

A Deed of Gift

"A lady to see you, sir; Miss Barry."

"Miss Barry? Ask her in at once."

Dornard Warburton rose with alacrity, for as a lawyer and as a man he was interested in the new arrival. She came in handsomely dressed in deep mourning, so slim and graceful that she looked taller than she really was. She had a pale, well-featured face and blue Irish eyes which flatly contradicted the set coldness of every line.

Sometimes in these professional interviews it is the lady who is emotional, while her adviser remains chilly; on this occasion the visitor bowed formally, and save for the grace of her action it might have been a doll saluting another doll, so blank was her face and changeless. He, on the contrary, dropped officiality and advanced with outstretched hand.

"I think, as we are relatives, we should shake hands."

Courtesy constrained her to follow the lead, but he thought he had rarely touched so passive a hand, but she was quick in repudiating his claim.

"We can hardly be related—except merely by marriage."

"Precisely; but that means a good deal. I am glad to see you. The title deeds of your little estate are ready and waiting."

He spoke smilingly, for her quaint speech had amused him; but her next words took him aback. Like other sensible men, he had a horror of women without common sense.

"I came to say that I want neither title deeds nor the estate, I have no use for them."

Sheer amazement kept him dumb, but he looked keenly to see if she was hysterical or out of her mind. Scarcely as he might, however, he could only see steady purpose underneath her white earnestness.

"But this is sheer nonsense. Narn left you unconditionally by your grandfather, with the sole exception that you are to take his name. No doubt about that, is there?"

"There is every difficulty, even the name is hateful to me."

Her breathing quickened, but she spoke calmly as before.

"The name is also mine," he answered, curtly, and because of her flat instincts a touch of sensitive fear came and went.

"I beg your pardon; I should have remembered better."

He considered her again attentively, trying to reconvert up this unknown entity.

"She has a quick Irish temper—a warm Irish heart. What does she do when sitting there like a little doll, trying to lead me astray? There must be something behind all this absurdity, and I must get to the bottom of it. Having decided that, he dropped his relative and assumed the man of being in temporary charge of me. I must ask your reasons for this unprecedented conduct?"

"It was judicial enough for a bag of gold, but having nothing to hide, she is not dismayed."

"Can you tell me in a few sentences what she is dead now, for years ago she had been battling against the party which killed her by inches—"

"A doubt about it, for she died of proper food of necessary food and the lack of all comfort, had to work almost to the last, when I wrote to her father telling him of our distress, he left the matter unanswered because my mother married a poor Irish gentleman who had been cured eight months ago. She would have been living if the owner of it had only put a helping hand, I should not have been hearted for the loss of it. I am to-day."

"How now the sort of apathy that so dulled her? It was as stark, as she had said, and it was the intensity of her emotion which kept her low voice from being strong, but she—my God!—in the slow drowning of the love beat on earth, to see a day by day for want of the necessities of life, yet with patience and smiling lips. I have died to save her, but my death nor my life could help her. You must pardon me that I speak of these things with a choking choke."

The window was open and, going she stood for a few moments out; then she returned quietly her seat. It was not without that her story had come to knowledge too late; he would like to have saved this girl's mother from under, and it would have been for his own father had been the man and the son was alive to help hunters without crippling estate.

"There was still the girl, and he

looked critically at her handsome dress; it looked new, so perhaps he guessed that it had been purchased with a view to this particular interview. People do not come threadbare to repudiate property.

"I am extremely sorry to hear this; I wish I had known it earlier. As regards your refusal of Narn, I am more in the dark than ever."

"This was not so true as it sounded, but she was urged to full confession."

"Now it is too late, the tide has turned. I have pupils to teach and orders to execute, it means hard work, and for that I am thankful."

"But you might work hard at Narn, I could not imagine any place better suited to an artist. It is only a few miles away, may I not take you to see it?"

