

A Reporter's Romance

I.

Walter Condon and I—reporters for two morning newspapers in the city of New York—were nearing the end of our long round of visiting police stations in search of news, as the clocks were making ready to strike twelve. Turning out of Pearl Street, where the bitter wind of this January midnight was drifting fine icy snow into our chilled faces, the green signal lanterns before the door of our last station showed us a hospital ambulance standing there. Hastening to enter, we found lying on the floor of the back office, with an ugly wound in his head, a man whose face we had often seen in the cells for thieving, and whose business was to peddle sweetmeats among the concert saloons and sailors' resorts existing in such terrible abundance between Chatham Street and the East River. The surgeon thought the man would not live, but ordered him removed to a hospital. At that moment the front door was opened timidly, and a small voice asked, "Please, sir, is he dead?"

"No, he a'n't croaked yet, but he will 'fore long," answered the glum doorman. Then, seeing the scared, pitiful little face, he added, more kindly, "What do you want with old Baldwin, anyhow?"

"I dun know, sir. He was my uncle, and Big-nosed Jim told me he was killed." And she began to cry.

Now there was something so uncommonly friendless in the appearance of this ragged, bare-headed little girl crying silently by the door, not offering to come near the unconscious man, nor wailing loudly, as is the custom of street children in trouble, and something so pathetic in her soft voice, that we were all interested, and began to question her, but had got no further than to find out that her name was Elsie, and that she had lived with Baldwin for a long time, but she thought not always, for she remembered playing with a beautiful young lady in a fine house, "where it uz allers warm, you bet!" she exclaimed, spreading her blue hands out before the great coal stove, when the door opened again, and a policeman pushed in before him an old hag, bleary-eyed, half dressed, and furious with anger. At the sight of her the little waif broke her story short off, and crept tremblingly over to the farthest corner, begging us piteously not to let the woman take her.

"Arrah!" shrieked the beldam. "Jist let me get a hold of yez wunst, and I'll—"

But her threat was lost as she was hurried back to her stone bedroom. Then the dying old sinner was carried to the ambulance, and it rattled off to the relief hospital, where Baldwin's name was placed upon the death-roll before another sunset.

Meanwhile Condon was trying to comfort the girl. Elsie told him about a long journey, and that afterward Baldwin had made her go about with him at night and sing in the saloons, had forced her to beg for nearly all her food and for the rags she called clothes, and to pick over the ashes in street barrels for gleanings of coal to burn in the broken stove that warmed his garret, Elsie explained her terror in the presence of the woman by saying that Baldwin had sometimes left her in the beldam's charge, when she had been beaten shamefully. Condon always thought this

woman could have told him more about Elsie, but not feeling it strongly at the time, he never afterwards was able to discover her.

The story Walter won from the little stranger touched him deeply, used as he was—and as we all come to be—to the woes of the poor in the metropolis; and most of all when, her confidence fully won, she said, simply, “I’ll sing for you,” and began a pretty melody, while we all listened to the sweet tones so strange in a police office; then, I think, his mind must have been decided, for when the bluff sergeant called out, “Well, what shall be done with the kid?” Condon’s answer was quick, “I’ll take care of her.”

“Tonight, Tom,” he explained to me, “I think she had better go to an hotel, and tomorrow I’ll take her home.”

“And a fine time you’ll have of it!” was my thought; but I said, “Oh, certainly.” So off we went to a small German hotel we knew of, and put the little waif to bed.

Walter lived up in the Eighth Ward, with an aunt, who was a good old soul, but had rather more acerbity mixed with her affection than any of us liked. It was a snug little home, though, and the young man had good reason to suppose he should succeed to its ownership.

I did not see Condon until the following evening at the Press Club, and I was very anxious to know how he felt about his generous act, after sleeping on it, and, moreover, how he had introduced his ward to his aunt. I rather expected the complete disappointment of my enthusiastic friend’s plans. He told me all about it at once. Elsie had been rather distrustful of him in the morning, but took a childish delight in the new clothes he had bought for her.

