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Her Promise True,

BY DORA RUSSELL.

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"A Man's Privilege," etc.

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CHAPTER I.—BELLE WAYLAND.

"I cannot help it," Belle. I have no choice; it is very hard on me."

"It is very hard," was the low and faltering reply to these words.

The two speakers—a young man and a maiden—were sitting on a bright October morning on the sea-wall before Hove at Brighton, and they both looked very sad. The girl—Belle Wayland—had a charming face, bright, pleasant, and full of animation. Her features, too, were delicate, and her complexion, Hugh Gilbert, was also very good—firm, shapely lips, hidden by his heavy mustache. He was a soldier, on the eve of rejoining his regiment in India, and the war was a certain thing in his gray eyes which well became his profession.

Neither spoke again for a few moments. Before them lay the long blue, almost waveless sea-stretch, with a golden track on its broad breast, reflected from the sun, clouded sun. A white-sailed ship was sailing before the light wind in the distance, and a gentle stillness seemed around. At least these two heard nothing. They were absorbed in the thought that they were about to part, and that it might be years before they met again.

"But you love me, Belle?" suddenly asked the soldier, turning round and looking earnestly in the girl's face.

"Why do you ask? You know I do," she answered.

"And you will be true to me? You will never alter and turn away?"

"I never will, Hugh; I promise you faithfully I never will."

"Your mother is a worldly woman, you know, Belle," continued Gilbert, and a half-sad smile passed over his lips; "and you are well, a very pretty girl. She will advise you not to wait for a poor soldier, but to accept some rich lover. Will you let her tempt you?"

"It is unkind of you to say that, Hugh; you know I will not."

Gilbert's brown slim hand stole beneath Belle Wayland's cape, and he caught her little fingers in his own.

"Do believe that you will not," he said, "and I will trust you faithfully. Be true to me, Belle, and as soon as I get my company I will return to England for you, or you must come to me. We will not have to wait more than a year I hope, and then—"

"I would rather wait many years than break my word."

"Then I shall always think of you as my own dear Belle, no one's Belle, but mine!"

"And you?" said the girl, somewhat wistfully, looking at him half-shyly, half-tenderly. "Will you be true too, Hugh?"

"I swear that I will! Have no fear, my darling Belle."

Belle Wayland sighed softly, and just at this moment there passed at the back of the two chairs on which they were sitting, a tall, rather distinguished-looking middle-aged man. He glanced at Belle's charming profile, and as he did so instantly recognized it. It was indeed quite visible, as her large picture hat was pushed slightly back from her fair brown curls.

"Pretty Belle Wayland," thought the passer-by, "I wonder who she has got with her."

The passer-by was John Dudley, Lord Stanmore, who had but lately come into the family title, the unexpected death of his elder brother. The late Lord Stanmore had been married to Belle Wayland's aunt, and the present Lord knew the pretty girl sitting with the sad look on her sweet face by Hugh Gilbert's side.

But Belle never saw Lord Stanmore. She only saw her lover and thought of the weary gap of time he was forced to be away.

But suddenly she started up after glancing at the little watch fastened to her dress.

"Oh, Hugh, I must go," she said, "it's past lunch-time, and mother is so cross when I keep her waiting, and she won't go down without me."

"How tiresome!" answered Gilbert; "and our last morning, too. But promise me one thing, Belle; come out with me for a walk to-night? You must manage this; I will wait outside the hotel until you come."

"I will try," answered Belle Wayland. "No! I will come," she added more determinedly. "I will shake mother off somehow."

"It will be our parting," said Gilbert, in a low tone, and a slight twitch of pain passed over his face.

"I cannot bear to think of it—can you not stay a day or two more, Hugh?"

"Unhappy as it is impossible; to-morrow night I must be at Southampton, and I start the day after for India—yes, Belle, we must say good-bye to-night."

The girl made no reply to this, and the two walked on together in silence to the more crowded parts of Brighton, and Gilbert accompanied her to the Hotel Metropole, where her mother was staying. Before the entrance of the hotel they parted.

