

Kelly Florence Finch

# The Fate of Felix Brand



Florence Kelly

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### CHAPTER I

#### Felix Brand Has a Mysterious Experience

Felix Brand awoke with a start and looked about him with a puzzled stare. And yet there was nothing unfamiliar in what met his gaze. The bed wherein he lay and its luxurious appointments were of his own recent buying. He had himself designed the decorations of the room and selected its furnishings. As his eyes leaped from one object to another his bewildered glance seemed to slide unnotingly over the furniture, and the draperies, walls and pictures, indicative of a fastidious taste, that made up the interior of his bedroom.

But it was no more than a few seconds until his consciousness came again into accord with his surroundings. His look of perplexity quickly changed into one of satisfaction and amusement, and he exclaimed aloud:

“Good Lord, how vivid that was! Never before has it been so strong!” He rubbed his eyes, slapped his arms and moved about in the bed as if to be assured of his bodily intactness and smiled again as he thought:

“No, I’m here, all right, and I’m I, as usual! But it seems as if I’d only have to close my eyes to swing back into it again!”

His eyelids dropped as if in response to his thought, but quickly opened again, with a little frown, as he murmured, “No, I guess not. This is better!”

He rested his head upon his locked hands and stretched himself full length upon his back, as his eyes roved about the beautiful interior. They dwelt caressingly upon its details with the pride and pleasure of the creator and the satisfaction of the owner for whom possession has yet the bloom of newness.

It was a handsome face, framed in dark, waving hair, that thus lay back against the whiteness of the pillow; dark skinned, smooth shaven, squarish in its general outline, with regular, pleasing features; a mobile face, whose whole seeming would depend upon the expression by which it should be lighted. Just now it looked sensitive, amiable, satisfied, and, at the first glance, one would be sure that it bespoke a mind and soul of fine fibre. But if one looked a second time and more searchingly one would perceive some clouding and coarsening of that refinement, signs not yet marked enough to tell their story openly and not likely to be noted by the ordinary observer, but able to make the keener student of the human countenance doubt his first impressions.

“It’s queer how much more vivid and real those dreams are nowadays – every time one comes it’s stronger than ever it was before,” Felix Brand’s thought was running as he made ready for the day. The illusion that had possessed him as he awoke surged through him again and again with such force that it seemed almost strong enough to sweep his consciousness out of his actual surroundings. Razor in hand, ready to begin the task of shaving, a fresh onset, still more insistent, went whirling through his brain and sent a sudden numb sensation down his arm. He shook himself irritably.

“Confound it!” he muttered. “Can’t I keep awake this morning? But I’m not sleepy – I’m as wide awake as ever I was! It’s queer!”

He frowned at his reflection in the mirror, then suddenly his countenance glowed with interest. “I wonder if I could – I believe I’ll try!” he exclaimed aloud. “Jove! What an experience it would be! It’s worth trying!”

He turned to lay the razor down and felt his eyes fasten themselves in a devouring stare upon its bright blade. An instant, and he was startled by the sound of a strange voice which he caught just as it was dying out of his ears, a strong, vigorous voice, speaking in tones of authority.

“Who’s that?” he cried out, glancing about the room in surprise. What he had heard had sounded like a name and his thought snatched at it as it faded quickly away from him. “Hugh Gordon!” he repeated softly, and said it over to himself as he gazed dazedly about the room. Well might he turn the name over and over in his mind and wonder about it, for it was destined to become to him the most hateful thing in the world.

“Nonsense! What’s the matter with me this morning?” and he shrugged impatiently. “I don’t know anybody named ‘Hugh Gordon’ and there’s nobody in here anyway. The sound must have come from the hall, or, maybe, from the street.”

His eyes fell upon the clock and he started with surprise. “Why, it can’t be that late! Only a moment ago I looked and it was – I couldn’t have seen straight or something’s gone wrong with it. Anyway, I’d better get a move on.”

He turned briskly to the mirror to resume the operation of shaving and stared again as he put out his hand to pick up the razor. For it was not where he had laid it down a moment before. His wondering glance quickly discovered it on the other side of the dressing table, and bewildered amazement overspread his countenance. It was laden with the results of recent use.

“The devil!” he gasped. “I hadn’t shaved! I hadn’t even lathered!”

But the half fearful look of inquiry he darted into the mirror showed his face to be freshly shaven, and in the usual manner, except the upper lip, where had been left the faint, dark stubble of a mustache.

## CHAPTER II

### “Like Ottar of Roses Out of an Otter”

“Breakfast is a little late, Harry. Delia is in one of her introspective moods and it has made her slow. I hope you won’t miss your boat!”

She turned an anxious face toward her sister, who was entering the room, and Henrietta Marne smiled reassuringly, as she set down a suitcase, laid her hat and coat upon a chair, and replied in a hearty, cheerful tone:

“No, indeed! I’ve plenty of time. And I was glad to have an extra five minutes with mother. Do you think she’s better than she was yesterday? Bella, I’m afraid I ought not to go to Mr. Brand’s theatre party tonight!” And her countenance clouded with anxiety as they seated themselves at the breakfast table.

“Don’t think of missing it, Harry! Mother will be all right. She seems a lot better this morning.”

“Y-e-s, I thought so, but I’m afraid she’ll miss me tonight. It always seems to please her when I come home in the evening.”

“Of course, dear, we’ll both miss you! You’re the man of our household, you know, and you go out and battle with the world every day and bring us a fresh breath from it every night!”

“And you always ‘meet me with a smile,’” laughed Henrietta.

“Of course! And we’ll be twice as glad to see you tomorrow night, and we’ll smile twice as big a smile, because you’ll have such a lot of things to tell us.”

“Mr. Brand has a curious effect upon me that I don’t quite like.” Henrietta frowned thoughtfully into her coffee cup while she hesitated, as if choosing words for further speech. In shirtwaist, linen collar and cloth skirt she looked trim, well groomed, alert. Fair-haired and fresh-colored, her expression capable, composed and sweet-natured, she was what a Scotchman would call “a bonny lass.” Her sister, also fair, was smaller of mold and daintier of look and manner. She appeared a little older, but her features were finer and more regular and a twinkle of humor barely hid itself in the corner of her blue eye, as if ready to spring forth at the first encouragement.

“This begins to sound romantic!” chaffed Isabella. “Let’s hope he’s at least a pirate in disguise.”

“No, let’s not. Because then he’d sail away and I’d have to hunt a new job. And it is such a nice place, Bella! I don’t believe another girl in my whole class just fell into such good luck as I did. He seems pleased with my work, too.”

