

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

As a frightened girl of twenty, in the last stage of labour, attempted ineffectually to mount the steep narrow stairs of a small house in Sydenham she cried out sharply: 'Frank! It's coming again! Don't let it! Come home and stop it. Please. You *must* stop it!'

Another pain tore through her as she clung to the banister rail. When it had ebbed she abandoned the attempt to reach her room and die, as she was obviously going to die, in her bed. Gripping the rail with both hands she moved clumsily down to the sitting-room where, holding on to a table, she wondered what on earth she was going to do if her husband did not come home quickly. For months she had exulted at the thought of this momentous day and until now she had never once felt the slightest fear. For months, too, both doctor and nurse had been engaged, and mocking her from the mantelpiece was a postcard on which Frank had written their addresses and telephone numbers. He had written it some weeks ago and impressed upon her that, if by any mischance she was alone in the house when her confinement began, she must ask a neighbour to telephone for them immediately. She had only herself to blame for the fact that she was alone now. It was Saturday and Frank had left about half-past eight for his temporary job in the War Office, but Mrs. Huntley, who came each morning to do the housework, had been with her until midday. The restlessness preceding the first pains had commenced about ten o'clock, and Mrs. Huntley, to whom childbirth was no mystery, had trenchantly remarked that the time was come to fetch doctor and nurse. Hilda Burton, however, despite the

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

YOUNG MRS. BURTON

evidence of her senses, could not believe that her baby was about to be born, for only the previous night Nurse Cowick had been to see her and had pronounced authoritatively that she would 'go' well over the week-end and probably into the middle of the following week. 'There's nothing to worry about,' she had said. 'You're a healthy girl and there'll be no fancy business. I'll look in on Monday night and we'll see how things are shaping then. What a pretty little house this is!' she had observed as her eyes roved round the cosy but rather ugly room.

'Oh, but it isn't,' Hilda had protested. 'It's comfortable though, and will do until we find something better. It's only a furnished house.'

Nurse Cowick had looked thoughtful, and then asked: 'How long have you taken it for if it's not a rude question?'

'Only twelve months. It's not our sort of house at all, and I shouldn't like anybody to think it was. The furniture is so ugly,' Hilda had said, with a scornful wave at the solid walnut chairs and table. 'I've put away all the ornaments and pictures. They were just silly.'

'I see. Well, until Monday then, and get to bed early. My guess is Wednesday or Thursday.'

Relying absolutely upon this professional forecast, and assuring the worried Mrs. Huntley that in any case Captain Burton would be back by one o'clock at the latest, Hilda had allowed her, had indeed compelled her, to go home at her usual hour.

The pains, each one biting deeper, made her feel confused; and it was now two o'clock and Frank was not home. Supposing he did not return for hours! This possibility was so alarming that she groped her way to the kitchen door and, scarcely knowing what she was doing, shouted for help; not from her pleasant neighbour, Mrs. Fewings, but from Frank. Nobody heard her frantic cries, for all were snugly indoors. The sky, smooth as dull grey satin, was heavy with banked-

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

up snow and, gazing up into its heartless immensity, Hilda Burton was in despair. Somehow it reminded her of the hairless, swollen body of a drowned dog she had once discovered at the reed-fringed edge of a marsh. Was she, young and strong, with help all around her, to perish like a dog? She began to cry, and stumbling back to the warm sitting-room she made a final bid for help by standing full in the window, determined to beckon in the first passer-by, for she was too frightened to risk going out. There was no sign of life in the straight, quiet road; no movement or fire-glow in the sitting-rooms across the way, for these were only occupied on Sundays. Every house looked as neat and dead as a coffin. She had been at the window for what seemed hours when a man came into view. He was elderly; from his whole appearance, she judged, a business man, and he was walking rapidly, obviously bent on getting home before the snow began to fall. Hilda, by this time half-hysterical, flung open the window and beckoned to him. For a startled moment he stopped to stare at the apparently insane young woman in the pale blue dressing-gown, her hair in two long plaits, gesticulating and screaming: 'Fetch a neighbour, please. Anybody. I can't move. Please!' He stepped hesitantly towards the gate and then, as though pursued by devils, broke into an undignified trot in his haste to get away. Hilda sobbed with rage and terror. She knew now beyond any doubt that the child was fighting its way out of her shaking body, and it fought with demoniacal strength. She *must* get on to her bed, and, bent almost double, she managed the short distance to the first stair; and there, crying out for him, some minutes later her husband found her.

