

The Wedding Gift

Rafael Sabatini

Table of Contents

<u>The Wedding Gift</u>	1
<u>Rafael Sabatini</u>	1

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Sir George Jeffreys, Lord Chief Justice of England, looked up from the papers before him, and fixed his melancholy eyes upon his visitor, the Lady Mary Ormington.

You have done the State a great service, ma'am, said he, his voice gentle, his utterance slow. Of that there is no more doubt than that you'll be setting a price on't.

And his red lips startling red in so pale a face were twisted never so faintly in a sneer.

He was arrayed in his scarlet, ermine-bordered robes, for he was fresh from the court-house of Dorchester, where, pursuing the instructions of his Royal master, and venting a savage humour, sprung, perhaps, from the awful disease that ravaged him, he had horribly dealt out the dread, unsparing justice that was to make his name a by-word of blood-lust.

Yet you had looked in vain for a trace of the man's ferocious nature in that pale face, its oval outline sharpened by the heavy periwig that framed it. It was a countenance mild and comely; the eyes were large and liquid, and haunted by a look of suffering.

My lord, said the Lady Mary, wisely. I have not come to bargain, but to do my duty by my King. Were it otherwise, I would have begun by naming the price of my disclosures.

Instead of ending by it? he questioned drily.

She flushed under the humourously scornful glance, and fidgeted an instant with her riding-switch.

In no case can there be a question of price, said she, though there may be a question of rewarding a service, which your lordship has acknowledged to be great.

Sire George's smile broadened.

I have no doubt that you will find His Majesty graciously generous. What is the reward you seek?

Her increasing pallor was dissembled by the shadows of her wide, plumed hat; but the strained tones betrayed her anxiety.

I seek a small thing a small thing to His Majesty, though to me a great one I seek the pardon of a misguided gentleman who has borne arms against His Majesty in the late rising Stephen Vallancey is his name.

Having uttered the name, she watched him breathlessly.

Stephen Vallancey! he croaked, and then fell silent, frowning at the papers on the table.

The Wedding Gift

Presently, he began to smile, and her fears grew, for the smile's significance eluded her swimming senses.

Stephen Vallancey, he repeated. Hum! His arrest is expected by tomorrow. We are informed that he is in hiding in the neighborhood of St. Mary Ottery; and a troop of dragoons set out to find him an hour ago. A very desperate and dangerous man.

He looked up to find her leaning for support against the table; her face was grey, her eyes wide with fear. He was moved to a pity that was unusual in him, and to a liking for the foolish young rebel whose life she begged.

It was her good fortune to have come to him in such an hour as this. The pain by which all day he had been tormented had receded half-an-hour ago, when the Court adjourned, and the reaction brought now a mood of kindness. Besides, his petitioner was a woman of handsome shape and face, and to the appeal of beauty the libertine Chief Justice was oddly, weakly susceptible.

Now it fell out that he gave full consideration to the circumstance that Lady Mary Ormington came of a family staunchly loyal to King James, and was staunchly loyal herself, as she had just proved by the service she had done the State in revealing the details of the plot against the life of His Majesty.

You ask much, he said, as if demurring.

I have given much, she answered, and pointed to the papers.

True, he admitted. He put forth a hand, white and slender as a woman's, and took up a quill. His Majesty, no doubt, will not find the price exorbitant. I will undertake its payment, but on condition that Mr. Vallancey shall withdraw from England, and remain absent during His Majesty's lifetime, or at least, during His Majesty's pleasure.

I pledge his word for it, she cried in a glad tone.

He nodded, dipped his quill, and began to write.

So much is not necessary. I am setting it for that if Mr. Vallancey is in England seven days from now, he will be hanged if taken. There! He sealed the document, and thrust it across to her. Mr. Vallancey is very fortunate in his advocate, and very enviable.

She thanked him with a simple and touching earnestness; dropped him a curtsy, and departed hurriedly.