“I know he is, Harry, because Mrs. Annister told me last week that Mr. Brand thinks he has found a jewel of a secretary – the best he’s ever had. I was waiting” – and a gleam of mirth sparkled in her eyes as she smiled fondly upon her sister – “to tell you until some day when you’d be feeling blue. But I just couldn’t wait any longer.”

Henrietta flushed with pleasure. “I’m so glad to know that! If he’ll just keep on being satisfied a few months longer, we’ll have this place paid for!”

“Oh, we’re going to pull through all right!” Isabella exclaimed, hopeful conviction in her tones and smile. Then she puckered her brows and did her best to look doubtful and alarmed as she went on in a tragic half whisper, her blue eyes dancing: “If he doesn’t turn pirate and sail away in the meantime, or, maybe, make a villain out of you, with this wicked influence you’re getting alarmed about, so that you’ll maybe steal your own salary and run away with it and leave mother and me to star-r-ve! To think that a famous architect should be just oozing badness all around him like that – as Mark Twain said, ‘like ottar of roses out of an otter’ – at the same time that he’s evolving such beautiful things out of his brain! Ugh! It’s awful!”

Henrietta laughed, a short, chuckling laugh that suggested deeper amusement than it expressed. “Is there anything you wouldn’t make fun of, Bella? Very likely it isn’t he, after all, but just my own

innate wickedness coming to the surface. It's only that I feel a great desire to amuse myself, and am more willing to be selfish about it than I used to be. Three months ago I wouldn't have gone to this theatre party, with mother ill and you alone with her. I know I'm a beast to do it, but I do want to go dreadfully, and – ”

“And you're going, and you're not to coddle your conscience any more about it. It's all right, and we're all right, and mother and I would feel we were two beasts if you stayed away on our account. What makes you think Mr. Brand responsible for this awful depravity? Because he invited you to his house-warming?”

“Oh, no! It was thoughtful and lovely of him to include poor little me among his guests, and I'm as grateful as – Cinderella. But he sometimes says some little thing, in connection with what we are doing, about the pleasure there is in beautiful things and how it and the joy one ought to get out of life enlarge and deepen one's existence. And then I begin to feel, away down inside of me, a longing for pleasure, and as if I could reach out and grasp all sorts of – of things, just for my own enjoyment.”

“And that makes you feel dreadfully wicked!” Isabella's laugh tinkled through the room, a lighter, merrier sound than her sister's. “Dear me! As if we didn't all feel that way once in a while!”

“You never do,” Henrietta interrupted.

“Don't inquire too deeply into my feelings, unless you want to be shocked. Suppose we have some hot toast to cheer us up after this awful confession. Delia,” to the maid who entered in response to her ring, “have you some fresh toast ready?”

“The toast is awfully good this morning, Delia,” said Henrietta smiling at her. “It's always nice, but it's particularly good, exactly right, this morning.”

“Thank you, Harry!” said Isabella as the maid disappeared. “I'm so glad you said it. Maybe it will make her feel better. Did you see that determined, dare-and-die look on her face? I'm sure something's going to happen!”

“And we've raised her wages twice already,” the other exclaimed, as her face took on the same anxious expression that had just clouded her sister's.

“Yes, and we can't pay her any more than we're giving her now. She isn't worth it and we couldn't afford it if she were.”

“Just as we've begun to feel sure she was satisfied and would stay. Oh, Bella! It's too bad! But maybe it's no worse than it was the last time we got scared, when her cousin was married and she wanted a day off. You remember, she had two days of the introspective mood then.”

“Thank you, Delia! It's done to a turn!” and Isabella smiled sweetly at the returning maid, who retreated a step and stood still, fumbling her tray, an embarrassed, determined look upon her face.

“It's perfectly lovely,” chimed in Henrietta with enthusiasm.

The girl shuffled from one foot to the other but her expression did not relax. Isabella cast an “I-told-you-so” look at her sister and glanced expectantly at the maid.

“What is it, Delia?”

“I'm thinkin', Miss Marne, you'd better be lookin' for a new girl.”

“Why, what's the matter? You don't want to leave us, do you?”

“No, miss, I don't want to, an' that's the truth. But I don't think I'll be stayin' any longer than you can get another girl.”

“What's the trouble, Delia?”

“It's lonesomeness, Miss Marne. It's that respectable out here that there's niver a policeman comes along this street for days at a time. An' the milkman comes around that early I niver see him, an' anyway he's elderly an' the father of four. An' it's so high-toned, there ain't a livery stable anywhere, an' so there's none of them boys to pass a word with once in a while. An' there's only the postman, an' him small and married.”

There was silence for a moment while the maid shuffled her feet and turned her tray about and the sisters bit their lips. Then Isabella exclaimed, in a tone of brisk sympathy:

“Yes, Delia, I understand how you feel, and I don’t blame you at all, but – ”

“Don’t make up your mind right away, Delia,” Henrietta broke in. “Think about it a little longer. Maybe something will happen.”

“And only think, Harry,” Isabella groaned, as Delia left the room, “what a wonderful bargain that real estate agent made us think we were getting, just because there were so many restrictions there could never be anything or anybody objectionable within a mile of us!”

“I had an inspiration just in the nick of time,” Henrietta replied. “Mrs. Fenlow told me, when she was in the office the other day, waiting for Mr. Brand, that she is going to move her garage to this end of her property, which you know is just a block away, with an entrance from this street – she hoped it wouldn’t annoy us – and she said she was going to have a new chauffeur. And we can hope, Bella, that he’ll be young and tall and handsome and inclined to be flirtatious with good-looking maids who sometimes work in front door-yards nearby. Why, here’s Billikins! You naughty doggie, where have you been?”

A white fox terrier had bounded into the room and was giving her exuberant greeting, having stopped first to drop at her feet a rag-doll that he carried in his mouth. “There, that will do,” she laughed as he sprang to her lap, and thence to her shoulder and testified his overflowing affection with voice and tongue. “Get down now and take care of your babykins!”

“I must go now,” she declared, and, rising, began putting on hat and coat. “I’ll just run upstairs and kiss mother good-bye again. If anything should happen, Bella, or should you want me to come home for any reason, you can ’phone me at the office until five o’clock, and after that at Dr. Annister’s. Mrs. Annister, you know, is going to chaperon Mildred and me. Wasn’t it sweet of her to ask me to stay all night with them!”