'Hilda! My poor darling! There, there. It will soon be over. Oh, curse that Boche!' In her joy at the sight of him she did not hear the shocking invective directed at the German sniper who had shot away Frank's left arm in the Battle

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

YOUNG MRS. BURTON

of the Somme. Although he could not lift her bodily, he managed, in some fashion that neither of them could ever afterwards remember, to get her into bed. 'There, dearest. Be brave. I'll be back in one second with some woman or other, and in minutes with the doctor and nurse.' He ran from the room and soon returned with Mrs. Fewings, enveloped in a white cooking apron, her hands all floury, her face red and frightened. Frank pushed her towards the bed, saying peremptorily: 'Look after her. Wash your hands. I'll be back in a jiffy with the doctor. Don't stand looking at her! Help her!' He was gone, and Mrs. Fewings, more frightened even than Hilda had been, washed her hands and, still drying them, tiptoed to the bed. Hilda, waiting quite calmly now for the next mad plunge, beamed up at her. Lying safely in her bed, with the dragging weight taken from her limbs and Frank seeing to everything, she was in command of herself again. For one thing — she was not going to die. Frank would take care of that! The past bewildering hours, even the terrified stranger who had passed by on the other side, were forgotten.

'Oh, thank you, Mrs. Fewings, for coming in. I tried to make you hear from the kitchen door. I shouted and shouted.'

'You poor dear! Why ever didn't you come for me when it first started? There, try to keep quiet. It can't be long now. Press your feet against the end of the bed as hard as you can. It helps.'

Hilda pressed. She was being rent in twain and could not stifle one last scream. Then all was tranquil. The baby was born and a minute later Nurse Cowick bustled in, followed quickly by the doctor, and at once both became busy with cotton wool and lint, while Hilda lay in a blissful trance. She caught the words: 'Badly torn', but they conveyed nothing to her until Doctor Mallinson smiled down at her and said: 'There's nothing further to be afraid of, Mrs.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

Burton. Just a couple of stitches. Keep quite still. You've done splendidly so far, and all by yourself, too. And you have a lovely little girl. Now, quite still, please.'

Hilda, who could not have moved had she wanted to, set her teeth. She was so grateful to everyone for helping her, so astonished at finding herself alive and whole instead of in two moribund halves, that she had momentarily forgotten what all this activity was for. Then she heard the child cry. She was a mother! She had a daughter! The fact that she and Frank had so passionately wished for a boy did not now seem to matter. . . . The baby's eyes? Were they being properly attended to? In the book about childbirth which she had studied so earnestly, and every precept in which she had forgotten while her daughter was being born, there was a grave ruling that a baby's eyes must be cleansed the instant it was delivered. 'Nurse,' she called out anxiously, 'have you washed her eyes? Please bring her here and let me look.'

Doctor Mallinson assured her that all was well, but Hilda, convinced that no other woman could properly appreciate the peril to which her child was exposed, repeated her request, and at a nod from the doctor Nurse Cowick brought the baby over.

'There. Take a good look. Now are you satisfied?'

Hilda, fascinated by the creased little monkey-face, boldly asserted her authority as a mother by lightly touching the eyelids. 'Make them open, Nurse. I want to see what colour they are.'

Nurse Cowick frowned. 'It's time you had some rest, Mrs. Burton. You've got a perfect baby. Here's Mrs. Fewings with some hot milk. Drink it and try to sleep for a bit; then, if you're a good girl, I'll let your husband come in and have a cup of tea with you. Do as I tell you,' she added rather sharply.

