

# *The Rich Are With You Always*

## *Chapter I*

**B**EADOR WAS DESPERATE for money. That ought to have made negotiations simple. Sir George Beador wanted money; and John Stevenson wanted land. Specifically, he wanted twenty acres near Stockton on the river Tees, the best place in the whole country, he decided, for a small iron foundry and smelting works. Sir George Beador had land in Stockton, and John had money in the bank. Yet the negotiations were not proving at all simple.

*You're a liar, John thought. And not even a good liar.*

The young baronet's frank, blue, uncaring eyes wavered as if he read John's thoughts.

"See here, Stevenson," he blustered. "I'm putting land into this partnership." He was shivering, as if his sincerity had already been challenged. "Land!" He repeated the word, making it sound like 'blood.' John could see him trying to say 'good land' but the words stuck in his throat.

"And therefore ...?" John prompted.

"Well ... I mean to say. Just as land conveys certain privileges in life – privileges that mere money can never purchase – don't ye think it should convey the same sort of privilege in business, too?"

John pretended to consider this nonsense while he wondered what lay behind it. Sir George was trying to distract his attention from something. But from what? Nasty, uncharitable suspicions were already forming in his mind. He hoped he was wrong. In a curious way, he almost liked Sir George – an amateur swindler who had not even practised how to lie convincingly. It touched some reserve of sympathy within him.

One end of a burning log fell onto the hearth. Sir George rose and pulled the bell chain; then he stood looking directly down at the burning wood. The smoke rising from it made him cough. Even his coughing lacked conviction. It sounded like a smothered laugh.

Wheezing, Sir George crossed to the tall French window. His waterfilled eyes trembled. The sky beyond was a uniform leaden gray, and from it fell a steady rain, warm for early February. While his breath returned, he looked morosely out. "They'll find nothing today. We had the best of it this morning."

Fleeting John thought of Nora, still out there somewhere amid the weather; if they had found, she'd be up among the leaders, no matter how

strange the country or how cunning the fox. Yet how she'd love to be here, too. She'd soon run Sir George Beador to a standstill. And she'd stay to see him broken.

A footman came in and, without a word, rebuilt the fire. He did not look at Sir George, and Sir George did not even notice him.

"But you've said you're willing to pay me ten thousand pounds for the land," Sir George wheedled. "Surely you'd not go back on your word!"

John, counting silently to retain his patience, looked around the room at the books of polished leather and soft suede, warm by the firelight in their tall glass cases. The man was not the fool he seemed. It would pay to remember that. "I will offer ten thousand to secure the land and your partnership. You know the value of your name around Stockton. And elsewhere. Subtract that from ten thousand and you have the price of your land."

Sir George turned toward him at last. John could not read his face against the brightness of the window, but the voice was cold and morose. "Money! Even one's name is negotiable nowadays."

"Be thankful for that," John said.

Sir George laughed. "Aye," he agreed. "I'll not deny it." He came and sat by the fire, cheerful again. The mud that had earlier fallen from his boots crunched on the polished floor. "Should get out of these wet things. I'll regret it."

John smiled. Sir George looked at him and chuckled, an echo of his earlier laugh. "That's a smug sort of a smile, Stevenson," he said. "You've no cause for it, I may say. You may be dry but you stink of that wretched mackintosh stuff."

Sir George would not risk such warmth unless he felt he had somehow mastered this discussion. It was the moment of overconfidence for which John had been waiting.

"Not railway shares, is it, Beador?" he asked, his voice suddenly crisp and brutal. "Not been speculating there?"

Sir George's immature cunning could not withstand such an assault. His eyes registered shock, fear, guilt, confusion, and finally anger at having registered anything at all.

"Dammit, Stevenson!" he said.

"What have you applied for?" John did not relent.

"I've been allotted nothing." Sir George Beador regained some of his composure. But it was too late. The mask had slipped, and all the truculence and all the cold blue blood he could muster would never divert John Stevenson from pursuing this particular inquiry to its end, however many weeks or months it might take.

"But you have applied?"

Sir George looked sharply at him, offended.

“As a partner, I’d have to know,” John said. “I’d be liable for any debt of yours.”