“She only needed some colour in her cheeks,” he averred, warmly, “to make her positively a pretty girl. But her comfortless look was an advantage in one respect, for it softened a little the muscular heart of that excellent old aunt of mine, and I believe Elsie will really win her. By Jove! I hope so.”

Elsie did win her, and although at first her ignorance and street manners annoyed the old lady a great deal, she was partly coaxed and partly forced to be patient with the girl, and Elsie rapidly refined.

II.

Not long after this I left New York and went to California for five years. I could tell you some stories about that too, if I had time; but no matter. I kept up a sort of connection with the newspapers through correspondence, and therefore, when my property in San Francisco was burned, and I came back as poverty-stricken as ever, I had little difficulty in finding a position on the press, and was fortunate enough to get into the same office with my old-time chum.

Condon had hardly changes his status. He was the regular Wall Street reporter now, and on a salary, but spent most of his energy in writing critical essays and in the study of political economy. For politics, in the abstract, he had a profound admiration; for ward caucuses, party

machinery, and Congressional wranglings an intense disgust. He therefore might have occupied a far more prominent place in metropolitan journalism if he had not persistently chosen to keep his position, which suited him and favoured his pet study. He seemed indifferent and indolent, and was so in many respects, for he loved quiet and his mood; yet, when an emergency rose, he could summon tremendous activity. He carried about with him always much latent power.

Changes in his affairs contributed to this gentlemanly and studious neglect of stirring work. The death of his aunt left him with the little house in which they had lived and a comfortable income, and a staid old lady became his housekeeper.

As for Elsie, she had become the pet of the household, and Walter always spoke of her as his little sister. His aunt had left a special bequest providing for her education, and she was happy at a boarding-school up the Hudson.

So affairs went on. The purity of our September climate faded into sere October, and chilling airs bore premonition of winter. One day we were all in the office, awaiting assignments for the afternoon, when the hall boy brought in a visitor's card. The editor glanced at it, grumbled at the interruption, and tossed it toward Walter, calling out roughly, "Go see what she wants, Condon."

Walter growled some anathema on the head of the whole female sex—I think we were all in bad humour that morning—and took the card. I saw it:

Miss Hilda Brand,

written in a firm, upright, feminine hand, with no waste of ink in flourishes. Rising indolently, he sauntered out to the anteroom, leaving the door ajar, and thus permitting a glimpse of the lady—a rather young and slender woman, with a sweet and serious face, no dimples nor long eyelashes, but a clear complexion, gray eyes full of purity and earnestness, and thin lips expressing self-reliance and strength. She was very plainly attired in dark clothing, and her simple hat was concealed in the folds of a veil.

Condon bowed in the attitude of sincere respect he held for all women—an attention to their every word that had captivated many a one by its subtle flattery—and asking how he could serve her in place of Mr. Brennell, whose excuses he presented.

"Thank you," she replied; "I am seeking employment as a stenographer. I have had experience in taking the proceedings of Congressional committees at Washington, and hope to be able to avail myself of it in newspaper work here. I can refer—"

"It's not all that necessary," Walter interrupted. "Reporting for us is a question of present ability rather than of antecedents." He was looking at her sharply, and I thought I saw her lip tremble at his austere and business-like manner. Perhaps he saw it too, for he added, more kindly, "We have never made use of any feminine skill, but if you will wait a moment, I will consult with Mr. Brennell."

It was soon understood among us that the fair stenographer was to be a member of the staff. She came, and did her work well. We readily got acquainted with her, but could never be familiar at all, and I believe that men generally disliked her. She was rather too mysterious to please us. Condon seemed to pay less attention to her than anyone else; but one dark night when she had been kept until ten o'clock, and it had come on to rain, Condon remarked: "I will give you the shelter of my umbrella to the car, Miss Brand," and went in spite of her protest—a piece of solid audacity three reporters I knew of had ignominiously failed in within a fortnight.