Five minutes later she came hurrying downstairs again, and Isabella, waiting for her at the front door, put the suitcase into her hand, pressed an arm about her waist, and gave her a farewell greeting.

“Have just as good a time as you can, Harry, dear,” she said gaily, “so you’ll have all the more to tell mother and me tomorrow night!”

The morning sun shone down through the golden autumn foliage of the maple trees that lined the street, and now irradiated Henrietta’s figure and then dyed it somberly as she passed with rapid step through open space and shadow. Isabella watched her progress down the quiet road toward the avenue, half a dozen blocks away, whence came the clang of street cars and the rattle of traffic. But the girl turned now and then and cast an eager glance in the other direction.

“I’m so glad she could go tonight,” Isabella was thinking. “She works so hard and she doesn’t have many pleasures – neither do I! But I don’t mind – very much!” She cast another glance up the street and caught sight of a smallish man’s figure bending one-sidedly under a burden of other people’s joys and sorrows as he passed in and out of the gateways in the next block. A pleased smile brightened her face and she turned back to watch her sister’s progress.

“There! She was just in time to catch that car! She’s just a brick, Harry is! What a funny notion about Felix Brand! If it was little Bella, now – ” She threw up her head saucily and danced a step or two as she faced about to see how near the postman had come.

“An’ him small an’ married!” she repeated to herself and laughed softly as she watched his slight, burdened figure on its slow progress. “Poor Delia! If I was in her place I’m afraid I’d flirt with him anyway!”

She ran down the walk to the gate and greeted him with a merrily smiling, “Good morning.”

“Only one this morning, Miss Marne,” he said, smiling back at her, and then added, as he saw her face brighten, “but it’s the one you want, I guess!”

“Yes,” she gaily replied, “you’re always very welcome when you bring me a letter like this!”

She was keenly conscious of the caress in her hand as she held the letter in close clasp. Once inside the door again, she pressed the missive softly to her cheek as she whispered, “Dear Warren! You dear boy! I just knew you were writing to me yesterday, and you didn’t disappoint me!”

## CHAPTER III

### The Mask of His Countenance

It was a curious mixture of people whom Felix Brand had bidden to the theatre party and house-warming with which he celebrated the setting up of his bachelor household gods in a studio apartment house. But the varied contents of that mixture were not so much indicative of catholic tastes in human nature as of an underlying trait of his own character, a trait which led him to look first, in whatever he did, for his own advantage. But whatever their differing attitudes toward life there were few of his guests who did not follow his movements with admiring eyes and think of him as one of Fortune's favorites.

For in this artistically decorated and luxuriously furnished apartment there was nothing to hint that until recent years he had lived as yoke-fellow with severest economy. The son of a school-teacher in a Pennsylvania town, the family purse had had all that it could do to provide for him a course in college and the training for his profession. But at the beginning of his career he had won a rich prize in an architectural competition, and afterwards commissions and rewards and honors had flowed in upon him in constantly increasing measure. While he did not yet quite merit the adjective which Isabella Marne had applied to him, there was every promise that he would soon be, in truth, a "famous architect."

Although he had barely entered his third decade, certain characteristic features of his work had already won attention, and these had been praised so much, and had begun to exercise so evident an influence, that many looked upon him as destined to be and as, indeed, already becoming, the leader of a new and fruitful movement in American architecture. A Felix Brand design, whether for a dwelling, a church, a business building, or a civic monument, was sure to be marked by simplicity of conception, exquisite sense of proportion and rhythmic harmony of line.

"What a perfectly charming manner he has!" said Miss Ardeen Andrews to Henrietta Marne, who knew of her as a rising young actress. "And such wonderful eyes! Why, there is a caress in them if he only looks at you!"

"Yes," replied Henrietta in a matter-of-fact way, "it's a very pleasant expression, isn't it? But it doesn't mean anything in particular. It's just their natural expression."

"And he's not only handsome," Miss Andrews went on with enthusiasm, "but he's the most sensitive and refined-looking man I've met in a long time." And she flashed a glance of covert admiration across the room at their host, who was talking with two men of such different type as to make his own courtly manner and intellectual features noticeable by contrast.

A little later Henrietta, passing the two men, heard them speculating, in tones touched with an Irish brogue, as to whether or not the young architect was already making money enough out of his profession to pay for such surroundings as these in which he was settling himself.

"There's money enough in it when you get to the top," one of them was saying. Henrietta remembered him as a certain district political leader, Flaherty by name, with whom her employer had lately held several conferences. "Money enough to buy old masters to paper your walls with and velvet chairs to sit in for a year, and never the same one twice. But Brand's not up to the top yet. He must have some other jug to go to, and I'd like to know just what it is and how big it is!"

Henrietta could have told them what it was, and she was presently reminded of it when two men were presented to her and she recognized their names as that of the firm of brokers through which Felix Brand had for some time been carrying on what she knew to be very profitable operations in stocks.

“The doctor won’t forget us entirely, will he, Mrs. Annister?” the host was saying to the tall and handsome woman with iron-gray hair and warm-colored cheeks who sat beside him at the supper table.

“I hope not; but you know I never vouch for him. Mildred impressed it upon him that he must be here in time for supper,” and she glanced at the young replica of herself at Brand’s other hand.

“Yes,” confirmed the girl, “he promised very faithfully that he’d come as soon as he could. But he was to see a case tonight in which he’s very much interested, and if he gets to thinking and reading about that, you know, Mr. Brand, that he is just as likely as not to forget all about us.”

“Oh, yes, that case!” said her mother. “It’s most curious and interesting – one of the sort that makes you feel creepy.”

“Do tell us about it then,” exclaimed Ardeen Andrews, farther down the table.

“It’s a man possessed by the illusion that his dreams are the real thing and his waking hours are imaginary. Just think what a topsy-turvy state that must keep his family in!”

Felix Brand looked up with sudden interest, but before he could speak a man’s voice called out from the other end of the table, “The doctor doesn’t consider faith in one’s dreams evidence of a pathological state, does he, Mrs. Annister?” It was Robert Moreton, a young author, whose name was of frequent occurrence in magazine tables of contents.

“If he does,” Mrs. Moreton broke in, “how crazy he would think you, Rob! You see, when he is writing a story,” and she glanced up and down the table, “Robert imagines it’s being acted out around him, and I have to be the heroine and the villainess and the parlor maid and the cook and answer to all their names.”

“That must give some variety to existence, Mrs. Moreton,” said Brand. “And variety is the best spice for life that I know of.”

