CHAPTER XIX--A piteous story is told, and the old cellars walled in

It is, indeed, strangely easy in the great world for a man to lose his importance, and from having been the target for all eyes and the subject of all conversation, to step from his place, or find it so taken by some rival that it would seem, judging from the general obliviousness to him, that he had never existed. But few years before no fashionable gathering would have been felt complete had it not been graced by the presence of the young and fascinating Lovelace, Sir John Oxon. Women favoured him, and men made themselves his boon companions; his wit was repeated; the fashion of his hair and the cut of his waistcoat copied. He was at first rich and gay enough to be courted and made a favourite; but when his fortune was squandered, and his marriage with the heiress came to naught, those qualities which were vicious and base in him were more easy to be seen. Besides, there came new male beauties and new dandies with greater resources and more of prudence, and these, beginning to set fashion, win ladies' hearts, and make conquests, so drew the attention of the public mind that he was less noticeable, being only one of many, instead of ruling singly as it had seemed that by some strange chance he did at first. There were indeed so many stories told of his light ways, that their novelty being worn off and new ones still repeated, such persons as concerned themselves with matters of reputation either through conscience or policy, began to speak of him with less of warmth or leniency.

"'Tis not well for a matron with daughters to marry and with sons to keep an eye to," it was said, "to have in her household too often a young gentleman who has squandered his fortune in dice and drink and wild living, and who 'twas known was cast off by a reputable young lady of fortune."

So there were fine ladies who began to avoid him, and those in power at Court and in the world who regarded him with lessening favour day by day! In truth, he had such debts, and his creditors pressed him so ceaselessly, that even had the world's favour continued, his life must have changed its aspect greatly. His lodgings were no longer the most luxurious in the fashionable part of the town, his brocades and laces were no longer of the richest, nor his habit of the very latest and most modish cut; he had no more an equipage attracting every eye as he drove forth, nor a gentleman's gentleman whose swagger and pomp outdid that of all others in his world. Soon after the breaking of his marriage with the heiress, his mother had died, and his relatives being few, and those of an order strictly averse to the habits of ill-provided and extravagant kinsmen, he had but few family ties. Other ties he had, 'twas true, but they were not such as were accounted legal or worthy of attention either by himself or those related to him.

So it befell that when my Lady Dunstanwolde's lacquey could not find him at his lodgings, and as the days went past neither his landlady nor his creditors beheld him again, his absence from the scene was not considered

unaccountable by them, nor did it attract the notice it would have done in times gone by.

"He hath made his way out of England to escape us," said the angry tailors and mercers--who had besieged his door in vain for months, and who were now infuriated at the thought of their own easiness and the impudent gay airs which had befooled them. "A good four hundred pounds of mine hath he carried with him," said one. "And two hundred of mine!" "And more of mine, since I am a poor man to whom a pound means twenty guineas!" "We are all robbed, and he has cheated the debtors' prison, wherein, if we had not been fools, he would have been clapped six months ago."

"Think ye he will not come back, gentlemen?" quavered his landlady. "God knows when I have seen a guinea of his money--but he was such a handsome,
fine young nobleman, and had such a way with a poor body, and ever a smile and a chuck o' the chin for my Jenny."

"Look well after poor Jenny if he hath left her behind," said the tailor.

He did not come back, indeed; and hearing the rumour that he had fled his creditors, the world of fashion received the news with small disturbance, all modish persons being at that time much engaged in discussion of the approaching nuptials of her ladyship of Dunstanwolde and the Duke of Osmonde. Close upon the discussions of the preparations came the

nuptials themselves, and then all the town was agog, and had small leisure to think of other things. For those who were bidden to the ceremonials and attendant entertainments, there were rich habits and splendid robes to be prepared; and to those who had not been bidden, there were bitter disappointments and thwarted wishes to think of.

"Sir John Oxon has fled England to escape seeing and hearing it all," was said.

"He has fled to escape something more painful than the spleen," others answered. "He had reached his rope's end, and finding that my Lady Dunstanwolde was not of a mind to lengthen it with her fortune, having taken a better man, and that his creditors would have no more patience, he showed them a light pair of heels."