At the stairs' foot she found her elderly servant awaiting her.

Quick, Nat, said she, the horses. We ride at once.

Half-an-hour later, in that same room in which he had received her, the Lord Chief Justice, half drunk, was cursing himself for having paid the price too readily; another hour, and, racked by pain, he reviled himself for having paid the price at all.

Meanwhile, Lady Mary rode briskly amain in the cool of that September evening, attended by her single groom.

The news Sir George had given her, that the dragoons were ahead, bent upon Vallancey's capture, increased her haste. Accidents might occur. Vallancey at bay might offer a rash resistance, preferring a soldier's death to the hangman's rope that must await him were he taken. Therefore must she outpace the troops, and reach his hiding-place ahead of them.

The Wedding Gift

She was well mounted, and she knew the country as she knew the palm of her own hand. Often had she ridden to hounds across it, but never quite at such a breakneck pace as she rode in the dusk of that September evening, to the great alarm of her attendant. She left the road, and seemed to him bent upon going to St. Mary Ottery as the crow flies, or as nearly so as might be possible for a woman on horseback.

Ahead of them the saffron of the sky grew paler; it became faintly violet, then grey. The stars came out, and the night deepened. Still she pounded on relentlessly, uphill, downhill, by meadow and moorland, over wall and hedge, across brooks and through fords. Twice did her horse stumble, unseating her on the second occasion. Yet undaunted, she pursued her headlong way.

A fearless, high-spirited woman was Lady Mary, as Nat, old groom, was fully aware; and she was as resourceful as she was spirited.

It was midnight when two reeking, steaming horses pulled up on the very borders of Devonshire, at an inn that stood on the left bank of the Char. It was the last inn in England where you would have expected to find relays. But Lady Mary had provided for everything against the success of interview with Jeffreys, and a pair of stout nags were at once forthcoming, to dash Nat's hope that it might be her ladyship's good pleasure to lie the night in that hovel.

The saddles being transferred, they mounted the fresh horses, went splashing through the ford and on. By daybreak they had left Colyton behind them, and were breasting the slopes above the valley of the Otter. On the heights they paused to breathe their nags.

The mellow, golden light of the new-risen sun flooded the country at their feet. They beheld St. Mary Ottery still sleeping below them, and beyond it the gleaming river. For miles they could see the road that wound about the foot of the hills, and nowhere was there a sign of troops. In her reckless cross-country gallop she had outpaced them. She looked at the haggard old groom, and laughed, well pleased.

All fatigue fell from her in that moment of victory. There was no sign of weariness in her fine eyes, her cheeks were delicately flushed, and there was an uprightness in her carriage which made it seem incredible that she should have ridden fifty miles between sunset and sunrise.

Gently they ambled down the slope and through the township, heading for a homestead by the river, a mile or so beyond St. Mary. Across an old stone bridge, barred by a gate which Nat got down to unlatch, they came straight into the yard of the farm, scattering a cloud of poultry in clucking terror. A dog barked furiously, and then, before Nat raised his whip to knock, the door was opened, and a tall, heavy man came forth into the light to challenge them.

He was in grey homespun, with rough woollen stockings, and wooden-soled shoes. His face was bronzed and bearded, his hair touched with grey. There was malevolence in his air, a truculence which vanished the moment his keen blue eyes lighted on this handsome woman in her riding-habit of brown velvet.

Ye be early astir, ma'am, was his greeting, a lingering suspicion in his voice.

There is occasion for it, Master Leigh, said she, giving the reins to Nat, and coming lightly to earth. I am seeking Mr. Vallancey.

His face remained impassive.

Whom did ye zay? he inquired, as though the name uttered were one that he now heard for the first time.

The Wedding Gift

She smiled as she advanced towards the porch.

I said Mr. Vallancey, she replied, and explained: I am Lady Mary Ormington. You will have heard my name from him.

I have not, ma'am, said he. But he drew aside to make way for her, and she stepped airily past him into the hall.