Condon had a way of quietly taking possession of every lady he chose to speak to, as though he knew precisely what they wanted to do and ought to do far better than they did themselves; and this firm, quiet, polite persistence they generally found irresistible, knowing that he would not be irritated by a rebuff.

One day there was to be an important inquest at Newark upon the causes of a fatal boiler explosion some days previous, and Miss Brand was sent down to take a shorthand report of the proceedings. She was expected to return between nine and ten o'clock in the evening. It was the 17th of March, and a cold, snowy day—the ugliest end of winter. After our early evening dinner Condon went over to Jersey City on an errand, and returning about nine o'clock, heard at Cortlandt Street that a railway train had fallen through a bridge on the Meadows. He glanced at his watch, "It's her train," he said to himself, with a chill feeling about the heart, and, hastened by impulse rather than controlled by purpose, he ran across to the next wharf and leaped upon a boat just leaving the slip.

Now he had time to think. The night was cold, and the icy wind from down the bay swept before it snow and sleet, which rattled on the roof of the cabin, and slammed the doors with changing gusts. The storm was dense as a fog, and Condon found himself chafing with a nervous haste quite unusual to him, as the ferryboat stopped again and again in the ice, whistling her hoarse warning. He went out on deck and peered into the murky night, but got little consolation. Vexed with himself for feeling so much concern, it never occurred to him that ordinary humanity would require him to go on such an errand as this; that the fraternal interest of journalistic association would demand that he do what service he could to a sister reporter. He only saw possible harm to her individually. He called her "Hilda" in his thought, and not "Miss Brand," as always hitherto.

An engine and some cars were waiting to take the surgeons down to the wreck, and upon representing himself to be a reporter, Walter received a grudging permission to go also. The short ride ended, Condon was the first to alight and hurry toward a fire built by the ruined bridge, for there was no shelter near except a single overcrowded coach. He scanned a group of figures around the blaze. Miss Brand was not amongst them. Trembling with excitement, he caught a brakeman's arm, and hurriedly described her.

"She's all O K, Sir!—not a scratch—I know her—just started to the city down the track—couldn't hold her—"

Condon waited to hear no more, but started to follow her. The track was rough and slippery, the sleet was changing into steady snow, and the darkness was intense, but he stumbled on with all speed, and presently thought he saw some one ahead. He hallooed, but the wind drowned his

voice, and he seemed to gain nothing upon the figure, until suddenly it disappeared, and the next instant, so deceiving was distance in the snow, a woman rose up from almost under his feet.

“Hilda!” he exclaimed.

“Who is it? Mr. Condon? Oh, I am so glad!”

“Are you hurt?” was his anxious question.

“No,” she said, “but very tired;” and she clung to his arm, her form shaking with fatigue and excitement and cold. His overcoat was off in an instant, and wrapped around her. Then he supported her firmly, and started on, for she would not go back.

“There are no roads on these meadows,” he said. “We must walk back all the way to the ferry, for it will not do to stand still in this storm. Can you endure four miles of this?”

“With your help, I think so,” she replied; and they struggled on. Suddenly she stopped. “Your report, Mr. Condon! What will you write? You must go back.”

He stopped also, but to fold his unwieldy Ulster more closely about her slight, thinly clad form.

“I did not come for news. I came for you.”

She only held more tightly to his arm, murmuring, “I was pretty badly frightened,” and walked on. Not far, however, for that moment they descried the relief train returning to the city with the wounded, and, managing to make the engineer hear their cries, they were taken on board.

III.

The rest in the cars and on the ferry-boat restored the girl so much that she insisted upon walking up to Printing-house Square, where she made haste to hand in her report of the inquest at the counting-room. Then she turned to go, holding out her hand at the door to Walter in an embarrassed way, and saying, “I cannot thank you properly for your kindness, Mr. Condon; but now I must bid you good-night.”