"Promise," said Gilbert, as he held her hand in his firm grasp, "to come to-night? I will be here at eight o'clock, and I will wait for you. Your mother dines at seven, I suppose?"

"Yes, and generally falls asleep for a little while in the drawing-room afterwards. But the worst of it is, I believe she falls asleep with her eyes open, however, I'll contrive to steal away. I'll pretend I am going to listen to the music."

"I will be here whenever you come," answered Gilbert, and then with another hand clasp they said good-bye, and Belle entered the hotel and went up the lift to the fourth floor, where her mother's room and her own were situated.

As she walked down the corridor she met her mother, who looked extremely annoyed.

"Well, here you are at last," she said impatiently. "But come in here," she added, pushing open the door of her own room,

before which she was standing. "I've something to say to you."

Belle followed her mother into the room, and Mrs. Wayland shut the door behind her, and then turned round and sharply addressed her daughter.

"This will never do you know, Belle, she began."

"What will never do?" answered Belle with a slight toss of her pretty head.

"Your walking about Brighton with Hugh Gilbert. I saw you from the window, so it's no use your denying it."

"I did not mean to deny it," said Belle.

Mrs. Wayland was a tall, stout, well-made elderly woman with a brown wig and good features, but with a dissatisfied expression. She was, in truth, a professional grumbler, and nothing pleased her long except to win money at cards. She was a horse gambler, and had lost some of money at the tables at Monte Carlo which she could ill afford. To lose sixpence at whist, however, cost her nearly as much chagrin, and her temper was detestable during every game she played.

"Don't answer in that tone," she continued, addressing her daughter; "I did not go to the expense of bringing you here for you to be seen loitering about with a penniless young fellow like Hugh Gilbert. And I tell you I won't have it."

"Don't distress yourself about it," she said, carelessly, or rather with affected carelessness, "Hugh Gilbert leaves Brighton to-morrow, and starts for India."

"And I am very glad to hear it. It is quite time you left of such folly. You must begin to think seriously of life, Belle. You know we are horribly poor. I am sure I do not know how to meet the enormous hotel bill unless your aunt Lucy helps me."

"Then why did you come to such an expensive place?" retorted Belle.

"I brought you here to be seen and to look as if we had more money than we really have. It's no good in this world to make a poor face. Girls to marry must appear to be well off, must dress well, however much their unfortunate parents have to pinch themselves. Just look at me. I haven't a decent gown; and then look at your aunt Lucy. She made a good match and I made a bad one; it makes all the difference in life."

"Yet I don't believe Aunt Lucy was happy a bit in her married life. When Stanmore died, and I tried to say something about being sorry for her, she smiled a very peculiar smile and shrugged her shoulders over her husband's death!"

"Then all I can say is, she had no occasion to shrug her shoulders. Stanmore left her very well off, and gave her a title, and I don't know what else she wanted. It was ungrateful of Lucy to shrug her shoulders."

"He had an odious temper, hadn't he?"

"Well, if he had, you can't have everything. Your father had an odious temper too, yet he left me poor and Lucy is rich. Things are most unequally divided in this world."

"But when you married my father, he was supposed to be rich, wasn't he?"

"I would not have married him unless he had been supposed to be rich; you may be very sure. I was taken in. He speculated and lost nearly all his money, and here am I, a poor widow, and Lucy a rich one, and I was much the best looking of the two to begin with. It's real disgusting! But its no use standing here; and don't you make a fool of yourself as I did. Come down to lunch. I feel I require something, though I have no appetite. By-the-by, I see Stanmore has arrived here. I wonder when we shall see him?"

"You mean Jack Dudley? Oh, yes, to be sure he is Stanmore now; well he is rather nice."

"He is extremely agreeable; unusually so, and very good-looking."

"He is quite old, isn't he?"

"How absurd you are, Belle! Chits like you think everyone old, if they are past five-and-twenty. I hope we shall see Stanmore to-day. But come along."

