Weyman Stanley John

The King's Stratagem, and Other Stories

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THE KING'S STRATAGEM

In the days when Henry IV. of France was King of Navarre only, and in that little kingdom of hills and woods which occupies the southwest corner of the larger country, was with difficulty supporting the Huguenot cause against the French court and the Catholic League-in the days when every isolated castle, from the Garonne to the Pyrenees, was a bone of contention between the young king and the crafty queen-mother, Catherine de Medicis, a conference between these notable personages took place in the picturesque town of La Réole.

La Réole still rises gray, time-worn, and half-ruined on a lofty cliff above the broad green waters of the Garonne, forty odd miles from Bordeaux. But it is a small place now. In the days of which we are speaking, however, it was important, strongly fortified, and guarded by a castle which looked down on a thousand red-tiled roofs, rising in terraces from the river. As the meeting-place of the two sovereigns it was for the time as gay as Paris itself, Catherine having brought with her a bevy of fair maids of honor, in the effect of whose charms she perhaps put as much trust as in her own diplomacy. But the peaceful appearance of the town was delusive, for even while every other house in it rang with music and silvery laughter, each party was ready to fly to arms without warning, if it saw that any advantage was to be gained thereby.

On an evening shortly before the end of the conference two men sat at play in a room, the deep-embrasured window of which looked down from a considerable height upon the river. The hour was late, and the town silent. Outside, the moonlight fell bright and pure on sleeping fields and long, straight lines of poplars. Within the room a silver lamp suspended from the ceiling threw light upon the table, leaving the farther parts of the room in shadow. The walls were hung with faded tapestry. On the low bedstead in one corner lay a handsome cloak, a sword, and one of the clumsy pistols of the period. Across a chair lay another cloak and sword, and on the window seat, beside a pair of saddlebags, were strewn half a dozen such trifles as soldiers carried from camp to camp-a silver comfit-box, a jeweled dagger, a mask, and velvet cap.

The faces of the players, as they bent over the dice, were in shadow. One-a slight, dark man of middle height, with a weak chin, and a mouth as weak, but shaded by a dark mustache-seemed, from the occasional oaths which he let drop, to be losing heavily. Yet his opponent, a stouter and darker man, with a sword-cut across his left temple, and that swaggering air which has at all times marked the professional soldier, showed no signs of triumph or elation. On the contrary, though he kept silence, or spoke only a formal word or two, there was a gleam of anxiety and suppressed excitement in his eyes, and more than once he looked keenly at his companion, as if to judge of his feelings or learn whether the time had come for some experiment which he meditated. But for this, an observer looking in through the window would have taken the two for only one more instance of the hawk and pigeon.

At last the younger player threw down the caster, with a groan.

"You have the luck of the Evil One," he said bitterly. "How much is that?"

"Two thousand crowns," replied the other without emotion. "You will play no more?"

"No! I wish to Heaven I had never played at all!" was the answer. As he spoke the loser rose, and going to the window stood looking moodily out.

For a few moments the elder man remained seated, gazing at him furtively, but at length he too rose, and, stepping softly to his companion, touched him on the shoulder. "Your pardon a moment, M. le Vicomte," he said. "Am I right in concluding that the loss of this sum will inconvenience you?"

"A thousand fiends!" exclaimed the young vicomte, turning on him wrathfully. "Is there any man whom the loss of two thousand crowns would not inconvenience? As for me-"

"For you," continued the other, smoothly filling up the pause, "shall I be wrong in saying that it means something like ruin?"

"Well, sir, and if it does?" the young man retorted, drawing himself up haughtily, his cheek a shade paler with passion. "Depend upon it you shall be paid. Do not be afraid of that!"

"Gently, gently, my friend," the winner answered, his patience in strong contrast with the other's violence. "I had no intention of insulting you, believe me. Those who play with the Vicomte de Lanthenon are not wont to doubt his honor. I spoke only in your own interest. It has occurred to me, vicomte, that the matter might be arranged at less cost to yourself."

"How?" was the curt question.

"May I speak freely?" The vicomte shrugged his shoulders, and the other, taking silence for consent, proceeded: "You, vicomte, are Governor of Lusigny for the King of Navarre; I, of Créance, for the King of France. Our towns lie only three leagues apart. Could I, by any chance, say on one of these fine nights, become master of Lusigny, it would be worth more than two thousand crowns to me. Do you understand?"

"No," the young man answered slowly, "I do not."

"Think over what I have said, then," was the brief answer.

For a full minute there was silence in the room. The vicomte gazed out of the window with knitted brows and compressed lips, while his companion, sitting down, leaned back in his chair, with an air of affected carelessness. Outside, the rattle of arms and hum of voices told that the watch were passing through the street. The church bell struck one. Suddenly the vicomte burst into a hoarse laugh, and, turning, snatched up his cloak and sword. "The trap was very well laid, M. le Capitaine," he said almost jovially; "but I am still sober enough to take care of myself-and of Lusigny. I wish you good-night. You shall have your money, never fear."

"Still, I am afraid it will cost you dearly," the captain answered, as he rose and moved toward the door to open it for his guest. His hand was already on the latch when he paused. "Look here," he said, "what do you say to this, then? I will stake the two thousand crowns you have lost to me, and another thousand besides against your town. Fool! no one can hear us. If you win, you go off a free man with my thousand. If you lose, you put me in possession one of these fine nights. What do you say to that? A single throw to decide."

The young man's pale face reddened. He turned, and his eyes sought the table and the dice irresolutely. The temptation indeed came at an unfortunate moment, when the excitement of play had given way to depression, and he saw nothing before him outside the door, on which his hand was laid, but the cold reality of ruin. The temptation to return, and by a single throw set himself right with the world was too much for him. Slowly he came back to the table. "Confound you!" he said irritably. "I think you are the devil himself, captain."

