The Christmas Sister

...By HOWARD FIELDING...

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HERE are two matters which may help to give me a nook of your mind for a few minutes. If you haven't heard of one, you very likely have heard of the other.

First, I am the only original survivor of the Delphic, that was lost at sea in May of 1887; second, in partnership with Tom Campbell I discovered the Golden Bush mine in Idaho. The wreck of the Delphic figures in this story; the Golden Bush mine merely stands in the background as a source of affluence.

"I TOOK CONNOR BY THE SHOULDER."

I was five years old when the Delphic was lost. With my father and mother and infant sister I had sailed from Liverpool in this ill fated vessel, which was in collision before she got out of sight of the harbor. She returned and was laid up for several days, not very much damaged, but most of the passengers were sent forward by another ship. My parents chose to stay by the Delphic, I know not why.

It has always been supposed that she struck an iceberg off the banks. I can tell you only that the disaster was at night. I remember the awakening, the thrill of half realized terror, the wild noises and the trampling. My father was carrying me, wrapped in a coat, my mother following with little Hilda. Then something crashed. I recall no feeling of a blow, but my consciousness went out like a candle. The next thing I knew it was dawn and I was in a boat with one sailor who had a wounded head and was covered with blood. It has been supposed that this boat was lowered end foremost in true panic style and all aboard her were pitched out except the wounded sailor and myself.

Eventually we were picked up by a sailing vessel, my companion unconscious and dying. I was taken to Boston and sent on thence to an uncle in New York, by whom I was reared. He died when I was thirteen, leaving a small property in trust. I attended Columbia college and school of mines and eventually took my inheritance and went west. Two years later came the affair of the Golden Bush, and I was rich.

The larger part of the year 1907 I spent in New York and thereabouts. I had everything except a home. On the 23d of December of that year I was living in luxurious bachelor apartments, more lonely than I was in the week that I spent on the Golden Bush claim with only the haggard faces of the mountains for company.

On the evening of the day that I have named I returned from a rather early and very lonesome dinner and found a young man named Connor waiting for me. I had never met him before. He was a sturdy, pleasant fellow, Celtic and Dutch on the face of him, and he introduced himself by presenting a letter from a very estimable and charming young matron, Mrs. Leslie Gilbert, whose somewhat misguided charities had occasionally appealed to my pocket.

"MY BROTHER!" SAID SHE.

"Mr. Connor will tell you a surprising story," wrote this lady. "I would have liked to tell you myself, but he insists upon his right. He is a journalist, and this is his story. My heartiest congratulations."

In my apartments the tables were littered with photographs, as they always are. My fad since I was a boy has been the study of the different kinds of men and the faces that they wear. I do not study horses, but it happened that I had some photographs that had been sent up from a friend's stock farm in Kentucky, and it seemed to me that Connor saw these before he fairly got into the room. He did not notice any of the portraits of people, but plumped straight down upon the picture of a horse which he recognized instantly, though there was no lettering on it.

"Humbert!" he cried and went on to give me the horse's pedigree—Bertram on one side and Humble on the other, and all the rest of it—but suddenly broke off this strain and came to the business that had brought him there.

First, with inimitable brevity and pith, he sketched the wreck of the Delphic.

"You," said he in closing, "were the sole survivor."

"Yes," said I.

"I have found another," said he. "There floated away from that wretched vessel, heaven knows how, a sort of life raft, very small and not properly a part of the regular equipment of the ship, though it was stenciled with her name. There is a tradition that one of the officers of the Delphic invented this style of raft or was interested in it in some way. Anyhow, it was aboard, and it floated and was picked up by a fishing schooner out of Newfoundland. It bore the dead body of a man and a living child. The man had saved this child even after his own death, for his stiffened arms held it. A little girl"—

I took Connor by the shoulder.

"You are going to tell me," said I, "that this girl was my sister. Don't do it unless you're sure. I am very much alone in the world. A sister would mean to me—well, perhaps rather more than you could easily believe."

He took some sheets of paper from his pocket. They were folded and fastened together at a corner.

"There's a list," said he, "of every human being on the Delphic. I told you that nearly all the original passengers were transferred to another vessel. What resulted? Why, just this—there was only one girl baby on the ship!"

The simplicity and force of this statement staggered me. There remained, of course, many questions, but I was unable for the moment to frame one.

"Let me tell you," said he, "how I first got on the track of this. It was through Mrs. Gilbert. She is interested in the Woman's Exchange, as you're aware, and thus she came to know a very beautiful and charming girl who brought embroideries to the exchange to be sold. This girl fell ill, and—well, she was pretty hard up; that's the fact about it."

The tears rushed to my eyes. Ill and destitute, my sister, and I so rich that people pointed me out in public places as the Golden Bush man!