Before my Lady Dunstanwolde left her house she gave orders that it be set in order for closing for some time, having it on her mind that she should not soon return. It was, however, to be left in such condition that at any moment, should she wish to come to it, all could be made ready in two days' time. To this end various repairs and changes she had planned were to be carried out as soon as she went away from it. Among other things was the closing with brickwork of the entrance to the passage leading to the unused cellars.

"'Twill make the servants' part more wholesome and less damp and draughty," she said; "and if I should sell the place, will be to its

advantage. 'Twas a builder with little wit who planned such passages and black holes. In spite of all the lime spread there, they were ever mouldy and of evil odour."

It was her command that there should be no time lost, and men were set at work, carrying bricks and mortar. It so chanced that one of them, going in through a back entrance with a hod over his shoulder, and being young and lively, found his eye caught by the countenance of a pretty, frightened-looking girl, who seemed to be loitering about watching, as if curious or anxious. Seeing her near each time he passed, and observing that she wished to speak, but was too timid, he addressed her--

"Would you know aught, mistress?" he said.

She drew nearer gratefully, and then he saw her eyes were red as if with weeping.

"Think you her ladyship would let a poor girl speak a word with her?" she said. "Think you I dare ask so much of a servant--or would they flout me and turn me from the door? Have you seen her? Does she look like a hard, shrewish lady?"

"That she does not, though all stand in awe of her," he answered, pleased to talk with so pretty a creature. "I but caught a glimpse of her when she gave orders concerning the closing with brick of a passage-way below. She is a tall lady, and grand and stately, but she hath a soft pair of

eyes as ever man would wish to look into, be he duke or ditcher."

The tears began to run down the girl's cheeks.

"Ay!" she said; "all men love her, they say. Many a poor girl's sweetheart has been false through her--and I thought she was cruel and ill-natured. Know you the servants that wait on her? Would you dare to ask one for me, if he thinks she would deign to see a poor girl who would crave the favour to be allowed to speak to her of--of a gentleman she knows?"

"They are but lacqueys, and I would dare to ask what was in my mind," he answered; "but she is near her wedding-day, and little as I know of brides' ways, I am of the mind that she will not like to be troubled."

"That I stand in fear of," she said; "but, oh! I pray you, ask some one of them--a kindly one."

The young man looked aside. "Luck is with you," he said. "Here comes one now to air himself in the sun, having naught else to do. Here is a young woman who would speak with her ladyship," he said to the strapping powdered fellow.

"She had best begone," the lacquey answered, striding towards the applicant. "Think you my lady has time to receive traipsing wenches."

"'Twas only for a moment I asked," the girl said. "I come from--I would speak to her of--of Sir John Oxon--whom she knows."

The man's face changed. It was Jenfry.

"Sir John Oxon," he said. "Then I will ask her. Had you said any other name I would not have gone near her to-day."

Her ladyship was in her new closet with Mistress Anne, and there the lacquey came to her to deliver his errand.

"A country-bred young woman, your ladyship," he said, "comes from Sir John Oxon--"

"From Sir John Oxon!" cried Anne, starting in her chair.

My Lady Dunstanwolde made no start, but turned a steady countenance towards the door, looking into the lacquey's face.

"Then he hath returned?" she said.

"Returned!" said Anne.

"After the morning he rode home with me," my lady answered, "'twas said he went away. He left his lodgings without warning. It seems he hath come back. What does the woman want?" she ended.

"To speak with your ladyship," replied the man, "of Sir John himself, she says."

"Bring her to me," her ladyship commanded.

The girl was brought in, overawed and trembling. She was a country-bred young creature, as the lacquey had said, being of the simple rose-and-white freshness of seventeen years perhaps, and having childish blue eyes and fair curling locks.

She was so frightened by the grandeur of her surroundings, and the splendid beauty of the lady who was so soon to be a duchess, and was already a great earl's widow, that she could only stand within the doorway, curtseying and trembling, with tears welling in her eyes.

"Be not afraid," said my Lady Dunstanwolde. "Come hither, child, and tell me what you want." Indeed, she did not look a hard or shrewish lady; she spoke as gently as woman could, and a mildness so unexpected produced in the young creature such a revulsion of feeling that she made a few steps forward and fell upon her knees, weeping, and with uplifted hands.

"My lady," she said, "I know not how I dared to come, but that I am so desperate--and your ladyship being so happy, it seemed--it seemed that you might pity me, who am so helpless and know not what to do."

