

pillows, a background for a girl's face, and with a sort of maddest vision, more like feeling than seeing, I perceived the doctor in the shadows beyond the bed, watching.

"The girl's eyes seemed very large in her pale and thin face. They spoke to me in a silent language that I knew. They reached out to my soul with a natural, deep long look."

"I extended my hand to her, and she grasped it with a quick, childish clutch. 'My brother!' said she, and the tears rushed from her eyes."

"I have since been informed that I acquired myself admirably. Three witnesses have testified in my favor, four, indeed, if I include my sister, whose emotional state may be held to impair the value of her testimony."

"You were a dear," declared Mrs. Gilbert. "I could have hugged you." But this is the way it appeared to me: That I was confronted by a situation utterly impossible and beyond mortal tact and discretion; that of two courses open to me I chose the worse and might have done much better than I did even with the best. You must take my evidence against that of all the others, for I alone was competent to judge of my conduct, as you will presently see.

My sister told me that she had been known as Della Gray, the first name probably having been derived from the name of the fishing vessel that had rescued her. In his home she had lived until her ninth year, when a lady, a summer visitor to Newfoundland, had taken her away to the town of Chatham, N. H. Why the Grays had consented to have her go she did not know, but it was something about money. The lady from Chatham was a Mrs. Lawrence, and she lived in a good home. At her death two years ago my sister had come to New York and had been employed as a stenographer in the office of a lawyer, a cousin

of the doctor. "If you were misguided, I must give me the money for the needful, and I'll manage all that. Hilda will enjoy it as coming from you, but not as gifts. Do you understand?"

"I thought I was her brother," said I. "Aren't you proceeding on the theory that I'm her husband?"

"It wouldn't make any difference if you were her father," she declared. "We don't want clothes from our father. We want the money for them. But we'll take diamonds. Oh, you must give Hilda lots of pretty things! Isn't it lovely that you can do it? And isn't she a dear?"

"I surely never dreamed of having a sister like her," said I, and was surprised to find that I had told the truth. So Mrs. Gilbert and I went shopping next day at the earliest possible hour. I had not supposed that it was possible for a man to tell so many lies in one day. I spent the forenoon with Mrs. Gilbert, and we talked of nothing but "my sister"—every word of mine a lie, of course. I spent the afternoon or most of it with Hilda, whom I called by that new name, though I knew it was not hers, and to make matters worse, she had fallen into a dubious state of mind, and I must recur to her all Connor's previous "wishes" of severe and blissful conviction, for if a mere shadow of doubt could so affect her spirits what would the plain truth do?

"The Christmas day Hilda woke to find that Hilda had since the beginning of her illness. The tide of returning health had begun to run strong, and so she was able to make something like a real Christmas without risk of harm. But the climax was reserved for the evening, after Hilda had had her supper. Then the lights were extinguished, the door was opened and in there walked a Christmas tree, apparently upon its own legs, but really propelled by the servicable Connor. It blazed with candles and glittered with tinsel, and its boughs were well laden—better, indeed, than I was aware of—the wise Mrs. Gilbert had bought some gifts for me from Hilda that the dear girl might not lack the pleasure of giving."

"I have never seen upon the face of any grown person such an expression of enthrancement in pure joy as glowed on Hilda's in the light of the shining tree. At the sight of it I lost my sense of shame and deception, and a child-like faith took hold upon me that this would all come right and that I should find a way to make her happy all her life."

By the next day, however, I had recovered some part of my common sense, and the difficulties of the situation were clear to me again, but the path of escape from them was not clear at all. I spent that day chiefly in meditation and the next as well. Then a voice seemed to tell me that I needed the counsel of a woman, and whom could I appeal to but Mrs. Gilbert? By this time Hilda had been transferred to the Gilbert residence, a favor not too great to be accepted by a young lady whose brother owns half of a very productive gold mine. I secured a private interview with Mrs. Gilbert and disclosed to her the truth. "Oh, impossible, impossible!" she cried. "Why you seemed to know each other at the very first glance?"

"As I was five years old when I last saw my sister, and she was hardly one," said I, "a recognition would not amount to very much, even if it had occurred."

"Ah, but there's instinct," said Mrs. Gilbert. "I said I genty, 'there is no more chance that I am this young lady's brother than I am the bearded assid in the Central park zoo.'"

"But what shall we do?" she exclaimed. "Indeed, this is a very delicate matter. We cannot tell her now. She need not remain in this house. I know her. She has the artistic ideas about incurring obligations. She would rather die in the street."

