

# THE LADY OF LYNN

By SIR WALTER BESANT

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CONTINUED

"What a villain is this!" said Molly. "He is in love with my fortune, and he pretends it is my person. He thinks to steal my fortune when he runs away with me. You are a highwayman, Mr. Rising, a common thief and a common robber. You shall be hanged outside Norwich castle."

Tom Rising swore a great oath, calling, in his blasphemous way, upon the Lord to inflict dire pains and penalties upon him if he should resign the lovely object of his affection now in his possession. You have heard that he had the reputation of a reckless daredevil who struck at nothing, was daunted by nothing and was like a bulldog for his tenacity.

"Understand, madam," he concluded this declaration, "I am resolved to marry you—resolved. Bear that in mind."

"And I, sir, am resolved that I will not marry you—resolved. Bear that in mind."

"Never yet did I resolve upon anything but I had it. No; never yet."

"Mr. Rising, you think you have me in your power. You shall see. Once more I ask you as a gentleman, to see that back. Because I have many friends. The whole town high and low will be peering out after me, seeing the coming in every direction."

"In an hour you will be at Wootton. The parson hath promised to wait us there. You shall be my wife within one short hour."

"You waste words, sir."

"You will have to alight, madam. The post chaise is here to carry us to Wootton, where the parson waits to marry us. In an hour, I say, you shall be my wife."

Molly looked out of the other window. The post chaise was there with its pair of horses and the postboy waiting at the horses' heads. She would have to make her stand at once, therefore. To get into the post chaise with that man would be dangerous, even though she was as strong as himself, and, since she was not a drinker of wine, she was in better condition.

"I looked round at the house," she told me afterward. "I thought that if I could get into the house I might gain some time—perhaps I could bar the door, perhaps I could find that griddle or the frying pan of which I spoke. Or if it came to using the bodkin there would be more room for my arm in a house than in a chair or a chaise. So I had one more parley in order to gain time and then slipped out."

"Sir," she said, "I give you one more chance of retaining the name and reputation of gentleman. Carry me back or else await the vengeance of my friends. I warn you solemnly that murder will be done before I marry you; understand, sir, murder of you or of your confederates or of myself."

She spoke with so much calmness and with so much resolution that she aroused all his native obstinacy. Besides it was now too late. The news of the abduction would be all over Lynn; he must carry the thing through. He swore another loud and blasphemous oath. Heavens! How he was punished! How swiftly and speedily!

Molly stepped out of the chair. Tom Rising, his hat in hand, again bowed low. "Madam," he said, "you are well advised. Pray let me hand you into the chaise."

She made no reply, but, rushing past him, darted into the house. She stumbled down one step and found herself in a room where the twilight outside could not penetrate. It was quite dark. She closed the door behind her and bolted it, finding a bolt in the usual place.

Then she waited a moment, thinking what she could do next. A rustling and a footstep showed that she was not alone.

"Who is there?" she cried. "Is there no light?"

She heard the striking of flint and steel; she saw the sputtering yellow light of a match, and by its flickering she discerned an old woman trying to light a candle—a rushlight in a tin frame, with holes at the sides.

Molly looked quietly round the room. A knife lay on the table. She took it up. It was one of the rough clasp knives used by rustics when they eat their dinners under the hedge. She stepped forward and took the light from the old woman's hand.

"Quick!" she said. "Who is in the house?"

"No one except myself. He said the house was to be kept clear tonight."

"Can they get in?"

"They can kick the house down if they like; it's so old and crazy."

"Is there an upper room?"

The old woman pointed to the far corner. Molly now perceived that the place was the kitchen, the taproom, the sitting room and all. A table was in the middle; a settle was standing beside the empty fireplace; there was a bench or two; mugs and cups of wood, pewter and common ware stood on the mantelshelf; a side of bacon hung in the chimney; in the corner to which the old woman pointed was a ladder. Molly ran across the room. At the top of the ladder, there was a square open-

ing large enough for her passage. She went up and found herself by the dim rushlight in an upper chamber the floor of which was covered with flock beds laid on the boards. There was one small frame of glass in the roof, a window which was not made to open. The place reeked with foul air worse than the orlop deck or the hold after a voyage.

Down below she heard her captor kicking at the door. Apparently the old woman drew back the bolt, for he came in noisily and swearing horribly. Apparently the old woman pointed to the ladder, or perhaps the glimmer from the room above guided him. He came to the ladder and tried persuasion.

"Molly, my dear," he cried, "come down, come down! I won't harm you. Upon my honor I will not. I want only to put you into the chaise and carry you off to be married. Molly, you are the loveliest girl in the county. Molly, I say, there is nobody can hold a candle to you. Molly, I will make you as happy as the day is long. Molly, I love you ten times as well as that proud lord. He will not marry you. There isn't a man in all the company I will not fight for your sake. Don't think I will let any other man have you. Confound it, Molly, why don't you answer?"

