

THE LADY OF LYNN

By SIR WALTER BESANT

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CONTINUED

"I have promised to meet him. I must at least send him a message, if only to say that I shall not come."

"I should like to send him nothing. But you are right. It is best to be courteous. Well, you may send him a letter. I will myself take it to the Crown."

"But afterward, Jack? What shall we do afterward? If he is innocent, he will take offense. If not?"

"If you were engaged to marry a young merchant, Molly, or to a skipper and you heard rumors of bankruptcy, drink or evil courses, what would you do?"

"I would tell him that I had heard such and such about him, and I should ask for explanations."

"Then do exactly the same with Lord Fyngdale. He is accused of certain things. The captain must make inquiry. He is bound to inquire. Why, the vicar himself says that he would, if necessary, in order to ascertain the truth, travel all the way to London, there to learn the foundations. If any, for these charges, and afterward into Gloucestershire, where his country mansion stands, to learn on the spot what the tenants and the people of the country know of him."

"But suppose he refuses explanations. He is too proud to be called to account."

"Then send him packing. Lord or no lord, proud or humble, if he refuses explanations, if these things are untrue, then—why, then you will consider what to do. But, Molly, I do not believe that any explanations will be forthcoming and that your noble lover will carry it off to the end with the same lofty pride and cold men."

"Let us go into the parlor, Jack. There are the captain's writing materials. Help me to say what is proper. Oh, is it possible? Can I believe it? Are these things true? That proud man, raised above his fellows by his virtues and his rank and his principles! Jack, he risked his life for me."

"Ask no more questions, Molly. We must have explanations. Let us write the letter."

"It was Molly's first letter—the only letter, perhaps, that she will ever write in all her life. Certainly she had never written one before, nor has she ever written one since. Like most housewives, her writing is only wanted for household accounts, recipes for puddings and pies and the labeling of her bottles and jars. I have the letter before me at this moment. It is written in a large, sprawling hand, and the spelling is not such as would satisfy my father."

Naturally she looked to me for advice. I had written many letters to my owners and to foreign merchants about cargoes, and the like, and was therefore able to advise the composition of a letter which should be justly expressed and to the point:

"Honored Lord—This is from me at the present moment in my guardian's parlor—writing parlor, when I am mate of the ship should have written port or harbor. 'It is to inform you that intelligence has been brought by letters from London and Cambridge. Touching the matters referred to in these letters, I have to report for your satisfaction that they call your lordship in round terms a gamester and a ruined rake and your companions at the spavils, Sam Semple, the parson, the rickety old bean and the colonel—simple rogues, common cheats and sharpers. Shall not, therefore, meet your lordship at the church tomorrow morning as instructed. Awaiting your lordship's explanations and commands, your most obedient, humble servant."

"MOLLY."

This letter I folded, sealed, addressed and dropped into my pocket. Then I bade Molly good night, entreated her to be thankful for her escape and so left her with a light heart. Verily it seemed as if the sadness of the last two months had been wholly and suddenly lifted, and on my way back to the Crown I passed the Lady Anastasia's lodging just as her chair was brought to the house. I opened the door for her and stood but in hand.

"Why, it is Jack!" she cried. "It is the sailor Jack, the constant lover. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Only that Molly will not keep that appointment of tomorrow evening."

"Oh, that interesting appointment in St. Nicholas' church. May a body ask why the ceremony has been postponed?"

"Things have been disclosed at the last moment, fortunately in time."

"What things, and by whom?"

"By letter. It is stated as a fact well known that Lord Fyngdale is nothing better than a ruined rake and a notorious gamester."

"Indeed! The excellent Lord Fyngdale! Impossible! Quite impossible! The illustrious example of so many virtues! The explanations will be, I am sure, complete and satisfactory. What next will the world say? Does his lordship know of this discovery? Not yet? You said it was a discovery, did you not? Well, my friend, I am much obliged to you for telling me. You are quite sure Molly will not be there? Very good of you to tell me."

For my own part I start for London quite early—at 5 o'clock. Goodbye, Jack!"

Then I went into the Crown, where I learned that the captain had been reading another letter containing accusations as bad as those in the other two.

So we fell to talking over the business, and it was resolved that the captain should demand explanations by letter, that he should refuse to receive the villain Sam Semple or his lordship and that the vicar should, if necessary, proceed to London and there learn what he could concerning the past history and the present reputation of the noble suitor. Meantime I said no more about the intended marriage at St. Nicholas' church and the abandonment of the plan. As things turned out, it would have been far better had I told the captain and had we both planted ourselves as sentinels at the door, so as to be quite sure that Molly did not go forth at 6 in the morning.

That evening, after leaving me, Lady Anastasia sent a note to Lord Fyngdale. "I am leaving Lynn early tomorrow morning. I expect to be in London in two days. Shall write to Molly."

CHAPTER XIV.

A WEDDING.