“Not in the least,” objected Walter, stoutly. “I shall not be so thoughtless as to let you go home alone at this hour of the night. Why, it’s twenty minutes past eleven, and St. Patrick’s night too, when even I used to feel squeamish at going about alone.”

“But you *can not* go with me, and I don’t wish you to,” said she, trying ineffectually to escape.

“I shall not consent to leave you unattended this black night,” he answered, earnestly; “and if you persist in your refusal, you may be sure I shall not lose sight of you until I know you are safely at home. And now we must have a cup of coffee.”

The commanding way of the man conquered. She allowed him to put her arm through his, and went with him. But she was silent all the way; and when the café was reached, and he had again refused to let her go away into the great city by herself, she dropped her face into her hands and sat the image of misery. Condon, utterly unable to comprehend, regarded her without a word. Suddenly she lifted her face and spoke to him: "Mr. Condon, once more, will you not leave me to go alone?"

The noise of a fierce scuffle in the street penetrated the room at the moment. The pleading look in the sad face, which had caused him to waver in what he was sure was right resolve, changed to one of terror, and Walter had only to point to the door to enforce significantly his final refusal: "Tonight?—no."

"Then I must tell you something which I never should have confided to you if I could have helped it. Yet I do want your—somebody's aid—oh, so much! You know we used to live in Washington, and that my father was an editor there. He lost his money and place through bad men, and fell sick; and then—Oh, listen! it's striking twelve o'clock. Come, we must hurry," and she sprang from the table. "You must not ask me where I am going," she went on, excitedly, "but only go with me. And will not you be afraid? I should hate to have any harm come to you."

He was puzzled, and glanced at her face as he assured her of his composure. The wavy brown hair was blown back from the broad forehead, where some delicate wrinkles were drawn in anxiety over the gray eyes, and the shapely lips were set with intense purpose and courage. It was such a face as seems to lead a forlorn hope.

The snow and sleet had ceased, but heavy clouds still scudded overhead, and a biting wind raced through the streets and spun giddily round the corners, shaking with angry hand the endlessly creaking signs, rattling the locks of the heavy doors, drifting the snow into banks, pounding and battering at every obstacle.

Hilda was poorly clad for such a night, shivering in spite of herself; and when Walter laid his arm around her slender shoulders and almost carried along, she did not resist. He was going straight down to Fulton Ferry, supposing she was on her way to Brooklyn; but she made him turn up empty Nassau Street, which rang with their quick tread above the roar and rattle of the gale, and then guided him eastward block after block.

"Do you know where you are going?" he interrogated at last, in surprise.

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"Hush! you will see," she answered, in a low voice. "Please don't speak to me now—and you may never want to again."

After that he asked no more questions, but applied himself wholly to taking care of her, keeping all his senses on the alert, while she hurried him farther and farther from the brilliant thoroughfares, deeper and deeper into a wilderness of tortuous narrow streets, where the sun can scarcely penetrate to the pavements even at high noon, and the most brilliant moonbeams fail to sound the fathoms of darkness that lie damp and cold between the tall warehouses. Above, perchance, the moonlight silvers the edge of the cornices; below, the heavy doorways are dimly

outlined at intervals by the flickering street lamps that paint a long line of bright dots upon the darkness. Here and there glows a red eye out of the gloom, and behind it shines the entrance of a drinking resort for the desperate and squalid inhabitants of this nether side of the city. Into two or three such places Hilda led the young man for a moment, while she eagerly searched for some one—whom Walter could not surmise. Once or twice he was glowered at by faces which he remembered very well from his night-reporting days as those of cut-throats. He knew they were approaching the river, and this meant a constant increase of peril. So when Hilda turned swiftly down Oak Street, and, in response to his “Where now?” said, faintly, “To Water Street. Will go there also with me?” (go with her!—he would have gone to the end of the world if she had asked him then), he bethought him of a ruse, and answered, gaily, as they were passing a police-station, “I shall certainly do nothing else; but I would like to run in here and light my cigar, if I may.”