“Do you know that story of Colonel Higginson’s,” Moreton went on, “called ‘A Monarch of Dreams,’ about a man who developed the power of controlling his dreams and became so delighted and absorbed in them that he gave himself up to the life he lived while asleep and allowed his real existence to wither away until it was of no consequence at all to him or any one else? It has always seemed to me a wonderful bit of eerie imagination. And there are such alluring suggestions for experiment in it!”

Felix Brand’s brown eyes were fixed in a speculative stare upon the mass of roses that glowed at the center of the table. Miss Marne, glancing at him, knew that, whether or not he was thinking of them, he was conscious of their beauty in every fibre of his being. “I wonder,” he said slowly, and she saw Mildred Annister’s gaze turn quickly upon him as the girl bent forward with parted lips. “I wonder very, very much,” he repeated, “just how much one could do toward making one’s dream-people come alive. I mean, toward making the different kind of person one sometimes is in a dream the real person when one is awake. You know how different you seem sometimes when you are asleep, not at all the same kind of person you are when you are awake. Now, wouldn’t it be interesting if you could make yourself be that person sometimes after you wake up? It seems to me it would be a delightful change from being the same person all the time. This being tied fast to yourself year in and year out gets very monotonous.”

Miss Annister gave a little gasp and leaned nearer to him, distress in her eyes.

“Don’t say that!” she begged, hardly above a whisper. “Don’t even think such things! You are you, and I wouldn’t have you different for worlds and worlds!”

Her disturbed little appeal was shielded from observation by a vivacious feminine voice which called out simultaneously: “Please finish my house before you turn yourself into anybody else, Mr. Brand! You know we’ve only settled on the back porch and one dormer window, so far, and I’ll leave it to these good people if that’s enough for a family of six to live in!”

Henrietta smiled discreetly at her plate, for she knew along what a tortuous path of inchoate ideas and breezy caprices Mrs. Grahame Fenlow, upon the sightliness of whose new chauffeur she

and her sister were basing their hopes of keeping their maid of all work, had led the architect in his attempt to design a new house for her.

“Aren’t you afraid, mother,” exclaimed Mark Fenlow, from his seat beside Henrietta, “if you don’t decide pretty soon whether you want that dormer window in the cellar or the roof and whether the back porch is to be before or behind the house, that Mr. Brand will be driven to try a new personality, or incarnation, or – or drink, or whatever you call it!”

“Why, here’s the doctor at last,” cried Felix Brand as he rose to greet the newcomer and lead him to his seat at the table.

Dr. Philip Annister, smiling affably at the company, scarcely looked the famous specialist in nerve diseases that he was. Short and slight in physique, his head, when he stood beside his handsome wife, was barely on a level with hers. Wherefore, his shoes, ever since his wedding day, had been noticeably high of heel, and rarely was he known to wear other head covering than a silk hat. He had cast aside the look of abstraction which commonly possessed his thin, pale countenance and his manner and speech of modest geniality soon won for him the favor of all the heterogeneous company to whom he was not already known. His wife noticed that his eyes rested frequently upon their host and later she said to him:

“Felix is looking handsomer than ever tonight, isn’t he!”

“Yes, I suppose so,” he answered hesitatingly. “But, Margaret, there’s an expression growing on his face that I don’t like. It’s creating a doubt about him in my mind.”

“What do you mean? His manner tonight toward all this queer mixture of people has been perfect – cordial, unassuming, delicately courteous and friendly toward every one. And, really, Philip, I don’t know a handsomer man! His face is so refined, and those brown, caressing eyes of his are enough to turn any girl’s head. I don’t wonder in the least that Mildred is so completely in love with him. What is it you don’t like about his looks, Philip?”

“I don’t quite know, and perhaps it isn’t fair to him to put it into words until I do know. It is less evident tonight, when he is all animation and his thoughts are full of the entertainment of his guests, than I have seen it sometimes lately. You know, Margaret, Felix has an unusually expressive countenance. It’s like a crystal mask, and it’s bound to reveal the very shape and color of his soul. I think I begin to see signs in it of selfishness and grossness – ”

“Oh, Philip! How can you! Grossness! He’s the most refined – ”

“You haven’t announced Mildred’s engagement yet, have you?” her husband interrupted. “I’m glad of that,” he went on in a relieved tone as she shook her head, “and I hope you will not for some time.”

“Mildred is beginning to look forward rather eagerly to being married,” said Mrs. Annister, smiling soberly. “I’m almost afraid she’s more in love than he is.”

“I’m so glad I came tonight. It has been lovely!” Henrietta Marne at that moment was saying to her host, at the other side of the room.

“You have enjoyed it?” and he bent upon her his brown eyes with their look of caressing indulgence. “I’m glad of that, for I’m afraid you don’t have as many enjoyments as a girl ought to have, by right of her youth and beauty and charm.”

“I was afraid I ought not to come, because my mother is ill.”

“Ah, that Puritan conscience of yours, Miss Marne! Don’t be so afraid of it when the question is nothing more than getting some innocent pleasure out of life.”

“But one isn’t afraid of one’s conscience. One just takes counsel of it, or with it.”

“Of course! But if one – you, for instance – yielded to it more than its due – and it really is insatiable, you know, if you let it get the upper hand – what a wretched affair life would be! Simply unendurable!”

“But there’s always a satisfaction in doing what one ought to do, Mr. Brand – don’t you think so? – even if it is hard.”

“Oh, if you like your satisfaction to taste hard and bitter! I don’t! I think it’s much better to hold ourselves free to take advantage of all the possibilities of happiness, little and big, that come our way. It’s really a duty that we owe ourselves. And, of course, if we are happy we make others about us happy too. You, I’m sure, need enjoyment so much that it would be a great mistake for you to throw away any opportunity. And I’m very glad you didn’t neglect this little one!”

Mrs. Fenlow and her son were at his elbow to say goodnight, and as he shook hands with Mark, whose mother had already passed on to an exchange of confidences concerning hairdressers with Miss Ardeen Andrews, he laid his hand affectionately on the young man’s shoulder and said in a low tone:

“You’re coming tomorrow night, Mark, of course?”

“Sure! D. V. and d. p. – God willing and the devil permitting!”

“It will be very different from this,” and Brand smiled slightly, a winning, deprecating smile, as with the least perceptible motion of his head he indicated the company that filled his spacious drawing room. “But a man doesn’t want his relaxations to be all alike, any more than he wants all flowers to be of the same color.”

