

# **THE LAKE OF WINE**

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## EPIGRAPH.

*“So fares the unthrifty lord of Linne  
Till all his gold is gone and spent:  
And he maun sell his lands so broad,  
His house and landes and all his rent.*

.....

*Thus he hath sold his land so broad,  
Both hill and holt, and moore and fenne,  
All but a poore and lonesome lodge,  
That stood far off in a lonely glenne.*

*For soe he to his father hight:  
‘My sonne, when I am gonne,’ sayd hee,  
‘Then thou wilt spend thy lande so broad,  
And thou wilt spend thy gold so free:*

*But sweare me nowe upon the roode,  
That lonesome lodge thou’lt never spend;  
For when all the world doth frown on thee,  
Thou there shalt find a faithful friend.’*

.....

*Away then hyed the heire of Linne  
O’er hill and holt, and moore and fenne,  
Untill he came to the lonesome lodge,  
That stood so lowe in a lonely glenne.*

.....

*Then round his necke the corde he drewe,  
And sprang aloft with his bodie:*

*When lo! the ceiling burst in twaine,  
And to the ground came tumbling hee.*

*Astonyed lay the heire of Linne,  
Ne knewe if he were live or dead:  
At length he looked, and sawe a bille,  
And in it a key of gold so redd.*

*He took the bill, and lookt it on,  
Strait good comfort found he there:  
Itt told him of a hole in the wall,  
In which there stood three chests in-fere.*

*Two were full of the beaten golde,  
The third was full of white monèy;  
And over them in broad lettèrs  
These words were written so plaine to see:*

*‘Once more, my sonne, I sette thee clere;  
Amend thy life and follies past;  
For but thou amend thee of thy life,  
That rope must be thy end at last.’”*

# **THE LAKE OF WINE.**

## CHAPTER I.

SOME time in June of the year 1800 (as privately chronicled) there came a famous evening at Whitelaw's Club in St. James's Street, off Piccadilly, London. There and then—according to the unattested evidence of an eyewitness—Mr. Ladislaw lost his head, Lord Dunlone his mistress, Sir Robert Linne his fortune, and Major Dalrymple his life. Thus it appears these four were all losers, and each of a material property, save the first, who, alone of the quartette, commuted his self-possession for a very real equivalent in hard cash.

“Whitelaw's” in those days ran, of a host of gambling clubs, the deepest. It was there all heavy potations and long stakes (at which many a self-martyr burned); but the first of these were put down and the second up with an accepted solemnity of decorum that was traditional to the place and the sign of its moral endowment. Fox, in his heavier moments, had been known to hazard in its glooms occasionally, and to lose, of course; and—equally of course—to find immediate balm for his scorched fingers in the inevitable “Herodotus.” Selwyn, also, and Topham Beauclerc, and many another Georgium sidus, had played and hiccupped within its pregnant walls; but always with gravity and a weight of personal responsibility towards the foundation. “Brookes's” might have held in its time more showy revelry; “Almack's” have gambled in broad-brimmed straw hats, bedecked with flowers, and masks to hide the play of emotions. “Whitelaw's” would have none of these. It had ever stood coldly aloof from flash and notoriety, accepting Todd's definition of a club as “An association of persons subjected



to particular rules,” rather than that of Johnson (the rendering has a warm personal flavour), who calls it “An assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions.” From first to last it remained ponderous in self-importance and rigid in exacting the observance of its unwritten codes of conduct. If its gaming operations were large, it desired the company of no feather-brain “plungers”; but rather of players of substance, to whom cards were a market, not a raffle.

Therefore, when on this particular night no fewer than four of its members—like those in the fable—suddenly revolted against the central system, and, for a space of minutes, made havoc of its respectable traditions, it is no wonder that “Whitelaw’s” rose at the outrage like one man, and, in the upshot, pronounced sentence of club ostracism upon the delinquents. This, as it affected three, is matter of private history. The fourth escaped the distinction there and then through the interposition of “the man with the scythe.”

Faro was the game, and the stakes were swingeing. The four had played from three o’clock of a Thursday afternoon to six of the Friday morning. In the white spread of day their eyes showed up blood-shot, their cheeks grimy with candle soot, their hair slack and unstrung. My lord Dunlone, who was a slipslop youth, colourless and jejune, with stains of wine on his chin and high cravat, brooded in fathomless sulkiness, the only pronounced expression he was ever real master of. His neighbour, Sir Robert Linne, had the look of a fine tormented devil, desperate and at bay.