He lighted his cigar, to be sure, but his real object was to ask for a detective to follow them closely. Then the two pursued their zigzag way, buffeting the wind.

Few people were in the streets—it was too blustering for that—but from all the many drinking shops came sounds of rude music and riotous revelry. Even Hilda could not help remarking how frequently they met policemen.

“Do you see that half-shut door over there?” and Hilda pointed it out. “I must look there. If I do not find him, then—I don’t know what I *shall* do.”

They crossed the street, and were just under the large red lantern, when a great commotion was heard within, the door burst open, and an old man was cast headlong to the pavement by a blow from a young ruffian, who, following to complete his work, was met by so stunning a counter-blow from Condon as stopped his interest in that quarrel at once. His companion, seeing him fall, leaped at Walter, but met instead the detective’s club.

It was all over in half a minute, and Walter turned to Hilda. She was holding the head of the insensible old man on her knee, and with her handkerchief staunching a cruel wound in his forehead. With a face as white as his, but calm, with tender industrious hands, and a solicitude regardless of public gaze, she bathed the old man’s bleeding face, and tried to restore animation to the wasted hands, while other put drops of brandy between his lips. Walter knelt beside him, and told her the heart still beat. But Hilda only moaned, “Oh, father, father, come back to me! come back to me!”

By this time a stretcher was brought, and laying the old man upon it, two officers carried him to the police-station, setting him down in the back-room—the self-same station and the self-same spot where old Baldwin had lain five years before.

A surgeon had been telegraphed for by the police, and, with the hospital ambulance, was waiting at the station when the little procession entered the double doors. The surgeon pronounced the wound not necessarily dangerous, and very soon brought back consciousness, the old man first opening his eyes first on Hilda, to his evident astonishment.

“Father,” she said to him, softly, “you have been hurt; you must lie quite still until we can take you home.”

Meanwhile Walter was saying to the public surgeon and the grave-minded officer behind the desk, “That is as much of the story as I know. Doubtless I shall find out all the rest from the young lady very soon. I will have the old gentleman taken to my house; there, surgeon, is the address for your driver. Meanwhile I will be accountable for the appearance of Miss Brand and myself as witnesses against the prisoners if the old gentleman cares to prosecute them.” Then turning to Hilda: “This gentleman” —for he would not betray what might be her confidence— “this gentleman must go to the hospital, and we must go with him. He will be taken in the ambulance, and I shall get a carriage for us.” Where the “hospital” was he forbore to explain.

Whereupon he went out, and returning presently, helped tenderly—in spite of a slight revulsion of feeling—to lay Mr. Brand into the springy couch of the hospital van, after which he handed Hilda into the carriage he had brought, and, directing the driver to follow the ambulance, seated himself beside her.

“Miss Brand,” Walter asked, gently, in a moment, seeing that she was composed—“Miss Brand, you began to tell me something about yourself when we were in the restaurant. Will you continue? I am better prepared to hear it now.”

“Yes,” she answered, wearily. “It is better you should know all now.”

Then she related to him rapidly the chief points of her history. How her father, an educated man, had been editor of an influential newspaper in Washington, but becoming involved in unsuccessful political schemes, had lost his position; how misfortunes rapidly followed, and how her father had resorted to wine and the gaming table to drown his sorrows, until he had impoverished his family, which then consisted of Hilda and another daughter much younger than she, whose birth Mrs. Brand had not survived. They had to give up their home, and were very unhappy. It was a sad story, and Walter protested against hearing any more, seeing the pain it gave her to tell it. But she would not cease.

“It was only a little while after that my sister and I went out to do some errands one pleasant afternoon in October. She was four years old then, and I took her every where with me. It was nearly dark when we got through, and hurrying home, I left sister a moment with a playmate, telling her to come quickly. Our house was only two squares away, and I had no fear of her not knowing the way. They told us she really did start after me almost immediately, but I never saw her again. Where she went, whether she is even alive, none us know.”