"Never! It is enough to be there in dreams, as I so often am. In those dreams she is not dead, but living—coming back to health and strength in the old house that I shall never see. To go there without her and to remember in it the want in which she died would be too bitter, I could not bear it."

"Which she died would be too bitter, visit. At this time of year the little valley below Narn is all gold, and a tiny river threads it like silver."

"I have no further need of gold, and the river would only flash my own loneliness back to me."

"Narn stands high and sees the sun long after the valley has bid it good-night."

"The Narn sun would only dazzle my eyes until they ached; I should be longing for the night."

"There is a rose garden nestled in the shelter of the hill, the cottage is covered with roses, too, so that you may gather them from the open window."

"These things are not for me, don't you see that to work for my daily bread is the only solace left me? If I once dropped the threads I should never pick them up again."

"Now, he knew well enough that there was method in her madness, and that hard, necessary work might be the only tonic for her state. But there was Narn, and he was a lawyer and not an artist, although he had tried to speak her language."

"Then what do you intend doing? I must warn you that any property, however small, brings some responsibility with it."

"I know; that is why I am here to-day. There is seed time and harvest that must not be neglected. I know nothing about these things, but you do, and you are next of kin, although remotely so."

A sudden light flashed into his face which might have been greed, for much can easily do with more. He had certainly no wish to see Narn thrown away by the folly of a girl.

"I am next of kin; do you think of giving Narn to me?"

For the first time he saw a flicker of satisfaction in her face, as though a troublesome business were nearly disposed of.

"Yes, I should like you to have it. I want you to draw out a deed of gift, so that I can sign it before I go away."

He bowed with inscrutable gravity, and taking a huge folio, scratched away upon it with a dull pen at some length. When his scribbling was finished he found her at his elbow, eager to sign and have done with it.

"Before you sign it, Miss Barry, let me warn you that you are doing an extremely foolish thing."

She shook her head, and taking up a pen, was about to sign, when she noticed an omission.

"It ought to be over a stamp, surely. Did you forget that?"

"It would be just as legal," he answered, "but you shall have your stamp."

He produced a penny one and then affixed by his red tap a clumsy waxen seal which had an imposing effect. In all good faith she was about to sign for the second time, when another omission occurred to her.

"There should be witnesses, surely."

Her manner rebuked him for his singularly unbusiness-like habits; now was she without an innocent vanity in knowing so well what ought to be done.

"You would prefer a witness? You shall have one."

So he called in his head clerk, who stared agape at the strange document, with his penny stamp and dangling seal. On being asked to witness the lady's signature, he was about to make some sort of expostulation, when he was silenced by an imperative gesture from his employer. So Miss Barry wrote boldly across the Queen's countenance, and the head clerk witnessed with as much professional dignity as sheer amazement left at his disposal.

"Is one witness sufficient?" she asked, doubtfully.

"Amplly sufficient. Thank you, Simpson; that is all I want."

So Simpson retired helplessly, while Warburton, producing a formidable bunch of keys, opened the iron safe and deposited the deed of gift with- in. As he clanked the door so sharply he saw that she was duly impressed with the stern custody of an important document. The mere rattling of the keys suggested severe frowning, and she was satisfied, too, only his manner changed, and for one who was popularly accredited with being a gentleman, he became somewhat bullying.

"Now that the thing is irrevocably done, I am going to give you some advice gratis. You have a fatal habit of believing in people. I warn you

against this. Here, of course, you have walked obligingly into the jaws of the wolf, and he has napped you up. It's nothing to me now, so I can warn you not to let other wolves do it."

"But you did your best to dissuade me from it. No real wolf would have done that."

"It is evident that you do not know much about them. There is an old proverb about going to Saltash backward, and I was dealing with a woman. You understand? I should have been a fool not to annex property when I had merely to draft out a deed and expend a penny stamp."

His change of manner perplexed her, but she had a latent confidence in him that would not easily take fright.