"Mrs. Gilbert was very good to her," continued Connor, "but I guess the best thing she did for her was to tell me that the young lady was a survivor of the Delphic and had been brought up by foster parents at a place in Newfoundland. I thought I saw a story, and I telegraphed to our correspondent in Newfoundland on my own account. When I got his answer—which was a peach, as you'll see—I made some investigations here through the agents of the line to which the Delphic belonged and had the luck to tumble straight on one old fellow who knew everything and had records and all that. Then I went to Mrs. Gilbert and told her what I had learned. You may imagine her surprise in view of her acquaintance with you and the fact that she didn't know that you were the original Delphic survivor."

"I never told her," said I, "but I supposed she knew. It has been printed often enough."

"Mrs. Gilbert says she never reads the papers," replied Connor. "There was only one kink in the story, and that was the reason why the rescue of your sister was kept so extraordinarily quiet. Why didn't your uncle hear of it? I don't know yet, but that can't alter the fact. As to her being a survivor of the Delphic, my man in Newfoundland says there is no shadow of doubt whatever. You will see in his story"—

He was interrupted by a ring at my telephone. I heard the voice of Mrs. Gilbert:

"Oh, Mr. Owen, is that you? Has he told you?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it beautiful? I've told her! You must come up—you must come right up. Take an electric, you and Mr. Connor. I'll wait for you right here. The doctor is with her now."

This overwhelmed me, accustomed as I was to Mrs. Gilbert's exuberant style of conversation. I could only gasp, "Where are you?"

"At the drug store on the corner," she replied. "Mr. Connor will know. Hurry!"

It appeared that Mr. Connor really did know, and we obeyed instructions and hurried. We found Mrs. Gilbert, and she led us a little way along a rather poor street, but not squalid, and into a bleak hall bedroom in a lodging house.

That was the room my sister had used before Mrs. Gilbert had transferred her to a better one. It was a "hall room," somewhat larger than a prison cell, sparely but neatly furnished, unprovided with any means for heating except a wretched apparatus fitted to the gas fixture. My sister had lived there. She had lain ill in that narrow bed without care, without attendance, doubtless poorly fed. I thought of it, and I remembered that evening's extravagant dinner with nausea.

I am not ashamed to say that my knees shook under me when I was summoned to the larger room. There was a bed with its head against the wall opposite the door. I saw only a part of it, just a whiteness of piled pillows, a background for a girl's face, and with a sort of undirected vision, more like feeling than seeing, I perceived the doctor in the shadows beyond the bed, watching.

The girl's eyes were blue. They 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 longing.

I extended my hand to her, and she grasped it with a quick, childish clutch.

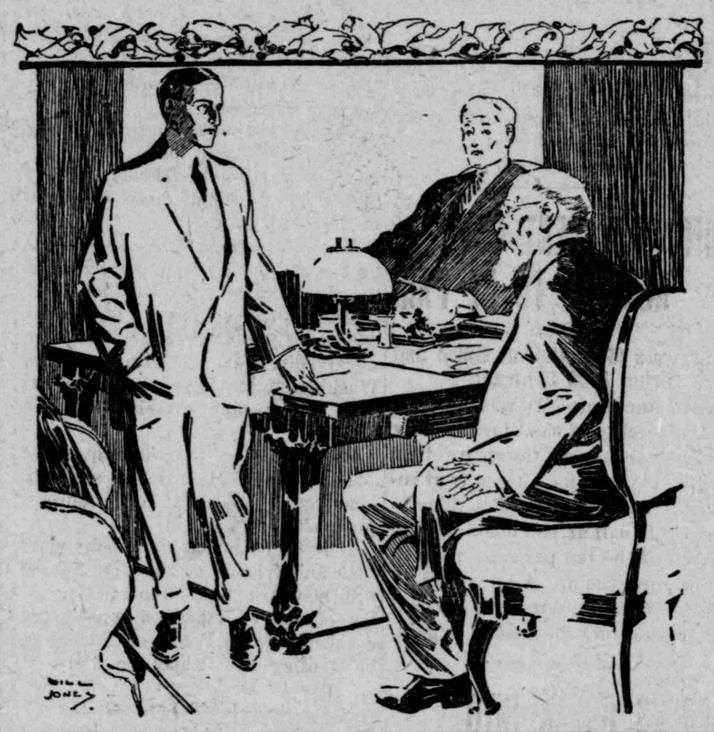
"My brother!" said she, and the tears rushed from her eyes.

I have since been informed that I acquitted 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 that. 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 Delphic. Gray was the name of the skipper of the fishing vessel that had rescued her. In his home she had lived until her ninth year, when a lady, a summer visitor in 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 her late patron. He died within a few months, and then began the days of dire poverty, the days of embroidery.



HARDENBERG AND CONNOR BOTH STARTED BACK FROM ME, STARING.

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

"She won'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 world that 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 a 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?"

Hardenberg and Connor both started back from me, staring.