These were the losers. Of the winners, Mr. Ladislaw was a perspiring cabbage of a man, stunted and over-headed; and he seemed drunk and amazed with his good fortune; and the major

presented a lean and hungry appearance, as if his passions were devouring worms—which indeed I believe they were.

About six of the clock there came a pause in the game—the lull before the crash. Mr. Ladislaw, twinkling prosperity, bent obsequiously to the baronet, his cards clumped together in one hand.

“The stakes as before, Sir Robert?” he said in a small, confidential voice.

The other gave a hollow laugh, checking it frowningly in mid-career.

“I think so,” he said. “If there happens a margin, why—we must make it a broad one, on paper.”

“As you please, sir.”

Major Dalrymple, with his thick lips dropped apart, was gazing breathingly at his sulky neighbour. The latter, conscious of the inquiring scrutiny, pulled himself erect—a cub of ill-temper.

“Curse it!” he muttered, with a surly sidelong glance. “What am I being stared at for, curse it?”

“Your pardon, my lord,” said the major, in a high, stiff voice. “I looked only to inquire your stake.”

“I can settle it myself, sir, without your help”—and, with a very meaning action, he held his cards face-downwards upon his breast.

The major went back in his chair, his corded hands thrust out rigidly before him on the table.

“My lord Dunlone,” he said, “impugns not only my judgment, but my honour!”

“Oh, curse it!” cried the Viscount. “What have I said?”

“It was your action spoke, sir.”

Sir Robert laughed recklessly.

“You’re hard on my lord. He clasped his dear love to his bosom—no more. ’Tis an amorous way he has.”

The dyspeptic face of the soldier went dark. He recognized an allusion in the bantering words. The Viscount Dunlone, in fact (it was notorious), had outbidden him in the favour of a certain Mademoiselle Carminelle, a *figurante* at Vauxhall in the suit of Mr. “Tom Restless”; and, popularly, he was supposed to have aged under the disappointment.

“Come!” cried the baronet. “Give us the privilege of driving to the devil our own way. You mustn’t criticize the actions of dying men. We writhe with wounds, sir, while you are sound.”—He turned to Mr. Ladislaw, who sat staring, apprehensive. “I stake my all,” he said; and named a sum sufficiently desperate.

There were a few late *habitués* in the room. One of these, a dry, long man, with a face like a puckered medlar and a short-sighted contraction of the eyelids, had been . for some time a stealthily intent observer of the quartette. Now this individual, humouring a habit of his by drawing in his breath with a wincing sound, gave his chair a shift, and seemed to be awaiting results, at a distance, with some secret interest.

“Stake, and have done with it!” cried Sir Robert boisterously to the young lord.

The latter turned an insolent, languid glance on Major Dalrymple. They were a contrast. The soldier set, spare, bilious, with a great hooked nose and cracked heavy lips; the other a ruffled *petit-maître* of the first folly, pearl-powdered, cherry-mouthed, a model of sartorial elegance from his choking cravat—so amplified as that his face looked like a peach stuck in a napkin—to his full pantaloons of apricot-coloured velvet.

“I stake,” lisped this exquisite—“I stake your reversion, sir.”

There were influences of wine and ill-fortune fermenting in the fool’s empty head. Otherwise he would have hardly dared such perilous banter.

“I fail to gather your lordship,” said the soldier, going red.

“The adorable Carminelle,” began the Viscount drawlingly, when the other jumped up with a furious face, upsetting his chair in the act, and clapped his left hand instinctively upon his thigh.

There was a moment’s commotion. One or two in the room rose; but the dry, short-sighted stranger sat on, quietly rubbing his chin.

Nonplussed for the moment, as it seemed, by the absence of his weapon, Major Dalrymple gasped, hesitated—and sat down again. As he did so, some were aware of a blue streak across his forehead that remained there after his flush of passion had subsided.

“I stake a thousand pounds against that,” he said, with a sudden fall to intense quietness of intonation.

The incident passed, and the deal. There was a stern spirit of expectancy in the room. This was not “Whitelaw’s” way—either as regarded the outburst, or the nature of the declaration that had produced it.

Then, all in a moment, Sir Robert Linne had leaped up and flung his cards in Mr. Ladislaw’s face, and the major was on his feet again, stamping and declaiming.