Her ladyship leaned forward in her chair, her elbow on her knee, her chin held in her hand, to gaze at her.

"You come from Sir John Oxon?" she said.

Anne, watching, clutched each arm of her chair.

"Not from him, asking your ladyship's pardon," said the child, "but--but--from the country to him," her head falling on her breast, "and I know not where he is."

"You came to him," asked my lady. "Are you," and her speech was pitiful and slow--"are you one of those whom he has--ruined?"

The little suppliant looked up with widening orbs.

"How could that be, and he so virtuous and pious a gentleman?" she faltered.

Then did my lady rise with a sudden movement.

"Was he so?" says she.

"Had he not been," the child answered, "my mother would have been afraid to trust him. I am but a poor country widow's daughter, but was well

brought up, and honestly--and when he came to our village my mother was afraid, because he was a gentleman; but when she saw his piety, and how he went to church and sang the psalms and prayed for grace, she let me listen to him."

"Did he go to church and sing and pray at first?" my lady asks.

"'Twas in church he saw me, your ladyship," she was answered. "He said 'twas his custom to go always when he came to a new place, and that often there he found the most heavenly faces, for 'twas piety and innocence that made a face like to an angel's; and 'twas innocence and virtue stirred his heart to love, and not mere beauty which so fades."

"Go on, innocent thing," my lady said; and she turned aside to Anne, flashing from her eyes unseen a great blaze, and speaking in a low and hurried voice. "God's house," she said--"God's prayers--God's songs of praise--he used them all to break a tender heart, and bring an innocent life to ruin--and yet was he not struck dead?"

Anne hid her face and shuddered.

"He was a gentleman," the poor young thing cried, sobbing--"and I no fit match for him, but that he loved me. 'Tis said love makes all equal; and he said I was the sweetest, innocent young thing, and without me he could not live. And he told my mother that he was not rich or the fashion now, and had no modish friends or relations to flout any poor beauty he might

choose to wed."

"And he would marry you?" my lady's voice broke in. "He said that he would marry you?"

"A thousand times, your ladyship, and so told my mother, but said I must come to town and be married at his lodgings, or 'twould not be counted a marriage by law, he being a town gentleman, and I from the country."

"And you came," said Mistress Anne, down whose pale cheeks the tears were running--"you came at his command to follow him?"

"What day came you up to town?" demands my lady, breathless and leaning forward. "Went you to his lodgings, and stayed you there with him,--even for an hour?"

The poor child gazed at her, paling.

"He was not there!" she cried. "I came alone because he said all must be secret at first; and my heart beat so with joy, my lady, that when the woman of the house whereat he lodges let me in I scarce could speak. But she was a merry woman and good-natured, and only laughed and cheered me
when she took me to his rooms, and I sate trembling."

"What said she to you?" my lady asks, her breast heaving with her breath.

"That he was not yet in, but that he would sure come to such a young and pretty thing as I, and I must wait for him, for he would not forgive her if she let me go. And the while I waited there came a man in bands and cassock, but he had not a holy look, and late in the afternoon I heard him making jokes with the woman outside, and they both laughed in such an evil way that I was affrighted, and waiting till they had gone to another part of the house, stole away."

"But he came not back that night--thank God!" my lady said--"he came not back."

The girl rose from her knees, trembling, her hands clasped on her breast.

"Why should your ladyship thank God?" she says, pure drops falling from her eyes. "I am so humble, and had naught else but that great happiness, and it was taken away--and you thank God."

Then drops fell from my lady's eyes also, and she came forward and caught the child's hand, and held it close and warm and strong, and yet with her full lip quivering.

"'Twas not that your joy was taken away that I thanked God," said she. "I am not cruel--God Himself knows that, and when He smites me 'twill not be for cruelty. I knew not what I said, and yet--tell me what did you then?

Tell me?"

"I went to a poor house to lodge, having some little money he had given me," the simple young thing answered. "'Twas an honest house, though mean and comfortless. And the next day I went back to his lodgings to question, but he had not come, and I would not go in, though the woman tried to make me enter, saying, Sir John would surely return soon, as he had the day before rid with my Lady Dunstanwolde and been to her house; and 'twas plain he had meant to come to his lodgings, for her ladyship had sent her lacquey thrice with a message."

The hand with which Mistress Anne sate covering her eyes began to shake. My lady's own hand would have shaken had she not been so strong a creature.