Sir George lowered his eyes; his shoulders slumped. “Damn complicated,” he said to the palms of his hands.

“I must know. Before we engage in any deed.”

“I’ll draw up a list,” Sir George said. His interest in his hands was now intense, making it difficult for John to persist.

The distant clatter of hooves on sodden gravel announced the return of the rest of the party. It annoyed John; his whole purpose in leaving the field early had been to settle this partnership once and for all. If only Sir George would behave rationally, like a man needing money, instead of with this boyish mixture of dumb cunning and lordly indifference.

Sir George looked up the avenue and rubbed his hands gladly; for him the returning riders were a rescue party. John kicked a dead ember back into the grate and left the room. A more open show of his annoyance would achieve nothing.

His way out lay through the gun room, then down the passage to the north wing, which flanked the stable yard. This wing was, in fact, the remains of an H-shaped Tudor manor – or I-shaped, to keep the convention that puts north at the top. The passage was the crossbar, but where the southern wing had once stood there was now a large square block built in Georgian stone. Its full three stories laid a permanent shadow over the two humbler floors of the old red-brick manor, now called the north wing.

A large weeping ash dominated the stable yard. Through its tired branches, gleaming in the rain, he saw the riders, some still mounted. The grooms stood waiting to take their charges. He knew at once that they had broken up a fox; why else would people soaked to the skin, weary from a day’s hard riding over drenched fields through Hertfordshire gravel and clay, slip so jauntily down, pat their horses’ flanks and necks so heartily, and laugh and chatter with such gusto? Vapour from the horses hung above the group, rising with their laughter.

The last to dismount was Nora, savouring the chase to its uttermost moment, In that brief supremacy her eyes raked around the yard until they fell on John, still sheltering from the rain under the canopy of the Tudor door. The radiance of her smile banished all trace of his annoyance; for a moment their eyes dwelled, each in the other’s. He smiled reassuringly, conveying no more than a welcome. Already he could imagine the questions lining up in that part of her mind closest to speech – Had Sir George agreed? What were the terms? What was the extent of his debt? She would put them into words soon enough. And what would he tell her? That Sir George Beador had gone to earth – to a very foul-smelling earth?

She hitched up her habit and ran to him through the pendant branches of the ash, reaching the nearer cobbles in a star-burst of rain droplets shaken from

its glistening twigs. “We saw blood. There were only six on terms at the end,” she said. Rivers of rain gleamed on her skin. An intoxicant steam curled from her sodden clothing.

He grasped her outstretched arms and turned her gently in a half-circle, as in a stately dance. “And you among them, I know,” he said.

She grinned, breathed happily in, and nodded. The rest of the party now began walking more slowly toward them.

“Missed a slashing good trot, Stevenson,” Dalglish called; he was a captain in the Greys, a friend of Sir George’s younger brother. The others, knowing how shallow was John’s love of the chase, laughed.

“I was well represented, I think,” he answered.

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Sir George, despite the protests of Mrs Lambourne, his housekeeper, had put the Stevensons in the main guest suite, over the ballroom on the south of the house. All the other guests were of higher rank – indeed, as John had been no more than a railway navvy only six or seven years earlier, it would be hard not to be. It was Sir George’s none-too-subtle way of stressing how important Stevenson was to him at this moment; it was also, John was sure, Sir George’s highly subtle way of blackmailing him – saying, in effect: See how many friends I will slight for the sake of John Stevenson!

Nora had not needed to have all this explained to her. As soon as Mrs Lambourne had left them alone, having pointedly announced that this was the principal suite, Nora had laughed, with more pity than humour, at the transparency of it. “We’ll plug that gun for him,” she said. “Behave as if it was no less than our due.”

Only Mrs Lambourne had seemed disappointed at their cool acceptance of the honour.

Now John left Nora to change from her soaking habit and take a bath, while he did his daily correspondence with his deputies, partners, and subcontractors. In railways alone he was laying about 600 miles of road that year, including Berwick–Edinburgh, York–Scarborough, Faversham–Margate, and, for Brunel, a stretch of the new atmospheric railway from Exeter to beyond Teignmouth. He had many other contracts, too: a foundry and some back-to-back housing at Holbeck, just south of Leeds; some harbour works at Newcastle and more at Stockton; some wharfs at Teignmouth; and about fifteen acres of mills and housing in Warrington.