"Don't talk child's talk!" said the other coldly, drawing back as his victim advanced. "If you do not like the offer you need not take it."

But the young man's fingers had already closed on the dice. Picking them up he dropped them once, twice, thrice on the table, his eyes gleaming with the play-fever. "If I win?" he said doubtfully.

"You carry away a thousand crowns," answered the captain quietly. "If you lose you contrive to leave one of the gates of Lusigny open for me before next full moon. That is all."

"And what if I lose, and not pay the forfeit?" asked the vicomte, laughing weakly.

"I trust to your honor," said the captain. And, strange as it may seem, he knew his man. The young noble of the day might betray his cause and his trust, but the debt of honor incurred at play was binding on him.

"Well," said the vicomte, "I agree. Who is to throw first?"

"As you will," replied the captain, masking under an appearance of indifference a real excitement which darkened his cheek, and caused the pulse in the old wound on his face to beat furiously.

"Then do you go first," said the vicomte.

"With your permission," assented the captain. And taking the dice up in the caster he shook them with a practiced hand, and dropped them on the board. The throw was seven.

The vicomte took up the caster and, as he tossed the dice into it, glanced at the window. The moonlight shining athwart it fell in silvery sheen on a few feet of the floor. With the light something of the silence and coolness of the night entered also, and appealed to him. For a few seconds he hesitated. He even made as if he would have replaced the box on the table. But the good instinct failed. It was too late, and with a muttered word, which his dry lips refused to articulate, he threw the dice. Seven!

Neither of the men spoke, but the captain rattled the cubes, and again flung them on the table, this time with a slight air of bravado. They rolled one over the other and lay still. Seven again.

The young vicomte's brow was damp, and his face pale and drawn. He forced a quavering laugh, and with an unsteady hand took his turn. The dice fell far apart, and lay where they fell. Six!

The winner nodded gravely. "The luck is still with me," he said, keeping his eyes on the table that the light of triumph which had suddenly leapt into them might not be seen. "When do you go back to your command, vicomte?"

The unhappy man stood like one stunned, gazing at the two little cubes which had cost him so dearly. "The day after to-morrow," he muttered hoarsely, striving to collect himself.

"Then we shall say the following evening?" asked the captain.

"Very well."

"We quite understand one another," continued the winner, eyeing his man watchfully, and speaking with more urgency. "I may depend on you, M. le Vicomte, I presume?"

"The Lanthenons have never been wanting to their word," the young nobleman answered, stung into sudden haughtiness. "If I live I will put Lusigny into your hands, M. le Captaine. Afterward I will do my best to recover it-in another way."

"I shall be entirely at your disposal," replied the captain, bowing lightly. And in a moment he was alone-alone with his triumph, his ambition, his hopes for the future-alone with the greatness to which his capture of Lusigny was to be the first step, and which he should enjoy not a whit the less because as yet fortune had dealt out to him more blows than caresses, and he was still at forty, after a score of years of roughest service, the governor of a paltry country town.

Meanwhile, in the darkness of the narrow streets the vicomte was making his way to his lodgings in a state of despair and unhappiness most difficult to describe. Chilled, sobered, and affrighted he looked back and saw how he had thrown for all and lost all, how he had saved the dregs of his fortune at the expense of his loyalty, how he had seen a way of escape and lost it forever! No wonder that as he trudged alone through the mud and darkness of the sleeping town his breath came quickly and his chest heaved, and he looked from side to side as a hunted animal might, uttering great sighs. Ah, if he could only have retraced the last three hours!

Worn out and exhausted, he entered his lodging, and, securing the door behind him, stumbled up the stone stairs and entered his room. The impulse to confide his misfortunes to someone was so strong upon him that he was glad to see a dark form half sitting, half lying in a chair before the dying embers of a wood fire. In those days a man's natural confidant was his valet, the follower, half-friend, half-servant, who had been born on his estate, who lay on a pallet at the foot of his bed, who carried his *billets-doux* and held his cloak at the duello, who rode near his stirrup in fight and nursed him in illness, who not seldom advised him in the choice of a wife, and lied in support of his suit.

The young vicomte flung his cloak over a chair. "Get up, you rascal!" he cried impatiently. "You pig, you dog!" he continued, with increasing anger. "Sleeping there as though your master were

not ruined by that scoundrel of a Breton! Bah!" he added, gazing bitterly at his follower, "you are of the *canaille*, and have neither honor to lose nor a town to betray!"

The sleeping man moved In his chair and half turned. The vicomte, his patience exhausted, snatched the bonnet from his head, and threw it on the ground. "Will you listen?" he said. "Or go, if you choose look for another master. I am ruined! Do you hear? Ruined, Gil! I have lost all-money, land, Lusigny itself, at the dice!"

The man, aroused at last, stooped with a lazy movement, and picking up his hat dusted it with his hand, and rose with a yawn to his feet.

"I am afraid, vicomte," he said, his tones, quiet as they were, sounding like thunder in the vicomte's astonished and bewildered ears, "I am afraid that if you have lost Lusigny, you have lost something which was not yours to lose!"

As he spoke he struck the embers with his foot, and the fire, blazing up, shone on his face. The vicomte saw, with unutterable confusion and dismay, that the man before him was not Gil at all, but the last person in the world to whom he should have betrayed himself. The astute smiling eyes, the aquiline nose, the high forehead, and projecting chin, which the short beard and mustache scarcely concealed, were only too well known to him. He stepped back with a cry of horror. "Sire!" he said, and then his tongue failed him. He stood silent, pale, convicted, his chin on his breast. The man to whom he had confessed his treachery was the master whom he had conspired to betray.

"I had suspected something of this," Henry of Navarre continued, after a pause, a tinge of irony in his tone. "Rosny told me that that old fox, the Captain of Créance, was affecting your company a good deal, M. le Vicomte, and I find that, as usual, his suspicions were well founded. What with a gentleman who shall be nameless, who has bartered a ford and a castle for the favor of Mlle. de Luynes, and yourself, I am blest with some faithful followers! For shame!" he continued, seating himself with dignity, "have you nothing to say for yourself?"