Hilda spoke the last sentence in so low and sad a voice that Walter could hardly hear her.

“Papa clings to the hope that we shall find her one day; but I think she is dead.”

Paralyzed at first by the blow, precious time was lost before active search was begun, and then no trace could be found, the only thing discovered being that an Irishwoman, whom Hilda had once discharged from her employ for stealing, had disappeared from Washington about the same

time as the child. But search for her proved equally fruitless. Walter's breath came fast as there rushed upon his recollection the memory of Elsie, and of the beldam who wanted to take her away from the police-station.

"Finally," Hilda went on, in her weary voice, "our money all gave out, so that we could not pay any more detectives; people became tired of sympathizing with us, and we had to bear our sorrow in decorous silence. Then papa—Oh! I can't tell you all about it. You *must* know how terrible it was, and I *can't* explain. I shall cry if I do."

Again Walter bade her not to try. Nevertheless, she did, telling him, with passionate earnestness, how her father had changed from the proud, handsome man into the decrepit old drunkard; how she had resorted to stenography—her amusement in earlier years—for a livelihood; and what a wretched weight of sorrow she had borne from loneliness and degradation.

"One day last September," Hilda continued, gently withdrawing her forgotten hand from Walter's—for he had taken it in an assuring clasp when once she had been sobbing with the misery of her recollections—"papa came home more like himself, and startled me by telling me he believed our lost darling was in New York, and that he was resolved to go himself to seek her. I pleaded with him, but it was of no use, and I could only persuade him to wait a few days until I could go with him. He had obtained some money by selling his last little piece of property. Well, we came to New York without any plans, but by a fortunate accident found a good boarding-place. Papa was hopeful, and said he was on the track of my sister, but I always doubted him. He would stay at home all day, but go out in the evening; and one night he did not come home till morning, and then I could see that he had been drinking again, and had lost all his money. I begged him not to go away the next evening, but he did, so I followed him, and persuaded him to come home. In that way I learned his haunts, where he went to gamble, and often I have been in those dreadful places at midnight when I could not induce him to leave earlier. I am afraid he will never give it up. Oh, father, father, how could you sink so!"

Hilda's brave voice was lost in the despairing cry, and she had no more than time to recover her self-possession before the cab stopped.

IV.

It is the next afternoon.

On Walter's bed, in the neat little room of the "library," lies old Mr. Brand, quietly sleeping. The rattle of the cart on the avenue, the heavy grinding rumble of the horse-cars, the screams of the hucksters, the many noises of the city streets, mingle in a subdued roar that is tempered by distance and brick walls into a soothing sound.

When Walter entered this quiet room he found Hilda sitting in a low rocking-chair by the bedside. "Has he become clearly conscious?" he asked her, for Mr. Brand had been somewhat delirious during the night.

“Yes,” she answered, in a whisper; “he knew me, and asked where we were and what had happened, yet seemed to care very little for these things, only begging Elsie to come to him.”

Walter started. Was his Elsie the lost daughter and sister, the darling of the old man’s heart, for lack of whom his weak moral nature had broken down? Elsie was not an uncommon name. It might only be a coincidence.

“Hilda,” he said, quietly, “what causes your father to think so strongly that your sister—Elsie did you say her name was? —is here in New York? Perhaps he had some clue which would help me to look for her. I am a famous detective.”

“I never could find out. Father once said that the Irishwoman I told you of came here, but afterward he denied that he knew anything about it. So I have always thought it was only a hallucination of his, but one I could never dissipate;” and she sighed wearily.

“Tell me what Elsie looked like,” he asked, again, and he was startled by the resemblance she drew of her to the picture of the little girl he had won from barbarism five years before. When she spoke of her sweet silvery voice as a marked characteristic, and dwelt with loving earnestness on the pretty way in which she sang, he was almost sure of the identity, and came near blurting out the whole story.