## CHAPTER IV

### Billikins is Frightened

It was inevitable that the personality of Felix Brand should loom large in the home of his secretary. Mrs. Marne was a semi-invalid and suffered frequent relapses into more serious illness. The care of her and the management of their little household were Isabella's part, and to these two, much confined at home and by necessity cut off from nearly all outside pleasures and interests, the chief daily event was Henrietta's return from her busy hours and responsible tasks in the architect's office. But, of still more importance, their worldly welfare hung upon the salary which he paid to the younger sister.

Mrs. Marne's husband had been a physician in one of the smaller cities of Massachusetts; but, though a New Englander, he had not possessed the characteristic thrift of the sons of that region, and consequently his widow and his daughters found, after his death, that the settlement of his affairs left them a very slender sum of money. It was necessary that one of the young women should become an income earner, and it was decided that Henrietta, since she had a better head for affairs and more liking for business, should take this share of their burden. There was enough money to give her a course in secretarial training in a women's vocational college in Boston and to support them all in economical comfort until she should be ready to begin her work. As she was at once successful in finding a position in New York, they invested the few hundred dollars still left in a first payment upon a little home in Staten Island, and they were now carefully husbanding Henrietta's salary and paying off the remaining debt upon the instalment plan.

It was through Dr. Annister that Henrietta found a good position so quickly. He and Dr. Marne had been classmates and warm friends during the years of their medical training, and afterward, although one had gone to New York and become one of the famous specialists of his generation and the other had sunk into the obscurity of general practice in a small city, they had kept up their friendship in a desultory way, with occasional meetings at medical conventions and now and then a letter. When Dr. Marne died, a missive came from his friend that seemed so simple and genuine in its feeling that it deeply touched Henrietta, to whom fell the duty of answering it, because of her mother's stricken condition.

The memory of that letter and a warmly reverent feeling for the friendship that had called it forth stayed long in her heart. And at last, when she was ready to try conclusions with the world, and felt sure, with the usual conviction of youth, that it would be much better to go somewhere else to begin, she wrote to Dr. Annister, telling him briefly her plans and hopes and what her training had been. And the famous Dr. Philip Annister interested himself in the daughter of his old friend, and at once found for her a well-paid position as secretary for Felix Brand, his prospective son-in-law. Mrs. Annister also showed much kindly feeling for the girl and often had her stay overnight at their home for a visit to the theatre or the opera.

Between Mildred Annister and Henrietta there existed a friendship which made up in outward warmth what it lacked in depth. For Mildred, with her woman's heart but lately awakened and filled to the brim with absorbed and adoring first love, could not help some secret resentment that any other woman should be anything to her beloved or give him any service. Her good sense told her that this was unreasonable, while her respect and kindly feeling for Henrietta made her ashamed of it. So she did her best to conceal it and in the effort overdid her expressions of affection. Henrietta would have responded to these with girlish ardor, for she liked Mildred and greatly admired her tall and stately beauty, had she not felt some barrier just below the surface that kept her as reserved, in all the little confidences that usually go on between young women, as was Mildred herself. She did not even know of the semi-engagement, to which Dr. and Mrs. Annister had not yet given their full

assent, that existed between Mildred and Felix Brand, although she felt sure that the girl was wholeheartedly in love with him.

As the weeks went on and autumn merged into winter, Henrietta sometimes noticed a harried look upon her employer's countenance. She wondered much about this, for he was winning success and honors in ample measure. An international committee of artists and architects, sitting in judgment upon the competitive designs submitted for a memorial building to one of the country's heroes, had announced their decision awarding the prize to Felix Brand. He had been made a member of the municipal art advisory commission and a little later a national society of architects had elected him to its presidency. There were private commissions in plenty, enough to keep him and his assistants busy. And, finally, – and Brand laughingly told his secretary that he considered this the most signal success of his career – Mrs. Fenlow had approved his last design for the country house she purposed to build up the Hudson and had been moved to transports of enthusiasm over its every detail.

In addition to these honors and successes, Henrietta knew that he was making much money outside of his profession; that his operations in stocks were nearly always profitable, that once or twice they had been richly so, and that he had bought a large number of shares in a marble quarry for whose product his designs often called.

So she marveled much within herself that he should so often look careworn and show a furtive anxiety in his eyes and face when he had, or was rapidly winning, almost every good thing that mortals count a source of happiness and when even her intimacy with his affairs did not reveal a solitary cause for distress or uneasiness of mind.

She spoke of this sometimes at home. For her mother and sister were always concerned to know what her day had been, and Felix Brand being so important a person to their lives, they were deeply interested in whatever he did or said and in everything Henrietta could tell them about him. They were scrupulously careful not to ask or to speak about anything that would approach too nearly her confidential relations with her employer. But outside those lines there was a large and interesting territory wherein they could and did have much converse together about the architect, his success, and his personality.

On a bright and mild Sunday morning in mid-winter, whose sunshine was full of that guileful promise of spring with which the tricky weather goddess of the Manhattan region loves to play pranks upon its residents, the two Marne sisters, in their mother's room, were chatting with her as she reclined in the sun beside a south window.

"I've some good news," said Henrietta. "I didn't tell you last night, because I knew we'd all be gossiping in here this morning and it would be so cosy to talk it all over then. Mr. Brand has raised my salary, to date from the first of this month!"

Mrs. Marne's thin hand sought her daughter's where it lay upon the arm of her chair and then hastened to wipe away a tear or two. For she was nervously much broken and her tears, whether of joy or sorrow, came easily.

Isabella sprang up, exclaiming, "Harry! How splendid!" And the two girls hugged each other delightedly and kissed first each other and then their mother. Then they kissed each other again and whirled about in a waltz measure. Billikins, the white fox terrier, quickly put a stop to this exuberance by endeavoring to take part in it himself, barking furiously and making ecstatic rushes between them.

"The second time, dear!" exclaimed Isabella as they settled down again, cheeks flushed and eyes shining. "Only think of it! At Christmas, and now again so soon!"

"It isn't so very much," said Henrietta, "only ten dollars a month more, but it will be a lot for us, and it means a great big lot to me, because it makes me feel that I'm succeeding. What is it, Billikins? Do you want to come up? And you've brought babykins, haven't you? Come on, then, both of you." The fox terrier was begging and wriggling beside her, his inseparable companion and plaything, a dilapidated rag-doll, in his mouth. She lifted them to her lap, where, after much licking and nuzzling of the doll, he curled himself up to sleep.

“Of course you’re succeeding!” cried Isabella. “How could you help it when you’re the cleverest girl in New York and work the hardest and – have such a nice home to stay in at night!”