Often he thought back with something close to nostalgia to the days when he had had just one or two contracts to oversee – when sometimes an entire week would pass without a single important problem or setback. Now not a day went by without news through the mails of at least one headache. A quaking bog in the Vale of York. An uncharted subterranean river in

Warrington. Nondelivery of the atmospheric tube at Exeter. A scarcity of brick at Stockton, where frost and floods were making the local clay beds unworkable. One needed good partners and smart deputies to work so many contracts at once. Yet he would rather cope with a hundred such troubles, even by mail, than with a single George Beador or his grubby kind.

“I sh’ll go back to Yorkshire tomorrow,” he called through the open door to the dressing room, where one of the maids was helping Nora to dress. To his surprise the door was slowly closed against him, making further talk impossible. He shrugged and returned to his letters.

Now and then he heard Nora and the maid giggling, and when, at last, she came into the room, he saw her eyes gleaming with the promise of a secret to unfold. The heady, damp smell of her was gone.

“That Kitty,” she said when the maid left the room, “has been here more than ten years.

“Oh?”

“She has. That’s before Sir George bought this place from – you’ll never guess who from.”

John thought hard; the vaguest memory of some useless information stirred. “He was a merchant in the Russian trade. Someone on the Baltic Exchange?”

“But his name. His name was Thornton.”

John frowned in disbelief. “Not – no, surely not – not connected with *our* Thornton! Dear Walter?”

“His uncle!”

“I don’t believe it!”

“It’s true. She’s just told me it all ...”

“The uncle who brought him up! When he was made an orphan?” The story, as Walter had told it to them – it must have been five years since, sometime in 1840 – began to come back to him.

“That’s the one,” Nora said. “They took a plunge in forty-three. This place changed hands then. Kitty stayed on.”

Her slow, salacious grin infected him. He took her hand and led her to the sofa in the bay window. “So she knew our Walter when he was a lad,” he prompted.

“In the most biblical sense!” Nora laughed.

“She told you that?” He was astonished.

“I had to get it out of her. But she wasn’t that unwilling, not once she’d started to talk. He was even worse here, I think, than when we knew him.”

They both laughed again – a little longer and more heartily than the situation might seem to warrant. Walter Thornton was a subject of some delicacy between them. Almost six years ago, Nora, then destitute and tramping from Manchester to Leeds, had sold herself to this Walter for a few shillings – though, as it turned out, he had eventually given her a sovereign. A

casual suggestion of Walter's had led to her meeting with John, who was then at the very start of his astonishing rise from being a navvy to becoming one of the foremost contractors in England – indeed, in the world. John had always known of that transaction between Nora and Walter, yet, though he had never reproached her, she was never easy in Walter's presence, and she was always a little too brazen, too cool, when the talk turned to what they politely called Walter's 'Irish toothache' – for Thornton, as the navvies bluntly said, always carried four spare pricks in his purse.

"I had to tell her a thing or two about his goings-on since we knew him. To get her talking."

"Not ...?" he asked.

"Of course not!" She was annoyed he could even think it. "Just him and that halfwit wench on the canal bank. And the goings on with that skinny servant girl up in Carlisle – things like that."

She was smiling again. "Go on," he said. "What did Kitty say?"

She looked around, as if for eavesdroppers, before she began, in a low voice full of gossipy complicity. "He used to ..." She got no further, but covered her face and laughed. "It's awful," she said. "I shouldn't be telling you, really."

He did not reward her with any display of his impatience.

"She says he never left the servant girls alone. He was always hanging about the rooms, trying to lift their skirts while they worked. He was 'fierce to get it' always, she said. Mind you, I think she was more than half willing, was Kitty. I fancy she's a right little clever."

"Why?"

"She said he used to catch her in the garden room, which is at the far end of the north wing from here. Well, you couldn't be taken by surprise there, could you? Just imagine it. No matter what direction anyone came from, you'd get good warning. I think she has her heels lightened, all right."

"How old was he then?"