'All right, nurse,' Hilda answered meekly. She closed her eyes but was far too excited to sleep and, though she had

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

YOUNG MRS. BURTON

drunk the milk, she was so hungry that she longed for a substantial meal, but felt that to ask for it in the circumstances would be altogether too unromantic. She heard the doctor leave, and after him Mrs. Fewings. She heard Frank knock softly, and the nurse's whisper: 'In about an hour. She's dropped off now. She's been badly frightened and she's over-excited. I can't think why she didn't send for me this morning. I'd warned her about the first symptoms.'

'I'm to blame, nurse. I'll never forgive myself. I promised to be home by one o'clock, but something detained me. She was all right when I left home this morning.'

'Now don't go fretting. She'll soon forget it. They always do, you know. I'll tell you as soon as she wakes.'

Hilda smiled to herself and glanced at the silver clock on the mantelpiece, a gift from her Aunt Helen. Its confident Edwardian tick would make short work of an hour, and meanwhile she would dream about her daughter and about her dear, dear husband, and amuse herself by laughing at all those prophets of woe who had warned her of the folly of rushing into a wartime marriage with a man more than twice her age. Her Aunt Helen had been the worst of them all with her gloomy prognostications that she would live to rue her wedding day. Over and over again she had quoted, as if she had invented it, the old saw — marry in haste and repent at leisure. She had even talked to Frank as if he had been a callow schoolboy instead of a brave officer who had proved himself in battle. Frank had been in the very thick of the bloody fighting at Festubert, and Hilda knew by heart the terrible letter in which he had described this to her. In a hailstorm of lead, with bullets splitting up the ground and filling the air with the buzz of angry bees, he had been caught in the barbed wire but had torn himself free. And this was the man whom her aunt had dared to lecture! But Frank had carried the day and her aunt had remarked, rather meanly, Hilda thought: 'Oh well, if Hilda

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

has made up her mind to marry you, I may as well, to save face, give in, for there's nothing to be done about it.'

'There's nothing else I want to do about it,' Frank reminded her.

'All the same, I think it's a pity. How can she, at her age, know *what* she wants?' She's not even thought of what marriage means. She's in love, or thinks she is, and a young girl in love is incapable of thought. When I had a serious talk to her the other day she laughed and quoted Shakespeare at me! "Let still the woman take an elder than herself; so wears she to him, so sways she level in her husband's heart." What do you think of that? It came out so pat and made me feel such a fool.'

Frank had laughingly repeated this conversation to her and they had joked about it, but neither of them realized how deeply worried Helen Shephard was. She liked Frank, and she respected him for having unhesitatingly left his job on a great newspaper and volunteered for Kitchener's Army, but probing cautiously here and there she had heard hints and whispers that she did not like at all. Hints that indicated a darker side — a mysterious side. In the open-handed fellowship of Fleet Street, Dermot McGilray had confided, Frank was sometimes criticized harshly for his unlikable habit of slipping unobtrusively from a friendly gathering in one pub and being discovered later on moodily drinking by himself in another. 'It isn't meanness,' Dermot said loyally. 'Nobody's ever known old Frank not to stand his corner. After he's vanished we've discussed him often but we've never quite fathomed him. And when we've finally run him to earth, and started chaffing him, he's turned nasty and quarrelsome — you'd scarcely credit he was the same chap. The Street doesn't approve of solitary drinkers, and if there wasn't so much else we all like about him some of us would fight shy of him.'

'Solitary drinkers!' Helen did not like the sound of that.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

YOUNG MRS. BURTON

‘Look here, Dermot. You and I are old friends. You’ve known Frank longer than I have. Be honest with me. What do you think of Hilda marrying him?’

Dermot was embarrassed. ‘I wish you hadn’t asked me, Helen, but, since you have, I think, as you do, that it’s a pity. Hilda’s too young for him and far too romantic, but I agree that it’s no use your trying to stop her. So why not hope for the best? When she’s not being divinely silly, Hilda’s not without intelligence; and when he’s demobbed Frank has his job waiting safely for him — at least as safely as any job on a paper can be. And if he does drink a bit too much at times, what of it? There are worse things, and the responsibility of being married to a girl as attractive as young Hilda should steady him up. She might even reform him,’ he concluded with a smile.

‘She might. And as you say, there are worse things. Unfaithfulness, for instance.’