“It will soon be nicer,” rejoined Henrietta with a laugh, “when we get rid of its mortgage decoration. Now we can get that all paid off by the end of the summer and then we’ll be sure of a home, whatever happens.”

Mrs. Marne pressed her hand in a closer clasp. “Dear child! You and Bella are the best children a mother ever had. I’ve just been thinking that I really have three children, a son as well as two daughters. For you’re just as good as a son, Harry, besides being a daughter too. When you were born, dear, I was disappointed that you weren’t a boy, and sorry for you that you weren’t.”

“Were you sorry about me, too?” demanded Isabella saucily.

“You, dear! Why, when you came – you were the first, you know – I was too proud and delighted to think of anything but just that I had you. By the time Harry arrived I had learned more about what it means to be a woman and I was sorry I had brought another into the world. But I soon got over all that and was so glad to have you both. After all, girls, it is a grand thing to be a wife and a mother!”

“Yes, if you can only get your salary raised often enough,” said Isabella gaily. “And I guess,” she went on as she saw a little wave of amusement cross her mother’s face, “I’d better have that settled right away. I’ll write to Warren that I shall expect an increase every time Harry gets one. Tell us more about your raise, Harry. What did Mr. Brand say?”

“Oh, he was very nice – but he always is nice, just as kind and courteous as can be. He said he was much pleased with the good judgment and the care with which I had managed things while he was away. Before this, when he’s been gone for a day or two or three, he has made some arrangements beforehand and has told me where he would be so that I could telegraph or ’phone him on the long distance if necessary. But lately he’s been called away twice so suddenly that he left me no directions and I didn’t know his address, and so, although he was gone only two or three days each time, I had a good deal of responsibility. But he was very kind and praised everything I did and yesterday he told me that he thought I deserved a reward and as he might be called away again the same way, he didn’t think it was fair to put so much more upon me without paying me for it.”

“Isn’t he lovely!” exclaimed Isabella. “As Delia says about Mrs. Fenlow’s chauffeur, ‘he’s sure very gentlemanly and strong!’”

“Indeed, you’ve been most fortunate in getting so good a position, Harry, dear!” said Mrs. Marne, her voice trembling with her depth of feeling. “I fairly ached with anxiety over your going into this secretarial work, but Mr. Brand has proved to be all that even his secretary’s mother could expect or wish.”

“And here he is, right now!” cried Isabella as she glanced from the window at the sound of an automobile in the quiet street. “And if he isn’t going to honor our humble but happy home with a call from his very handsome self!” she went on excitedly as the machine slowed down and its occupant, glancing at the house numbers, stopped in front of their cottage.

He told Henrietta that he had just learned it might be necessary for him to leave town that day and that he wanted to give her some instructions for her guidance if he should be away more than a day or two. His manner was disturbed and restless, although not lacking in its usual suave and gentle courtesy, and she noted in his face, more strongly marked than she had seen it before, that troubled, anxious look concerning which she had already wondered much. And from the whole man there seemed to her to emanate an unconscious appeal, as of one in such sore and badgering straits that he knew not where to turn for help.

“I may be able,” he said, “to – put off this trip, to make some arrangement about – this matter, so that it will not be necessary for me to go. I hope so – I don’t want to leave the office just now. And, by the way, if I do go, there’s another thing. If there should be a letter in my general mail – not marked ‘personal,’ you know – ” he hesitated, and Henrietta observed that he turned his eyes away and did not meet her gaze as he went on, “but not of the regular business sort, just glance at the

signature first thing, won't you, please? And if it should be signed 'Hugh Gordon,' don't read it, but lay it aside for me to look at when I return."

He straightened up and she could feel the effort of will with which he conquered his perturbation and continued in a more offhand way: "Gordon is apt to write confidential things about his own affairs and he is the sort of man who would never think of marking a letter 'personal.'"

Billikins trotted into the room, his doll in his mouth, and, laying his burden down in mid-floor, as if to make easier the concentration of his faculties upon the duty of investigating this stranger, advanced with signs of ready friendship. Brand responded to his overtures, but the dog, after a preliminary smell or two, broke into a sudden howl and trembled as if with fear. Reproved by Henrietta, he hastened back to his babykins, with which he rushed to a place of safety beneath her chair. There she heard him giving vent to his emotions in subdued whining and growling and in much worrying and tearing of the rag-doll.

Brand rose to go, but lingered beside his chair and made conversation, as though loath to take his leave; and Henrietta, catching a glimpse of Isabella passing through the hall, called her in.

Whenever Isabella entered a room it was like the advent of a merry little breeze. For all the look and manner of her suggested buoyant spirits and gaiety of heart, from the lurking twinkle in her blue eye to her light quick step. Daintiness and prettiness characterized her attire, which she carried gracefully, to the accompaniment of a soft, faint rustle. With pleasure Henrietta watched her employer's face brighten and clear as he talked with her sister. The agitation faded from his manner and presently she was aware that the impression she had had of struggle and appeal, which had begun to tense her own nerves, had disappeared.

"I don't wonder," she thought. "Bella is so light-hearted and so merry, and so pretty and sweet, too, that she could charm away anybody's dumps. I wish I had some of her gift that way – I'm always so serious."

Brand suggested that they should take a spin with him in his automobile. "The day is so fine," he pleaded, as they hesitated a little before answering. "You don't know how splendid it is! And the roads are good down through the island." He glanced from one to the other and Henrietta saw in his brown eyes a look of eager wistfulness.

"It would be lovely and a great treat for us," she said. "You've no idea, Mr. Brand, what a temptation it is. But we don't like to leave mother alone, for she's never very well."

"Oh, is that all?" he exclaimed. "Then bring her along! It would do her a lot of good. Wrap her up well and I'll carry her out to the auto."

He begged Isabella not to desert him while Henrietta went to prepare their mother for the drive.

"How well they get on together," said Mrs. Marne, smiling at the gay laughter that now and then floated up the stairs.

As they came slowly down, the elder woman leaning heavily upon the other's shoulder, Felix Brand ran into the hall, exclaiming:

"Why didn't you call me and let me bring her down!" And at once, notwithstanding her assurance that she could walk, he picked her up and carried her to the street in his arms, saying, "I can just as well save you that fatigue," and carefully settled her in the automobile.

"You'll sit in the front with me and help me drive, won't you?" he said to Isabella as the two girls came out cloaked and furred.

"Yes, do, Bella," said Henrietta cordially in response to a glance from her sister, "and give me a chance to show what good care I can take of mother."

