

THE LADY OF LYNN

By SIR WALTER BESANT

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CONTINUED

Sam Semple showed good sense in going around to visit his old friends. Among others he called upon Captain Crowle, to whom he behaved with singular discernment, in such a way as would please the old man, for on board ship we like a cheerful sailor, one who takes punishment without sniveling and bears no malice thereafter. A ship is like a boys' school, where a flogging wipes out the offense and master and boy become good friends after it, whatever the heinousness of the crime.

"Sir," said Sam, standing before the captain modestly, "you will understand, first of all, that I am reminded in coming here of the last time that I saw you."

"Aye, my lad, I have not forgotten." The captain did not rise from his armchair, nor did he offer Sam his hand. He waited to learn in what spirit the young man approached him.

"Believe me, sir," said Sam, "I am not unkindful of a certain lesson, rough perhaps, but deserved. The presumption of youth, ignorance of the world, ignorance of the prize to which I aspired, may be my excuse, if any were needed. I was then both young and ignorant." It must be admitted that Sam possessed the gift of words. "Indeed I was too young to understand the humble nature of my origin and my position and too ignorant to understand my own presumption. Therefore, sir, before I say anything more I beg your forgiveness. That presumption, sir, can never, I assure you, be repeated. I know at least my own place and the distance between a certain young lady and myself."

"Why, my lad," said the captain, "since you talk in that modest way I bear no malice—none—wherefore here in my hand in token of forgiveness. And so on that head we will speak no more."

He extended his hand, which Sam took, still in humble attitude.

"I am deeply grateful, captain," he said. "You will perhaps before long find out how grateful I can be." Time, in fact, did show the depth of his gratitude.



ture. "Well, sir, I am now in high favor with my Lord Fylingdale, on whom you waited this morning."

"I hope his favor will end in a snug place, Sam. Forget not the main point. Well, your patron is a goodly and a proper man to look at. Sit down, Sam. Take a glass of home brewed. You must want it after the ale of London, which is, so far as I remember, but poor stuff. Well, now, about your noble lord. He is a married man, I suppose?"

"Unfortunately, no. He is difficult to please."

"Ah! And I suppose, like most young noblemen, something of a prodigal, eh, Sam? Or a gambler, likely? One who has ruined many innocents? Eh?" The captain looked mighty cunning.

"Sir—sir"—Sam spread out his hands in expostulation—"you distress me. Lord Fylingdale a prodigal? Lord Fylingdale a gambler? Lord Fylingdale a libertine? Sir—Captain Crowle"—He spoke very earnestly.

"The tears came into his eyes. He laid his hand upon the captain's knee. "Sir, I assure you, he is, on the contrary, the best of men. There is no more virtuous nobleman in the country. My tongue is tied as his lordship's secretary, else could I tell of good deeds. Truly his right hand knoweth not what his left hand doeth. My lord is all goodness."

"Aye, aye. This is good hearing, indeed."

"Lord Fylingdale a gambler? Why, he may take part at a table, but not a gambler. No man is less a gambler. What doth it matter to him if he wins or loses a little? He neither desires to win nor does he fear to lose. You will, I dare say, see him in the cardroom just to encourage the spirit of the company."

"A very noble gentleman, indeed." The captain drank a glass of his home brewed. "A very noble gentleman, truly. Go on, Samuel Semple."

"Also he is one who—Captain, if there is one thing in the world that my patron abhors it is the man who ruins innocence and leaves his victim to starve. No, sir; his lordship is a man of the nicest honor and the highest principle."

"He has a secretary who is grateful, at least," observed the captain.

"His sword is ever ready to defend

the helpless and to uphold the virtuous. Would to heaven there were more like the right honorable the Earl of Fylingdale!"

"Look you, Master Sam," said the captain. "Your good opinion of your patron does you credit. I honor you for your generous words. I have never so far, and I am now past 70, encountered any man who was either saint or angel, but in every man have I always found some flaw whether of temper or of conduct. So that I do not pretend to believe all that you make out."

Sam Semple sighed and rose. "I ask not for your entire belief, sir. It will be sufficient if you learn, as I have learned, the great worth of this exalted and incomparable nobleman. As for flaws, we are all human, but I know of none. So I take my leave. I venture to hope, sir, that your good lady and your lovely ward—I use the word with due respect—are in good health."

So he departed, leaving the captain thoughtful.

And now they were all among us, the vile crew brought together for our undoing by this lord so noble and so exalted. And we were already entangled in a whole mesh of lies and conspiracies, the result of which you have now to learn.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ABDUCTION.

It was the custom with some of the high fliers, or the bucks, as they were called, when the cardroom was closed to go off together to a tavern, there to finish the night drinking, singing, gambling and rioting the whole night through and long after daylight. Truly the town of Lynn witnessed more profligacy and wickedness during this summer than all its long and ancient history had witnessed or could relate.