The mother and daughter accordingly went down to lunch, and more than one man's eyes followed the pretty girl, as she walked by Mrs. Wayland's side. Among those who looked after her was Lord Stanmore, and presently he rose and went up to the table where Mrs. Wayland and Belle were sitting.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wayland," he said; "I hope you have not quite forgotten me?"

"Not in the least, Stanmore," answered Mrs. Wayland, graciously, extending her large, white hand. "Your new name does not change old friends, you know. This is Belle—do you remember her?"

"I remember Miss Wayland perfectly," replied Lord Stanmore, smiling. "Indeed, it would be impossible to forget her."

Belle smiled too, not displeased by the compliment. She had met Jack Dudley, as she had called him, more than once at her aunt Lady Stanmore's during the lifetime of his brother, and Jack Dudley had always thought her a remarkably pretty girl. And now Lord Stanmore thought so also.

"A charming face," he reflected, looking at Belle attentively; "but all the same, there's a spice of the devil in those big hazel eyes."

Stanmore was a man, however, who rather liked "a spice of the devil" in a woman, and Belle's appearance took his fancy. He stood talking with Mrs. Wayland for a few minutes, and then asked if they were staying at the Metropole.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Wayland, "and I expect your sister-in-law, and my sister Lucy, will come down and join us presently."

"That will be charming. But in the meantime will you dine with me this evening; it will give me great pleasure if you will."

Mrs. Wayland was delighted. She loved a good dinner, and a good dinner at any one else's expense still more. But Belle listened to the invitation with a sinking heart.

"You are very kind," answered Mrs. Wayland; "yes, we shall be very pleased to dine with you."

Belle opened her lips to say she was sorry she could not, but she was afraid to speak the words. It made her promise to Hugh Gilbert more difficult to keep, she knew, this invitation of Lord Stanmore's; but all the same she determined to keep it.

Presently Lord Stanmore went away to smoke, and the Waylands went out to drive. Mrs. Wayland was—for her—in high good humor.

"It's very nice of Stanmore to ask us to dine with him to-night, Belle, isn't it?" she said, after eating herself as comfortably as she could in the carriage.

"I suppose he thought it wouldn't be as dull as dining alone," answered Belle, revolving in her mind how she could escape from the dinner.

"Nonsense; just as if he could not get anyone he chose to ask to dine with him. I must say that is a very ungrateful speech Belle."

Belle did not reply; she was, for her, strangely silent. But Mrs. Wayland made up for her taciturnity. She commented on the want of taste displayed in the dress of some of those around her, and criticised in general severely. Suddenly however, Belle put her hand to her forehead.

"Mother," she said, "would you mind going back to the hotel? I've taken such a frightful pain in my head I cannot bear driving any longer."

"Good gracious! you are not going to be ill surely!" exclaimed Mrs. Wayland, in genuine alarm; "and when we are to dine with Lord Stanmore too?"

"I don't think I can go down for dinner," answered Belle faintly.

"You must go down to dinner," said Mrs. Wayland. "Go and lie down now, and I'll give you some sal-volatile, and by half-past seven you will be all right."

They accordingly returned to the hotel, and Belle lay down and drank the sal-volatile. But when her mother went to her room and told her it was time for her to rise and dress for dinner Belle positively refused to do so.

"I am not fit to go downstairs, and I won't," she said. "My head is splitting, and I am not going to make a fool of myself before everyone."

In vain Mrs. Wayland stormed and scolded. Belle remained firm, and Mrs. Wayland was at last obliged to go away to consider her own toilette, and Belle was left in peace. She presently heard the rattle of her mother's silk dress as she passed her door, and then Belle rose quickly. It was just eight o'clock now, and in a few minutes Mrs. Wayland would be dining, and Belle felt herself safe.

