss Phyllis looked questioningly at him for a moment, and then said, soberly:

"Don't you ever get tired of laughing at things?"

Something made his thoughts rush back to that terrible race against death, and his face grew suddenly stern.

"This is the first time I have laughed in many hours," he answered.

"Laugh just as much as you wish to," she said, impulsively, for it seemed to her that she had unwittingly struck a painful chord. "Carrie will like you to be merry. She is such a jolly little thing herself. Only you won't say anything that will seem like making fun of her, will you?" and the beautiful, sweeet young face grew very tender.

"Trust me, Miss Phyllis," he said, with deep feeling, and she smiled gratefully at him, and left the room.

When he was alone he began to examine the little room, and was thinking what a dainty place it was to be away up in the attic of a dirty London house, when he heard a sort of squeal of delight, and knew that either the flowers or the prospect of seeing the famous Sir Lionel had called it forth.

"Did you hear her?" said Miss Phyllis, from the doorway.

"Yes, I heard her. Was it the flowers, or the famous Sir Lionel?"

"Both. She wanted me to make you wait while I fixed up the room, but——"

"Nonsense," said he, with a man's scorn of fixing.

"That's what I told her," said Miss Phyllis. "I said you would never know the difference."

"Oh, but that wasn't a bit complimentary," said he.

"Of course not. I don't believe in compliments."

"Not even when the subject is not present?"

"Then it isn't a compliment, but only the truth. But how you do keep on talking about nothing!"

"I protest against that," he said, following her into the adjoining room.

"Miss Carrie Braithwait," said Phyllis, quietly ignoring his protest, "permit me to present to you Sir Lionel Warne."

"I ask your pardon, Miss Phyllis," said Lionel, "the famous Sir Lionel, if you please."

At that Carrie laughed merrily, proving Phyllis' words that she was a jolly little thing. And, as it was what Lionel had wished to make her do, he was satisfied, though he could not help wondering pitifully how the little creature, all propped up with pillows, could find the heart to laugh at all.

"I hope you will excuse the room," said Carrie, as soon as she had laughed her fill.

"He needn't do anything of the sort," said Phyllis. "The room is good enough. It is our studio, Sir Lionel, and you can't expect it to be in order."

"I should have thought it was in order," he said.

"Oh, my!" said Carrie; "but of course it must be this way. I can't very well get out of the room—at any rate not without being carried, and I won't let Phyllis do it, though she is terribly obstinate."

"Oh, I was certain of that," said Lionel, laughing.

"She would go out that night," said Carrie. "You know, the night you—you—oh, you rescued her, don't you know. Only it sounds so foolish and romantic."

"It is the truth, nevertheless," said Phyllis, gravely. "I don't know what I should have done if Sir Lionel had not been there. But what in the world were you doing in this part of the city, at that time of night?" she asked, as if the thought had just come to her.

"What was I doing?" he asked himself aloud. "Oh, yes," and then he hesitated, though why he did he could not have told.

"Well?" said Phyllis, as he did not go on.

"Why, Phyllis," said Carrie, "what difference does it make to you what he was doing here?"

"None," said Phyllis, quietly; "only he started to tell."

"I think," said Lionel, gravely, "you would both be interested to hear why I was in this part of the city that night."

They both looked at him inquiringly.

"Have either of you ever heard of Lady Flora Vanemore?" he asked.

"What! the famous beauty! Yes, indeed," they both answered.

"Well," he said, slowly, "I had just asked her to be my wife, or I had told her I loved her."

For a moment those two pairs of eyes stared at him as if he had been a vision out of some fairy tale. Then Phyllis asked, with gentle commiseration:

"And she had refused you?"

"Oh, no, she had accepted me."

"Oh!" cried Carrie, clasping her thin little hands ecstatically; "and you too are going to be married! Oh, how I'd like to see you! Is she so very beautiful? More than——"

And she nodded her head and pointed a finger in dumb show at Phyllis, who at that moment was standing with her back to them, looking, with head inclined to one side, at a picture she had been touching up.

Lionel looked at her as she stood there, and then called up the image of the stately woman who had promised to be his bride.

"Different," he said to Carrie.

"What do you mean by different?" asked Phyllis; "I didn't catch all you said just then."

"She was admiring her picture," laughed Carrie.

"But I don't see," said Phyllis, in her direct way, "why you should have come away over here if she had accepted you. Now, if she had said no——"

"That is what I expected her to say," said Lionel, "and it rather upset me to have her say yes."

"Oh!" said Carrie.

"I don't see why," said Phyllis, painting briskly.

"Well, I hadn't any money, for one thing," said Lionel.

"Oh, yes, that was in the paper," said Carrie.

"The duse it was! I beg your pardon; I mean I'm surprised. No, I'm not surprised, either. Why, of course, I might have expected it."

"We were awfully sorry," said Carrie.

"I'd forgotten all about it," said Phyllis, "until you spoke of it. Was it all true?"

"What was in the newspaper, do you mean?" he asked, in vexation.

"Yes."

"I haven't read it, and I don't know. Confound—well, it is disgusting to have one's self made common property in that way. However," he said, with sudden cheerfulness, "it doesn't matter, for there isn't any Sir Lionel any more."

"There isn't any Sir Lionel!" said Phyllis. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why, I am the Earl of Basingwell, now."

"The Earl of Basingwell!" repeated Phyllis, in a low tone, and when they looked at her they saw she was pale and tottering.

(To be Continued.)

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