It was a long, low-ceilinged chamber, paved in stone and panelled in oak that had all but blackened. In this was ruddily reflected a flickering light from the logs that burnt in the great cowed fireplace. There were leather cushions on the oak settle against the wall; a harpsichord stood open in the embrasure of the long window, and some sheets of music lay upon it. There were books on a table in mid-chamber, and a copper bowl filled with late roses, whose fragrance hung sweetly upon the air. For a rude homestead the place breathed a singular refinement.

On a side-table there was a tall white jug and a glass retaining a film of the milk that it had lately held.

'Tis what I most need, cried her ladyship. I have ridden all night, and neither bite nor sup have I had since Dorchester.

She took up the jug. It was half full of fresh milk. She looked doubtfully at the used glass, then set the rim of the jug to her dainty lips, and drank deeply.

The farmer's eyes never left her. But not the grace of her carriage, not the richness of her attire, not the noble beauty of her face was it that engaged his sole attention. His was the suspicious nature of a rustic, and of a rustic with something to hide something that it would be dangerous for him to have it known he harboured.

What if she were a spy of Bloody Jeffreys? Queer tales of his wiliness abounded in the countryside, and Vallancey had been a notorious rebel. To capture him the King's men might adopt sly shifts. It was like them, thought Leigh, to send a woman on the business of discovering his whereabouts.

The lady set down the jug and broke in upon his musings.

Come, Master Leigh, will you send to tell Mr Vallancey that I am here?

You know my name, ma'am, said Leigh woodenly.

I have it from Mr. Vallancey he told me in his letters.

He scratched his head, still dubious. Then there was an interruption.

The door leading to the interior was opened, and on the threshold a girl came to a sudden halt, checked at the sight of this splendid stranger.

Lady Mary considered her in a swift glance of some astonishment. She was slight to the point of frailness, arrayed in grey homespun, with a band of black silk at waist and hem, and a deep collar of white lawn descending to a point across her breast. A little quakeress she looked in that sober garb. Her face was delicately tinted; her red lips were parted now in the surprise reflected in her deep blue eyes eyes that announced her kinship to Joseph Leigh.

From the crown of her golden head to the soles of her dainty shoes, she explained to Lady Mary the refinement of that chamber which was a setting proper for so fair a jewel.

Even as her ladyship looked, the surprise in the child's eyes turned to recognition. She advanced a step.

The Wedding Gift

Lady Mary! she exclaimed.

Her ladyship's brows went up in quick astonishment.

Why, child, quoth she, how comes it that you know me?

I have seen your picture. Stephen has it in a locket, she explained, and left Lady Mary speechless with fresh and great surprise that the familiar manner in which the yeoman's daughter spoke of a gentleman of Mr. Vallancey's quality.

Why, then, there's no more ado, said Leigh. Your ladyship will forgive my caution, but a want on't might ha' put a nooze about my own neck as well as Mr. Vallancey's.

I understand, said she. Now that you are reassured, pray summon Mr. Vallancey.

I'll zend for him, said Leigh. He rose betimes to go a-fishing. In that moment across the cobbles of the yard came a clatter of feet. A shock-headed boy, breathless from running, flung himself into the room.

Soldiers! he gasped out in terror. There be soldiers at St. Mary and they be a-looking for Master Vallancey!

There was a sharp cry from Leigh's daughter; the colour had perished in her cheeks; her eyes were full of fear and horror, and her hand had flown to her breast as if to repress its sudden tumult.

Lady Mary observed these signs of deep concern with a sickness of misgiving.

Send for him at once, she bade the farmer, and her tone was one of cold authority. He has nothing to fear. The soldiers will not harm him. Let him be told so from me. And as you go, Master Leigh, give a thought to my groom out there. He has ridden all night with me, and is still fasting.

The yeoman bowed. Her ladyship's tone and manner were such as compelled obedience. He turned and departed with the lad who had brought news of the military.