The young noble stood with his head bowed, his face white. This was ruin, indeed, absolutely irremediable. "Sire," he said at last, "your Majesty has a right to my life, not to my honor."

"Your honor!" quoth Henry, biting contempt in his tone.

The young man started, and for a second his cheek flamed under the well-deserved reproach; but he recovered himself. "My debt to your Majesty," he said, "I am willing to pay."

"Since pay you must," Henry muttered softly.

"But I claim to pay also my debt to the Captain of Créance."

"Oh," the king answered. "So you would have me take your worthless life, and give up Lusigny?"

"I am in your hands, sire."

"Pish, sir!" Henry replied in angry astonishment. "You talk like a child. Such an offer, M. de Lanthenon, is folly, and you know it. Now listen to me. It was lucky for you that I came in to-night, intending to question you. Your madness is known to me only, and I am willing to overlook it. Do you hear? Cheer up, therefore, and be a man. You are young; I forgive you. This shall be between you and me only," the young prince continued, his eyes softening as the other's head drooped, "and you need think no more of it until the day when I shall say to you, 'Now, M. de Lanthenon, for France and for Henry, strike!'"

He rose as the last word passed his lips, and held out his hand. The vicomte fell on one knee, and kissed it reverently, then sprang to his feet again. "Sire," he said, standing erect, his eyes shining, "you have punished me heavily, more heavily than was needful. There is only one way in which I can show my gratitude, and that is by ridding you of a servant who can never again look your enemies in the face."

"What new folly is this?" said Henry sternly. "Do you not understand that I have forgiven you?"

"Therefore I cannot give up Lusigny, and I must acquit myself of my debt to the Captain of Créance in the only way which remains," replied the young man, firmly. "Death is not so hard that I would not meet it twice over rather than again betray my trust."

"This is midsummer madness!" said the king hotly.

"Possibly," replied the vicomte, without emotion; "yet of a kind to which your Majesty is not altogether a stranger."

The words appealed strongly to that love of the chivalrous which formed part of the king's nature, and was one cause alike of his weakness and his strength, which in its more extravagant flights gave opportunity after opportunity to his enemies, in its nobler and saner expressions won victories which all his astuteness and diplomacy could not have compassed. He stood looking with half-hidden admiration at the man whom two minutes before he had despised.

"I think you are in jest," he said presently.

"No, sire," the young man answered gravely. "In my country they have a proverb about us. 'The Lanthenons,' say they, 'have ever been bad players, but good payers.' I will not be the first to be worse than my name!"

He spoke with so quiet a determination that the king was staggered, and for a minute or two paced the room in silence, inwardly reviling the generous obstinacy of his weak-kneed supporter, yet unable to withhold his admiration from it. At length he stopped, with a low, abrupt exclamation.

"Wait!" he cried. "I have it! *Ventre Saint Gris*, man, I have it!" His eyes sparkled, and, with a gentle laugh, he hit the table a sounding blow. "Ha! ha! I have it!" he repeated joyously.

The young noble gazed at him in surprise, half sullen, half incredulous. But when Henry, in low, rapid tones, had expounded his plan, the vicomte's face underwent a change. Hope and life sprang into it. The blood flew to his cheeks. His whole aspect softened. In a moment he was on his knee, mumbling the king's hand, his eyes full of joy and gratitude. After that the two talked long, the murmur of their voices broken more than once by the ripple of low laughter. When they at length separated, and Henry, his face hidden by the folds of his cloak, had stolen away to his lodgings, where, no doubt, more than one watcher was awaiting him with a mind full of anxious fears, the vicomte threw open his window and looked out on the night. The moon had set, but the stars still shone peacefully in the dark canopy above. He remembered on a sudden, his throat choking with silent repressed emotion, that he was looking toward his home-the stiff gray pile among the beech woods of Navarre which had been in his family since the days of St. Louis, and which he had so lightly risked. And he registered a vow in his heart that of all Henry's servants he would henceforth be the most faithful.

Meanwhile the Captain of Créance was enjoying the sweets of coming triumph. He did not look out into the night, it is true, but pacing up and down the room he planned and calculated, considering how he might make the most of his success. He was still comparatively young. He had years of strength before him. He would rise. He would not easily be satisfied. The times were troubled, opportunities many, fools many; bold men with brains and hands few.

At the same time he knew that he could be sure of nothing until Lusigny was actually his, and he spent the next few days in considerable suspense. But no hitch occurred. The vicomte made the necessary communications to him; and men in his own pay informed him of dispositions ordered by the governor of Lusigny which left him in no doubt that the loser intended to pay his debt.

It was, therefore, with a heart already gay with anticipation that the Captain rode out of Créance two hours before midnight on an evening eight days later. The night was dark, but he knew the road well. He had with him a powerful force, composed in part of thirty of his own garrison, bold, hardy fellows, and in part of six score horsemen, lent him by the governor of Montauban. As the vicomte had undertaken to withdraw, under some pretense or other, one-half of his command, and to have one of the gates opened by a trusty hand, the captain trotted along in excellent spirits, and stopped to scan with approval the dark line of his troopers as they plodded past him, the jingle of their swords and corselets ringing sweet music in his ears. He looked for an easy victory; but it was not any slight misadventure that would rob him of his prey. As his company wound on by the riverside,

their accouterments reflected in the stream, or passed into the black shadow of the olive grove which stands a mile to the east of Lusigny, he felt little doubt of the success of his enterprise.