"Once he came about her five times in one day, she said. He let out he was sick, when the family went away out calling and left him, which they usually did. He often used to say he was sick then, and go to bed, and get cordials brought up."

"By Kitty?"

"Well, she wouldn't volunteer, would she? Not if she wasn't willing. She tried to talk like she hated it and only did it for fear of dismissal."

"I should think he was sick after that. Five times!"

Nora laughed again. "Aye! She said it didn't take much pretence when the rest came back. He looked like a second helping of death. But next day he was harder than ever for it. She said from the time he was sixteen he had every below-stairs and every above-stairs unmarried female. As often as they'd let

him. Also a retired cook above sixty who came back to see the family and had just been widowed.”

“A good chance,” John said judiciously. “Thornton would know that.”

“She was only here the one afternoon, but he followed her out, up the road, and took her into a field. Over sixty!” She shook her head.

He reached his arm around her. “Thou’ll be over sixty one day, see thee.” He put his lips to her ear. “And I sh’ll still crave after thee.”

She grazed her ear on his moustache and shivered, serious now. “Nay,” she said softly, dropping back into dialect, too. “Leave off with thee!” But despite this verbal rejection, she did not repel his caresses. The Walter Thornton catharsis was over – until the next time.

Far out over the park the sun slipped below the pall of raincloud, moments before it set. In that brief interval it suffused the canopy of unrelieved grey with a raw, burning red.

“Look at that,” John said. “Promises fair tomorrow.”

“Talking of promises fair,” Nora said, her eyes baleful with the borrowed fire, “what of our host?”

John sighed. “You are sure we need to go into ironfounding?” he asked. He did not want to tell her yet how inconclusive his talk with Sir George had been. Nor did he want to confess that he felt threatened in some obscure way by the very idea of partnership with the man.

She bit her lip. “You speak as though it was me forcing us to it.”

He did not answer. She pulled away from him then and grasped his arms, compelling him to face her, “It’s our business,” she said. “Not me.”

He nodded, still unhappy.

“I’m not often wrong in these things,” she said.

He smiled then. “That’s the annoying part. You’re never wrong. He touched her forehead gently. “I trust that instinct. Never fear I don’t.”

“Yet you hesitate.”

He pulled down the corners of his mouth, ruefully. “I think you and Chambers with your ledgers and balances don’t see the half of it.”

“What half?” She was not belligerent or challenging. She knew too well that the financial insight which had grown during the years she had spent in managing their books was only one small element in their business.

“Trouble like Sir George Beador, for a start,” he said. If only he could put his disquiet into words!

“Drop him! We only took him up to get land and influence cheap. But we don’t need either. Not cheap. It’s only our greed.”

He shook his head. “We must build in Stockton. We both agree it’s the best place in the whole kingdom. And we can’t build there without Beador. Not now we’ve taken him up. We can’t afford to make an enemy of him. But” – he waved Sir George away to a distant horizon – “that’s not the real worry. It’s the permanence of a foundry, d’ye see? Till now we’ve had nothing that’s

permanent. Not even the depots. It's what I'm used to. I'm a travelling man. But with a foundry we'll have static plant, a fixed gang of workers." He laid his fist heavily on the sill at each item. "Offices. Staff. Fixed deliveries. Orders. Supply troubles. Labour troubles. It's not – my skill, my instinct, it doesn't run that way."

"You've never been one to turn from troubles. Not profitable ones."

"Aye." He laughed. "I'm as keen on profit as the next man." He pinched her cheek lightly. "And as the next woman, too, belike. So I sh'll do it. I shall build. All I'm saying is, don't think that because your books say it's one-tenth of our assets, this new foundry's going to be only one-tenth of our troubles."

His answer pleased her. He had never committed himself so fully to the idea of going into ironfounding; until now he had always called his talks with Beador mere 'soundings.' She did not again raise her unanswered question about Sir George.

"By the way," he called to her as he was dressing. "I'll likely see Thornton next week. Down in Exeter. I've heard Brunel's asked him to take over daily charge down there."

"Well," she said. "I don't expect we shall ever escape him." But she barely thought of Walter Thornton; instead she wondered what dismal things John had discovered about Sir George – things that had made him lay such an elaborate false trail for her as his own alleged fear of possessing one small factory.