

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD.

BY MADGE BARLOW.

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"It's disgustingly selfish of cousin Dan to sacrifice you to a deathbed whim," grumbled Victor Merridale, leaning on the mantelpiece and scowling down at the fire which a chilly June day made necessary to the comfort of the big, draughty room. A certain greedy eagerness in his averted eye belied the annoyance of his tone, and the girl sitting on the other side of the hearth was not blind to it. She had unbuttoned her shabby jacket, thrown back her veil, and with gloved hands folded on her lap sat perfectly quiet, listening to the amazing communication she had been brought thither to hear.

"There need be no sacrifice either I consent," she reminded him.

"But you must, Caroline," he cried, his jaw dropping.

"It's a ghastly kind of farce, Victor."

"For my sake you'll carry it through, for both our sakes, to enable us to marry and end a weary hopeless engagement. You won't have to bear the unpleasantness long. Dan cannot last beyond a week or two; you'll be his widow and sole legatee, and we'll fix our wedding for an early date after three months' decorous mourning, or less, if you don't mind shocking convention."

"Why doesn't Dan Merridale leave his money to you—his relative? Why am I singled out for the burden? Why must I be mock wife and widow in order to benefit you?" She spoke irritably.

"I have already explained, and you haven't paid attention. In the first place he prefers that it should filter through your fingers into mine. In the second place he is debarred by a clause of my uncle's will from leaving the money out of the family, therefore he marries you on his deathbed to fulfil the condition. How much simpler had he arranged for your immediate marriage to me. But no, he covets the satisfaction of scoring one over me, of hearing people call you Mrs. Dan Merridale before he dies. Don't pretend that you were ignorant all along of his hopeless infatuation for you."

"For me!" Her eyes dilated and stared at him in a frightened way. "I had no idea. He didn't even hint—"

"Because he saw he had no chance and hung back. I let him understand pretty early that you favoured me, were my prize, and—er—would rather he didn't push himself."

"So like you," she smiled, and her smile had an inscrutable quality.

"And now he has the whip hand of me. Pah! If we weren't a pair of beggars I'd fling his offer in his teeth."

An imperative knock came to the door.

"They are ready for us. Don't be an idiot," he implored. "Don't spoil my whole future prospects."

"I hope you will remember that you thrust me into this," she replied as they went upstairs. The eyes of all in the room fastened on them. Caroline bowed to doctor, nurse, and clergyman, and though none of them questioned her mercenary motives, her dark beauty and proud composure won their admiration. Crossed to the bed, she bent over the sick man. He was older than Victor, with a plain rugged face, and a mouth of wonderful sweetness and strength.

"You agree to the condition?" he asked gently, and she said, "I agree."

The service began. She uttered the solemn vows firmly, faltering only at the words, "I take thee to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward." Victor noticed her agitation, and whispered encouragingly, "For a couple of weeks at the most," and Dan must have heard too, he smiled upon his bride so wistfully.

Like one in a dream she looked at the ring on her finger, answered when somebody addressed her as Mrs. Merridale, felt Victor's arm about her leading her downstairs, drank the water he held to her lips. And all the time "to have and to hold" buzzed in her ears, throbbled in her brain—"to have and to hold."

"I will fetch you home at once," said Victor.

"I am at home," said Caroline, removing hat and jacket.

Victor pleaded, expostulated, prophesied that her action would be criticized and misconstrued. She was adamant, and he adopted a domineering tone. Caroline picked up a book, and resumed her old seat at the hearth, and when his temper wore it out, he quitted the house chewing threats between his teeth.

Left alone, the girl tossed the book aside, and clasping her knees, sank into reverie, seeing strange misty pictures in the red core of the fire—things that might have been if life had not gone awry and her father's fraudulent bankruptcy cast her upon the world to earn her bread. Of her lovers and friends only Victor Merridale clung to her at that period, and in sheer gratitude she accepted his proposal of marriage and promised to wait until he could make a home for her.

In her self-absorption she was deaf to sounds around her, and Nurse Jones's prim cough at her elbow made her jump.

"Mr. Merridale is easier and dozing nicely, madam."

"That is splendid," stammered Caroline. "I am so pleased. May I see him when he awakes? We—we used to be good friends."

"If he desires it—yes. He does not ask for you."

"He thinks I've gone, maybe. You will say I'm here; let me help to nurse him, won't you?"

"Thanks. If help be required we shall get it from outside."

She winced under the harsh rebuff. A fiery spot flamed on either cheek and spread to her temples. Did they imagine that she who would benefit by his death would attempt to hasten it? Her eyelids drooped. A shiver passed through her frame. She could not meet the watching woman's gaze.

"It's a tedious affair," Victor complained. The anticipation of great wealth—comparatively great—had had a deteriorating effect on his character. "What will become of us if he recovers? People have rallied on the brink of the grave and cheated death and doctors.

Heavens! if Dan were to do that—"

Caroline shaded her eyes from the noon sunshine. Neither saw a white-capped figure hovering on the threshold.