"But, as you said, every property brings its own trouble. You will have to cultivate the land and be kind to the cottagers who work for you."

He gave a hard, short laugh, as though her simplicity began to be irritating.

"You must not be kind to those sort of people. They encroach at once and take liberties. But at least under my management they shall pay their rent. I promise you that. Give me your address, please. I may have occasion to write or see you about certain things."

So having disencumbered herself of those things which make for ease of body and sloth of mind, Nora Barry went back to the battle of life. She had to fight it strenuously and so get ease for her headache and partial forgetfulness of those happy things which might have been had a hard, unforgetting old man died a few months earlier.

From a worldly point of view she had acted disastrously, and yet after all she had known what was best for herself, and in fighting and overcoming difficulties the keenness and zest of youth came back to her. Through pressing forward in so eager a race, she slowly overtook the shadows and passed beyond them into the cheerful sunlight. Bernard Warburton, who always saw her when he was in town, noticed the gradual brightening of her eyes, and perhaps vainly suggested that he himself had something to do with this happy change. At any rate he was very cozily attentive, and she frankly appreciated his society, for he was a man of parts, and art was no dead letter to him.

Sometimes—but not often—she would let him take her here or there, and those rare holidays were very pleasant to her. She wondered that a man without sisters could make himself so companionable, and on one subject only did they seem to strike a discordant note. Whenever they talked about business or of Narn he seemed to change at once into a hard, money-loving man. So striking was this that she rarely mentioned either, leaving it to him to come out occasionally with a sentiment only worthy of old Scrooge or a man who found pleasure and profit in grinding the face of the poor.

In spite of her faith in him she would wince then, although putting it all down to the hard facts of legal training. She did not believe in his hard savings until one bitter day when she could not help herself, he convicted himself out of his own mouth—and perhaps no other kind of evidence could have convinced her.

Her small suburban room looked very cramped that May morning, and he made mention of the primroses that he had left behind him in the country.

"The primroses! Ah! I remember how they used to grow in Ireland when I was a little girl!"

She looked dreamily beyond the bricks and mortar as she spoke, and he wondered if she ever regretted Narn. Quite suddenly he struck the discordant note.

"I suppose primroses are not bad in their way, but the country is not Arcadia, after all. The balliff of that wretched little Narn—you are well quit of it—has been spreading reports that I have no real right to the place. I have not been able to bring it home to him, but I've saved him seven-and-sixpence by shooting his dog."

She came back from her primrose memories with a moist pink cheek; the bad taste of his joke set her teeth on edge.

"You did it—by accident of course?"

"By accident! I never aimed more carefully in my life. I do not say that I would have done it if I had liked the dog, but it was an ugly, ill-conditioned cur."

"It was impossible to doubt that he spoke the truth, and for her the light of the May day went suddenly out.

"But the dog was not yours—he may have loved it—may have thought there was no dog in the world like it. Oh! I could not have believed that."

So keenly did disillusion sting her that words failed. He shrugged his shoulders as one who had little patience with sentimental folly.

"It is quite as well you gave up Narn, they would have fleeced you right and left. Only the other day I had to restrain upon an old widow's pig, it is not pleasant, but rent must be paid."

This time she regarded him with real horror, and the quick Irish temper of which he had suspected the existence on their first meeting blazed up into her face.

"Do you mean to say that you actually robbed a poor old woman of her pig?"

"Robbed! nonsense! The old hound could not pay her rent—or would not—the one more likely than the

other, so I made six-and-eightpence a score—not a bad price for a good bacon pig."

There was a pause, and then she spoke at a white heat of sorrowful indignation: "You shall give me back Narn! I see you are not fit to have any sort of power!"

"Give you back Narn?" he answered, scornfully. "What! rob myself of what is legally mine? Remember the stamp across which you signed. Remember Simpson, a witness of full age and well acquainted with the nature of an oath."