Her ladyship seated herself in a leather armchair by the table, and proceeded to draw off her embroidered riding-gloves.

Lucy Leigh approached her, between eagerness and timidity eagerness to know more of the immunity which her ladyship had promised Stephen Vallancey, timidity of one so regal and commanding.

Your ladyship said, she murmured, that the soldiers will not harm your cousin?

My cousin? quoth her ladyship, her fine brows again contracting. As swiftly they regained their smoothness. I said so yes, she replied. But her tone was such as to discourage further questions, and for a moment Lucy stood hesitating betwixt fear of her ladyship and anxiety for knowledge.

In that moment Mary Ormington weighed the situation.

Why had Vallancey lied to this child, and told her that the lady whose picture he carried was his cousin?

Her ladyship had heard of Vallancey some of those things which are seldom heard by a man's betrothed. She had been told of his reputation for dalliance, his irrepressible gallantry, and she had striven loyally to disbelieve it all.

The Wedding Gift

Yet here it seemed was proof. And as she looked upon the gentle, trusting child before her she was moved to a great pity for her, to a great anger against Vallancey who could so unscrupulously lighten the tedium of his concealment, gathering a heart as lightly as one gathers a rose-bud, to wear it for a day and then leave it broken and wilted without another thought.

Can your ladyship not tell me more? Lucy implored I am in an agony of fear for him.

Lady Mary observed that the child expressed herself like a person of some culture, in the musical rising and falling inflexion of the west country.

Ye've grown fond of him, child, it seems, said her ladyship.

The girl's scarlet lips and averted eyes sent a stab through Lady Mary's heart. But there was worse to come.

We are to be married when this trouble is over, said Lucy softly.

She never saw Lady Mary's sudden start. Nor when presently, after a spell of silence, she raised her eyes to her visitor's face did she observe its deep pallor.

It is a great honour for you, said her ladyship, her voice expressionless. Does your father know of it?

Not yet. We have not told him. Stephen desired me to wait until matters should be easier for him.

Ah!

Her ladyship rose, her face marble-white and marble-calm. Her resolve at the moment was to call her groom and ride away as she had come, without seeing Vallancey, taking Jeffrey's pardon with her, and leaving her betrothed to his fast-approaching fate.

Nor was she obeying an impulse merely of jealousy or vengeance. It was an impulse of mercy to this poor child he had befooled for his entertainment. Better a thousand times for Lucy that Vallancey should be taken and hanged; better a thousand times than that he should ride gaily away, leaving a heart-breaking disillusion behind him. To mourn him dead would be a small sorrow by comparison.

Within a pace of the door her ladyship checked suddenly, smitten by a fresh notion; and Lucy, watching her, marvelled at the oddness of a bearing, which at last she noticed. Her ladyship's next words, she fancied, explained it.

They are very long in coming.

He may have gone some way downstream, Lucy explained, and added fearfully the question: Is there danger in his delaying?

Why, no, child, said her ladyship.

She came slowly back to the table, sat down again, and engaged Lucy in talk of this fine lover.

Gradually and skillfully she drew out the tale of it her manifest sympathy and the relationship in which Lucy believed her to stand to Vallancey, effectively inducing the girl to speak upon a topic that filled her soul.

The Wedding Gift

She found it all precisely as she had feared. The child's love for Vallancey amounted to worship; her trust in him had become the very breath of her life. In her pity for Lucy Lady Mary almost forgot to be sorry for herself. Her resolve to act upon the inspiration that had come to her gathered strength with every word that Lucy uttered. For the child's frank and artless nature made no attempt to use dissimulation with Vallancey's dear cousin.

Presently came a sound of steps and voices. Through the long latticed window they saw Vallancey crossing the bridge with Leigh and the shock-headed lad. He was shouldering a long rod, and a brace of golden trout swung from the butt of it.

Lady Mary stood up.