I HAD rowed myself aboard that evening in a strange condition of exultation, for I had no doubt—no doubt at all—that the charges were true and that a conspiracy of the most deadly kind was not only discovered, but also checked, and I could not but admire the craft and subtlety with which the favorite of the muses had devised a plan by which it was made possible for the conspirators to come all together without the least suspicion to the town of Lynn.

Nobody could stand against him, nor could any one in Lord Fyngdale's rank visit the town in its ordinary condition without receiving an invitation to Houghton if Sir Robert was there unless, indeed, there were reasons why he should not be visited or received. What Sam had not expected was without doubt the wonderful success of his deception, the eagerness with which the country round accepted his inventions, the readiness with which they drank these innocent waters, the miraculous cures effected and the transformation of the venerable old port and trading town into a haunt and resort of fashion and the pursuit of pleasure.

Thinking of all these things and in blissful anticipation of the discomfiture of all the conspirators, there was an important thing that I quite forgot—namely, to send Molly's letter to her suitor in his room at the Crown. I carried the letter in my pocket. I undressed and lay down in my bunk. I slept with a light heart, dreaming only of things pleasant until the morning, when the earliest stroke of the hammer from the yard and the quay woke me up. It was then 5:30. I sat up. I rubbed my eyes. I then suddenly remembered that the letter was in my pocket still.

It was, I say, 5:30. The engagement was for 6 o'clock. I might have to run yet to stop Lord Fyngdale.

It does not take long to dress. You may imagine that I did not spend time in powdering my hair. In a quarter of an hour I was over the side of the ship and in my dingy.

By the clock in the Common Stair it was five minutes to 6 when I landed and made her fast. I climbed the stairs and ran as fast as my legs could carry me to the Crown inn. As I reached the door the clock struck 6.

Was Lord Fyngdale in his room? I was too late. He had left the house only five minutes before and had been carried in his chair across the market place.

I followed. It was already five minutes past the hour. I should find him in the church chafing at the delay. I should give him the letter and retire.

The market place was filled with the market people and with the townsmen.

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pie who came to buy. I pushed across, stepping over a basket and jostled by a woman with poultry and vegetables. It was seven or eight minutes after 6 when I arrived at the church. The doors of the south porch were open. Within I heard the sound of voices or at least of one voice. I looked in.

Heavens! What had happened? Not only was I late with my letter, but—could I believe my eyes? Molly herself stood before the altar. Facing her was Lord Fyngdale, who held her hand. Within the rails stood the Rev. Benjamin Purden, beside him the clerk to make the responses, and the minister, when I arrived, was actually saying the words which the bridegroom repeats after the minister, completing in effect the marriage ceremony.

"I, Ludovic, take thee, Mary, to my wedded wife," and so on, according to the form prescribed, and again the words beginning:

"With this ring I thee wed"—I stood and listened, lost in wonder.

Then came the prayer prescribed, after which the clergyman joined their hands together, saying:

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

I heard no more. I sat down on the nearest 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 two 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 no 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 agreed 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. If you like it better, I crawled away, for I was sick at heart. The thing which I most dreaded, the marriage of our girl to a rake 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 tomorrow. 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 Fyngdale 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. Fortunate 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—alas! Poor Molly! 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 "Fyngdale."

The clergyman sprinkled the pounce box 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.

"And now," said Mr. Purden, "let me 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 Fyngdale, 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—at least so 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 or the church.) "You may therefore take off your domino."

"As your lordship pleases," Lord Fyngdale started. Whose voice was that? "As you order I obey." So the bride removed her domino and threw back the hood.

The bridegroom 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 it is a marriage. The registers are in the strong box. They cannot be altered."

"Go after the clerk, man. Order him to give up the keys. Tear the pages out of the registers."

"I cannot," said Mr. Purden. "I dare not. The man is a witness of this marriage. 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, I 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 his cold and haughty front? It was gone. He sat in the chair, upright, his face purple, his eyes starting from his head, as one who hath some kind of fit.

The clergyman, still in his white surplice, looked on and trembled, for his old pupil was in 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 Fyngdale 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 6 to marry you. 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 Molly? 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, it is true, under a false name, but I am married none the less."

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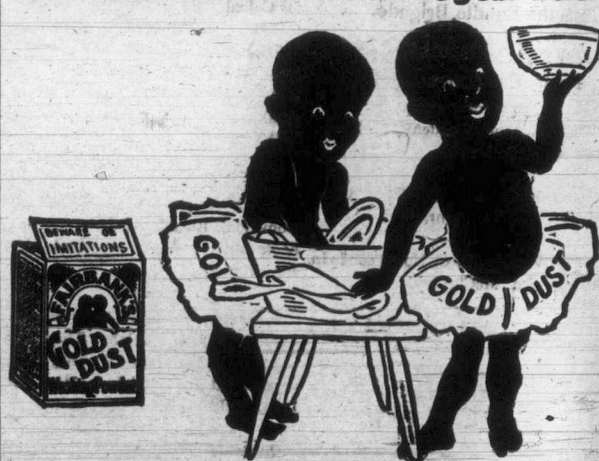
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