

# Thirteen at Table

By Lord Dunsany

In front of a spacious fire-place of the old kind, when the logs were well alight, and men with pipes and glasses were gathered before it in great easeful chairs, and the wild weather outside and the comfort that was within, and the season of the year—for it was Christmas—and the hour of the night, all called for the weird or uncanny, then out spoke the ex-master of foxhounds and told this tale.

“I once had an odd experience too. It was when I had the Bromley and Sydenham, the year I gave them up—as a matter of fact it was the last day of the season. It was no use going on because there were no foxes left in the country, and London was sweeping down on us. You could see it from the kennels all along the skyline like a terrible army in grey, and masses of villas every year came skirmishing down our valleys. Our coverts were mostly on the hills, and as the town came clown upon the valleys the foxes used to leave them and go right away out of the country, and they never returned. I think they went by night and moved great distances. Well, it was early April and we had drawn blank all day, and at the last draw of all, the very last of the season, we found a fox. He left the covert with his back to London and its railways and villas and wire, and slipped away towards the chalk country and open Kent. I felt as I once felt as a child on one summer’s day when I found a door in a garden where I played left luckily ajar, and I pushed it open and the wide lands were before me and waving fields of corn.

“We settled down into a steady gallop and the fields began to drift by under us, and a great wind arose full of fresh breath. We left the clay lands where the bracken grows and came to a valley at the edge of the chalk. As we went down into it we saw the fox go up the other side like a shadow that crosses the evening, arid glide into a wood that stood on the top. We saw a flash of primroses in the wood and we were out the other side, hounds hunting perfectly and the fox still going absolutely straight. It began to dawn on me then that we were in for a great hunt; I took a deep breath when I thought of it; the taste of the air of that perfect spring afternoon as it came to one galloping, and the thought of a great run, were together like some old rare wine. Our faces now were to another valley, large fields led down to it with easy hedges, at the bottom of it a bright blue stream went singing and a rambling village smoked, the sunlight on the Opposite slopes danced like a fairy; and all along the top old woods were frowning, but they dreamed of spring. The fields had fallen off and were far behind and my only human companion was James, my old first whip, who had a hound’s instinct, and a personal animosity against a fox that even embittered his speech.

“Across the valley the fox went as straight as a railway line, and again we went without a check straight through the woods at the top. I remember hearing men sing or shout as they walked home from work, and sometimes children whistled; the sounds came up from the village to the woods at the top of the valley. After that we saw no more villages, but valley after valley arose and fell before us as though we were voyaging some strange and stormy sea; and all the way before us the fox went dead up-wind like the fabulous flying Dutchman. There was no one in sight now but my first whip and me; we had both of us got on to our second horses as we drew the last covert. Two or three times we checked in those great lonely valleys beyond the village, but I began to have inspirations; I felt a strange certainty within me that this fox was going on

straight up-wind till he died or until night came and we could hunt no longer, so I reversed ordinary methods and only cast straight ahead, and always we picked up the scent again at once. I believe that this fox was the last one left in the villa-haunted lands and that he was prepared to leave them for remote uplands far from men, that if we had come the following day he would not have been there, and that we just happened to hit off his journey.

“Evening began to descend upon the valleys, still the hounds drifted on, like the lazy but unresting shadows of clouds upon a summer’s day; we heard a shepherd calling to his dog, we saw two maidens move toward a hidden farm, one of them singing softly; no other sounds but ours disturbed the leisure and the loneliness of haunts that seemed not yet to have known the inventions of steam and gunpowder.