Lord Stanmore was waiting in the next room for his expected guests, and it must be admitted the expression of his face slightly changed when he saw that the pretty mother was not followed by the pretty daughter. But he was a man of the world, and he received Mrs. Wayland's excuses for Belle's non-appearance gracefully enough.

"The poor child has got one of her bad headaches," she said, "and is dreadfully disappointed she is not well enough to come down to dinner, but I would not allow her. It is best for her to be ill."

"I am very sorry indeed, but I hope another time she will be my guest," answered Stanmore, and then he proposed they should go into the dining-room, and Mrs. Wayland did not allow Belle's absence to affect her appetite nor spoil the enjoyment of the most expensive champagne Stanmore could provide for her.

Before dinner was over, however, his thoughts evidently reverted to Belle.

"Perhaps Miss Wayland would be well enough to come down into the lounge and have some coffee and listen to the music?" he said, and Mrs. Wayland agreed, she would go up to her room and see.

Accordingly she proceeded there, but when she reached Belle's room to her consternation she found it empty. She looked hastily round and then went to the wardrobe. Belle's usual cape and hat were not there, and then Mrs. Wayland knew she had been deceived.

"The little fool, the deceitful little fool," she thought, angrily. "So her headache was all a sham, and no doubt she has gone out to meet that penniless fellow Hugh Gilbert. Was there ever such a lunatic, and when Stanmore evidently admires her. But he must never know this!"

She sat down for a few minutes to consider what it was best to do and to recover her composure. Then she went down in the lift and proceeded to the lounge, where Stanmore was waiting her.

"I am so sorry," she said addressing him, "but I found Belle fast asleep, and I thought it best not to rouse her. She was sleeping like a child, and no doubt her headache will be all gone in the morning."

"We must hope so," answered Stanmore, courteously. "But she was about tired of Mrs. Wayland's company by this time, and presently strolled away, and by and by Mrs. Wayland re-ascended to her daughter's room, and sat there grimly awaiting her return.

Belle in the meanwhile was with her lover, and her heart was full of strange, sad happiness. She was happy to be with him; to be near him, but the coming parting lay like a dark shadow clouding this last trust.

She had quitted the hotel shortly after her mother had come down to dinner, and outside Hugh Gilbert was waiting for her. He was standing a little back in the shadow, but as she descended the brilliantly lighted entrance steps, he went forward instantly to meet her.

"You see I have managed it," she said, looking up smilingly in his face. "I pretended I was ill, and would not go down to dinner; mother is dining with Lord Stanmore."

"The man who came lately into the title?" asked Hugh Gilbert, drawing her hand through his arm.

"Yes; mother's awfully fond of titles, you know," answered Belle, with a little laugh, as much as to say that she was not.

"Is he married?" next inquired Gilbert.

"Oh no; until his brother died, I do not suppose he had any money to marry on, and besides—"

"Well, what besides?"

"I was considered a bit of a scamp, I believe Aunt Lucy always used to say. Jack Dudley was not a marrying man."

"And you knew him well?"

"I have met him once or twice at Aunt Lucy's, and today at lunch he came up, and asked us to dine with him? He's not interesting."

"No; and you are. Oh! Belle, Belle!" continued the young man, with deep feeling, and emotion in his voice, drawing her arm closer to his side. "To think that I am going away from you; that we must part tonight—and that others will be with you when I am not here."

"But if I do not care for others?" answered Belle, in a low sweet voice, nestling nearer to him.

"Now, I believe you do not; nay I know you do not. But after I am gone—"

"You will only be dearer to me, Hugh—if that could be."

"You are my own love, then; my own true love, Belle. I will live on this thought when I am far away."

"And you will write very often?" said Belle.

"Of course I shall. And no one sees your letters, I suppose, Belle?"

"I should think not, indeed?"

"Then I will tell you what I am thinking of; what I am doing. Only I suppose the things will be very monotonous."

"Why? How do you mean?"

"Because it will be always Belle, Belle! I shall be always thinking of you, Belle, and out of the fullness of the heart, you know, the mouth speaketh, and I suppose the pen writes."