The assembly was held twice a week, on Thursday and on Friday. It was on Thursday night that a certain statement was made in a drunken conversation which might have awakened suspicion of some dark design had it been recorded. A small company of the said high fliers, among whom were Colonel Lanyon and a young man named Tom Rising, marched off to the tavern most frequented by them after the closing of the rooms and called for punch, cards and candles. Then they sat down to play, with the ungodly and profane discourse which they affected. They played and drank, the young man drinking fast and hard, the colonel, after his custom, keeping his head cool.

Tom Rising's estates lay near Swaffham. He was well known as the best and most fearless rider in the whole county. He was the keenest sportsman. He knew where to find fox, hare, badger, ferret, stoat or weasel. He knew where to put up a pheasant or a covey of partridges. He could play at all manly sports. He was a wild, fearless, reckless, debauched young fellow, whom everybody loved and everybody feared, always ready with a blow or an oath, afraid of nothing if he set his heart upon anything. You shall see that he set his heart upon one thing and failed. Tom lost heavily and drank deep.

"I will play till I have stripped every man among you to the very bones," he said. "Why do I say this? Because, gentlemen, after tomorrow night I shall be the richest man in the county. Do you hear? The richest man in the county. You don't know how? Very well. Do you think I'm going to tell you? Ho, ho! When you hear the news, you'll say 'twas only Tom—only Tom Rising—had the courage to venture and to win.'"

"He means the bazzard table," said the colonel.

"No, not the bazzard table." Tom went on. "Oh, I know the table and the woman who keeps the bank and pretends to weep when you lose. I know about her. I've heard talk about her. What is it? Don't remember. Tell you tomorrow."

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"He should stop talking," said the colonel. "We must not listen to his wanderings."

"Richest man in the county," he repeated. "Colonel, I like your company. You lay down your money like a man. In a week, colonel, I'll have it all. There shan't be a guinea left among you all. Richest man in county—make—guineas—fly." His head sank down again. He was once more speechless.

His friends looked from one to the other. What did Tom Rising mean?

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, "he has been drinking for many days. He has some kind of a fit upon him. After a sleep he will be better. Just now he dreams of riches. I have known men in such a condition to see animals and think that they are hunted by rats and clawed by devils."

Again Tom lifted his head and babbled confusedly.

"The richest man—the richest man—in the whole county. After tomorrow night—not tonight—after tomorrow night. I have found out a short way to fortune. The richest man in the county."

So they left him sleeping in his chair, with his head on the table among the glasses and the spilt punch.

The next was the night of the assembling, and Molly was present.

After dancing with his lordship, who then offered his hand to a lady of the county, she stood up with Tom Rising, who was by this time as sober as could be expected after such a night. He, in the hearing of everybody, loaded her with compliments of the common kind, such as would suit a milkmaid, but were not proper for a modest woman to hear. To these, however, Molly returned no reply and danced as if she heard them not. She then rejoined Lady Anastasia and with her retired to the cardroom, whither many of the young men followed her. She stood beside her ladyship and obliged the young men by choosing cards for them, which they lost or won. Tom Rising followed her and stood beside her with flushed face and trembling hands. It was remarked afterward that he seemed to assume the care of her. He kept gazing upon Molly with fierce and ravenous looks like a wolf who hungers after his prey and lives to wait for it. He played the while, however, and lost during the evening, I believe, some hundreds of pounds, but for reasons which you will presently hear he never paid that money.

Molly next had a second dance with his lordship. After it had been finished he offered her the refreshment of wine or chocolate, but she declined, saying that the captain now would be wishing her to go home and that her chair would be waiting.

So his lordship led her to the door, where indeed her chair was waiting, but no captain, and, bowing low, he handed her in and shut the door, and he returned to the assembly, and Molly's chair was immediately lifted up and borne rapidly away, she sitting alone, thinking of the evening and of her great triumph, suspecting no evil and thinking of no danger.

A minute later the captain came to the door. There he saw Molly's chairmen waiting with her chair. He looked about him. Where was Molly? He returned to the assembly; the girl was not there. He looked into the cardroom; his lordship was standing at the table, looking on. "My lord," said the captain in confusion, "where is my ward?"

"Miss Molly? Why, captain, I put her into her chair five minutes ago. She is gone."

"Her chair?" The captain turned pale. "Her chair is now at the door with her chairmen."

"What devilry is forward?" cried Lord Fylingdale. "Come with me, captain. Come with me."

