

THE WILD GEESE

by Stanley J. Weyman.

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

The man and the horse! The colonel began to understand that something more than wantonness had inspired Payton's conduct the previous night. He had had an interest in nipping the inquiry in the bud, and had acted on the instant and with considerable presence of mind.

The colonel remained within doors until five minutes before 3 o'clock. Then, attending to the directions he had received, he made his way to a particular room or a little within the back gate.

Had he glanced up at the windows he would have seen faces at them; moreover, a suspicious ear might have caught a scurrying of feet, mingled with stifled laughter. But he did not look up. He did not seem to expect to see more than he found when he entered—a great bare room, with its floor strewn with sawdust and its walls adorned here and there by a gaudy trophy of arms. In the middle of the room engaged apparently in weighing one foil against another, was a stout, dark man, whose light and nimble step gave the lie to his weight.

Certainly there came from a half-opened door at the end of the room a stealthy sound as of rats taking cover. But Colonel John did not look that way. His whole attention was bent upon the maitre d'armes, who bowed low to him. Clicking his heels together and sending his palms in the french fashion, "Good morning, sire," he said, his southern accent unmistakable. "I make you welcome."

The colonel returned his salute less elaborately.

"The maitre d'armes, Lemoine?" he said.

"Yes, sire; that is me. At your service."

"I am a stranger in Tralee, and I have been recommended to apply to you. You are, I am told, accustomed to giving lessons."

"With the small sword?" the Frenchman answered, with the same gesture of the open hands. "It is my profession."

"I am desirous of brushing up my knowledge—such as it is."

"A rare good notion," the fencing master replied, his black, beady eyes twinkling. "Vare good for me. Vare good also for you. Always ready, is the gentleman's motto, and to make himself ready his high recreation. But, doubtless, sire, with a faint smile, "you are proficient and I teach you nothing. You come but to sweat a little."

"At one time," Colonel John replied with simplicity, "I was fairly proficient. Then—this happened. He held out his right hand, and the colonel took it. "Ah!" the Frenchman said in a low tone, and he raised his hands. "That is rare ogly. That is rare ogly. Can you hold with that?" he added, inspecting the hand with interest. He was a different man.

"So, so," the colonel replied cheerfully.

"Not strong, eh? It is not possible."

"Not very strongly," the colonel assented. His hand, like Bale's, lacked two fingers.

Lemoine muttered something under his breath and looked at the colonel with a wrinkled brow. "Tut, tut!" he said, "and how long are you like that, sire?"

"Seven years."

"Pity!" Lemoine exclaimed. Again he looked at his visitor with perplexed eyes. After which, "Peste!" he said suddenly.

The colonel stared.

"It is not right!" the Frenchman continued, frowning. "I don't pardon me, sire, I do not fence with less estrople."

If the colonel had been listening he might have caught the sound of a warning cough, proceeding from the direction of the inner room. He had had his back to the half open door. "But if," he objected, "I am willing to pay for an hour's practice."

"Another day, sire. Another day, if you will."

"But I shall not be here another day. I have but today. By and by," he continued with a smile, as kindly as it was humorous, "I shall begin to think that you are afraid to pit yourself against a manco!"

"Oh, la! la!"

"Do me the favor, then," Colonel John retorted. "If you please."

Against one of the walls were three chairs arranged in a row. Before each stood a stool, and beside it a pair of boot hooks, and a pair of gloves. There were two or three pegs for the occupant's wig, cravat and cane. The colonel, without waiting for a further answer, took his seat on one of the chairs, removed his boots, and then his coat, vest and wig, which he hung on the pegs above him.

"And now," he said gaily, as he stood up, "the mask!"

He did not see the change, but as he rose, the door of the room behind him became fringed with grimacing faces. Payton, the two youths who had leaned from the window of the inn, a couple of older officers, half a dozen subalterns, all were there. The more grave could hardly keep the more hilarious in order. The stranger, who fought no duels, yet thought that a lesson or two would make him a match for a dead-head like Payton—was ever such a promising joke conceived?

The Frenchman made no further demand. He took his mask, and proffered a choice of foils to his antagonist, whose figure, freed from the heavy coat and vest of the day, seemed more supple than the Frenchman had expected. "A pity, a pity!" the latter said to himself. "To the loss, he never was professor, the joy of life."

"Are you ready?" Colonel John asked.