For now she kept silence. The more he parleyed the more time she gained. But she found one or two loose boards that had been used for laying in trestles for the support of the flock beds. She laid them across the trapdoor. There was, however, nothing to keep them down.

Then Tom Rising began to swear at the old woman.

"You fool! You blundering, silly, Jenny ass of a fool! What the devil did you give her the candle for?"

"I didn't give it. She took it."

"Go get another candle, then."

"There are no more candles, master," said the old woman in her feeble voice. "She's got the only one."

"Molly, if you won't come down, I shall force my way up."

Still she kept silence.

He took two steps up the ladder and lifted the boards, showing the fingers of his left hand. Molly applied her knife gently, but dexterously; but it touched the bone and taught him what to expect. He drew back with a cry of rage.

"Come down," he said, "or it will be worse for you. Come down, I say."

He had not reckoned on a knife and on the girl's courage in using it.

"You have no food up there," he went on. "Your window is only a light in the roof looking away from the road. No one from Lynn will come this way. If they do, they will see nothing. You had better come down. Molly, I shall wait here for a month. I shall starve you out. Do you hear? I will set fire to the thatch and burn you out! You shall come down!"

So he raved and raged. Meantime the two chairmen, who were his own servants, stood pole in hand, one in front of the house and one behind, to prevent an escape, but this was impossible, because the room, as you have heard, had no other window than a small, square opening in the roof, in which was fitted a piece of coarse, common glass.

"Jack," she told me, "when he talked of setting fire to the thatch, I confess I trembled, because, you see, my knife would not help me there, and, indeed, I think he would have done it, because he was like one that has gone mad with rage. He was like a mad bull. He stormed; he raged; he cursed and swore; he called me all the names you ever heard of, such names as the sailors call their sweethearts when they are in a rage with them, and then he called me all the endearing names, such as loveliest of my sex, fairest nymph, tenderest beauty. What a man! What a man!"

CHAPTER VII  
THE PUNISHMENT.

MUST admit that in the conduct of this affair Lord Fylingdale showed both coolness and resolution. The news that the heiress of Lynn had been abducted spread immediately through the rooms. The whole company flocked to the doors, where Lord Fylingdale stood calm and without passion, while beside him the old captain stamped and cursed the villains unknown.

He called Molly's chairmen. What had those fellows seen? They said they were waiting for orders; that another chair stood before them at the door, the bearers of which were strangers to them, a fact which at this crowded season occurred constantly; that a gentleman whose name they knew not, but whom they had seen in the streets and at the assembly, mostly drunk, had come out hastily and spoken to these chairmen; that his lordship himself had handed the lady into the chair and closed the doors, to their astonishment, because they were themselves waiting for the lady, and that the chair was carried off instantly, leaving them in bewilderment, not knowing what to do.

He asked them next for a closer description of the gentleman. He was young, it appeared. He was red in the face. He looked masterful. He cursed the chairmen in a very free and noble manner. One of the chairmen gave him his sword to wear, which is not permitted in the assembly. He was swearing all the time, as if in great wrath.

"My lord," a gentleman interrupted, "the description fits Tom Rising."

"Has Mr. Rising been seen in the assembly this evening?"

"He was not only here, but he danced with the lady."

"Is he here now? Let some one look for Mr. Rising."

There was no need to look for him, because the rooms, even the cardroom, was now empty, all the people being crowded about the doors.

"Where does he lodge? Let some one go to his lodgings."

"With submission, my lord," said another. "It is not at his lodgings that

Meantime she made no answer whatever, and the darkness and the silence and the obstinacy of the girl were driving the unfortunate lover to a kind of madness, and I know not what would have happened.

"Molly," he said, "willy nilly, down you come. I shall tear down the thatch. I would burn you out, but I would not spoil your beauty. I shall tear down the thatch, and my men shall carry you down."

Then Molly made answer. "I have a knife in my possession. Do not think that I am afraid to use it. The first man who lays hands on me I will kill, whether it is you or your servants."

"That we shall see. Look you, Molly, you are only a merchant's daughter, and I am a gentleman. Do you think I value that compared with marrying you? Not one whit. When we are married, I will buy more land. I will be the greatest landowner of the whole county. Sir Robert will make me sheriff. I will go into parliament. Molly, he will make me a peer. Come down, I say."

But she spoke no more.

Then he lost control of himself and for awhile stamped and swore, threatened and cursed. "You will have it, then? Here, John, go and look for a ladder. There's always a ladder in the back yard. Put it up against the thatch. Tear it down. Make a hole in the roof. Tear off the whole roof."

The man propped his chair pole against the door and went round to look for the ladder and to obey orders.

