

CHAPTER XXVII

"'Twas the night thou hidst the package in the wall"

"So," said the fashionable triflers, "'twas the Duke after all, and his Grace flies to France to draw his errand to a close, and when he flies back again, upon the wings of love, five villages will roast oxen whole and drink ale to the chiming of wedding-bells."

"Lud!" said my Lady Betty, this time with her pettish air, this matter not being to her liking, for why should a Duke fall in love with widows when there were exquisite languishing unmarried ladies near at hand. "'Tis a wise beauty who sets bells ringing in five villages by marrying a duke, instead of taking a spendthrift rake who is but a baronet and has no estate at all. I could have told you whom her ladyship would wed if she were asked."

"If she were asked! good Lord!" cried Sir Chris Crowell, as red as a turkey-cock. "And this I can tell you, 'tis not the five villages she marries, nor the Duke, but the man. And 'tis not the fine lady he takes to his heart, but our Clo, and none other, and would have taken her in her smock had she been a beggar wench. 'Tis an honest love-match, that I swear!"

Thereupon my Lady Betty laughed.

"Those who see Sir John Oxon's face now," she said, "do not behold a pretty thing. And my lady sees it at every turn. She can go nowhere but she finds him at her elbow glaring."

"He would play some evil trick on her for revenge, I vow," said another lady. "She hath Mistress Anne with her nearly always in these days, as if she would keep him off by having a companion; but 'tis no use, follow and badger her he will."

"Badger her!" blustered Sir Chris. "He durst not, the jackanapes! He is not so fond of drawing point as he was a few years ago."

"'Tis badgering and naught else," said Mistress Lovely. "I have watched him standing by and pouring words like poison in her ear, and she disdain to reply or look as though she heard."

My Lady Betty laughed again with a prettier venom still.

"He hath gone mad," she said. "And no wonder! My woman, who knows a mercer's wife at whose husband's shop he bought his finery, told me a story of him. He was so deep in debt that none would give him credit for an hour, until the old Earl of Dunstanwolde died, when he persuaded them that he was on the point of marrying her ladyship. These people are so simple they will believe anything, and they watched him go to her house and knew he had been her worshipper before her marriage. And

so they gave him credit again. Thence his fine new wardrobe came. And now they have heard the news and have all run mad in rage at their own foolishness, and are hounding him out of his life."

The two ladies made heartless game enough of the anecdote. Perhaps both had little spites of their own against Sir John, who in his heyday had never spoke with a woman without laying siege to her heart and vanity, though he might have but five minutes to do it in. Lady Betty, at least, 'twas known had once had coquettish and sentimental passages with him, if no more; and whether 'twas her vanity or her heart which had been wounded, some sting rankled, leaving her with a malice against him which never failed to show itself when she spoke or heard his name.

A curious passage took place between them but a short time after she had told her story of his tricking of his creditors. 'Twas at a Court ball and was a whimsical affray indeed, though chiefly remembered afterwards because of the events which followed it--one of them occurring upon the spot, another a day later, this second incident being a mystery never after unravelled. At this ball was my Lady Dunstanwolde in white and silver, and looking, some said, like a spirit in the radiance of her happiness.

"For 'tis pure happiness that makes her shine so," said her faithful henchman, old Sir Christopher. "Surely she hath never been a happy woman before, for never hath she smiled so since I knew her first, a child. She looks like a creature born again."

Lady Betty Tantillion engaged in her encounter in an antechamber near the great saloon. Her ladyship had a pretty way of withdrawing from the moving throng at times to seek comparative seclusion and greater ease. There was more freedom where there would be exchange of wits and glances, not overheard and beheld by the whole world; so her ladyship had a neat taste in nooks and corners, where a select little court of her own could be held by a charming fair one. Thus it fell that after dancing in the ball-room with one admirer and another, she made her way, followed by two of the most attentive, to a pretty retiring-room quite near.

'Twas for the moment, it seemed, deserted, but when she entered with her courtiers, the exquisite Lord Charles Lovelace and his friend Sir Harry Granville, a gentleman turned from a window where he seemed to have been taking the air alone, and seeing them uttered under his breath a malediction.

"To the devil with them!" he said, but the next moment advanced with a somewhat mocking smile, which was scarce hidden by his elaborate bow of ceremony to her ladyship.

"My Lady Betty Tantillion!" he exclaimed, "I did not look for such fortune. 'Tis not necessary to hope your ladyship blooms in health. 'Tis an age since we met."

