

The Storyteller.

A WORK-A-DAY ROMANCE.

(By MARY CATHERINE CROWLEY, in the *Ave Maria*.)

I.

It was an afternoon in midsummer. The city streets were hot and dusty; the great main thoroughfares swarmed with sweltering, suffering humanity. In the district of the large retail stores the character of the crowd was different from that of other seasons. It consisted mainly of panting, jaded country-folk, bent upon seeing the sights and doing a little shopping; with now and again a few women of fashion, and modish, sunburned young girls, who had evidently come up to town for the day, either from the beaches or their cool suburban homes.

In the great department store of Knowlton and Co. the temperature was stifling. The countenances of the older saleswomen wore a resigned expression, which said that, having stood it many summers, they were determined to drag through this one; but their younger companions looked wited, like the flowers outside the florists window around the corner.

At the button counter Dora Wylie had a particularly wearisome time. Her companion in charge was away on vacation; shoppers were flustered and exacting; and, fagged out by the sultriness, she found it especially difficult to preserve the regulation smiling face and obliging manner.

A year ago Dora had not anticipated the necessity of seeking employment at Knowlton's; but family reverses had recently obliged her to take the first position that offered.

'I shall not mind coming to and fro in rain or snow half so much; but, oh, this dreadful heat!' she sighed, as, at leisure for a breathing space, she leaned back against the wall, fanning her-elf with her handkerchief.

At this moment a face once familiar to her appeared among the throng passing continually in and out through the doorway,—a face which, in its glowing youth and happiness, might have been taken for an ideal picture of summer; not the summer of the city pavements, but the joyous, care-free spirit whose haunts are rural lanes and shady nooks, green hill-sides and the borders of the sea.

'My schoolmate, Phyllis Newton; and she is making straight in this direction. To be ignored or patronised by my Lady Phyllis, as we used to call her, is more than I can abide,' mentally ejaculated the much-tried girl, who, yet a novice in the work-a-day world, was, like many another, foolishly self-conscious and sensitive to a degree.

There was no chance of escape, however. The slight, trim figure was already beside her; and, in complying with a gentle request for some of her wares, she was obliged to meet the clear grey eyes, into which flashed a gleam of recognition. In their school-days, Phyllis had been considered aristocratic and exclusive; therefore Dora was now the more surprised, for, exclaiming, 'Why, Dora, how glad I am to meet you!' Phyllis clasped her hand in genuine pleasure, and sat down to converse a few minutes, since no other customer appeared just then to demand attention. Few, indeed, could have resisted this unaffected friendliness; certainly not Dora, who responded with equal sincerity.

Phyllis seemed to have brought with her something of the breeziness of the seaside resort where she had been staying. She was very pleasant to look at in her dainty costume of buff linen and natty sailor hat, her soft hair parted above a smooth forehead, her expressive face lighted up with animation.

'I never thought her pretty before,' mused Dora; 'but there is a charm about her which is so much more than mere prettiness; she appears, what she is, a perfect lady.' And the gaze of the tired girl strayed to a cluster of pink asters that the other wore.

'Do take them!' begged her friend, following the glance. And, leaning across the counter, she pinned them on Dora's white waist, chattering the while of the old times at St. Mary's.

'I saw you one day last winter,' said Dora. 'You were walking on the avenue with your aunt; and you both bowed to a young man—not so very young either,—who seemed decidedly pleased at the encounter; for, although apparently a man of affairs and in something of a hurry, he not only turned and walked a few steps with you, but continued on to the end of the block, at which I fancied Miss Romaine looked vexed. Do you remember?'

Phyllis coloured and answered hastily:

'Had I seen you, my dear, I certainly should have stopped to speak to you; but—the circumstance you mention is so trifling—'

'She recalls it very well,' reflected the demure but quick-witted Dora. 'Clearly I have stumbled upon a romance of my Lady Phyllis. The young man had a frank, prepossessing face. I wonder why Miss Romaine does not like him?'

But Phyllis, eager to change the subject, was asking:

'Have you been away this summer, Dora? No! Then where are you planning to go?'

The smile of the working girl grew a little pensive.

'Oh, my lines are not cast in such pleasant places as yours!' she replied, lightly. 'I have been right here, and here I shall stay.'

'You surely are allowed a fortnight's holiday!' protested Phyllis, making a sweeping survey of the store.

'Usually the employees are given a week; but, having been here only a short time, I have no right to a vacation. Myra Lawson wanted me to spend a fortnight with her in the country—'

'Then why do you not take a fortnight and go?'

Dora shook her head.

'It may not be easy for you to understand,' she answered, with quiet dignity, departing from her habitual reticence; 'but I can not well afford to give up my weekly earnings, small as they are. Since father's death and all the trouble that followed, even a little sum counts at home.'

Quick tears of sympathy sprang to the eyes of the listener.

'What a noble girl you are, Dora!' she cried. 'What a comfort you must be to your mother! It is brave of you to work hard as you do; yet take care or you will break down. You ought to have an outing.'