Treachery apart, that is; and of treachery there was no sign. The troopers had scarcely halted under the last clump of trees before a figure detached itself from one of the largest trunks, and advanced to their leader's rein. The captain saw with surprise that it was the vicomte himself. For a second he thought something had gone wrong, but the young noble's first words reassured him. "It is all right," M. de Lanthenon whispered, as the captain bent down to him. "I have kept my word, and I think that there will be no resistance. The planks for crossing the moat lie opposite the gate. Knock thrice at the latter, and it will be opened. There are not fifty armed men in the place."

"Good!" the captain answered, in the same cautious tone. "But you-"

"I am believed, to be elsewhere, and must be gone. I have far to ride tonight. Farewell."

"Till we meet again," the captain answered; and with that his ally glided away and was lost in the darkness. A cautious word set the troop again in motion, and a very few minutes saw them standing on the edge of the moat, the outline of the gateway tower looming above them, a shade darker than the wrack of clouds which overhead raced silently across the sky. A moment of suspense, while one and another shivered-for there is that in a night attack which touches the nerves of the stoutest-and the planks were found, and as quietly as possible laid across the moat. This was so successfully done that it evoked no challenge, and the captain crossing quickly with some picked men stood almost in the twinkling of an eye under the shadow of the gateway. Still no sound was heard save the hurried breathing of those at his elbow or the stealthy tread of others crossing. Cautiously he knocked three times and waited. The third rap had scarcely sounded, however, before the gate rolled silently open, and he sprang in, followed by his men.

So far so good. A glance at the empty street and the porter's pale face told him at once that the vicomte had kept his word. But he was too old a soldier to take anything for granted, and forming up his men as quickly as they entered, he allowed no one to advance until all were inside, and then, his trumpet sounding a wild note of defiance, his force sprang forward in two compact bodies and in a moment the town awoke to find itself in the hands of the enemy.

As the vicomte had promised, there was no resistance. In the small keep a score of men did indeed run to arms, but only to lay them down without striking a blow when they became aware of the force opposed to them. Their leader, sullenly acquiescing, gave up his sword and the keys of the town to the victorious captain, who, as he sat his horse in the middle of the market-place, giving his orders and sending off riders with the news, already saw himself in fancy governor of a province and Knight of the Holy Ghost.

As the red light of the torches fell on steel caps and polished hauberks, on the serried ranks of pikemen, and the circle of white-faced townsmen, the picturesque old square looked doubly picturesque. Every five minutes, with a clatter of iron on the rough pavement and a shower of sparks, a horseman sprang away to tell the news at Montauban or Cahors; and every time that this occurred, the captain, astride on his charger, felt a new sense of power and triumph.

Suddenly the low murmur of voices was broken by a new sound, the hurried clang of hoofs, not departing but arriving. There was something in the noise which made the captain prick his ears, and secured for the messenger a speedy passage through the crowd. Even at the last the man did not spare his horse, but spurring to the captain's side, then and then only sprang to the ground. His face was pale, his eyes were bloodshot. His right arm was bound up in bloodstained cloths. With an oath of amazement, the captain recognized the officer whom he had left in charge of Créance and thundered out, "What is it?"

"They have got Créance!" the man gasped, reeling as he spoke. "They have got Créance!"

"Who?" the captain shrieked, his face purple with rage.

"The little man of Béarn! He assaulted it five hundred strong an hour after you left, and had the gate down before we could fire a dozen shots. We did what we could, but we were but one to seven. I swear, captain, we did all we could. Look at this!"

Almost black in the face, the captain swore another frightful oath. It was not only that he saw governorship and honors vanish like will-o'-the-wisps, but that he saw even more quickly that he had made himself the laughing-stock of a kingdom! And he had. To this day among the stories which the southern French love to tell of the prowess and astuteness of the great Henry, there is none more frequently told, or more frequently laughed over, than that of the famous exchange of Créance for Lusigny.

THE BODY-BIRDS OF COURT

"Eighty-eight when he died! That is a great age," I said.

"Yes indeed. But he was a very clever man, was Robert Evans, Court, and brewed good beer," my companion answered. "His home-brewed was known, I am certain, for more than ten miles. You will have heard of his body-birds, sir?"

"His body-birds?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, to be sure. Robert Evans Court's body-birds!" And he looked at me, quick to suspect that his English was deficient. He had learned it in part from books; and hence the curious mixture I presently noted of Welsh idioms and formal English phrases. It was his light trap in which I was being helped on my journey, and his genial chat which was lightening that journey; which lay through a part of Carnarvonshire usually traversed only by wool merchants and cattle dealers-a country of upland farms swept by the sea breezes, where English is not spoken even now by one person in a hundred, and even at inns and post-offices you get only "*Dim Sassenach*," for your answer. "Do you not say," he went on, "body-birds in English? Oh, but to be sure, it is in the Bible!" with a sudden recovery of his self-esteem.

"To be sure!" I replied hurriedly. "Of course it is! But as to Mr. Robert Evans, cannot you tell me the story?"

"I'll be bound there is no man in North or South Wales, or Carnarvonshire, that could tell it better, for Gwen Madoc, of whom you shall hear presently, was aunt to me. You see Robert Evans" – and my friend settled himself in his seat and prepared to go slowly up the long, steep hill of Rhiw which rose before us-"Robert Evans lived in an old house called Court, near the sea, very windy and lonesome. He was a warm man. He had Court from his father, and he had mortgages, and as many as four lawsuits. But he was unlucky in his family. He had years back three sons who helped on the farm, or at times fished; for there is a cove at Court, and good boats. Of these sons only one was married-to a Scotchwoman from Bristol, I have heard, who had had a husband before, a merchant captain, and she brought with her to Court a daughter, Peggy, ready-made as we say. Well, of those three fine men, there was not one left in a year. They were out fishing in a boat together, and Evan-that was the married one-was steering as they came into the cove on a spring tide running very high with a south wind. He steered a little to one side-not more than six inches, upon my honor-and pah! in an hour their bodies were thrown up on Robert Evans' land just like bits of seaweed. But that was not all. Evan's wife was on the beach at the time, so near she could have thrown a stone into the boat. They do say that before she was pining away at Court-it was bleak and lonesome and cold, in the winters, and she had been used to live in the towns. But, however, she never held up her head after Evan was drowned. She took to her bed, and died in the short month. And then of all at Court there were left only Robert Evans and the child Peggy."

