

CHAPTER XXVIII

Sir John Rides out of Town

Tom Tantillion had not appeared at the ball, having otherwise entertained himself for the evening, but at an hour when most festivities were at an end and people were returning from them, rolling through the streets in their coaches, the young man was sitting at a corner table in Cribb's Coffee-House surrounded by glasses and jolly companions and clouds of tobacco-smoke.

One of these companions had been to the ball and left it early, and had fallen to talking of great personages he had seen there, and describing the beauties who had shone the brightest, among them speaking of my Lady Dunstanwolde and the swoon which had so amazed those who had seen it.

"I was within ten feet of her," says he, "and watching her as a man always does when he is near enough. Jack Oxon stood behind her, and was speaking low over her shoulder, but she seeming to take little note of him and looking straight before her. And of a sudden she stands upright, her black eyes wide open as if some sound had startled her, and the next minute falls like a woman dropping dead, and lies among her white and silver like one carven out of stone. One who knows her

well--old Sir Chris Crowell--says she hath never fallen in a swoon before since she was born. Gad! 'twas a strange sight--'twas so sudden." He had just finished speaking, and was filling his glass again, when a man strode into the room in such haste that all turned to glance at him.

He was in riding-dress, and was flushed and excited, and smiling as if to himself.

"Drawer!" he called, "bring me coffee and brandy, and, damme! be in haste."

Young Tantillion nudged his nearest companion with his elbow.

"Jack Oxon," he said. "Where rides the fellow at this time of night?"

"Eh, Jack!" he said, aloud, "art on a journey already, after shining at the Court ball?"

Sir John started, and seeing who spoke, answered with an ugly laugh.

"Ay," said he, "I ride to the country in hot haste. I go to Wickben in Essex, to bring back a thing I once left there."

"'Twas a queer place to leave valuables," said Tom--"a village of tumble-down thatched cottages. Was't a love-token or a purse of gold?"

Sir John gave his knee a sudden joyous slap, and laughed aloud.

"'Twas a little thing," he replied, "but 'twill bring back fortune--if I find it--and help me to pay back old scores, which is a thing I like better." And his grin was so ugly that Tom and his companions glanced aside at each other, believing that he was full of liquor already, and ready to pick a quarrel if they continued their talk. This they were not particularly inclined to, however, and began a game of cards, leaving him to himself to finish his drink. This he did, quickly tossing down both brandy and coffee the instant they were brought to him, and then striding swaggering from the room and mounting his horse, which waited in the street, and riding clattering off over the stones at a fierce pace.

"Does he ride for a wager?" said Will Lovell, dealing the cards.

"He rides for some ill purpose, I swear," said Tom Tantillion. "Jack Oxon never went in haste towards an honest deed; but to play some devil's trick 'tis but nature to him to go full speed."

But what he rode for they never heard, neither they nor anyone else who told the story, though 'twas sure that if he went to Wickben he came back to town for a few hours at least, for there were those who saw him the next day, but only one there was who spoke with him, and that one my Lady Dunstanwolde herself.

Her ladyship rode out in the morning hoping, 'twas said, that the fresh air and exercise would restore her strength and spirits. She rode without attendant, and towards the country, and in the high road Sir John Oxon joined her.

"I did not know he had been out of town," she said, when the mystery was discussed. "He did not say so. He returned to Dunstanwolde House with me, and we had talk together. He had scarce left me when I remembered that I had forgot to say a thing to him I had wished to say. So I sent Jenfry forth quickly to call him back. He had scarce had time to turn the street's corner, but Jenfry returned, saying he was not within sight."

"Whereupon you sent a note to his lodgings, was't not so?" asked Sir Christopher.

"Yes," answered her ladyship, "but he had not returned there."

"Nor ever did," said Sir Christopher, whenever the mystery was referred to afterwards; "nor ever did, and where he went to from that hour only the devil knows, for no man or woman that one has heard of has ever clapt eyes on him since."

This was, indeed, the mysterious truth. After he entered the Panelled Parlour at Dunstanwolde House it seemed that none had seen him, for the

fact was that by a strange chance even the lacquey who should have been at his place in the entrance hall had allowed himself to be ensnared from his duty by a pretty serving-wench, and had left his post for a few minutes to make love to her in the servants' hall, during which time 'twas plain Sir John must have left the house, opening the entrance-door for himself unattended.

"Lord," said the lacquey in secret to his mates, "my gizzard was in my throat when her ladyship began to question me. 'Did you see the gentle, man depart, Martin?' says she. "'Twas you who attended him to the door, of a surety.' 'Yes, your ladyship,' stammers I. "'Twas I--and I marked he seemed in haste.' 'Did you not observe him as he walked away?' says my lady. 'Did you not see which way he went?' 'To the left he turned, my lady,' says I, cold sweat breaking out on me, for had I faltered in an answer she would have known I was lying and guessed I had broke her orders by leaving my place by the door--and Lord have mercy on a man when she finds he has tricked her. There is a flash in her eye like lightning, and woe betide him it falls on. But truth was that from the moment the door of the Panelled Parlour closed behind him the gentleman's days were ended, for all I saw of him, for I saw him no more."

And there was none who saw him, for from that time he disappeared from his lodgings, from the town, from England, from the surface of the earth, as far as any ever heard or discovered, none knowing where he went, or how, or wherefore.

Had he been a man of greater worth or importance, or one who had made friends, his so disappearing would have aroused a curiosity and excitement not easily allayed; but a vicious wastrel who has lost hold even on his whilom companions in evil-doing, and has no friends more faithful, is like, indeed, on dropping out of the world's sight, to drop easily and lightly from its mind, his loss being a nine days' wonder and nothing more.