"At this I went into a panic and vowed that I would keep up the deception to my last hour on earth though it should sink my soul beneath the reach of mercy."

A few days later Connor came to my rooms with a very long face. "There really is a snag in our story," said he. "Why in blazes did those Newfoundland Grays keep this thing so quiet? Why didn't your uncle find his little niece? It is inconceivable that the Grays did not get a list of the Delphic's passengers. That would have told them plainly who their founding was. She couldn't be anybody else, and surely they must have known that your uncle (whose name, with yours, was in every account of the wreck) would pay them handsomely for bringing the little girl to him. Didn't your uncle leave any papers, diaries or records of any kind which might throw some light on this matter?"

"All my uncle's private papers," said I, "were taken in charge by Judge Mahon of the supreme court. He said, 'I'll write to his son Jim to have the house looked over.'"

"I did so and received next day this telegram: 'Sent volume your uncle's diary, etc., containing full explanation of this affair to Mrs. Gilbert, Dec. 28. I didn't tell you, I told her.'"

Naturally I called upon Mrs. Gilbert, but the lady was from home. I would have gone away, but a beloved visitor heated down to me as I stood in the hall."

"Go into the drawing room," it said. "I'll come to you."

"I must see Hilda without knowing what Mrs. Gilbert knew. A cold chill struck upon me. Dec. 28! That was days and days ago, and all this time Mrs. Gilbert had been urging me to treat Hilda as a sister. 'Was it possible that I could be mistaken? No; she doesn't know it as he ought to, and she has the money for the needful, and I'll manage all that. Hilda will enjoy it as coming from you, but not as gifts. Do you understand?'"

What Mrs. Gilbert might have learned, it couldn't have altered the laws of nature or undone the divine handwork. And yet I would have given much for a few words with Mrs. Gilbert. It was Hilda, however, who appeared.

"This was the first time to my knowledge that she had ventured so far as to enter the drawing room, yet she walked without a sign of weakness and with a noble carriage. And oh, she was beautiful beyond dreams. She wore a sort of tea gown, I suppose it might be called, of green fabric, and she carried a small black book. I think my mouth must have fallen open like a dead man's when I saw the figures 1887 in gilt upon the book's cover. My uncle's diary!"

"Hilda" said I, without pause or preface. "I know what that book is. Tell me what you have found in it. Please tell me straight away."

Her blue eyes opened a bit wider. She looked at me, then down at the book and then at me again.

"Why, I haven't found anything," she said. "I just got it this morn'g. I said I gave it to me. I haven't even opened it."

"Mrs. Gilbert's maid, under orders, had been waiting for my arrival, of course. What did it mean?"

"That is a volume of my uncle's diary," said I. "Beyond question we shall find the answer to our riddle, the solution of all our doubts."

"I took it from her hand."

"The early June of 1887 should be the one," said I and I have opened the book, but Hilda's hands closed suddenly upon it.

"Oh, not yet," she said faintly. "Somehow I dread it."

"The palms of my hands were wet, and I was swallowing air, but I managed to summon up the appearance of calmness."

"What do you expect to find here?" I asked.

"Oh, you will think very meanly of me," she cried. "But, indeed, I have been overpermeated and silenced since the very first hour. Then for just that earliest hour I believed, but never afterward. And I have drifted on and on, not knowing what to do. I could see no escape from the evidence, and you were so sure!"

"Did Mrs. Gilbert tell you that?"

"Why, yes, but I'd have known that you believed without a word from her. You were such a good brother!" And she smiled through her tears. "But I knew in my own heart."

"Listen," said I. "Answer me. Did you wish to believe. This may be but very little minute. I think this book can never convince either of us, surely not me, unless it tells me who you really are. But, remember, it may part us forever. I have known from the first instant, and I know now, and I always shall know, that we are no more such good brothers as we once thought through Adam, and so I ask you, do you wish to believe?"

"I think not," she whispered, with white lips. "The book."

"It opened under my hand at the pages headed June 4 and June 5, and under the first of these dates I read the following in my uncle's hand: 'Captain Eoss Gray and his wife came today, bringing the child. It has blue eyes and bright golden hair. It could not be mistaken for the poor little Hilda, who had my dear sister's coloring, brown eyes and dark hair. Description had it in it. I don't know how I would take no risk of error and therefore had the child brought to me. If this wait real time from the Delphic I think it is the supposed son of First Officer Alston, whose body was found with white lips. According to the list, there were on the Delphic 'Charles Alston (if a son) and nurse. I think that 'Charlie' EEBERS ARE SAW wood for Charles. Loren each other in England, and not for Charles. I shall institute inquiries.' Then, evidently written later: 'Lieutenant Alston seems to have had not a relative in the world. The child is undoubtedly his, but it will not be claimed by any one. I have decided to send \$20 a month to the Grays for his support. This will give his life an added value to them, and they will rear it more carefully.'"