Although Isabella was the elder of the two by three years and formerly had been accustomed to take the lead between them, since the younger had become the support of the family she was beginning, quite unconsciously, to lean upon and defer to her sister. During the drive Henrietta and her mother exchanged many pleased glances as they listened to the merry chatter and the frequent

laughter that drifted back from the front seat. It was a smiling Felix Brand, suave, serene, and courtly of manner, who helped them from the machine on their return and carried Mrs. Marne into the house.

“Please don’t,” he said as they protested their enjoyment of the ride and their sense of his kindness. “For I assure you it has meant a great deal more pleasure and benefit to me than it possibly could to you.”

“I think he really meant that,” said Henrietta when the three women, alone again, were talking over what Mrs. Marne called their “little escapade,” “because when he came he seemed so disturbed and depressed and by the time we got back he was quite himself again. I think it was mainly you, Isabella,” she smiled at her sister, “for you seemed to have a very stimulating effect on him.”

“Oh, I’m willing to be a cocktail for him whenever he wants to bring his auto over here. Never mind, mother,” and she kissed one finger at Mrs. Marne in response to that lady’s shocked “Isabella!” “That’s just modern symbolism, you know. And the ride has made you look as if you’d had one yourself. I’m going to write to Warren that I’ve found a much nicer and handsomer man than he is and if he doesn’t get a stronger grip on my heart right quick it’s likely to get away from him.”

“Bella, dear! Don’t say such things!” admonished her mother in a grieved tone.

Isabella flew to her side and patted her cheek and kissed her brow. “There, there, mother! Don’t you know I’m just funning? Warren is the best man in the world, even if he hasn’t got beeyoutiful, caressing brown eyes, and I love him awfully, and we’re going to be married and live happily forever after. But, all the same, Felix Brand is perfectly lovely, and you think so too, now, don’t you, mother dear!”

“We all think alike about Mr. Brand, I’m sure,” she answered.

“Except Billikins,” amended Henrietta, and then told them of the fox terrier’s disgraceful behavior. “It seemed so queer for him to act that way,” she added, “when he’s always so friendly toward visitors and so effusive that he usually has to be put out of the room.”

“It was strange,” said Mrs. Marne, “for with his pleasant voice and gentle manner you would think Mr. Brand would be as attractive to animals as he certainly is to people. And he must be as kind and sweet-natured as he seems, for not one young man in a thousand would have taken the trouble he did to give three forlorn women a little pleasure.”

Henrietta made no reply as she laughed with her mother at the lively scolding Isabella was giving to the dog, but her thoughts were busy with the problem of why Felix Brand had seemed so anxious for them to go with him.

Her loyalty to her employer would not let her throw the least shade upon their enthusiastic appreciation of his courtesy and kindness. But her months of work at his side – she had been his secretary almost a year – had given her an intimate knowledge of his character and of his habits of thought and feeling.

She had learned that his habitual mental attitude was, “What is there in this for me?” He did not indeed use just those words or give such crude expression to his self-centeredness; but she had come to know that personal advantage was the usual mainspring of his actions. Presently deciding that Isabella’s enlivening effect upon his mood had inspired his desire for their company, her mind went on to busy itself with speculation over the cause for his despondency and uneasiness.

“I believe it must have something to do with that Hugh Gordon he mentioned, whoever he is,” she thought. “For he seemed most disturbed when speaking of him. Maybe it’s some relative who is giving him trouble – some black sheep of his family, very likely.”

She walked to the window and stood there silently, her thoughts hovering around this unknown personality, and became conscious of the upspringing in her breast of a feeling of disapproval and even of enmity toward the man because of the trouble he seemed to be giving to the employer she admired so much and for whose appreciation and unvarying kindness she felt so much gratitude.

Then there surged over her a wave of discontent, against whose threatened onslaught she had half consciously been doing battle ever since she had talked with Felix Brand in the morning. Now

it was upon her. How monotonous seemed her life, how destitute of the pleasures that most girls had as their right! If she could only use for her own enjoyment some of that money she worked so hard to earn! But that everlasting mortgage on their home which had to be paid off – how the thought of it irked and galled when she longed to travel, buy beautiful clothes, go to the theatre and the opera, have young friends and ride and drive and play golf and dance and sing with them. It was the playtime of life and she was having to spend it in work, work, work!

“Oh, there isn’t anybody who would enjoy all those things as I should,” she thought, “and I want them so!”

She turned impatiently from the window and her glance fell upon her mother, smiling gently and happily as she lay back in her easy chair, and remorse entered her heart.

“What an ungrateful little beast I am,” she stormed at herself, “to feel like that when I ought to be thankful I can earn money enough to keep mother in comfort! Was it because Mr. Brand was here that I felt that way? Harry Marne, be ashamed of yourself! Aren’t you old enough to be responsible for your own thoughts?”

She sat down beside her mother and taking her hand pressed it tenderly against her cheek.

## CHAPTER V

### Mrs. Brand's Dream Son

It was half a week after that spring-like Sunday when Felix Brand motored to his secretary's home on Staten Island, and a feathery pall, white as forgiven sins, was sifting down from the heavens upon all the eastern seaboard. In a town within the suburban radius of Philadelphia its mantle of purity lay almost undisturbed upon lawns and streets and vacant lots. Two women were looking out upon the snow-covered earth and snow-filled sky from the side window of a cottage near the edge of the town. One, small and gray-haired, perhaps looked older than she was because of the pathetic droop of her shoulders and the worn, patient expression of her face. But lined and sad though her countenance was, it told of a sweet and gentle soul and it was lighted now with a look of pleasure.

"Just look at it, Penelope!" she exclaimed, a little thrill of enthusiasm in her voice. "I never saw it snow harder, or look prettier! Isn't it beautiful!"

She turned a pair of soft brown eyes upon a younger woman sitting beside her in a wheel chair, who put down the book she had been reading, and sighed as she answered: "Yes, it is beautiful, mother, very beautiful. But when I look at it I can't help thinking how long it will be until spring comes again and I can be out in the yard under the trees."

The mother put out her hand, small and once of the shape that chirognomists call "the artistic hand," but now wrinkled, bony and toil-hardened, and rested it gently for a moment upon the mass of dark, waving hair, already well-threaded with gray, that crowned the other's head. Her face filled with sympathy but her voice broke cheerfully upon the silence:

"Oh, it won't be long now, Penelope, and not a bit longer because of this beautiful storm!"