"At your service, sire," the maitre d'armes replied. "The two advanced each a foot, the colonel with a confident salute with that graceful and courteous engagement which to an ignorant observer is one of the charms of the foil. As they did so, and steel grating on steel, the eavesdroppers in the inner room, and the soft, anubush-like rats issuing softly from the floor, seemed to be listening with interest. The colonel was not, strictly speaking, a tyro; moreover he had, as he said, a long reach. He was no match indeed for Lemoine, who might have touched him thrice had he put forth his strength. But he did nothing absurd. When he dropped his point, therefore, at the end of the rally, and turning to take breath came face to face with the gallery of onlookers, the best natured of these felt rather foolish. But Colonel John seemed to find nothing surprising in their presence. He saluted them courteously with his weapon. "I am afraid I cannot show you much sport, gentlemen," he said.

"One or two minutes, something—a good day, or the like," he said, merrily. Payton said nothing, but

folding his arms with a superior air, and frowning against the wall.

"Parbleu," said Lemoine as they rested. "It is a pity. The wrist is excellent, rare. But the pointing finger is not—is not!"

"I do my best," the colonel answered, with cheerful resignation. "Shall we engage again?"

"At your pleasure."

The Frenchman's eye no longer twinkled; his gallantry was on its mettle. He was grave and severe, fixing his gaze on the colonel's attack, and remaining blind to the nods and shrugs of his patrons in the background. Again he touched the colonel, and, alas, again, with an ease he could not mask.

Colonel John, a little breathed, and perhaps a little chagrined, dropped his point. Some one coughed, and another tittered.

"I think he will need another lesson or two," Payton remarked, loudly enough for all to hear.

The man whom he addressed made an inaudible answer. The colonel turned toward them.

"And—a new hand," Payton added in the same tone.

Even for his henchmen the remark was almost too much. But the colonel, strange to say, seemed to find nothing offensive in it. On the contrary, he replied to it.

"That was precisely," he said, "what I thought when this—he indicated his maimed hand—happened to me. And I did my best to procure one."

"Did you succeed?" Payton retorted in an insolent tone.

"To some extent," the colonel replied, in the most matter-of-fact manner. And he transferred the foil to his left hand.

"Give you four to one," Payton rejoined, "Lemoine hits you twice before you hit him once."

Colonel John had anticipated some of the things that had happened. But he had not foreseen this. He was quick to see the use to which he might put it, and it was only for an instant that he hesitated. Then "Four to one?" he repeated.

"Five, if you like," Payton sneered.

"If you will wager," the colonel said slowly, "if you will wager the gray mare you were riding this morning, sir—"

Payton uttered an angry oath. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Against 10 guineas," Colonel John continued, carelessly, bending the foil against the floor and letting it spring to its length again, "I will make that wager."

Payton scowled at him. He was aware of the other's interest in the mare and suspected that he had come to recover her. And caution would have had him refuse the snare. But his toadies were about him, he had ruled the roost, to retreat went against the grain; while to suppose that the man had the least chance against the floor and letting it spring to its length again, "I will make that wager."

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"It is true," the colonel answered, smiling.

"And learned that trick from him?"

"I did. It is of little use except to a left handed man."

"Yet in play with one not of the first force it succeeds twice out of three times," Lemoine answered. "Twice out of three times, with the right hand, I remember it well."

"I offered the master 20 guineas, monsieur, if he would teach me. But because"—he held out his palms pathetically—"I was right handed he would not."

"I am fortunate," Colonel John answered, bowing, "in being able to requite your good nature. I shall be pleased to teach it to you for nothing, but now, gentlemen," he continued, giving up his foil to Lemoine and removing his mask, "gentlemen, you will bear me witness I trust, that I have won the wager?"

Some nodded, some murmured an affirmative, others turned toward Payton, who nodded sullenly. How willingly the folk would have laid the Colonel dead at his feet, and Lemoine, and the whole crew, friends and enemies! "Oh, hang you!" he said. "Take the mare; she's in the stable."

That a brother officer touched his arm and drew him aside. The interviewer seemed to be reminding him of something; and the Colonel, not inattentive, caught the name "Asgil" twice repeated. But Payton was too angry to care for minor consequences. He took off his adviser with a rough hand.

"What do I care?" he answered. "He must shoe his own cattle!" Then, with a poor show of hiding his spite under a cloak of insolence, he addressed the Colonel. "The mare is yours," he said. "Much good may she do you."

And he turned on his heel and went out of the armory.

CHAPTER VII.

BARGAINING.

It was perhaps because Flavia often sought the tower beside the waterfall at sunset, and he had noted that, that Luke Asgill's steps bore him thither on an evening three days after the colonel's departure for Tralee. Asgill had remained at Morristown, though the gloom of the winter twilight and his presence. But to all her remonstrances the McMurrough had replied, with his usual carelessness, that the man was there on business—did she want to recover her mare, or did she not? And the fact of his being there, which she might rightly have attributed to Asgill's presence—had not melted her.