“And now the day and our horses were wearing out, but that resolute fox held on. I began to work out the run and to wonder where we were. The last landmark I had ever seen before must have been over five miles back, and from there to the start was at least ten miles more. If only we could kill! Then the sun set. I wondered what chance we had of killing our fox. I looked at James’ face as he rode beside me. He did not seem to have lost any confidence, yet his horse was as tired as mine. It was a good clear twilight and the scent was as strong as ever, and the fences were easy enough, but those valleys were terribly trying, and they still rolled on and on. It looked as if the light would outlast all possible endurance both of the fox and the horses, if the scent held good and he did not go to ground, otherwise night would end it. For long we had seen no houses and no roads, only chalk slopes with the twilight on them, and here and there some sheep, and scattered copses darkening in the evening. At some moment I seemed to realize all at once that the light was spent and that darkness was hovering. I looked at James, he was solemnly shaking his head. Suddenly in a little wooded valley we saw climb over the oaks the red-brown gables of a queer old house; at that instant I saw the fox scarcely leading by fifty yards. We blundered through a wood into full sight of the house, but no avenue led up to it or even a path, nor were there any signs of wheel-marks anywhere. Already lights shone here and there in windows. We were in a park, and a fine park, but unkempt beyond credibility; brambles grew everywhere. It was too dark to see the fox any more, but we knew he was dead-beat, the hounds were just before us—and a four-foot railing of oak. I shouldn’t have tried it on a fresh horse at the beginning of a run, and here was a horse near his last gasp, but what a run! an event standing out in a life-time, and the hounds, close up on their fox, slipping into the darkness as I hesitated. I decided to try it. My horse rose about eight inches and took it fair with his breast, and the oak log flew into handfuls of wet decay,—it was rotten with years. And then we were on a lawn, and at the far end of it the hounds were tumbling over their fox. Fox, horses, and light were all done together at the end of a twenty-mile point. We made some noise then, but nobody came out of the queer old house.

“I felt pretty stiff as I walked round to the hall door with the mask and the brush, while James went with the hounds and the two horses to look for the stables. I rang a bell marvellously encrusted with rust, and after a long while the door opened a little way, revealing a hall with much old armour in it and the shabbiest butler that I have ever known.

“I asked him who lived there. Sir Richard Arlen. I explained that my horse could go no further that night, and that I wished to ask Sir Richard Arlen for a bed.

“‘O, no one ever comes here, sir,’ said the butler.

“I pointed out that I had come.

“‘I don’t think it would be possible, sir,’ he said.

“This annoyed me, and I asked to see Sir Richard, and insisted until he came. Then I apologized and explained the situation. He looked only fifty, but a 'Varsity oar on the wall with the date of the early seventies made him older than that; his face had something of the shy look of the hermit; he regretted that he had no room to put me up. I was sure that this was untrue, also I had to be put up there, there was nowhere else within miles, so I almost insisted. Then, to my astonishment, he turned to the butler and they talked it over in an undertone. At last they seemed to think that they could manage it, though clearly with reluctance. It was by now seven o'clock, and Sir Richard told me he dined at half-past seven. There was no question of clothes for me other than those I stood in, as my host was shorter and broader. He showed me presently to the drawing-room, and then he reappeared before half-past seven in evening dress and a white waistcoat. The drawing-room was large and contained old furniture, but it was rather worn than venerable; an aubusson carpet flapped about the floor, the wind seemed momentarily to enter the room, and old draughts haunted corners; stealthy feet of rats that were never at rest indicated the extent of the ruin that time had wrought in the wainscot, somewhere far off a shutter flapped to and fro, the guttering candles were insufficient to light so large a room. The gloom that these things suggested was quite in keeping with Sir Richard's first remark to me after he entered the room.

“ ‘I must tell you, sir, that I have led a wicked life. O, a very wicked life.’

“Such confidences from a man much older than oneself after one has known him for half an hour are so rare that any possible answer merely does not suggest itself. I said rather slowly, ‘O, really,’ and chiefly to forestall another such remark, I said, ‘What a charming house you have.’

“ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I have not left it for nearly forty years. Since I left the 'Varsity. One is young there, you know, and one has opportunities; but I make no excuses, no excuses.’ And the door slipping its rusty latch, came drifting on the draught into the room, and the long carpet flapped and the hangings upon the walls, then the draught fell rustling away and the door slammed to again.