“If Elsie had only lived” (Hilda persisted in thinking her dead), “papa never would been led away so, I am sure. It is his despair.”

“Oh, keep up your courage! It’s not too late to renew the search. I tell you again I am famous as a detective.”

The surgeon dropped in before long, and announced Mr. Brand to be feverish and weak, but that his constitution seemed to be good, and all the physician’s anxiety was concerning the patient’s habit of moaning and muttering in his sleep, as though he had some settled grief or perplexity, which might induce congestion of the brain.

Walter thought it all over. He recalled every incident connected with Elsie’s history, and recited to himself all that she had told him of her vague recollections. He questioned Hilda once more as to her sister, and the more he studied the resemblance in face, form, and manner, the more firmly he became convinced that his “little sister” was the lost darling of his guests. It was with mingled sensations that he admitted this, and with conflicting hopes that he resolved to put it to the test. If *his* Elsie was *their* Elsie, there could be no question as to his duty. But he had been indulging almost paternal anticipations of her future, and had been allowing his love for the little waif to grow beyond his record until now the prospect of losing her had a bitterness in it akin to the sorrow a father’s heart would feel in like circumstances. So his honest hope that he might be able to reunite this broken family was in conflict with his selfish but irrepressible wish that she might prove, after all, not to be their Elsie, but only his.

Doing and thinking thus occupied several days, during which (after the first) Condon went about his work as usual. Mr. Brand’s wounds healed, and he seemed to grow better, yet his mind

remained dreadfully morbid, and he chafed because his illness prevented him from searching for his daughter. All knew what *his* searching would amount to; yet perhaps he did have an idea of her true fate, or he never would have mired body and soul in the slums of the Fourth Ward. At last the surgeon positively declared to Condon that unless the patient ceased fretting he would speedily die.

That same evening Walter called Hilda cheerily to come into the library, and when she had presented herself, with a puzzled air, he said, "You are looking well to-night, Miss Brand; I think you are bearing your burden heroically."

"I am surrounded by so much kindness," she answered, with the brightest smile he had seen for many a day, "that I should be very ungrateful to let my troubles annoy any one. I really do feel more courageous than I did. But why do you ask?"

"Because," he said, "I wanted you to be sure of your nerves before I told you something."

"Oh, is it bad news? —or—or—have you found out anything about Elsie?"

"Yes," he answered, so composedly that she became calm also; "I have found a clue—some one who thinks she can tell you about your sister; and if this person is right, Elsie is alive and happy."

Hilda did not speak. She sat before him, her delicate hands clasped upon her lap, listening with rapt attention to his words, her face rippling with a new light, full of a tender beauty and sweetness.

"You have heard what Dr. Gaines fears. Time, then, is precious. Now to-morrow morning I shall want you to go up the Hudson a little way with me and see this person. We will be back in the afternoon, and can leave your father quite safely. You can decide better than I whether this young lady really knows Elsie, or whether it is some one else she has in mind."

"Of course, I will go," she said, eagerly, "if you think I can be spared. But tell me, how did you find this person?"

"You shall know to-morrow."

The next morning was warm and balmy—one of those earliest spring days that sometimes follow the fiercest storms, suggesting to every heart into which the sap of nature can creep that the light and joy and fullness of summer approach. The city streets were alive to this gentle influence as well as the country lanes. Children crept out of tall dingy tenements and played in the sun; grandfathers marched out to the bit of garden behind the brown-stone houses and examined the swelling buds of the single grape that struggled for existence in the scant soil; middle-aged men in dark counting-rooms turned the pages of their huge ledgers with an indolent and weary air, while younger clerks examined fondly their fishing-rods before going down to business, and talked all the way of trout brooks and snipe-shooting.

This strength of hope, this vivifying influence of the growing sun, penetrated even to the sick-room of that quite house in C—— Street, and the wounded man was quite as generously happy in the prospect of his daughter's having a holiday as she was glad of a little relief from her vigil. She was happy and buoyant, but Walter found it hard to disguise his seriousness.