"How old was she then?" I asked. He had paused, and was looking thoughtfully before, as striving, it would seem, to make the situation quite clear to himself.

"She was twelve, and the old man eighty and more. She was in no way related to him, you will remember, but he had her stop, and let her want for nothing that did not cost money. He was very careful of money, as was right. It was that made him the man he was. But there were some who would have given money to be rid of her. Year in and year out they never let the old man rest but that he should send her to service at least-though her father had been the captain of a big ship; and if Robert Evans had not been a stiff man of his years, they would have had their will."

"But who-"

By a gesture he stopped the words on my lips as there rose mysteriously out of the silence about us a sound of wings, a chorus of shrill cries. A hundred white forms swept overhead, and fell a white cluster about something in a distant field. They were sea gulls. "Just those same!" he said proudly,

jerking his whip in their direction-"body-birds. When the news that Robert Evans' sons were drowned got about, there was a pretty uprising in Carnarvonshire. There seemed to be Evanses where there had never been Evanses before. As many as twenty walked in the funeral, and you may be sure that afterward they did not leave the old man to himself. The Llewellyn Evanses were foremost. They had had a lawsuit with Court, but made it up now. Besides there were Mr. and Mrs. Evan Bevan, and the three Evanses of Nant, and Owen Evans, and the Evanses of Sarn, and many more, who were all forward to visit Court and be friendly with old Gwen Madoc, Robert's housekeeper. I am told they could look black at one another, but in this they were all in one tale, that the foreign child should be sent away; and at times one and another would give her a rough word."

"She must have had a bad time," I observed.

"You may say that. But she stayed, and it was wonderful how strong and handsome she grew up, where her mother had just pined away. The sailors said it was her love of the sea; and I have heard that people who live inland about here come to think of nothing but the land-it is certain that they are good at a bargain-while the fishermen who live with a great space before them are finer men, I have heard, in their minds as well as their bodies; and Peggy *bach* grew up like them, free and open and upstanding, though she lived inland. When she was in trouble she would run down to the sea, where the salt spray washed away her tears and the wind blew her hair, that was of the color of seaweed, into a tangle. She was never so happy as when she was climbing the rocks among the sea gulls, or else sitting with her books at the cove where the farm people would not go for fear of hearing the church bells that bring bad luck. Books? Oh, yes, indeed! next to the sea she was fond of books. There were many volumes, I have been told, that were her mother's; then Robert Evans, though he was a Wesleyan, went to church because there was no Wesleyan chapel, the Calvinistic Methodists being in strength about here; and the minister lent her many English books and befriended her. And I have heard that once, when the Llewellyn Evanses had been about the girl, he spoke to them so that they were afraid to drive down Rhiw hill that night, but led the horse; and I think it may be true, for they were Calvinists. Still, he was a good man, and I know that many Calvinists walked in his funeral."

"*Requiescat in pace*," said I.

"Eh! Well, I don't know how that may be," he replied, "but you must understand that all this time the Llewellyn Evanses, and the Evanses of Nant, and the others would be over at Court once or twice a week, so that all the neighborhood called them Robert Evans' body-birds; and when they were there Peggy McNeill would be having an ill time, since even the old man would be hard to her; and more so as he grew older. But, however, there was a better time coming, or so it seemed at first, the beginning of which was through Peter Rees' lobster pots. He was a great friend of hers. She would go out with him to take up his pots-oh! it might be two or three times a week. So it happened one day, when they had pushed off from the beach, and Peggy was steering, that old Rees stopped rowing on a sudden.

"'Why don't you go on, Peter?' said Peggy.

"'Bide a bit,' said old Rees.

"'What have you forgotten?' said she, looking about in the bottom of the boat. For she knew what he used very well.

"'Nought,' said he. But all the same he began to put the boat about in a stupid fashion, afraid of offending her, and yet loath to lose a shilling. And so, when Peggy looked up, what should she see but a gentleman-whom Rees had perceived, you will understand-stepping into the boat, and Peter Rees not daring to look her in the face because he knew well that she would never go out with strangers.

"Of course the young gentleman thought no harm, but said gayly, 'Thank you! I am just in time.' And what should he do, but go aft and sit down on the seat by her, and begin to talk to Rees about the weather and the pots. And presently he said to her, 'I suppose you are used to steering, my girl?'

"'Yes,' said Peggy, but very grave and quiet-like, so that if he had not determined that she was old Rees' daughter he would have taken notice of it. But she was wearing a short frock that she used for the fishing, and was wet with getting into the boat, moreover.

"'Will you please to hold my hat a minute,' he said, and with that he put it in her lap while he looked for a piece of string with which to fasten it to his button. Well, she said nothing, but her cheeks were scarlet, and by and by, when he had called her 'my girl' two or three times more-not roughly, but just off-hand, taking her for a fisher-girl-Peter Rees could stand it no longer, shilling or no shilling.

"'You mustn't speak that fashion to her, master,' he said gruffly.

"'What?' said the gentleman, looking up. He was surprised, and no wonder, at the tone of the man.

"'You mustn't speak like that to Miss McNeill, Court,' repeated old Rees more roughly than before. 'You are to understand she is not a common girl, but like yourself.'

"The young gentleman turned and looked at her just once, short and sharp, and I am told that his face was as red as hers when their eyes met. 'I beg Miss McNeill's pardon-humbly,' he said, taking off his hat grandly, yet as if he meant it too; 'I was under a great misapprehension.'