So it was with this one, who had had his day of being the fashion and had broken many a fine lady's brittle heart, and, living to be no longer the mode, had seen the fragile trifles cemented together again, to be almost as good as new. When he was gone he was forgot quickly and, indeed, but talked about because her ladyship of Dunstanwolde had last beheld him, and on the afternoon had been entertaining company in the Panelled Parlour when the lacquey had brought back the undelivered note with which Jenfry had waited three hours at the lost man's lodgings in the hope that he would return to them, which he did no more.

"'Tis a good riddance to all, my lady, wheresoever he be gone," said Sir Christopher, sitting nursing his stout knee in the blue parlour a week later (for her ladyship had had a sudden fancy to have the panelled room made wholly new and decorated before the return of his Grace from France). "'Tis a good riddance to all."

Then he fell to telling stories of the man, of the creditors he had left in the lurch, having swindled them of their very hearts' blood, and that every day there was heard of some poor tradesman he had ruined, till 'twas a shame to hear it told; and there were worse things--worse things yet!

"By the Lord!" he said, "the ruin one man's life can bring about, the heartbreak, and the shame! 'Tis enough to make even a sinner as old as I, repent, to come upon them face to face. Eh, my lady?" looking at her suddenly, "thou must get back the roses thou hast lost these three days nursing Mistress Anne, or his Grace will be at odds with us every one."

For Mistress Anne had been ailing, and her sister being anxious and watching over her had lost some of her glorious bloom, which was indeed a new thing to see. At this moment the roses had dropped from her cheeks and she smiled strangely.

"They will return," she said, "when his Grace does."

She asked questions of the stories Sir Christopher had told and showed anxiousness concerning the poor people who had been so hardly treated.

"I have often thought," she said, "that so rich a woman as I should set herself some task of good deeds to do. 'Twould be a good work to take in hand the undoing of the wrongs a man who is lost has left behind him. Why should not I, Clo Wildairs, take in hand the undoing of this

man's?" And she rose up suddenly and stood before him, straight and tall, the colour coming out on her cheeks as if life flooded back there.

"Thou!" he cried, gazing at her in loving wonder. "Why shouldst thou, Clo?" None among them had ever understood her and her moods, and he surely did not understand this one--for it seemed as if a fire leaped up within her, and she spoke almost wildly.

"Because I would atone for all my past," she said, "and cleanse myself with unceasing mercies, and what I cannot undo, do penance for--that I may be worthy--worthy."

She broke off and drew her hand across her eyes, and ended with a strange little sound, half laugh.

"Perhaps all men and women have been evil," she said, "and some are--some seem fated! And when my lord Duke comes back, I shall be happy--happy--in spite of all; and I scarce dare to think my joy may not be taken from me. Is joy always torn away after it has been given to a human thing--given for just so long, as will make loss, madness?"

"Eh, my lady!" he said, blundering, "thou art fearful, just as another woman might be. 'Tis not like Clo Wildairs. Such thoughts will not make thee a happy woman."

She ended with a laugh stranger than her first one, and her great black eyes were fixed on him as he had remembered seeing her fix them when she was a child and full of some wild fancy or weird sadness.

"'Tis not Clo Wildairs who thinks them," says she; "'tis another woman. 'Twas Clo who knew John Oxon who is gone--and was as big a sinner as he, though she did harm to none but herself. And 'tis for those two--for both--I would have mercy. But I am a strong thing, and was born so, and my happiness will not die, despite--despite whatsoever comes. And I am happy, and know I shall be more; and 'tis for that I am afraid--afraid."

"Good Lord!" cried Sir Chris, swallowing a lump which rose, he knew not why, in his throat. "What a strange creature thou art!"

His Grace's couriers went back and forth to France, and upon his estates the people prepared their rejoicings for the marriage-day, and never had Camylott been so heavenly fair as on the day when the bells rang out once more, and the villagers stood along the roadside and at their cottage doors, courtesying and throwing up hats and calling down God's blessings on the new-wed pair, as the coach passed by, and his Grace, holding his lady's hand, showed her to his people, seeming to give her and her loveliness to them as they bowed and smiled together--she almost with joyful tears in her sweet eyes.

In her room near the nurseries, at the window which looked out among the ivy, Nurse Halsell sat, watching the equipage as it made its way up the long avenue, and might be seen now and then between the trees, and her old hands trembled in her lap, for very joy. And before the day was done his Grace, knocking on the door gently, brought his Duchess to her.

"And 'twas you," said her Grace, standing close by her chair, and holding the old hand between her own two, which were so white and velvet warm, "and 'twas you who held him in your arms when he was but a little new-born thing, and often sang him to sleep, and were so loved by him. And he played here--" and she looked about the apartment with a tremulous smile.

"Yes," said his Grace, with a low laugh of joyful love, "and now I bring you to her, and 'tis my marriage-day."

Nurse Halsell gazed up at the eyes which glowed above her.

"'Tis what his Grace hath waited long for," she said, "and he would have died an unwedded man had he not reached it at last. 'Tis sure what God ordained." And for a minute she looked straight and steady into the Duchess's face. "A man must come to his own," she said, and bent and kissed the fair hand with passionate love, but her Grace lifted the old face with her palm, and stooped and kissed it fondly--gratefully.

Then the Duke took his wife to the Long Gallery and they stood there, he holding her close against his side, while the golden sun went down.

"Here I stood and heard that you were born," he said, and kissed her red, tender mouth. "Here I stood in agony and fought my battle with my soul the first sad day you came to Camylott." And he kissed her slow and tenderly again, in memory of the grief of that past time. "And here I stand and feel your dear heart beat against my side, and look into your eyes--and look into your eyes--and they are the eyes of her who is mine own--and Death himself cannot take her from me."