“ ‘Ah, Marianne,’ he said. ‘We have a guest to-night. Mr. Linton. This is Marianne Gib.’ And everything became clear to me. ‘Mad,’ I said to myself, for no one had entered the room.

“The rats ran up the length of the room behind the wainscot ceaselessly, and the wind unlatched the door again and the folds of the carpet fluttered up to our feet and stopped there, for our weight held it down.

“ ‘Let me introduce Mr. Linton,’ said my host. ‘Lady Mary Errinjer.’

“The door slammed back again. I bowed politely. Even had I been invited I should have humoured him, but it was the very least that an uninvited guest could do.

“This kind of thing happened eleven times, the rustling, and the fluttering of the carpet, and the footsteps of the rats, and the restless door, and then the sad voice of my host introducing me to phantoms. Then for some while we waited while I struggled with the situation; conversation flowed slowly. And again the draught came trailing up the room, while the flaring candles filled it with hurrying shadows. ‘Ah, late again, Cicely,’ said my host in his soft mournful way. ‘Always late, Cicely.’ Then I went down to dinner with that man and his mind and the twelve phantoms that haunted it. I found a long table with fine old silver on it, and places laid for fourteen. The butler was now in evening dress, there were fewer draughts in the dining-room, the scene was less gloomy there. ‘Will you sit next to Rosalind at the other end?’ Sir Richard said to me. ‘She always takes the head of the table. I wronged her most of all.’

“I said, ‘I shall be delighted.’

“I looked at the butler closely; but never did I see by any expression of his face, or by anything that he did, any suggestion that he waited upon less than fourteen people in the complete possession of all their faculties. Perhaps a dish appeared to be refused more often than taken, but every glass was equally filled with champagne. At first I found little to say, but when Sir Richard, speaking from the far end of the table, said, ‘You are tired, Mr. Linton?’ I was reminded that I owed something to a host upon whom I had forced myself. It was excellent champagne, and with the help of a second glass I made the effort to begin a conversation with a Miss Helen Errold, for whom the place upon one side of me was laid. It came more easy to me very soon; I frequently paused in my monologue, like Mark Antony, for a reply, and sometimes I turned and spoke to Miss Rosalind Smith. Sir Richard at the other end talked sorrowfully on; he spoke as a condemned man might speak to his judge, and yet somewhat as a judge might speak to one that he once condemned wrongly. My own mind began to turn to mournful things. I drank another glass of champagne, but I was still thirsty. I felt as if all the moisture in my body had been blown away over the downs of Kent by the wind up which we had galloped. Still I was not talking enough: my host was looking at me. I made another effort; after all I had something to talk about: a twenty-mile point is not often seen in a lifetime, especially south of the Thames. I began to describe the run to Rosalind Smith. I could see then that my host was pleased, the sad look in his face gave a kind of a flicker, like mist upon the mountains on a miserable day when a faint puff comes from the sea and the mist would lift if it could. And the butler refilled my glass very attentively. I asked her first if she hunted, and paused and began my story. I told her where we found the fox and how fast and straight he had gone, and how I had got through the village by keeping to the road, while the little gardens and wire, and then the river had stopped the rest of the field. I told her the kind of country that we crossed and how splendid it looked in the spring, and how mysterious the valleys were as soon as the twilight came, and what a glorious horse I had and how wonderfully he went.

“I was so fearfully thirsty after the great hunt that I had to stop for a moment now and then, but I went on with my description of that famous run, for I had warmed to the subject, and after all there was nobody to tell of it but me except my old whipper-in, and ‘the old fellow’s probably drunk by now’ I thought. I described to her minutely the exact spot in the run at which it had come to me clearly that this was going to be the greatest hunt in the whole history of Kent. Sometimes I forgot incidents that had happened, as one well may in a run of twenty miles, and then I had to fill in the gaps by inventing. I was pleased to be able to make the party go off well by means of my conversation, and besides that the lady to whom I was speaking was extremely pretty: I do not mean in a flesh-and-blood kind of way, but there were little shadowy lines about the chair beside me that hinted at an unusually graceful figure when Miss Rosalind Smith was alive; and I began to perceive that what I first mistook for the smoke of guttering candles and a tablecloth waving in the draught was in reality an extremely animated company who listened, and not without interest, to my story of by far the greatest hunt that the world had ever known: indeed, I told them that I would confidently go further and predict that never in the history of the world would there be such a run again. Only my throat was terribly dry.