Since their rupture they had not spoken with each other, but my Lady Betty had used her eyes well when she had beheld him even at a distance, and his life she knew almost as well as if they had been married and she a jealous consort.

But she stood a moment regarding him with an impertinent questioning little stare, and then held up her quizzing-glass and uttered an exclamation of sad surprise.

"Sir John Oxon!" she said. "How changed! how changed! Sure you have been ill, Sir John, or have met with misfortunes."

To the vainest of men and the most galled--he who had been but a few years gone the most lauded man beauty in the town, who had been sought, flattered, adored--'twas a bitter little stab, though he knew well the giver of the thrust. Yet he steeled himself to bow again, though his eyes flashed.

"I have indeed been ill and in misfortune," he answered, sardonically.

"Can a man be in health and fortunate when your ladyship has ceased to smile upon him?"

My Lady Betty courtesied with a languid air.

"Lord Charles," she said, with indifferent condescension, "Sir Harry, you have heard of this gentleman, though he was before your day. In

his--" (as though she recalled the past glories of some antiquated beau) "you were still at the University."

Then as she passed to a divan to seat herself she whispered an aside to Lord Charles, holding up her fan.

"The ruined dandy," she said, "who is mad for my Lady Dunstanwolde. Ask him some question of his wife?"

Whereupon Lord Charles, who was willing enough to join in badgering a man who had still good looks enough to prove a rival had he the humour, turned with a patronising air of civility.

"My Lady Oxon is not with you?" he observed.

"There is none, your lordship," Sir John answered, and almost ground his teeth, seeing the courteous insolence of the joke. "I am a single man."

"Lud!" cried my Lady Betty, fanning with graceful indifference. "'Twas said you were to marry a great fortune, and all were filled with envy. What become, then, of the fair Mistress Isabel Beaton?"

"She returned to Scotland, your ladyship," replied Sir John, his eyes transfixing her. "Ere now 'tis ancient history."

"Fie, Sir John," said Lady Betty, laughing wickedly, "to desert so sweet a creature. So lovely--and so rich! Men are not wise as they once were."

Sir John drew nearer to her and spoke low. "Your ladyship makes a butt of me," he said. And 'twas so ordained by Fate, at this moment when the worst of him seethed within his breast, and was ripest for mad evil, Sir Christopher Crowell came bustling into the apartment, full of exultant hilarity and good wine which he had been partaking of in the banqueting-hall with friends.

"Good Lord!" he cried, having spoke with Lady Betty; "what ails thee, Jack? Thy very face is a killjoy."

"'Tis repentance, perhaps," said Lady Betty. "We are reproaching him with deserting Mistress Beaton--who had even a fortune."

Sir Christopher glanced from Sir John to her ladyship and burst forth into a big guffaw, his convivialities having indeed robbed him of discretion.

"He desert her!" said he. "She jilted him and took her fortune to a Marquis! 'Twas thine own fault, too, Jack. Hadst thou been even a decent rake she would have had thee."

"By God!" cried Sir John, starting and turning livid; and then catching

a sight of the delight in my Lady Betty's face, who had set out to enrage him before her company, he checked himself and broke into a contemptuous, short laugh.

"These be country manners, Sir Christopher," he said. "In Gloucestershire bumpers are tossed off early, and a banquet added turns a man's head and makes him garrulous."

"Ecod!" said Sir Christopher, grinning. "A nice fellow he is to twit a man with the bottle. Myself, I've seen him drunk for three days."

Whereupon there took place a singular change in Sir John Oxon's look. His face had been so full of rage but a moment ago that, at Sir Chris's second sally, Lady Betty had moved slightly in some alarm. Town manners were free, but not quite so free as those of the country, and Sir John was known to be an ill-tempered man. If the two gentlemen had quarrelled about her ladyship's own charms 'twould have been a different matter, but to come to an encounter over a mere drinking-bout would be a vulgar, ignominious thing in which she had no mind to be mixed up.

"Lord, Sir Christopher," she exclaimed, tapping him with her fan.

"Three days! For shame!"

But though Sir John had started 'twas not in rage. Three days carousing with this old blockhead! When had he so caroused? He could

have laughed aloud. Never since that time he had left Wildairs, bearing with him the lock of raven hair--his triumph and his proof. No, 'twas not in anger he started but through a sudden shock of recollection, of fierce, eager hope, that at last, in the moment of his impotent humiliation, he had by chance--by a very miracle of chance--come again upon what he had so long searched for in helpless rage--that which would give power into his hand and vengeance of the bitterest.