"I can't rest," Victor continued. "Can't work, can't sleep, thinking of the possibility. The strain is killing me. I've spent the money in imagination a hundred times. Why do you sit dumb? Have you no feeling? How does he look?"

"I haven't seen him. Nurse Jones rules. She tells me how he is, and keeps me out."

"Ah!" The haggard countenance wrinkled into coarsening lines. He plucked at his lower lip. "They want to hide from us that he's holding his own. He's no worse, in no danger, or they'd have tan or straw on the street in front of the house. It marks the last lap of the losing race. I'll be off and try to get a wink of sleep. I'm suffering more than Dan, and there's precious little pity for me. Got a miniature chemist's shop in my pocket, and it's no use. You're not listening, Caroline. 'Pon my soul, I'm beginning to believe you don't care a button what becomes of me."

He went abruptly, omitting his usual perfunctory endearments, and Caroline paced the floor restlessly, pondering over Victor's plaint—"People have rallied on the brink of the grave. If Dan were to do that—" Her eyes shone like stars in a tense grey face. She longed to know what was going on upstairs in the room from which she was shut out. The suspense was intolerable.

"Doctor," said Nurse Jones, following him as he prepared to depart after his next morning's call, "I want to speak to you. In here, please," leading the way to the dressing-room. "Something odd happened last night about twelve o'clock."

"What happened?" he asked brusquely.

"I was tired, and when the patient slept I reclined in the easy chair behind the screen, near the fireplace. I didn't doze. I was wide awake, though my eyelids were closed, but with the light lowered anybody coming in might suppose me to be sound asleep. The handle of the door turned. Mrs. Merridale took a careful survey of me, and entering noiselessly in her stocking feet, was creeping towards the bed when I stirred, knocking my shoe against the fender, and she fled in sudden fright."

"You have no liking for Mrs. Merridale, eh?"

"I cannot say. She is a woman wearing a mask, but to-night my feigned slumber shall be more realistic and the mask may slip."

"What do you suspect?"

"I hate to be premature, doctor. To-morrow, though, I'll have a tale to tell."

And the thing she told him on the morrow caused him to stare blankly at her.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," she said with emphasis. "I confess I wasn't prepared for a surprise of that sort when I peeped round the screen. It's a queer world, isn't it? And this is a complicated piece of business. I am anxious to try an experiment, doctor. Cancel the engagement of the second nurse, and let Mrs. Merridale assist me. Go down to her and explain our change of front as best you can, but respect my confidences."

"Has he made his will yet?"

"The lawyer will attend early in the morning," Caroline replied, barring Victor's ingress to the sick room.

Nurse Jones had gone to snatch a much-needed rest, leaving her in charge. "I'm fagged out, my dear," she had said. "You can give him his beef-tea. He takes it like a lamb from you, whereas I have the greatest trouble getting him to drink even a mouthful. He seems to court death. Oh, Mrs. Merridale, it's simply the will to live that's lacking. If he had something to live for, something he wanted to live for, we should find a remarkable alteration in him. He would recover."

A dose of medicine the nurse had measured with care stood on the table by Dan's bedside. Victor's roving gaze lingered upon it, caught by a glitter of sunlight on the little glass tumbler. "Not till the morning," he muttered. "And I daresay he's no worse."

"To-day we have strong hope."

"We!" he repeated in stupefaction. Then Caroline's face drew him from contemplation of the table and the glass barely three yards away, and its challenging, half defiant, wholly tender and protective expression revealed the bitter truth—she loved Dan Merridale, and he himself had been the one to blab of Dan's love for her, a secret he had kept religiously till circumstances compelled him to make use of it. He knew her force of character. By the strength of her love and the compelling power of her will she would drag him out of death's jaws, save him, hold him, rob her lover of the money necessary to avert his ruin. Victor moistened his lips. They were dry as ashes. His soul was a seething hell of vengeful thought.

"The unexpected generally happens," he said, descending a couple of steps, and halting with bowed head. Mrs. Merridale paid no attention. She was listening to a shouting of newsboys on the street. They might have been the heralds of a national calamity so excitedly did they cry their wares. Running softly to a window, she pushed it open a few inches and inclined her ear, her back towards the door and the landing. Victor fumbled in his pocket, slipped into the room, and spilled the contents of a tiny phial into the medicine glass. In one swift moment the deed was done.

When Caroline returned he stood where she had left him, breathing heavily, chalk-white. Her eyes were pitiful, but glad, glad as a happy child's.

"You heard the news they are shouting, Victor? Now you will not blame—misjudge me. You will believe in my love for Dan, and forgive me."

"Yes—yes—all right," he mumbled, stumbling downstairs like a drunken man. He had really heard nothing. The raucous yells were dying distantly. His sole idea was to get out of the house as he had come in, unseen. Fortune and neglectful servants favoured him. He gained the street. He had punished her treachery. None could say he had been upstairs except Caroline, and who would credit the word of a woman charged with the murder of her husband. There would be no will. He as next of kin would inherit his cousin's wealth, and suspicion would never fall upon him. He had purchased the poison abroad. Glancing hurriedly around to see that nobody observed him he thrust the tiny empty phial between the bars of a sewer grating, and hastened to his lodgings

by quiet side-streets, missing the stunning intelligence with which the busy thoroughfares pulsed. He stayed indoors, waiting for the tidings the next few hours might bring, shivering, burning, hating the girl who had deceived him, whose happy eyes were even then gloating over the face that smiled up at her from Dan's tumbled pillows.