"After that you may believe they did not enjoy the row much. There was scarcely a word said by anyone until they came ashore again. The visitor, to the great joy of Peter, who was looking for a sixpence, gave him half a crown; and then walked away with the young lady, side by side with her, but very stiff and silent. However, just as they were parting, Peter could see that he said something, having his hat in his hand the while, and that Miss Peggy, after standing and listening, bowed as grand as might be. Upon which they separated for that time.

"But two things came of this; first, that everyone began to call her Miss McNeill, Court, which was not at all to the pleasure of the Llewellyn Evanses. And then that, whenever the gentleman, who was a painter lodging at Mrs. Campbell's of the shop, would meet her, he would stop and say a few words, and more as the time went on. Presently there came some wet weather; and Mrs. Campbell borrowed for his use books from her, which had her name within; and later he sent for a box of books from London, and then the lending was on the other side. So it was not long before people began to see how things were, and to smile when the gentleman treated old Robert Evans at the Newydd Inn. The fishermen, when he was out with them, would tack so that he might see the smoke of Court over the cliffs; and there was no more Peggy *bach* to be met, either rowing with Peter Rees or running wild among the rocks, but a very sedate young lady who yet did not seem to be unhappy.

"The old man was ailing in his limbs at this time, but his mind was as clear as ever, and his grip of the land as tight. He could not bear, now that his sons were dead, that anyone should come after him. I am thinking that he would be taking everyone for a body-bird. Still the family were forward with presents and such like, and helped him perhaps about the farm; so that though there was talk in the village, no one could say what will he would make.

"However, one day toward winter Miss Peggy came in late from a walk, and found the old man very cross. 'Where have you been?' he cried angrily. Then without any warning, 'You have been courting,' he said, 'with that fine gentleman from the shop?'

"'Well,' my lady replied, putting a brave face upon it, as was her way, 'and what then, grandfather? I am not ashamed of it.'

"'You ought to be!' he cried, banging his stick upon the floor. 'Do you think that he will marry you?'

"'Yes, I do,' she replied stoutly. 'He has told you so to-day, I know.'

"Robert Evans laughed, but his laugh was not a pleasant one. 'You are right,' he said. 'He has told me. He was very forward to tell me. He thought I was going to leave you my money. But I am not! Mind you that, my girl.'

"'Very well,' she answered, white and red by turns.

"'You will remember that you are no relation of mine!' he went on viciously, for he had grown very crabbed of late. 'And I am not going to leave you money. He is after my money. He is nothing but a fortune-catcher!'

"'He is not!' she exclaimed, as hot as fire, and began to put on her hat again.

"'Very well! We shall see!' answered Robert Evans. 'Do you tell him what I say, and see if he will marry you. Go! Go now, girl, and you need not come back! You will get nothing by staying here!' he cried, for what with his jealousy and the mention of money he was furious-'not a penny! You had better be off at once!'

"She did not answer for a minute or so, but she seemed to change her mind about going, for she laid down her hat, and went about the house place getting tea ready-and no doubt her fingers trembled a little-until the old man cried, 'Well, why don't you go? You will get nothing by staying.'

"'I shall stay to take care of you all the same,' she answered quietly. 'You need not leave me anything, and then-and then I shall know whether you are right.'

"'Do you mean it?' asked he sharply, after looking at her in silence for a moment.

"'Yes,' said she.

"'Then it's a bargain!' cried Robert Evans-'it's a bargain!' And he said not a word more about it, but took his tea from her and talked of the Llewellyn Evanses, who had been to pay him a visit that day. It seemed, however, as if the matter had upset him, for he had to be helped to bed, and complained a good deal, neither of which things were usual with him.

"Well, it is not unlikely that the young lady promised herself to tell her lover all about it next day, and looked to hear many times over from his own lips that it was not her money he wanted. But this was not to be, for early the next morning Gwen Madoc was at her door.

"'You are to get up, miss,' she said. 'The master wants you to go to London by the first train.'

"'To London!' cried Peggy, very much astonished. 'Is he ill? Is anything the matter, Gwen?'

"'No,' answered the old woman very short. 'It is just that.'

"And when the girl, having dressed hastily, came down to Robert Evans' room, she found that this was pretty nearly all she was to learn. 'You will go to Mrs. Richard Evans, who lives at Islington,' he said, as if he had been thinking about it all night. 'She is my second cousin, and will find house room for you, and make no charge. A telegram shall be sent to her this morning. To-morrow you will take this packet to the address upon it, and the next day a packet will be returned to you, which you will bring back to me. I am not well to-day, and I want to have the matter settled and off my mind, Peggy.'

"'But could not someone else go, if you are not well?' she objected, 'and I will stop and take care of you.'

"He grew very angry at that. 'Do as you are bidden, girl,' he said. 'I shall see the doctor to-day, and for the rest, Gwen can do for me. I am well enough. Do you look to the papers. Richard Evans owes me money, and will make no charge for your living.'

"So Miss Peggy had her breakfast, and in a wonderfully short time, as it seemed to her, was on the way to London, with plenty of leisure on her hands for thinking-very likely for doubting and fearing as well. She had not seen her sweetheart, that was one thing. She had been dispatched in a hurry, that was another. And then, to be sure, the big town was strange to her.

"However, nothing happened there, I may tell you. But on the third morning she received a short note from Gwen Madoc, and suddenly rose from breakfast with Mrs. Richard, her face very white. There was news in the letter-news of which all the neighborhood for miles round Court was by that time full. Robert Evans, if you will believe it, was dead. After ailing for a few hours he had died, with only Gwen Madoc to smooth his pillow.

"It was late when she reached the nearest station to Court on her way back, and found a pony trap waiting for her. She was stepping into it when Mr. Griffith Hughes, the lawyer, saw her, and came up to speak.

"'I am sorry to have bad news for you, Miss McNeill,' he said in a low voice, for he was a kind man, and what with the shock and the long journey she was looking very pale.