And he had come upon it among chatterers in a ball-room through the vinous babbling of a garrulous fool.

"Three days!" he said, and took out his snuff-box and tapped it, laughing jeeringly. And this strange thing my Lady Betty marked, that his white hand shook a little as if from hidden excitement. "Three days!" he mocked.

"No man of fashion now," said Lord Charles, and tapped his snuff-box also, "is drunk for more than two."

But Sir Christopher felt he was gaining a victory before her ladyship's very eyes, which always so mocked and teased him for his clumsiness in any encounter of words, wherefore he pressed his point gleefully.

"Three days!" cries he. "'Twas nearer four."

Sir John turned on him, laughing still, seeming in very truth as if the

thing amused him.

"When, when?" he said. "Never, I swear!" and held a pinch of snuff in his fingers daintily, his eyes gleaming blue as sapphires through the new light in them.

"Swear away!" cried Sir Christopher; "thou wast too drunk to remember. 'Twas the night thou hidst the package in the wall."

Then he burst forth again in laughter, for Sir John had so started that he forgot his pinch of snuff and scattered it.

"Canst see 'tis no slander, my lady," he cried, pointing at Sir John, who stood like a man who wakes from long sleep and is bewildered by the thoughts which rush through his brain. "I laughed till I was like to crack my sides." Then to Sir John, "Thou hadst but just left Clo Wildairs and I rode with thee to Essex. Lord, how I laughed to watch thee groping to find a place safe enough to put it in. 'I'm drunk,' says thou, 'and I would have it safe till I am sober. 'Twill be safe here,' and stuffed it in the broken plaster 'neath the window-sill. And safe it was, for I'll warrant thou hast not thought of it since, and safe thou'lt find it at the Cow at Wickben still."

Sir John struck one closed hand sudden on the palm of the other.

"It comes back to thee," cried Sir Christopher, with a grimace aside at

his audience.

"Ay, it comes back," answers Sir John; "it comes back." And he broke forth into a short, excited laugh, there being in its sound a note of triumph almost hysteric; and hearing this they stared, for why in such case he should be triumphant, Heaven knew.

"'Twas a love-token!" said Lady Betty, simpering, for of a sudden he had become another man--no longer black-visaged, but gallant, and smiling with his old charming, impudent, irresistible air. He bent and took her hand and kissed her finger-tips with this same old enchanting insolence.

"Had your ladyship given it to me," he said, "I had not hid it in a wall, but in my heart." And with a soft glance and a smiling bow he left their circle and sauntered towards the ball-room.

"'Twas the last time I spoke with him," said my Lady Betty, when he was talked of later. "I wonder if 'twas in his head when he kissed my hand--if indeed 'twas a matter he himself planned or had aught to do with. Faith! though he was a villain he had a killing air when he chose."

When her ladyship had played off all her airs and graces upon her servitors she led them again to the ball-room that she might vary her

triumphs and fascinations. A minuet was being played, and my Lady Dunstanwolde was among the dancers, moving stately and slow in her white and silver, while the crowd looked on, telling each other of the preparations being made for her marriage, and that my lord Duke of Osmonde was said to worship her, and could scarce live through the hours he was held from her in France.

Among the watchers, and listening to the group as he watched, stood Sir John Oxon. He stood with a graceful air and watched her steadily, and there was a gleam of pleasure in his glance.

"He has followed and gazed at her so for the last half-hour," said Mistress Lovely. "Were I the Duke of Osmonde I would command him to choose some other lady to dog with his eyes. Now the minuet is ending I would wager he will follow her to her seat and hang about her."

And this indeed he did when the music ceased, but 'twas done with a more easy, confident air than had been observed in him for some time past. He did not merely loiter in her vicinity, but when the circle thinned about her he made his way through it and calmly joined her.

"Does he pay her compliments?" said Lord Charles, who looked on at a distance. "Faith, if he does, she does not greatly condescend to him. I should be frozen by a beauty who, while I strove to melt her, did not deign to turn her eyes. Ah, she has turned them now. What has he said? It must have been fire and flame to move her. What's this--what's

this?"

He started forward, as all the company did--for her ladyship of Dunstanwolde had risen to her full height with a strange movement and, standing a moment swaying, had fallen at Sir John Oxon's feet, white in a death-like swoon.