



The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

A REPORTER'S ROMANCE.

III.

The rest in the cars and on the ferry-boat restored the girl so much that she insisted upon walking up to the 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; and 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," she said, 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 cafe 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 almost to waver in what he was sure was a right resolve, changed to one of terror, and Walter had only to point to the door to enforce significantly his final refusal: "To-night?—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—advice—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 her along, she did not resist. He was going straight down to Fulton Ferry, supposing she was going 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.

"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 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 places Hilda led the young man for a moment, while she eagerly searched for some one whom Walter could only surmise. Once or twice he was glowered at by faces which he remembered very well from his old 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 Walter Street. Will you 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 gayly, 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, buffeted by 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 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 quarter 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 stanching 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 others 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 laid 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 opening his eyes first on Hilda, to his evident astonishment.

"Father," she said to him, softly, "you have been hurt; you must lie quiet until we can take you home."

Meanwhile Walter was saying to the police 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 his position was—said, "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."

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 I was hurrying home I left sister 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 almost immediately, but I never saw her again. Where she went, or whether she is even alive, none of us know."

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

"Papa clings to the hope that we shall find her some 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 Irish-woman, 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 had proved equally fruitless. Walter's breath came fast as there rushed upon his recollection the memory of Elsie, and of the bedlam 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 cry. 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 lot of sorrow she had borne in 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 that he believed our lost darling was in New York, and that he was resolved to go himself to seek for 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 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 places at midnight when I could not induce him to come home 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 this despairing cry, and she had no more 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 off the "library," lies old Mr. Brand, quietly sleeping. The rattle of the carts on the avenue, and the heavy grinding rumble of the horse-cars, the screams of the hucksters, the thousand hoarse 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 be only 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 Irish-woman came here, but afterward he denied that he knew anything about it. So I have always thought it was a hallucination of his, but one I could never dissipate," and she sighed wearily.

"Tell me what Elsie looked like," he asked again, and 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 have 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 rectified 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 this 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 the broken family was in conflict with his selfish yet irrepressible wish that she might prove, 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 wound 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 his 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 to be sure of your nerves before I told you something."

"Oh, is it bad news?—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 down 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 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 night and joy and fullness of summer approach. The city streets were alive to this gentle influence as well as the country lanes. Children, except in the sun-grass-fathers, marched out to the lot of garden behind the brown stone