"Here were all my doubts explained. There were all my mysteries and somewhat secretly because it was a source of revenue. At my uncle's death the income ceased, and a stranger was permitted to take the child away."

"I have a name for you at last," said I. "Not my sister's, Charlotte?"

"I would like Hilda better," said she softly. "You told me that first."

"Mrs. Gilbert has had this book since the day after Christmas," said I, "or the next at the latest. Why did she not tell me?"

"Perhaps she wanted us to wait a little."

"Perhaps," said I, "she saw just the very truth, that I've loved each other."

"We must always be very kind and sweet to her," said Hilda.

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HARDENBERG AND CONNOR BOTH STARTED BACK FROM ME STARING.

of her late patron. He died within a few months and began the days of dire poverty, the days of embroidery.

Mrs. Gilbert described her meeting with my sister and spoke of the look in her eyes of the effort she had made to induce my sister to accept "the least little thing."

"I don't let anybody do anything for her," she declared.

"Except her brother," said I, and the thin hand that still lay in mine thrilled with happiness as it answered my clasp.

Then I told her that her real name was Hilda Owen and that if there was anything in the efforts she wanted her big brother Bob would go right out and get it. To which she replied by saying "Robert" several times very softly and sweetly.

The hour was up and we were all excluded, leaving Hilda with Dr. Hardenberg and a nurse who had just arrived. Mrs. Gilbert rode home in her car, while Connor and I walked aimlessly for a matter of half an hour, when I led him to Dr. Hardenberg's house. The doctor was at work with his microscope.

"This is the best result I've had," he said. "This is absolutely confirmatory." He had been studying a part of the drop of blood, taken from my sister's finger tip, wherein he saw the germ, the infinitesimal enemy that warred against her health, and recognized the creature by its aspect.

"Doctor," said I, "you have permitted me to hold a somewhat exciting interview with your patient. I hope she has taken no harm."

"Harm?" he cried. "I should think not. She'll get well in half the time." "What result would follow?" I asked, "if she should now be told that I am not her brother?"

his hand, which was not overwringing to give me the money for the needful, and I'll manage all that. Hilda will enjoy it as coming from you, but not as gifts. Do you understand?"

"I will speak to you," said I, "as to a friend and to you, doctor, whom I have not the pleasure of knowing so well, as to a man of honor and discretion. I am very deeply and strongly attracted toward this young lady. It would be a strange and hard service that I would not render her, a bitter sacrifice that I should hesitate to make for her advantage. Do I wish she were already begun to press upon my heart. In the very first instant I knew that she was not, but when I looked into her eyes and saw the loneliness and that longing I would have died rather than grieve her. So I sat there and led."

"Great!" said the doctor. "You're the man for my money. You had like a gentleman. Nobody could have done it better. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't."

"Give me a week," cried Connor, "and I'll prove she's your sister, no matter if you're an Eskimo. Why, man, it's a positive certainty."

"And meanwhile what?" said I. "Do right ahead," said the doctor. "Accept her affection upon false pretenses," said I. "Chent her into taking gifts from a stranger; sit by her bed and lead her to build air castles with the very solid foundation of my money. And you have been so kind as to call me a gentleman?"

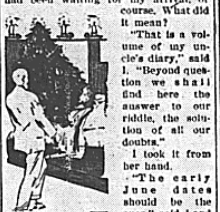
"If you do the other thing," said the doctor with fervor, "I give you my professional word that the result won't look to you very much like the work of a gentleman. If you value her safety you'll play brother."

"That's talking," said Connor. "And, however, she is your sister, so what harm can there be?"

When I returned to my apartments I received word that Mrs. Gilbert had requested me to call her up by telephone, whatever the hour might be. It was then midnight, but I obeyed instructions.

"That you'd want some help tomorrow," said I. "It's very kind of you," I replied. "About what time?"

"Why, your presents; the things you'll buy for Hilda. Of course she needs everything, just simply everything, but don't you buy necessities for Christmas. No woman wants them. We want trinkets, luxuries, useless things. It took me five years to beat that into my husband's head, and even



HE WALKED A CHRISTMAS TREE.

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