But that as it might, Asgill did not find her at the tower. But he thought that she might still come, and he waited, sitting low, with his back against the ruined wall, that she might not see him until it was too late for her to retreat, and by he heard footsteps mounting the path; his face reddened, and he made as if he would rise. But the face that rose above the brow was not Flavia's, but her brother's. And Asgill swore.

The McMurrough understood, grinned, and threw himself on the ground beside him. "You'll be wishing me in the devil's bowl, I'm thinking," he said. "Yet, faith, I'm not so sure—if you're not a fool. For it's certain I am your brother, and I might die in the gutter for you! But an egg, and an egg's fair sharing."

"Have I said it was any other?" Asgill asked gloomily.

"The old place is mine, and I'm minded to keep it."

"And any other marries her," Asgill said quietly, "he will want her rights."

"Well, and do you think," the younger man answered in his ugliest manner, "that I'm weren't for that small fact, Mister Asgill?"

"And the small fact," Asgill struck in, "that before your grandfather died I lent you a clear five hundred, and I'm to take that, that's my own already, in quitclaim of all!"

"Well, and wasn't it that same I'm saying?" the McMurrough retorted. "If it weren't for that and the bargain we've struck, do you think that I'd be looking my sister and a McMurrough lady in the eye?"

"The look Asgill shot at him would have made a wiser man tremble. But the McMurrough knew the strength of his position.

"An' you were to tell her?" Asgill said slowly.

"What?"

"That we've made a bargain about her."

It's the last strand of hope you'd be breaking, my man," the younger man answered briskly. "For you'd lose my help, and she'd not believe you—though every priest in Doual backed your word!"

(Continued Next Week)

REINCARNATE.

Or ever the knightly years were gone With the old world to the grave, I was a king in Babylon And you were a Christian slave.

I saw, I took, I cast you by, I bent and broke your pride. You loved me well, or I heard them lie, But you does not mean that you should keep your wife informed about your business. Every man should talk over his affairs with his wife, and she should always know the exact condition of his business. Many a man has come to grief by keeping his wife in ignorance of his straitened circumstances or declining business, or of the fact that he was temporarily pressed for capital and unable to indulge in certain luxuries. A good wife will help a man amazingly in his business troubles or struggles to get established. If she knows just how he is situated and what is required of her. Her economy and her planning may give just the needed support; her sympathy may take out the sting of the pain, and enable him to bear his trials. This confiding frankness in a wife is a very different thing from everlastingly harping on the disagreeable features of a business or letting their ruin your attitude toward your family, making life miserable for those who do not blame.

And a myriad suns have set and shone Since then upon the grave, Decried by the king in Babylon To her that had been his slave.

The pride I trampled is now my scathe, For it tramples me again, The old resentment lasts till death, I break my heart on your hard unfaith, And I break my heart in vain.

Yet not for an hour do I wish undone The deed beyond the grave, When I was a king in Babylon And you were a virgin slave.

—W. E. Henley.

The loudest smelling auto is not necessarily the one that runs over the most people.

Most of the men who are too bashful to propose marry widows.

The man who reserves a friend from whom to borrow an umbrella has something in store for a rainy day.

Usually physicians' bulletins are not signals for help, but notice to the undertaker.

There is many a man who reminds one of a sheep in wolf's clothing.

The woman who is promised that he will gratify her smallest wish is left in doubt.

It is always dangerous for a man married to a brunet to kiss a peroxide blond.

STAGE DISCIPLINE.

A Discourse by Horace Wyndham, St. James' Theater, London.

From the Sketch: It may possibly come as news to those who only witness a theatrical performance from the auditorium to learn that discipline is enforced almost as strictly on the stage as it is in a government department.

Every big London theater has a code of "rules and regulations" under which it is conducted, and rigid adherence to this is insisted upon from every one concerned—principal to call boy alike.

Speaking generally, the regulations are about twenty in number. Some managers, however, draw up so lengthy a list that they find it necessary to embody it in a small handbook.

Among the rules common to all theaters may be mentioned the following: (1) "The theater of the face must be shaven if required by the exigencies of the play represented;" (2) "All engagements to be regarded as exclusive, and no artist shall appear at any other theater or hall without the consent in writing of the manager or his representative;" (3) "All artists engaged are to be ready for the theater at the time specified, and to be ready to start at a moment's notice;" (4) "In the event of the theater being closed through riot, fire, public calamity, royal demise, epidemic or illness of principal, no salary shall be claimed during such closure;" (5) "The contract is an agreement that 'any breach of the above rules and regulations subjects the person who infringes to immediate dismissal at the option of the management.'"

As a matter of fact, however, such options are rarely exercised in extreme cases. The usual method adopted for enforcing compliance with the theater rules is much milder one. It consists in levying a graduated scale of fines for every infringement brought to light. Such fines are deducted from the offender's weekly salary, and may be anything from sixpence to a guinea.

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