"I doubt if the stamp means anything. I have thought since that it ought to have been quite another sort of stamp."

He had to laugh outright—he could not help himself, and to her the laugh sounded mocking and insolent.

"What about the great waxen seal with its red tape? How do you propose to get over that?"

"I don't know now—it is all so cruelly sudden, but that deed shall be annulled if there is law in England!"

"There is, and I am one of the most able expounders. I warn you that no judge in the kingdom would venture to negative the binding powers of seal and stamp. Then, again, if you recovered Narn you would still have to assume the hated name."

"I would do anything," she returned, passionately, "to prevent your merciless hand from oppressing the weak. And to think that it is I who have delivered them over to you!"

He flushed uneasily, and then went on in the same mocking way.

"There is one action you could take that might pave the way to annulling the deed—mind you, I do not promise that it would—but to do this you would have to swear that black was white before a clergyman."

"You are trading on my ignorance; if you mean anything you mean a mag. trate. People do not swear before clergymen."

"I happen to know what I am speaking about, and I mean a clergyman. See! it is done like this—having your hand I repeat this oath: 'I, Bernard, take thee, Nora,' and you answer—"

With burning indignation she wrenched her hand from his.

"I answer. Do you think anything on this earth could make me promise to love and honor a wolf? And to think I believed in you so utterly as a good man."

"And so you will again when you are a better woman of business and understand that you must either bite or get bitten. I suppose under tragic circumstances you will come and inspect Narn?"

"I am going there to-morrow and then I shall consult the ablest lawyer in England."

He bowed sarcastically.

"You do me too much honor, then I shall expect you. But remember, a dog—or wolf if you prefer it—does not readily give up a bone that has been once given him."

He met her at the station, and although she shrank painfully and visibly from the companionship of this sordid man, there seemed no other means of travelling the necessary miles save by his side, for Narn, peaceful little Narn, nestled away amongst its hills, knew nothing of such restless things as trains. At first they had to follow the silver thread of the river as it wound its way through the exquisite valley—such a tiny sparkling river, more like a brook as it bubbled and prattled its laughing way through its prismatic banks. Cuckoos singing against each other grew hysterical in emulation as to which should have the last liquid word; the wood pigeons, too, had plenty to say, but in a lower, more wailing key, to that the harmony of the woods remained perfect.

The earth new born, so fresh and tender and exquisite, had an influence hard to resist, but Nora, mindful of her sad errand, could only look on wistfully as one who had no part in these delights. He was just as silent as she, feeling perhaps at last the ungraciousness of his position. Once or twice she looked at him, as though trying to accustom herself to his new character, and the last time he noticed it.

"I am sorry, Miss Barry, but you know the fate of foolish Red Riding Hoods?"

She winced back from his hardness and nothing more was said until they had left the valley below them and were almost on the brow of the hill.

Then he turned his horse into a gateway, and the quiet beauty of the place made her forget her silence.

"Whose house is this?"

"Mine," he answered, curtly. "If you will come in for a moment we will do the rest on foot. As we are to visit the injured Widow Morris, I may as well take her the receipt for her rent."

She did not cross his threshold willingly, but, having done so, she would have been no artist if an interior so rich in oak carvings—so quaintly fashioned and adorned with the grace of a day that is fled—had not appealed to her strongly. The place was neither stately nor grand, but just homely in the best and most delicious sense of the word, and no ideal of hers could have improved upon it.

But she forgot art on approaching the window from which the ground fell softly away into the smiling valley. The sweet wind greeting her was as though it had been wafted across violet beds, and the white lilacs showed delicately against the wildness of crimson May. But the humming, happy bees had richer spoil

than either, knowing just where the sweetpeas could peep over the sheltering wall, and they were many-colored as Joseph's coat.

So for a few merciful moments she forgot everything save the beauty with which she was surrounded, and in those moments Narn—peaceful, happy little Narn—stole into her heart forever and nestled there just as if nestled into the warm protective hills. At his brusque summons she turned heavily away.