"Good heavens!" cried the doctor. "What do you mean? I wouldn't have that happen for a mint of money!"

"But you know that I'm not her brother, don't you?"

"I?" he gasped. "No. You must be. There was no other female child except your sister on that ship. How can we doubt?"

"You have seen us both," said I—"you who can recognize the features of that microscopic creature which you have to magnify a thousand times, I suppose, in order to see it at all."

"I've got 1,500 on it tonight," said the doctor. "If you were magnified as much as that you could carry the Flatiron building in your pocket for a matchbox. But what of it?"

"If you mean that she doesn't look like you," said Connor, "I tell you you're dead wrong. There's a strong family resemblance."

"And you're the man," said I, "who saw a horse for a few minutes two years ago and spotted a photograph of him tonight at a glance. Do you suppose I could go to the nearest stable and buy a horse—and a good one, too—and pass him off on you as a son of Bertram and Humble?"

"But your sister isn't a horse," protested Connor. "She's a human being. There's a thundering sight of difference."

"There's this difference," said I—"that it's easy to find a man who knows something about a horse. And now let me tell you what this young lady is whom I have had the peculiar pleasure of meeting tonight. She is a thoroughbred Saxon, the last one left alive, I should suppose; certainly the most beautiful example. But what am I?"

"English," said Connor promptly. "Just as English as she is."

"Both my father and my mother were born in Wales," said I. "Both had what you would call Norman ancestry on one side and Cymric on the other. I am colored like a Norman, but no person who has made even the most cursory study of the subject could fail to recognize my Cymric blood at a glance. On the other hand, there is not the faintest shadow of a possibility that this young lady has one drop of that blood in her veins."

There was a moment's silence, then Connor said, almost with a sob:

"You don't like her."

It was the word of a warm hearted Irishman. That good fellow had earnestly rejoiced in the idea that he was working to make two people happy, and now he was disappointed. I took his hand, which he was not overwilling to give me.

"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 my sister? God knows. The question already begins 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 the longing I would have died rather than grieve her. So I sat there and lied."

"Great!" said the doctor. "You're the man for my money. You lied 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.

"Go right ahead," said the doctor.

"Accept her affection upon false pretenses," said I. "Cheat her into taking gifts from a stranger; sit by her bed and help 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 anyhow, 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.

"I happened to think," said the lady, "that you'd want some help tomorrow."

"It's very kind of you," I replied. "About what?"

"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 now he doesn't know it as he ought to. Just 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 fathers. We want the money for them. But we'll take diamonds. Oh, you must buy 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 rehearse to her all Connor's proofs with an air of serene and blissful conviction, for if a mere shadow of doubt could so affect her spirits what would the plain truth do?

On Christmas day Hilda woke to find the plain room from which we dared not yet remove her bright with many flowers which the nurse had softly set in their places. This was the best day that Hilda had had since the beginning of her illness. The tide of returning health had begun to run strong, and so we were able to make it 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 serviceable Connor. It blazed with candles and glittered with tinsel, and its boughs were well laden—better, indeed, than I was aware—for 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 entrancement 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 childlike 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 semed to know each other at the very first glance!"

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

"Ah, but there's instinct."

"Mrs. Gilbert," said I gently, "there is no more chance that I am this young lady's brother than if I were the bearded aoudad 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 would not remain in this house. I know her. She has the strictest 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 foundling 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 Mahlon of the supreme court. He's dead, but 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, 1887, containing full explanation of this affair to Mrs. Gilbert, Dec. 26. I didn't tell you this. Understand? J. M.

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

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

So I must meet Hilda without knowing what Mrs Gilbert knew. A cold chill struck upon me. Dec 26! 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; surely not. Whatever Mrs. Gilbert might have learned, it couldn't have altered the laws of nature or undone the divine handiwork. 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 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 minute. A maid 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?

IN WALKED A CHRISTMAS TREE.

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

I took it from her hand.

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

"Oh, not yet," she said faintly. "Somehow I—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 overpersuaded 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 our very last 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 to each other than cousins 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 Enos Gray and his wife came today, bringing the child. It has blue eyes and bright golden hair. It could hardly be more unlike poor little Hilda, who had my dear sister's coloring, brown eyes and dark hair. Description had quite prepared me for this, yet I would take no risk of error and therefore had the child brought to me. If this waif really came from the Delphic I think it is the supposed son of First Officer Alston, whose body was found with it upon the raft. According to the list, there were on the Delphic 'Charles Alston (infant) and nurse.' I think that 'Charlie' stood for Charlotte, as is common in England, and not for Charles. I shall institute inquiries." Then, evidently written later:

"PERHAPS SHE SAW WE LOVED EACH OTHER."

"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 its support. This will give its life an added value to them, and they will rear it more carefully."

Here were all mysteries explained. The child was kept carefully 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 called 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 hold it?"

"Perhaps she wanted us to wait a little."

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

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