Dermot laughed. ‘That, I’d stake my last shilling, is something she won’t need to worry about. He’s demented about her. And as, if anything, she’s even more so about him, perhaps the sooner the burning question is settled the better.’

Helen sighed. ‘I’d always hoped that my niece would give a few years of her youth to the Cause. Oh, I know that we’ve now practically got our rights, and haven’t we had to fight for them! But there’s plenty of hard work to be accomplished yet, and after all I’ve drilled into Hilda it’s maddening to have her not caring whether we get the Vote or not, but thinking only of herself and rushing into marriage with the first man who, so far as I am aware, has taken her seriously. Most disappointing!’

‘Poor Hilda! At any rate there’s one thing to be thankful for. With Frank safely out of the fighting she’s not, barring accidents, courting early widowhood. And if she must work for your Cause, I can’t see that being married need interfere.’

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
Margaret Penn
Excerpt
[More information](#)

HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

With which dubious comfort, fortified by a not unnatural desire to shift the responsibility of her romantically inclined niece to hands more willing to accept it, Helen at length gave an ostensibly reluctant consent to the wedding.

Lying there, warm and safe, listening to the gay little clock ticking so loudly, and watching, from beneath her lashes, every movement of Nurse Cowick as she ministered to the baby, Hilda humbly thanked her Maker for being who she was and where she was. Her bed faced the wide bay window, and the pent-up snow which had seemed so menacing as she stood calling vainly for help was now glorious to behold as it whirled silently down. The little clock, for all its assertiveness, ticked with maddening slowness, and to speed away the time until Frank was allowed to come to her she gazed into the glowing heart of the fire where, in tiny pictures, she recaptured the lyrical days of her honeymoon, from which Frank had brought her to this house. He had hoped to take her for the honeymoon to Carcassonne, but the war had made that impossible. Instead they had gone to Amberley in Sussex and spent all their days upon the Downs, delighting in the fertile country below, where villages and farmsteads rode the deep green fields so sturdily. There they had had the luck to come upon a dewpond being made, and had talked with the men who were thatching it with straw as though it were the inverted roof of a cottage. While she took photographs of their operations, Frank plied them with questions and that night he wrote a factual and fascinating article about the construction of a dewpond. The article appeared a few days later in a London paper, and Hilda was so proud of her husband that she showed it to the landlady of their inn. She, too, was proud of it, for Captain Burton, she confessed, was the first 'writing gentleman' to stay at her house, and she asked his permission to pin it up in the bar.

On Amberley Mount they made the acquaintance of a

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-28298-7 - Young Mrs. Burton
 Margaret Penn
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

YOUNG MRS. BURTON

shepherd who startled them by confiding that, though he would not change his job for a kingdom, 'it was terrible quiet on the Lord's day'. To Frank and Hilda it had seemed enchantingly quiet up there all the time, but the shepherd insisted that on Sundays it was entirely different. 'Terrible still,' he repeated firmly — 'terrible still it be up here on the Lord's day.' Frank had photographed her with the shepherd and Dusty, his dog, who, his master informed them, was sagacious beyond belief, and, despite the fact that he was well past his prime and had left a hind leg in a cruel gin, nipped around when on duty as nimbly as a puppy. Frank had pondered on the shepherd's assertion about the Sabbath quiet; she, too, had wondered and then, rather shyly, said: 'I think I understand what he means, Frank. It's quiet for him because it is Sunday. The quiet is in himself, don't you think?'

'You're right! How like a woman to jump straight to it!' For a minute or so he was silent, then chanted:

She is wiser far above me
 And wiser when she wishes;
 She can knit with cunning skill
 And make the daintiest dishes.
 She can handle knife or pen
 And deal the wound which lingers,
 She can talk the talk of men
 And touch with thrilling fingers.

'Do you like it?' he added.

'I think you're the cleverest man in the world to make up a poem like that on the spur of the moment.'

'I'm sorry, Hilda, but it isn't mine at all. I've taken liberties with it from Meredith. But do you like it?'

'Some of it,' she said cautiously. 'It makes me sound cruel, though, and that isn't true.'

'That's merely poetic licence, darling. Listen!' They