The baronet’s victim, taken completely by surprise, started and fell over on his back, his chair splintering beneath him. The place was in an uproar at once—red and angry visages on all sides. Only Sir Robert stood placid with folded arms, smiling grimly down on the havoc he had wrought.

“I call all to witness,” screamed the major, panting and struggling in the arms of two who had seized him, “that I accepted my lord’s stake, but not his infernal insult. I have won the right of protection over an outraged lady, and I now call upon him to answer for his brutal abuse of her name in public”—and, despite his captors, he whipped up a glass of wine from the table, and dashed it at the stupid face of the lordling, who still sat, sullenly defiant of the spirit he had evoked. The glass cut his forehead and half-stunned him for the moment.

“Mr. Jephson,” cried the soldier, glaring round, and selecting one from the excited group about him—“you will do me the service to ac——”

The word snapped in his teeth like a pipe-stem. With a groan he sank upon the ground, and his face was purple from ear to ear.

An instant's silence followed, then babble of voices and the pressing inward of the spectators around the fallen man. Lord Dunlone sat mopping his red forehead in foolish vacancy; and Sir Robert Linne strode over to Mr. Ladislaw, who had been helped to his feet and stood apart and alone.

"I took full licence for a ruined man," said the baronet; "and am prepared to give the fullest satisfaction."

The injured one almost whimpered.

"That is the devil of *luck*," he said hysterically. "You force a quarrel on me, and deprive me of the fruits of it."

"Oh, sir! Not necessarily."

"You know I'm damned bad at shot and thrust."

The loser smiled wickedly. The only stealthy witness of the little scene was the short-sighted man.

"You desire to compound the insult, then?" said Sir Robert.

"Oh! surely, sir, with your kind permission."

The other laughed, shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. Mr. Ladislaw took a forward step and ventured timidly:

"You exaggerated, I trust, when you spoke of yourself as ruined?"

"Do you question my statement, sir?"

He flapped round with a mockery of fierceness. The little man fell back, scared.

"Oh, dear me, no!" he cried.

Sir Robert laughed again, shot a contemptuous look at the group by the table, and went quietly from the room.

In the Club-hall he came to a momentary pause.

“The fellow should have fought,” he muttered. “I would have made myself a broad target to him.”

Then he sighed.

“But there’s a shorter cut.”

## CHAPTER II.

SIR ROBERT LINNE, as he left the club, had no thought but to sever the tangle of things by cutting his own throat. He intended to do this agreeably and decently, and to step off the world into chaos with as little inconvenience to himself and to others as was compatible with the severity of the deed.

After considerable reflection, the plan that suggested itself to him was to proceed to some riverside station, hire a wherry, work his way down stream an indefinite distance; and then, sitting on the thwarts, neatly and philosophically put a weight in his pocket and a bullet in his head, and so overboard.

Ordinarily, he permitted himself some nausea and ill-temper after a night's debauch. This morning he would have none of them.

"It would be churlish," he thought, "to hand in my credentials with an ill-grace. If I have represented his sable majesty faithfully, he has his own good reasons, no doubt, for recalling me."

Therefore, to prove how the will can overcrowd the nerve, he whistled on his way, and was very affable and kindly to all his fellows with whom he came in contact. They were not many at that early hour. An amazed roysterer waking on a step; a kennel-scraper driving his broom before him at a shambling trot; Giles the apprentice, yawning over the shutters, and a pretty mop-squeezer or so who affected a demure propriety as he waved a kiss to them in passing, and blushed and giggled when he had gone by.



He turned into St. James's Park, where Moll and Meg were tethering their cows at the sweet-stuff stalls; and bought and drank a glassful of white innocence with a sort of pleasant bravado of geniality. It made him feel good for the moment—pastoral and boyish once more.

“What's your wish in life, Molly?” he said, turning with a smile to the girl who had supplied him.

“Sure your honour's quizzing!”

“No, I'm not. In truth now?”

“Tea at Bagnigge Wells, then, with china and a gilt spoon.”

He burst out laughing and then looked grave.

“Your ambition hath a goose-flight. What would you give for the treat?”

“Anything but my good name.”

“I stand corrected, sweetling. Here, take your golden egg, and never part with your goose.”

He took her chin in his hand.

“Bite,” he said, and clipped a guinea between her white teeth.

“That shall go to my credit,” he said to himself as he walked off; and made his way slowly to his rooms in Whitehall.

Therein he did not remain long, but came out very shortly, a pocket of his riding-coat bulged in a sinister manner.

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