Go child, she said. Let me speak to to Mr. Vallancey alone a moment. I will call you.

Lucy hesitated. It was clearly in her mind to protest against this. But overawed by her ladyship's manner, she ended by obeying her, though with obvious reluctance.

A moment later, when the door opened, and Vallancey, tall, lean and bronzed, appeared in the doorway, his betrothed was alone to receive him.

He greeted her with a joyous cry; a glad smile suffused his handsome face; his bold, dark eyes beamed upon her.

Why, Mary, dear! he cried. What is't I'm told that you're the bearer of great tidings?

He advanced towards her, and she was conscious, with a pang, of the melody of his voice, the grace and ease of his carriage, which not even the rough garb he bore could dissemble. Within a pace of her he halted, perplexed by the stiffness of her attitude, the coldness of her face.

Mary Mary! said he. Then, a sudden alarm gripping him What is't? Was it not true your message? Is there danger from the troopers at St. Mary?

Her answer increased his perplexity.

That shall be as you decide.

As I decide? he stared at her, frowning. Then he forced a laugh. You greet me oddly, faith! monstrous oddly!

'Tis that I find you monstrous odd, said she; and the fool conceived her words to concern his clumsy apparel, and began to explain its expediency.

She cut him short.

I have seen your host's daughter what time I waited for you, she announced.

A sweet chit, he flung in.

I have talked with her, said her ladyship, a thought more sternly.

Have you so? said he, beginning at last to take her meaning. Odds my life!

And she tells me that you are to be wed you and she.

The Wedding Gift

He clucked impatiently.

The little fool! Then he checked her anger, and laughed. Faith! It cannot be that the Lady Mary Ormington is jealous?

Jealous!

She hurled the word at him as though it were a missile. Then a smile of scorn twisted her lovely mouth. Could I be jealous seeing that this morning I discovered you to be a stranger to me a man whose acquaintance I had never made? For that Stephen Vallancey to whom I was betrothed was surely not the gentleman who stands before me. He never had life save in my fancy, and with that fancy he perished in this room a little while ago.

Consternation overspread his face.

Stay, Mary stay! You go too fast. You do not know.

I know how you have beguiled the weariness of your sojourn here. I have it all from Lucy, who trusted me, believing me your good friend and cousin, as you had falsely told her.

Still he sought to carry it with a high hand.

Pshaw! Listen, Mary. Am I to blame in that the little fool should come to rash conclusions?

It is quite as I supposed, said she.

But he swept on.

What harm has come to her? She is a sweet child, a sweet playmate. But no more, believe me, Mary. I may have wandered with her by the stream, and talked of love and moonshine, and haply snatched a kiss or two. But, on my soul, 'twas all in play.

I nothing doubt it, sir. And you would break her heart, and that would be in play; and your fine gentleman's conscience would have nought wherewith to reproach you. But break her heart you shall not. It is my good fortune to prevent it.

He stared, crestfallen. She explained.

The King's Dragoon are at St. Mary Ottery, seeking, ferreting, inquiring. Within the hour they will be here. Depend on't. They will find you, and it will be best so. Better for her less anguishing a thousand times that she should mourn you dead than mourn you faithless. You'll leastways leave a fragrant memory behind you.

His face had paled under its healthy tan.

God! he gasped. Did ye not send me word that I no longer stand in danger?

She looked him straight between the eyes, her face merciless.

I was mistook, said she. Ye stand in imminent danger. Yet if you love your life it shall be yours so that you swear to use it for that child's happiness, and fulfil the promise you have made her.

I have made her none, he thundered, angry now.

The Wedding Gift

Not in words, perhaps though even that I doubt. But you have made her believe that you love her and that you are sincere.

And so I do, faith! But if all love is to lead to marriage a man would

She cut him short.

Your philosophy needs no expounding, sir. I know its shamelessness. You stand 'twixt life and death, Stephen. I await your choice.