"And I shall tell you everything I do, also."

"Tell me all the little things; who you dance with, where you go, keep in your mind, Belle, and let distance be forgotten between us. Think of me as always near."

"But that will be difficult when you are so far away," answered Belle, and she sighed softly.

"No, not so difficult as you think. After you left Northbridge I often used to feel that you were still near me. Do you remember that night on the hillside, when the moon came out and I found courage at last to tell you what I felt. I often went to that spot afterwards, and sometimes I felt as if your spirit were near me there, and almost as if your hand lay in mine. But I could not do this always."

"I often used to think of that night, too," said Belle, in a soft, low voice, "when we sat together, and I was so pleased to know—"

"What were you pleased to know, Belle?"

"That you cared for me," half-whispered the girl.

"Do care for you deeply and truly. You have my future in your hands, Belle, for good or evil."

"Oh, it must be for good."

"I believe it will be. But now let us go along the sea-wall, and leave all this bustle behind us. I want you to remember this night, too, Belle."

A few minutes later they were leaning together on the iron railing in front of the sea-wall, watching the waves break below. In the morning a golden track from the sun had shone on the wide waters, and now a rippling stream of silver light fell there, for the moon was full, and cast with weird shadows all around.

"I shall dream of this," said Hugh Gilbert, and his arm stole round Belle as he spoke.

"And you, Belle, will you forget it?"

"No," and then her head fell a little low. "But it will be so sad—so sad," she murmured.

"What will be sad, my dear one?"

"To think that you might be ill, and I would not know—that you might be in danger."

"Ill, or well, your memory will be with me. You shall be my guardian angel, Belle."

More tender words they whispered; more dreams of days to come. The mystic music of the sea fell on their ears, and the fresh night breeze stole around them. It was their parting hour, and they lingered in its sad sweetness. They both knew the obstacles that lay before them; but they both also knew, or felt, and believed that its truth would stand the test of time.

At last unwillingly Belle laid her hand gently on her lover's arm.

"I must go now, Hugh," she said. "I dare not stay any longer."

"Yes, just a little longer," he answered, and Belle did not refuse his request.

"She clung to him, and they walked on almost in silence. More than once some farewell words trembled on her lips, but she could not speak them. Then, when no one was near, Hugh Gilbert bent down and pressed his lips on hers.

"Promise me," he whispered, "that no other lips shall touch yours until I return."

"I promise," she answered; "I promise this faithfully, Hugh."

"You will tell me this truly when I come back?"

"I will."

So the girl made her vow, and the man believed her. Above, the mysterious stars—those silent witnesses of many false vows and broken promises—shone calmly on. But the young passionate hearts heeded them not. They trusted in each other's faith, and so pledged their truth, at the very moment when others were planning to make it vain.

At last reluctantly, slowly, they turned and began retracing their footsteps. And when they reached the hotel Gilbert took leave of her.

"Remember, I trust you," were his last words to her, and then with a lingering hand clasp they parted, and Belle went quickly inside, pulling down a thick veil over her face as she did so. As she crossed the entrance hall she met Lord Stanmore, but she never looked up, and Stanmore did not recognise her. But something in her walk and general appearance made him turn his head and look after her.

"But no it cannot be," he thought; "unless this was the headache;" and he smiled a little cynically.

He had seen much of women, this man; of women who had not tended to elevate his ideas concerning them, and he sometimes spoke hardly and bitterly of their failings. But as a rule he took life easily and carelessly.

"It's giving oneself too much trouble to be angry when the lovely creatures cheat us," he used to say; "I suppose it's their nature."

This was his creed, yet he nevertheless worried more than once if the veiled girl he had passed at so late an hour was Belle Wayland. Her face interested him. "I should like to see behind that charming mask," he thought.

Belle in the meantime had ascended to her own room, and on opening the door was petrified to find her mother there. Mrs. Wayland was pale with anger and indignation, and at once attacked her daughter with extraordinary bitterness.

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