"And he has not yet returned, then?" she asked. "You have not seen him?"

The girl shook her fair locks, weeping with piteous little sobs.

"He has not," she cried, "and I know not what to do--and the great town seems full of evil men and wicked women. I know not which way to turn, for all plot wrong against me, and would drag me down to shamefulness--and
back to my poor mother I cannot go."

"Wherefore not, poor child?" my lady asked her.

"I have not been made an honest, wedded woman, and none would believe my

story, and--and he might come back."

"And if he came back?" said her ladyship.

At this question the girl slipped from her grasp and down upon her knees again, catching at her rich petticoat and holding it, her eyes searching the great lady's in imploring piteousness, her own streaming.

"I love him," she wept--"I love him so--I cannot leave the place where he might be. He was so beautiful and grand a gentleman, and, sure, he loved me better than all else--and I cannot thrust away from me that last night when he held me to his breast near our cottage door, and the nightingale sang in the roses, and he spake such words to me. I lie and sob all night on my hard pillow--I so long to see him and to hear his voice--and hearing he had been with you that last morning, I dared to come, praying that you might have heard him let drop some word that would tell me where he may be, for I cannot go away thinking he may come back longing for me--and I lose him and never see his face again. Oh! my lady, my lady, this place is so full of wickedness and fierce people--and dark kennels where crimes are done. I am affrighted for him, thinking he may have been struck some blow, and murdered, and hid away; and none will look for him but one who loves him--who loves him. Could it be so?--could it be? You know the town's ways so well. I pray you, tell me--in God's name I

pray you!"

"God's mercy!" Anne breathed, and from behind her hands came stifled sobbing. My Lady Dunstanwolde bent down, her colour dying.

"Nay, nay," she said, "there has been no murder done--none! Hush, poor thing, hush thee. There is somewhat I must tell thee."

She tried to raise her, but the child would not be raised, and clung to her rich robe, shaking as she knelt gazing upward.

"It is a bitter thing," my lady said, and 'twas as if her own eyes were imploring. "God help you bear it--God help us all. He told me nothing of his journey. I knew not he was about to take it; but wheresoever he has travelled, 'twas best that he should go."

"Nay! nay!" the girl cried out--"to leave me helpless. Nay! it could not be so. He loved me--loved me--as the great duke loves you!"

"He meant you evil," said my lady, shuddering, "and evil he would have done you. He was a villain--a villain who meant to trick you. Had God struck him dead that day, 'twould have been mercy to you. I knew him well."

The young thing gave a bitter cry and fell swooning at her feet; and down upon her knees my lady went beside her, loosening her gown, and chafing

her poor hands as though they two had been of sister blood.

"Call for hartshorn, Anne, and for water," she said; "she will come out of her swooning, poor child, and if she is cared for kindly in time her pain will pass away. God be thanked she knows no pain that cannot pass! I will protect her--ay, that will I, as I will protect all he hath done wrong to and deserted."

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She was so strangely kind through the poor victim's swoons and weeping that the very menials who were called to aid her went back to their hall wondering in their talk of the noble grandness of so great a lady, who on the very brink of her own joy could stoop to protect and comfort a creature so far beneath her, that to most ladies her sorrow and desertion would have been things which were too trivial to count; for 'twas guessed, and talked over with great freedom and much shrewdness, that this was a country victim of Sir John Oxon's, and he having deserted his creditors, was read enough to desert his rustic beauty, finding her heavy on his hands.

Below stairs the men closing the entrance to the passage with brick, having caught snatches of the servants' gossip, talked of what they heard among themselves as they did their work.

"Ay, a noble lady indeed," they said. "For 'tis not a woman's way to be

kindly with the cast-off fancy of a man, even when she does not want him herself. He was her own worshipper for many a day, Sir John; and before she took the old earl 'twas said that for a space people believed she loved him. She was but fifteen and a high mettled beauty; and he as handsome as she, and had a blue eye that would melt any woman--but at sixteen he was a town rake, and such tricks as this one he hath played since he was a lad. 'Tis well indeed for this poor thing her ladyship hath seen her. She hath promised to protect her, and sends her down to Dunstanwolde with her mother this very week. Would all fine ladies were of her kind. To hear such things of her puts a man in the humour to do her work well."