"So," Molly told me, "I was besieged. Mr. Rising was below, but I had my knife, and he was afraid to venture up the steps. I heard the men clumping about outside. I heard them plant the ladder and climb up. Now, a countryman who understands a thatch is able to tear it off very quickly, either to make or mend a hole or to tear down the roof altogether, and I feared that I must use my knife seriously. Was ever woman more barbarously abused? Well, I waited. By the quick tearing away of the straw I saw that the fellow on the ladder knew how to thatch a rick or a cottage. In a few minutes there would be a hole big enough for half a dozen men to enter. Jack," her cheek flushed and her eye brightened, "God forgive me, but I made up my mind the moment that man stepped within the room to plunge my knife into his heart."

However, this last act of defense was not necessary.

"Master," cried the postboy, who was waiting with the chaise—"master, here be men on horseback, galloping. I doubt they are coming after the lady."

Tom Rising stepped to the door and looked down the road. The day was already beginning to break. He saw in the dim light a company of horsemen galloping along the road. It was a bad road, and there had been rain, so that the horses went heavily. They were very near. In a few moments they would be upon him. He looked at the chaise. He made one more effort.

"Molly," he said, "come down quick. There is just time. Let us have no more fooling."

Again she made no reply. Knife in hand, with crimson cheek and set lips, she watched the hole in the thatch and the man tearing it away.

Tom Rising swore again most blasphemously. Then, seeing that the game was lost, he loosened his sword in its scabbard and stepped into the middle of the road.

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he will be found. After the assembly he goes to the Rose tavern, where he drinks all night."

"Let some one go to the Rose tavern, then, and quickly. Captain Crowle, we will go to the Crown while inquiries are made. Gentlemen, there is great suspicion that an abominable crime hath been committed and this young lady hath been forcibly carried away for the sake of her fortune. I take blame to myself for not making sure that I was placing her in her own chair. This is my business. But I ask your help for the honor of the spa and the company."

A dozen gentlemen stopped forward and offered their help and their swords, if necessary. Among them was Colonel Lanyon.

"Come, then; let us adjourn to the Crown and make inquiries. Be of good cheer, captain. We will find out which way they took. If they have nothing but the chair to carry her away, we can easily catch them up."

"I know my girl," said the captain. "It is not one man who can daunt her, nor will a dozen men force her to marry against her will. If they try, there will be murder."

"If we cannot find the way they took, we must scour the country."

At the gates of the garden they learned that the keeper had seen the chair go out and observed that it was closely followed by a gentleman whom he could only describe by his height, which was taller than the average. Now, Tom Rising was six feet at least.

At the Crown, in Lord Fylingdale's room, they held a brief consultation, after which the gentlemen who had volunteered their help went out into the town to make inquiries.

In a few minutes they began to return. It was ascertained that Tom Rising was not at his lodging, nor was he at the Rose tavern, nor could he be found at any of the taverns used by gentlemen. This strengthened the suspicion against him. Then one remembered the strange words of the early morning in which Tom Rising had promised his friends that he would before the next day was done be the richest man in the county—rich enough to play with them until he had stripped every man as bare as Adam. Those words were taken as mere drunken ravings. But now they seemed to have had a meaning. Where was Tom Rising?

Another discovery was that of the two men belonging to the chair in which Molly was carried off. They were found in one of the low taverns by the riverside drinking. One of them was already too far gone to speak; the other, with a stronger head, was able to give information, which he was quite ready to do. A gentleman, he said, had engaged the chair and had given them a guinea to drink if they would suffer him to find his own chairmen. His description of the gentleman corresponded with that already furnished. He spoke of a tall gentleman with a flushed face and rough manner of speech. He knew nothing more except that two men, strangers to himself, had taken the chair and carried it off.

"Gentlemen," said his lordship, "there can be, I fear, no doubt. The abduction of Miss Molly has been designed and attempted by Mr. Rising. Fortunately he cannot have gone very far. It remains for us to find the road which he has taken."

They fell to considering the various roads which lead out of the town. There is the highroad to Ely Cambridge and London, but to carry a chair with an unwilling lady in it on the highroad, frequented by night as well as by day with travelers of all kinds and strings of pack horses, would be ridiculous. There was the road which led to the villages on the east side of the Wash. There was also the road to Swaffham and Norwich.

"I am of opinion," said one of the gentlemen, "that he has fixed on some lonely place not far from Lynn where he can make her prisoner until she consents with his purpose and consents to marry him."

Captain Crowle shook his head. "She would never consent," he said. "My girl is almost as strong as any man and quite as resolute. There will be murder if this villain attempts violence."

Just then the landlady of the Crown threw open the door and burst in. "Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen," she cried, "I have found out where they are gone! Ride after them! Ride after them, quick, before worse mischief is done. I have ordered all the horses in the stables to be saddled. There are eight. Quick, gentlemen! Ride after them!"

"Quick, quick!" said his lordship.

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