"It is possible that you can live here—here, where everything seems to preach the love of God—and yet have a hard heart toward the poor? I wonder how many gentle, kindly souls have moved about this house. I should think there must be many footprints of angels."

She looked for no answer. What could he know about such gentle visitants? And together they passed into fields that were fields of flowers.

In among the mowing grass—all most ready for the reapers—the great white daisies stood thickly, and over the higher ground, where the young corn was springing vigorously up, hovered larks singing gloriously.

In the grazing meadows, where the grass was fed down industriously by contented cattle, great dazzling patches of bluebells reflected the cloudless sky. The whole scene was pure poetry; but they discovered prose at the very heart of the idyl in the sharp of a bluff yeoman who seemed hardly able to take his eyes off one of the animals which munched so happily near him.

With an effort he wrenched away his eyes to pass the time of day, and then they returned lovingly to the object of his admiration.

"Narn, sir, you come just lucky to see the last of the bullock. I'll warrant you'll not see a finer butcher beast in the whole market."

He gave a poke here and a prod there to show the animal's unlimited capacities for beef, and his employer looked critically on.

"It is a very fair bullock—very fair, indeed. You remember, Warren, you thought it would not fatten on that sort of cake, but I knew better."

The balliff gave a grudging assent. "I'd always been used to the folk, and some cattle is like some others. No matter what you do or what you don't do, they will fatten to spite you."

"Have you got another dog yet?"

Warren shook his head sorrowfully. "No, I ain't sir. I've had the refusal of many, but one to mate with I've lost is hard to come by. I miss it almost like a child, and sometimes of nights I dim I hear it scratching at the dairy door."

There were almost tears in the man's eyes, and after leaving him Nora turned scantly upon her companion.

"Of course, he cannot know how cruel you have been or he would not speak so nicely to you?"

"Why did you not ask him? He was there to speak for himself. As to speaking nicely, he must do that to my face, whatever he does behind my back, he has a wife and family."

By this time they had crossed the stile and were in the little hamlet about half a dozen cottages.

Even to the prejudiced eye they looked comfortable dwellings, and there was evidently a friendly rivalry between the cottagers as to who the most dazzling garden should belong to. The owner of this apartment prosperity may have been a skinflint—may, he was on his own showing—but the women and children seemed very anxious to propitiate their hard landlord by coming out of their cottages to do the honors of the place with smiles and friendly words.

Nora could not understand this until she decided that they were afraid of him and had ineffectual rent day in their scared minds. Be this as it may, they were extremely voluble—as frightened women often are—and he answered them back in a neighborly way that might have deceived the most acute.

Mrs Morris' cottage was the last one of all, and before they reached it a stout figure showed itself at the gate with a welcoming face wreathed and dimpled with smiles.

"Come in—come in, sir, you and the young lady. You haven't a horse to mind these mares?"

Lost in wonder, Nora studied this persecuted widow, white Warburton answered her as cordially as she herself had spoken.

"Not to-day, thank you, Mrs. Morris, I merely called to bring you the money for your pig."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure I'm turrible grateful to you, and the bit of money for the rent—you've kept that back, I hope?"

"Yes. You asked me to, if you remember?"

"Ess, for sure I did." Then she turned to Nora to politely include her in the conversation. "Mr Warburton knows me well enough, he never presses for my bit of rent money knowing that I'll pay it just as soon as I can, don't you, sir?"

He nodded. "We are old friends, Mrs. Morris, and understand each other."

Mrs. Morris corroborated this with vigor.

"And that's just what I said to the pork butcher when he came and offered four-and-sixpence a score for as good a bacon pig as ever ate victuals. I let 'un have his sharp for coming to best a widow woman—and he a bachelor man without let or hindrance. Pigs is cheap, missus, '—Ellen Ada Smith in Longman's Magazine.

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