"You are awake," she said. "Could you bear a shock?"

"If you mean I'm going to get well and cheat you and Victor—I think I couldn't."

"You haven't cheated him, not of anything he values, but the Gold Bubble Mining Company has. It has failed, and you are a pauper. You should have seen the face of Victor when the hubbub began outside. He took it badly. He left me—left me to you, my husband. Dan, I thank God there is no barrier of money between us, that I can give you myself, and you can give me nothing more than yourself. I've loved you all my life, dear, and I didn't know you loved me. Pride misinterpreted your silence, and the rest—the part which concerns Victor—was a mistake. You will live now, won't you? We shall be poor together, but I would rather be your wife, Dan, than a queen on her throne."

She was sobbing, her head close to his, her joyful tears wetting his cheek; and after the first gasp of wonder, the first incredulous pause, his arms went about her, and he forgot that he was a sick man to whom excitement was forbidden.

"Carrie, you mean it? You mean it, darling? Why, I was led to believe I'd no chance, not the ghost of a chance. And those nights last week, the nights you stole in like a spirit and kissed me again and again, and cried over me—they weren't a fevered dream, they were real. You did do it, Carrie?"

"I did indeed, Dan. I thought you and nurse were asleep."

"I shall get better," he declared. "I'd swallow every noxious drug in the pharmacopoeia to get better. Isn't it time for my physic, Carrie? I want it. Jove! Nurse would stare if she heard that. We'll start poor Victor afresh just to show there's no ill-feeling. He has treated us both shabbily, but we can afford to pardon, can't we, dearest girl?" Flushed and radiant he raised the fatal glass to his lips and drained it.

"To our health and future bliss," he laughed weakly.

She arranged his pillows and smoothed the counterpane. Dan always crumpled the counterpane when he wasn't ruffling his hair or reducing the pillows to limp rags. "I feel uncommonly drowsy," he murmured. "It must be the dull sultry day. In case I don't waken before nurse turns you out, you ought to give me an extra kiss, Carrie."

She strained him to her heart in a passion of love.

"Never felt so drowsy," he whispered. "Good-night—little wife."

"Good-night, my own."

She rinsed the glass as usual, and sat near the foot of the bed, keeping serene vigil. Twilight came. The street lamps were lit, and still he lay in the same position, heavy and stilled.

Victor also succumbed to the influence of the electrically charged atmosphere. At dusk he summoned his landlady, and bade her call him at once if any message arrived from Blank Street where his cousin was lying at the point of death. He regretted having said "at the point of death," it might appear significant by and by.

"My head's addled," he whimpered. "Unless I sleep I'll go to pieces and make a hash of the whole affair. Where's that sleeping draught I bought yesterday? Thought it was in this pocket. Could have sworn I put it here. No, it's in the other pocket." He grinned stupidly. "I've had too much brandy, and I've got confused, began it rather early for my health to-day. Can't think how I mistook the pocket. What is there to think about anyway?"

The rest is told in a couple of extracts from the next day's papers.

"We learn that the illness of Mr. Dan Merridale, a well-known member of the Stock Exchange, has taken a most decided turn for the better, and it is hoped he may soon be able to journey seawards accompanied by the charming young bride to whom he has been privately and romantically married. Mr. Merridale narrowly escaped being bitten by the failure of the Gold Bubble Company from which he fortunately withdrew several months ago."

"A Mr. Victor Merridale was found dead in his apartments in Pimlico last night. It is supposed that he drank a deadly poison in mistake for a harmless sleeping draught he was in the habit of using. The poison phial bore no label, and was similar in size and shape to other phials discovered in his rooms, and which had contained sleeping draughts."

The scraping off of the label sealed his fate. In his haste of the morning Victor had blundered.

[The End.]

A READY WIT.

There is a species of sentry groups employed near the trenches. These are called "listening patrols," and their duties are to be always on the alert and give timely warning of any attempted attack. One night an officer on his rounds inspected a listening patrol stationed in an empty farm. He asked, "Who are you?" The reply was, "Listenin' patrol, sir." "What are your duties?" "We listen for the hen cacklin', and then we pinches the egg, sir."

MRS. BROWNING AND THE PORTUGUESE SONNETS.

Perhaps because of her dark skin and deep, luminous eyes, Browning had often called her "little Portuguese." One day, when he was writing, she came shyly into his room, laid a manuscript on the table before him, covered her burning face with her hands—and fled. Wonderingly, he opened it—to find the most exquisite portrayal of woman's love ever written or ever to be written in any language, breathing the fragrance of a pure and holy passion, burning with the divine fires of immortality—the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." One wonders what he said to her when they met again—this lover-husband who was also a poet.

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