The chair into which Molly stepped without suspicion and without even looking for the captain, who should have walked beside her, stood, as I have said before, at the entrance of the long room. Outside the trees were hung with colored lamps; the place was as bright as in the sunshine of noon. One would think that nothing could be done in such a place which would not be observed. There is, however, one thing which is never observed—it is the personal appearance of servants. No one regards the boatman of the ferry or the driver of the hackney coach or the postboy or the chairman. The chair, then, stood with its door open opposite to the entrance of the long room. The chairmen stood retired, a little in the shade, but not so far off as to need calling, when Lord Fylingdale handed in the lady. This done, he stood, hat in hand, bowing. The chairmen stepped up briskly, seized the poles and marched off with the quick step of those who have a light burden to carry. No one observed the faces of the chairmen, or indeed thought of looking at them; no one remarked the fact that Tom Rising walked out of the long room directly afterward and followed the chair. Within Molly sat, unsuspecting, excited by the triumphs of the evening. The chair passed through the gardens and its gates. Instead of turning to the right, which would lead into Hayman's lane, the chairmen turned to the left and so through the town gate and beyond the wall and into the open fields. Yet Molly observed nothing. I think she felt asleep. When she came to herself, she looked out of the window. On the right and on the left of her were open fields.

It was a clear evening. Toward the middle of May there is no black darkness, but only a dimmer outline, with deeper shadows. Molly, who knew the country around Lynn perfectly well, understood at once that she had been carried outside the town; that she was no longer on the highway, but on one of the cross tracks—one cannot call them roads—which connect the villages, so that there was very little chance of meeting any passenger or

vehicles. And by the stars she saw that they were carrying her in a northerly direction, perhaps to South Wootton.

She perceived, therefore, that some devilry was going on. Now she was not a girl who would try to help herself in such a deserted and lonely spot by shrieking, nor did she see that any good purpose would be served by calling to the chairmen to let her out. She sat up, therefore, her heart beating a little faster than usual, and considered what she should do.

Molly, though not a woman of fashion, understood by this time her value, especially in the eyes of the adventurer, and she also understood quite clearly at this moment that she had been carried away without the knowledge of her guardian and that the intention of the abduction was nothing more or less than a forced marriage and the acquisition of her fortune. "Jack," she told me afterward, "I confess that I did wish, just for a little, that you might be coming along the road with a trunk, but then I remembered that I was no puny threadpaper of a woman, but as strong as most men, and I took courage. Weapon I had none except a steel bodkin, gilt, stuck in my hair—a small thing, but it might serve if any man ventured too near, and I thought, besides, that there would be a hue and cry and that the country round would be scoured in all directions. They would most certainly grow tired of carrying me about in a chair; they must stop somewhere and put me into some place or other. I thought also that I could easily manage to keep off one man or perhaps two and that it would be very unlikely that more than one would attempt to force me into marriage. Perhaps I might escape. Perhaps I might barricade myself. Perhaps my bodkin might help me to save myself. I would willingly stab a man to the heart with it. Perhaps I might pick up something—a griddle would be a weapon handy for braining a man, or even a frying pan would do. What-

ever happened, Jack, I was resolved that nothing, not even fear of murder, should make me marry the man who had carried me off."

There are found scattered about the byroads of the country many small inns for the accommodation of persons of the baser sort.

It was before such a wayside inn that the chairmen stopped. Molly knew it very well. It was at a place called Rikley's Spring. The name of the house was the Traveler's Rest, and it stood just two miles and a half from Lynn and one mile or so from the village of South Wootton. It was a small house, gloomy and ill lighted at the best. There was a door in the middle. The diamond panes of the windows were mostly broken, in their leaden frames; the woodwork was decaying; the upper floor, projecting, darkened the lower rooms. In the dim twilight, when the chair stopped, the house looked a dark and noisome place, fit only for cutthroats and murderers.

The poles were withdrawn and the door thrown open. Molly, looking out, saw before her, hat in hand, her late partner, the young fellow they called Tom Rising.

"Oh," she cried, "is it possible? I thought I was in the hands of some highwayman. Is this your doing, sir? I was told that you were a gentleman."

He bowed low and began a little speech which he had prepared in readiness.

"Madam, you will confess that you are yourself alone to blame. Fired with the sight of so much loveliness, what wonder if I aspired to possess myself of these charms? Sure, a Laplander himself would be warmed even in his frozen region by such."

"Sir, what nonsense is this? What do you mean?"

"I mean, madam, that your lovely face and figure should be sufficient excuse not only in the eyes of the world, but in your own eyes, for an action such as this. The violence of the passion which—"

"Sir, will you order your fellows to take me back?"

"No, madam; I will not."

"Then, sir, will you tell me what you propose to do?"

"I intend to marry you."

"Against my consent?"

"I have you in my power. I shall, however, ask your consent. If you grant it, we shall enter upon married life as a pair of lovers should. If you refuse, I shall be the master, but you will be the wife."

Molly laughed. "You think that I am afraid? Very well, sir. If you persist, you shall have a lesson in love-making that will cost your life."

"Everything is fair in love. Come, madam, you will please to get out of the chair."

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