“And then, as it seemed, they wanted to hear more about my horse. I had forgotten that I had come there on a horse, but when they reminded me it all came back, they looked so charming leaning over the table, intent upon what I said, that I told them everything they wanted to know. Everything was going so pleasantly if only Sir Richard would cheer up. I heard his mournful voice every now and then—these were very pleasant people if only he would take them the right way. I could understand that he regretted his past, but the early seventies seemed centuries away,

and I felt now that he misunderstood these ladies, they were not revengeful as he seemed to suppose. I wanted to show him how cheerful they really were, and so I made a joke and they all laughed at it, and then I chaffed them a bit, especially Rosalind, and nobody resented it in the very least. And still Sir Richard sat there with that unhappy look, like one that has ended weeping because it is vain and has not the consolation even of tears.

“We had been a long time there, and many of the candles had burnt out, but there was light enough. I was glad to have an audience for my exploit, and being happy myself I was determined Sir Richard should be. I made more jokes and they still laughed good-naturedly; some of the jokes were a little broad perhaps, but no harm was meant. And then,—I do not wish to excuse myself, but I had had a harder day than I ever had had before, and without knowing it I must have been completely exhausted; in this state the champagne had found me, and what would have been harmless at any other time must somehow have got the better of me when quite tired out. Anyhow, I went too far, I made some joke,—I cannot in the least remember what—that suddenly seemed to offend them. I felt all at once a commotion in the air; I looked up and saw that they had all risen from the table and were sweeping towards the door. I had not time to open it, but it blew open on a wind; I could scarcely see what Sir Richard was doing because only two candles were left, I think the rest blew out when the ladies suddenly rose. I sprang up to apologize, to assure them—and then fatigue overcame me as it had overcome my horse at the last fence, I clutched at the table, but the cloth came away, and then I fell. The fall, and the darkness on the floor, and the pent-up fatigue of the day overcame me all three together.

“The sun shone over glittering fields and in at a bedroom window, and thousands of birds were chaunting to the spring, and there I was in an old four-poster bed in a quaint old panelled bedroom, fully dressed, and wearing long muddy boots; someone had taken my spurs and that was all. For a moment I failed to realize, and then it all came back—my enormity and the pressing need of an abject apology to Sir Richard. I pulled an embroidered bell-rope until the butler came; he came in perfectly cheerful and indescribably shabby. I asked him if Sir Richard was up, and he said he had just gone down, and told me to my amazement that it was twelve o’clock. I asked to be shown in to Sir Richard at once.

“He was in his smoking-room. ‘Good morning,’ he said cheerfully the moment I went in. I went directly to the matter in hand. ‘I fear that I insulted some ladies in your house. . .’ I began.

“ ‘You did indeed,’ he said. ‘You did indeed.’ And then he burst into tears, and took me by the hand. ‘How can I ever thank you?’ he said to me then. ‘We have been thirteen at table for thirty years, and I never dared to insult them because I had wronged them all, and now you have done it, and I know they will never dine here again.’ And for a long time he still held my hand, and then he gave it a grip and a kind of a shake which I took to mean ‘good-bye,’ and I drew my hand away then and left the house. And I found James in the disused stables with the hounds and asked him how he had fared, and James, who is a man of very few words, said he could not rightly remember, and I got my spurs from the butler and climbed on to my horse; and slowly we rode away from that queer old house, and slowly we wended home, for the hounds were foot-sore but happy and the horses were tired still. And when we recalled that the hunting season was ended, we turned our faces to spring and thought of the new things that try to replace the old. And that very year I heard, and have often heard since, of dances and happier dinners at Sir Richard Arlen’s house.”