But here Dora was called away, and the blithe shopper, having completed her purchase, departed with a nod and smile of good-fellowship.

A day or two later, however, Phyllis came in again.

'I have a favour to ask of you, Dora,' she announced. 'You won't refuse to grant it?'

'Refuse! I shall be only too happy to be of service, Phyllis dear. Is it about anything you wish sent home promptly from the store?'

'No; but you will do as I ask?'

Dora readily assented; marvelling, nevertheless, in what other way it might be in her power to oblige fortunate Phyllis Newton, who, it was supposed, would inherit the wealth of her eccentric aunt, Miss Romaine, with whom she lived.

Phyllis gave her friend no time for further conjecture.

'Write, then, to Myra Lawson, my dear,' she continued, 'and say you will go down to the country on Saturday, to remain with her during the fortnight for which she invited you. I shall take your place here, so you will lose nothing while you are gone.'

Dora was dumfounded.

'Why, Phyllis Newton—*you!*' she stammered, in bewilderment.

'Yes,' replied the other, laughing. 'Of course I have not your tact or patience; but do you think I don't even know buttons, and cannot calculate the price correctly?'

'It is not that,' objected Dora, seriously; 'but—the idea is too ridiculous. What would your aunt say? And if any of your fashionable friends should come in and find you selling goods over a counter—'

'Nonsense!' broke in Phyllis. 'As long as I behave properly, nothing in the world will make any difference in the manner of my friends toward me; and, anyhow, they are all out of town at present. As for Aunt Romaine, if a bit odd, she is very good to me, and I have her consent. I have won your mother's consent too—you need not raise your eyebrows in deprecation. I begged her not to tell you I had been to see her until the matter should be settled. Mr. Knowlton has even agreed to engage me as your substitute.'

Dora gasped as the enthusiastic girl ran on:

'Yes, I told him I was a schoolmate of yours, and offered to take your place if he would allow you a fortnight's vacation. He "looked at me hard" and asked my name, at which I felt a trifle disconcerted. Although aunt usually deals elsewhere, she sometimes shops here; and I was afraid if he knew who I was my scheme would fail, as he would not consider me competent. But, luckily, my name is not the same as hers: so I plucked up courage to mention her as my reference. Finally he told me to come on Monday morning; and your vacation is to begin Saturday at noon, when the store closes.'

Dora was dazed. In vain she protested, both then and afterward. The arrangements had been completed. Even her mother, when lovingly reproached for siding against her, declared tearfully:

'Your friend—dear, unselfish girl that she is—told me, what I have indeed seen for myself, that you are already worn out, and will be ill if you do not have the rest. How could I decline when she had so set her heart upon the project, too?'

It was true. And if Dora should really break down, what would her mother and small brother and sister do without her help? Where, moreover, would be the chance to obtain a better position in the autumn? For the sake of her loved ones, therefore, she finally allowed herself to be persuaded; and on Saturday afternoon, still as in a dream, found herself on the train speeding away to the hospitable farmhouse that was Myra's summer home.

'Quixotic in the extreme,' was Miss Romaine's first designation of Phyllis' plan, but, upon second thought, recognising in it a dash of her own originality and independence, she entered into it with whimsical ardour; for the shrewd and worldly-wise, albeit not unkindly, old lady foresaw a fund of satirical amusement for herself, as well as of experience for her niece, in the small drama sure to ensue from the altruistic scheme.

To the young girl, however, it was merely the most direct way of lending a helpful hand to an old schoolmate. Left an orphan when a little child, Phyllis had grown to girlhood at St. Mary's. During these years she received few visits from her aunt, who was much in Europe. Even now, although they lived together, alone but for the servants, they did not know each other very well.

The motherless girl was surrounded by luxury and provided with a handsome wardrobe. However, as Miss Romaine was of the opinion that to entrust young people with the free expenditure of money was but to encourage the formation of habits of extravagance, her niece's allowance was not so liberal as might have been expected. Phyllis could not have provided for Dora's outing from her own purse, even supposing her friend would accept the obligation. She might, indeed, have applied to her aunt. Miss Romaine had many hobbies; was an active member of the association for sheltering homeless cats, a subscriber to the bird hospital and to the society for the prevention of cruelty to animals; but how much her benevolence might be counted upon in favour of her own kind, Phyllis did not know.

'I will not ask aunt for the money that would insure Dora's holiday, or beg to have her with us as a guest, much as I should like to do so,' she decided; 'but, since I have at least a wealth of time at my disposal, I ought to begin to put into practice some of the good resolutions I used to make at the convent. What is that quotation about the higher motive rendering beautiful the humblest act of self-sacrifice? I intend to coax Dora into letting me have my own way in this project.'

And thus, eventually, she carried her point. Miss Romaine stayed on at the sea-shore; but Phyllis came up to town two weeks before the close of the season, and quietly slipped into Dora's place at Knowlton and Co's.

(To be continued.)