For the first time in his shallow, amiably irresponsible existence he was conscious of guilt, stung by the shame of detection; and he stood sullenly silent a moment. Then with a shrug that was boyish in its petulance he turned aside and moved towards the window. Then he faced her again, his countenance in shadow.

Are you bidding me to marry her? he asked, his voice charged with incredulity.

I am bidding you do no more than fulfil your undertaking.

But it is monstrous! he protested.

It is, she agreed.

Besides, are we not betrothed, Mary, you and I?

I thought I had made it clear that you are free of that.

But I do not want my freedom. Mary, he cried petulantly, I love you. You are the wife for me. I have never ceased to love you. As for this little rustic child. Oh, sink me! Can't you understand? he ended impatiently.

I think I can, said she, her voice ice-cold.

But consider, he begged her. How could I marry her? How could I? Why, you must see 'twere midsummer madness.

And half-sullenly he turned his shoulder upon her and stared through the window across the bridge and up the long dusty road. Then he rapped out an oath. He swung around, and his face had undergone a woeful change. It reflected abject fear.

They are coming, Mary. They are coming the soldiers! he cried, and halted, dismayed, angered, speechless before her icy calm that even his imminent peril could not conquer.

You have the less time in which to determine, she informed him.

He looked at her, breathing hard; realized that she was immovable, and clenched his hands despairingly.

Tell me where I stand, he asked, his voice thickening.

Briefly she announced the terms of the pardon she had obtained for him.

You depart for Ireland with your bride, she ended, or I suppress the pardon and you hang.

The Wedding Gift

You cannot do it! he cried. You cannot!

I can and will, said she; and as he looked deep into her stern eyes, he doubted no longer.

The thud of hoofs grew faintly audibly, and then the inner door opened, and Lucy stood regarding them from the threshold. Her face was ashen, and her blue eyes gleamed a smoldering anger. But they misread the signs, and supposed her pallor to spring from fear for her fine lover.

Moreover, Vallancey was more concerned with thoughts of himself at the moment. A cunning inspiration had come to his aid. Let him agree now to Lady Mary's proposal and obtain the pardon. He need not carry out his part of the bargain afterwards.

It was a knavish thing to do to give his word without intending to fulfil it; but then, her ladyship forced it upon him, he reflected, resentfully. She gave him a choice of evils, and he must accept the lesser.

And as he stood there pondering this, Lucy's fierce eyes never left his face.

The hoofs came nearer.

It shall be as you wish, he said suddenly.

You pledge me your word? quoth Lady Mary.

On my honour, madam, he replied without hesitation. And now the pardon.

From her bosom Lady Mary drew the document she had obtained from Jeffreys. He held out a trembling hand for it.

No, she said. I prefer to give it to your little bride.

Lucy saw him wince at the term before she turned her eyes to Lady Mary and received the paper.

I hope he will make you happy, child, said her ladyship, but there was doubt and some pity in her eyes. This is my wedding—gift to you.

Lucy glanced at the paper and uttered a short, hard laugh that startled them.

It is more than that, I think, said she. It is the price at which I am to be wed; the price at which Stephen is to commit this mid—summer madness.

And she laughed again, whilst Lady Mary and Vallancey realised the latter in utter dismay and fear that she had overheard all that had passed between them.

Lucy! he cried, and checked there, not knowing what to add.

But the price need not be paid, and so you will be saved, Stephen, from this monstrous wedding. As she spoke her fingers tightened over the paper and crumpled it into her palm. And since there is to be no wedding, my lady the wedding—gift will not be needed.

And she flung the crumpled pardon into the blazing fire. Then her laughter shrilled higher with the hysteria of a heart surcharged.

The Wedding Gift

With an oath Vallancey sprang to rescue that precious document. But a fluttering film of ash was all that remained a symbol of the life which his wantonness had forfeited.

Hoofs rattled on the cobbles of the yard, and a heavy knock fell upon the door.