Their destination reached, they drove at once to the school at the edge of the pretty town. Some one of the pupils was playing upon a piano and singing in the next room to the reception parlour as they sat down, and the sweet girlish voice at once attracted Hilda's attention in a marked manner. Condon was regarding her closely, for he had arranged with the principal of the school that Elsie should sing at that time as she was doing, but he did not guess to what arts the music teacher had been compelled to resort to carry out the plan. Now Walter was watching to see whether Hilda would recognise the voice. He had not long to wait. Hilda turned to him with an eager gesture and swimming eyes.

“Oh, Mr. Condon, if I thought it possible, I should say that was Elsie's own voice!”

Then a light seemed to break in upon her—a light that irradiated her countenance, and she cried out, “Who is it that is going to tell about her? Is it—oh, is it she herself?”

There was no time for Walter to reply, for Elsie, little thinking who was awaiting her, and little caring, so delighted was she with the thought that her “brother” had come to visit her—Elsie, bright and winning, sparkling with the zest of study and keen enjoyment of exercise—came running into the room.

She was thinking solely of Walter, but she saw some one else—a lady she could not find a place for in her recollection, yet whom she was intuitively certain belonged there, through whose face swiftly opened a vista into her forgotten childhood, where the landscape of memory was yet dim, truly, but now reached farther than a moment ago. All this was instantaneous, an impression rather than a ratiocination, for before she had half checked her impetuous entry she saw this lady leap up, saw her reach out her arms, heard her cry, “Elsie!”

Then she knew her, and only saying, “Hilda!” was folded in her embrace.

V.

Time swept on. Mr. Brand was won back to life through inspiration of Elsie's return, as he had been sent astray by the culmination of his misfortunes in her disappearance. And not this only, but won back to sobriety. He seemed to remember only vaguely, as a disturbed chronic dream, the life that he had led in the gutters of Washington and New York, shedding bitter tears over the ingratitude he had shown to his noble daughter, the disgrace he had brought upon the good old family name, the brutishness and evil he had done. He himself never sought excuse in the plea of insanity, but the more he learned of Mr. Brand, the more Walter became convinced that the unaccountable degradation of the old man—aged in tribulation rather than in years—proceeded from aberration of a brilliant mind unstayed by strong principles and impotent to endure sorrow.

His strength restored, Mr. Brand was glad to accept a position as proof-reader on one of the daily newspapers, obtained with Walter's help, while Hilda returned to her reporting. They installed themselves in a cozy little home near Condon's, and Elsie continued her studies. So when the spring had fully passed, and Elsie came home for her summer vacation, affairs were moving quietly and happily everywhere.

September came again, and a year to a day from the time Hilda Brand came to our office to get some work to do, and Walter had first met and frightened her, those two went up with Elsie to her school, and left her beginning another year of study. They returned to New York by a steamboat in the evening, and sat long on the deck, watching the romantic shores sweeping by them. It was Hilda's first voyage on the noble river, and Walter interested her greatly by his graphic accounts of the villages and cultured homesteads that line the banks. But deepening night and the passengers leaving the deck made her suddenly rise and say, "Shall we not go in?"

"Is it not too pleasant?" he replied. "Besides, I have not finished my cigar."

"Very well, then;" and quietly resuming her seat, she watched composedly the dancing path of the moon on the river—more composedly, perhaps, than if she had seen the intense, passionate look in the face of the man at her side, his cigar hanging idly from his fingers, his eyes on her countenance.

At last, with a half-trembling dread of the silence that had fallen between them, she turns, with downcast eyes, and says, "You have been very, very noble and true to me and mine. How can I ever pay you?"

She does not anticipate the answer that comes with startling quickness:

"I ask a great price—even the gift of yourself; and having trusted me before, will you not trust me now?"

The burning blushes and the sweet eyes raised timidly to his do not say him nay.

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