"'Oh, yes!' she answered, with a sort of weary surprise; 'I know it already. That is why I am come home-to Court, I mean.'

"He saw that she was thinking only of Robert Evans' death, which was not what was in his mind. 'It is about the will,' he said in a whisper, though he need not have been so careful, for everyone in the neighborhood had learned all about it from Gwen Madoc. 'It is a cruel will. I would not have made it for him, my dear. He has left Court to the Llewellyn Evanses, and the money between the Evanses of Nant and the Evan Bevans.'

"'It is quite right,' she answered, so calmly that he stared. 'My grandfather explained it to me. I fully understood that I was not to be in the will.'

"Mr. Hughes looked more and more puzzled. 'Oh, but,' he replied, 'it is not so bad as that. Your name is in the will. He has laid it upon those who get the land and money to provide for you-to settle a proper income upon you. And you may depend upon me for doing my best to have his wishes carried out, my dear.'

"The young lady turned very red, and raised her eyes sharply.

"'Who are to provide for me?' she asked.

"'The three families who divide the estate,' he said.

"'And are they obliged to do so?'

"'Well-no,' said he unwillingly. 'I am not sure that they are exactly obliged. But no doubt-'

"'I doubt very much,' she answered, taking him up with a smile. And then she shook hands with him and drove away, leaving him wondering at her courage.

"Well, you may suppose it was a dreary house to which she came home. Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was executor, had been before the Llewellyn Evanses in taking possession, so that, besides a lad or two in the kitchen, there were only Gwen Madoc and the servant there, and they seemed to have very little to tell her about the death. When she had heard what they had to say, and they were all on their way to bed, 'Gwen,' she said softly, 'I think I should like to see him.'

"'So you shall, to-morrow, honey,' answered the old woman. 'But do you know, *bach*, that he has left you nothing?' and she held up her candle suddenly, so as to throw the light on the girl's tired face.

"'Oh!' she answered, with a shudder, 'how can you talk about that now?' But presently she had another question ready. 'Have you seen Mr. Venmore since-since my grandfather's death, Gwen?' she asked timidly.

"'Yes, indeed, *bach*,' answered the housekeeper. 'I met him at the door of the shop this morning. I told him where you were, and that you would be back tonight. And about the will, moreover.'

"The girl stopped at her own door and snuffed her candle. Gwen Madoc went slowly up the next flight, groaning over the steepness of the stairs. Then she turned to say good-night. The girl was at her side again, her eyes shining in the light of the two candles.

"'Oh, Gwen,' she whispered breathlessly, 'didn't he say anything?'

"'Not a word, *bach*,' answered the old woman, stroking her hair tenderly. 'He just went into the house in a hurry.'

"Miss Peggy went into her room much in the same way. No doubt she would be telling herself a great many times over before she slept that he would come and see her in the morning; and in the morning she would be saying, 'He will come in the afternoon;' and in the afternoon, 'He will come in the evening.' But evening came, and darkness, and still he did not appear. Then she could endure it no longer. She let herself out of the front door, which there was no one now to use but herself, and with a shawl over her head ran all the way down to the shop. There was no light in his window upstairs: but at the back door stood Mrs. Campbell, looking after someone who had just left her.

"The girl came, strangely shrinking at the last moment, into the ring of light about the door. 'Why, Miss McNeill!' cried the other, starting visibly at sight of her. 'Is it you, honey? And are you alone?'

"'Yes; and I cannot stop. But oh, Mrs. Campbell, where is Mr. Venmore?'

"'I know no more than yourself, my dear,' said the good woman reluctantly. 'He went from here yesterday on a sudden-to take the train, I understood.'

"'Yesterday? When? At what time, please?' asked the young lady. There was a fear, which she had been putting from her all day. It was getting a footing now.

"'Well, it would be about midday. I know it was just after Gwen Madoc called in about the-'

"But the girl was gone. It was not to Mrs. Campbell she could make a moan. It was only the night wind that caught the 'Oh, cruel! cruel!' which broke from her as she went up the hill. Whether she slept that night at all I am not able to say. Only that when it was dawn she was out upon the cliffs, her face very white and sad-looking. The fishermen who were up early, going out with the ebb, saw her at times walking fast and then standing still and looking seaward. But I do not know what she was thinking, only I should fancy that the gulls had a different cry for her now, and it is certain that when she had returned and came down into the parlor at Court for the funeral, there were none of the Evanses could look her in the face with comfort.

"They were all there, of course. Mr. Llewellyn Evans-he was an elderly man, with a gray beard like a bird's nest, and very thick lips-was sitting with his wife on the horsehair sofa. The Evanses of Nant, who were young men with lank faces and black hair combed upward, were by the door. The Evan Bevans were at the table; and there were others, besides Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was undoing some papers when she entered.

"He rose and shook hands with her, marking pitifully the dark hollows under her eyes, and inwardly confirming his resolution to get her a substantial settlement. Then he hesitated, looking doubtfully at the others. 'We are going to read the will before the funeral instead of afterward,' he said.

"'Oh!' she answered, taken aback-for in truth she had forgotten all about the will. 'I did not know. I will go, and come back later.'

"'No, indeed!' cried Mrs. Llewellyn Evans, 'you had better stop and hear the will-though no relation, to be sure.'

"But at that moment Gwen Madoc came in, and peered round with a grim air of importance. 'Maybe someone,' she said in a low voice, 'would like to take a last look at the poor master?'

"But no one moved. They sighed and shook their heads at one another as if they would like to do so-but no one moved. They were anxious, you see, to hear the will. Only Peggy, who had turned to go out, said, 'Yes, Gwen, I should,' and slipped out with the old woman.

"'There is nothing to keep us now?' said Mr. Hughes briskly when the door was closed again. And everyone nodding assent the lawyer went on to read the will, which was not a long one. It was received with a murmur of satisfaction, and much use of pocket-handkerchiefs.

"'Very fair!' said Mr. Llewellyn Evans, 'He was a clever man, our old friend.' All the legatees murmured after him 'Very fair!' and a word went round about the home-brewed, and Robert Evans' recipe for it. Then Llewellyn, who thought he ought to be taking the lead at Court now, said it was about time to be going to church.

"'There is one matter,' put in Mr. Griffith Hughes, 'which I think ought to be settled while we are all together. You see that there is a-what I may call a charge on the three main portions of the property in favor of Miss McNeill.'

"'Indeed, but what is that you are saying?' cried Llewellyn sharply. 'Do you mean that there is a rent charge?'

"'Not exactly a rent charge,' said the lawyer.

"'No!' cried Llewellyn with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Nor any obligation in law, sir?'

"'Well, no,' assented Mr. Hughes grudgingly.

"'Then,' said Llewellyn Evans, getting up and putting his hands in his pockets, while he winked at the others, 'we will talk of that another time.'

"But Mr. Hughes said, 'No!' He was a kind man, and very anxious to do the best for the girl, but he somewhat lost his temper. 'No!' he said, growing red. 'You will observe, if you please, Mr. Evans, that the testator says, "Forthwith-forthwith." So that, as sole executor, it is my duty to ask you to state your intentions now.'

"'Well, indeed, then,' said Llewellyn, changing his face to a kind of blank, 'I have no intentions. I think that the family has done more than enough for the girl already.'

"And he would say no otherwise. Nor was it to any purpose that the lawyer looked at Mrs. Llewellyn. She was examining the furniture, and feeling the stuffing of the sofa, and did not seem to hear. He could make nothing of the three Evanses, Nant. They all cried, 'Yes, indeed!' to what Llewellyn said. Only the Evan Bevans remained, and he turned to them in despair.

"'I am sure,' he said, addressing himself to them, 'that you will do something to carry out the testator's wishes? Your share under the will, Mr. Bevan, will amount to three hundred a year. This young lady has nothing-no relations, no home. May I take it that you will settle-say fifty pounds a year upon her? It need only be for her life.'

"Mr. Bevan fidgeted under this appeal. His wife answered it. 'Certainly not, Mr. Hughes. If it were twenty pounds now, once for all, or even twenty-five-and Llewellyn and my nephews would say the same-I think we might manage that?'

"But Llewellyn shook his head obstinately. 'I have said I have no intentions, and I am a man of my word!' he answered. 'Let the girl go out to service. It is what we have always wanted her to do. Here are my nephews. They won't mind a young housekeeper.'

"Well, they all laughed at this except Mr. Hughes, who gathered up his papers looking very black, and not thinking of future clients. Llewellyn, however, did not care a bit for that, but walked to the bell, masterful-like, and rang it. 'Tell the undertaker,' he said to the servant, 'that we are ready.'

"It was as if the words had been a signal, for they were followed almost immediately by an outcry overhead and quick running upon the stairs. The legatees looked uncomfortably at the carpet: the lawyer was blacker than before. He said to himself, 'Now that poor child has fainted!' The confusion seemed to last some minutes. Then the door was opened, not by the undertaker, but by Gwen Madoc. The mourners rose with a sigh of relief; to their surprise she passed by even Llewellyn, and with a frightened face walked across to the lawyer. She whispered something in his ear.

"'What!' he cried, starting back a pace from her, and speaking so that the wine-glasses on the table rattled again. 'Do you know what you are saying, woman?'

"'It is true,' she answered, half crying, 'and no fault indeed of mine neither.'

"Gwen added more in quick, short sentences, which the family, strain their ears as they might, could not overhear.

"'I will come! I will come!' cried the lawyer. He waved his hand to them as a sign to make room for her to pass out. Then he turned to them, a queer look upon his face; it was not triumph altogether, for there was discomfiture and apprehension in it as well. 'You will believe me, he said, 'that I am as much taken aback as yourselves-that till this moment I have been honestly as much in the dark as anyone. It seems-so I am told-that our old friend is not dead.'

"'What!' cried Llewellyn in his turn. 'What do you mean?' and he raised his black-gloved hands as in refutation.

"'What I say,' replied Mr. Hughes patiently. 'I hear-wonderful as it sounds-that he is not dead. Something about a trance, I believe-a mistake happily discovered in time. I tell you all I know; and however it comes about, it is clear we ought to be glad that Mr. Robert Evans is spared to us.'

"With that he was glad to escape from the room. I am told that their faces were very strange to see. There was a long silence. Llewellyn was the first to speak: He swore a big oath and banged his great hand upon the table. 'I don't 'believe it!' he cried. 'I don't believe it! It is a trick!'

"But as he spoke the door opened behind him, and he and all turned to see what they had never thought to see, I am sure. They had come to walk in Robert Evans' funeral; and here was the gaunt, stooping form of Robert Evans himself coming in, with an arm of Gwen Madoc on one side and of Miss Peggy on the other-Robert Evans beyond doubt, alive. Behind him were the lawyer and Dr. Jones, a smile on their lips, and three or four women half frightened, half wondering.

"The old man was pale, and seemed to totter a little, but when the doctor would have placed a chair for him, he declined it, and stood gazing about him, wonderfully composed for a man just risen from his coffin. He had all his old grim aspect as he looked upon the family. Llewellyn's declaration was still in their ears. They could find not a word to say either of joy or grief.

"'Well, indeed,' said Robert, with a dry chuckle, 'have none of you a word to throw at me? I am a ghost, I suppose? Ha!' he exclaimed, as his eye fell on the papers which Mr. Hughes had left upon the table, 'so! so! That is why you are not overjoyed at seeing me. You have been reading my will. Well, Llewellyn! Have not you a word to say to me now you know for what I had got you down?'

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