The figure in the wheel chair bent forward again and looked out upon the pearly whiteness of the earth. It was a sad travesty of the human form, undersized, humped and crooked. But it bore a noble head with a broad, full brow and a strong, intellectual face that had in it something of the elder woman's sweetness of expression. But in her brown eyes the other's softness and wistfulness gave place to a keener, more flashing look that told of a high and soaring spirit. And in the lines of her face was a hint of possible storminess, though it was softened by an expression of self-mastery, eloquent of many an inner battle waged and won.

The window from which they looked commanded one side of their own wide yard, a vacant block, and beyond that a cross-street. The snow was feathering down so fast that it gave to the air a milky translucence through which bulked dimly an occasional traveler on the other thoroughfare. Penelope's eyes fixed themselves upon one of these vague shapes.

"Look, mother!" she exclaimed. "Do you see that man just turning the corner to come this way? It looks like Felix!"

"So it does!" the other cried.

They were both silent for a moment as they gazed intently at the dim figure, gaining definiteness now with each step toward them. "It doesn't walk like him," Penelope commented, her face already showing that she knew it was not he. But the mother hung a little longer to her hope. "No, it isn't Felix," she presently acquiesced, disappointment evident in her gentle tones. "I so hoped it was, at first."

With a firm, rapid stride the young man was coming eagerly up the street, his eyes upon their house. "He doesn't walk at all like Felix," Penelope repeated thoughtfully as his figure became more plainly visible through the veiling snow, "but it's curious how much like him he looks, after all."

"See, Penelope!" the mother exclaimed, reaching out to grasp her daughter's hand in sudden enthusiasm. "See how he comes out of the snow mist! Isn't it just like a figure in a dream getting plainer and clearer, and more like life!"

Penelope pressed her mother's hand and smiled up at her fondly. "Just like you, mother, to make something pretty out of a disappointment!"

They gazed at the advancing figure with renewed interest and saw that the man, with slightly slackened pace, seemed to be closely observing their house and yard. What he saw was a one-story red cottage, needing paint, its green window shutters looking old and somewhat dilapidated, its yard, of ample size and dotted with trees and shrubbery, surrounded by a wooden fence in whose palings were occasional breaks and patches. It was a commonplace object in an ordinary winter scene, but he seemed to feel in it the deepest interest. There was even a frown on his brow as his alert glance rested on a broken pane in the kitchen window.

"It has been a long time since Felix was here – six months, hasn't it, mother?" said Penelope, leaning back wearily again as the stranger passed from her range of vision.

"Hardly so long as that, dear. It was last fall. But, of course, he is very busy. He hasn't the time to travel around now and go visiting, even over here to see us, that he used to have, before he had begun to be so successful. We mustn't expect too much." As she spoke, her gentle tones as full of indulgence and excuse as her words, she moved to the front window and sought the figure of the stranger, now striding along the snow-covered sidewalk in front of her own yard.

"Penelope! He's coming here!" she exclaimed, starting back and dropping the muslin curtain she had pushed aside. "He's turning in at our gate! He does look like Felix – a little. Who can it be!"

Penelope bent forward to peer through the curtains and saw the man mounting the steps to their little veranda and stamping the snow from his feet. Instantly she wheeled her chair about and sped it into the adjoining room as her mother opened the door to their visitor.

"You are Mrs. Brand, I think? Felix Brand's mother?" he said. "I am a friend of his – my name is Hugh Gordon – and as I was coming to Philadelphia I promised him I would run out here and see you."

As they entered the living room his keen, dark eyes swept it alertly, as they had the exterior of the house. A shade of disappointment crossed his face.

"Your daughter?" he asked abruptly. "May I not see her, too?"

Mrs. Brand hesitated. The shyness of her girlhood years still lingered in her manner when in the presence of strangers, and she glanced at her visitor, then at the floor, and her hands fluttered about her lap. Gordon's face and eyes softened as he looked at her. There was something very sweet and appealing in the gentle diffidence of this little, plain, elderly woman.

"Penelope doesn't often see people – anyone, and she is very unwilling to meet strangers. Perhaps Felix told you – you know –"

"Yes, I know. I understand how she feels, but I want very much to see her. I know Felix well, and I know a good deal about her, enough to make me honor and admire her very much. Won't you tell her, please, that I came out here particularly to see you and her, and that I shall be much disappointed if I have to go back without meeting both of you?"

Penelope soon returned with her mother and both had many questions to ask concerning Felix. Was he well? Was he working harder than he ought? Was his new apartment very beautiful? Had Mr. Gordon seen the plans for the new monument with which he had won in the national competition?

He used to send them photographs, Penelope said, but lately they knew little about his work unless they saw pictures of it in the newspapers.

But, indeed, they didn't expect so much attention from him now, her mother quickly added, for as his work increased and became of so much importance they understood how necessary it was for him to give it all his time and thought.

"It would really be selfish," she went on, "as I sometimes tell Penelope, to want him to spend time on us, writing long letters, or coming over here, when we know that his success depends upon his devoting all his energies to his work."

Penelope, silent and gazing out of the window, was conscious of Gordon's quick glance at her, and was conscious too of the appeal in her mother's wistful brown eyes, which she felt were turned upon her. So many years these two had passed in intimate companionship and in loving ministrations on one side and utter dependence on the other, that spoken word was scarcely needed between them to make known the mood of each to the other.

In immediate response she turned, with a smile that lighted up her controlled, intellectual face, and said:

"Of course, we quite understand how occupied Felix is all the time, but that doesn't keep us from liking to know about him. So your visit, Mr. Gordon, is quite a godsend, and you mustn't be surprised that we ask you so many questions about Felix and want to know all about him and what he is doing."

Her voice was low, with rich notes in it, and her manner quite without self-consciousness. Notwithstanding her deformity and her secluded life, she betrayed neither shyness nor embarrassment. In both manner and speech was the poise that is usually the result of much association with the world.

"Yes," Gordon was assenting, "Felix has many irons in the fire, and he is planning to have more. But he thinks of you both, and you would be surprised to learn how much I know of you – through him." He rose and as he moved across the room to Penelope's chair he continued: "You, I know, Miss Brand, love the sunshine and the out-of-doors." He hesitated a moment and then went on, pouring out his words with a sort of abrupt eagerness:

"But I don't want to call you 'Miss Brand!' It doesn't seem as if I were talking to you. I feel as if I had known you so long that I want to call you 'Penelope,' as Felix does. Will you let me? You won't mind if I do? Oh, thank you! You are very kind to me, for I realize what a stranger I must seem to you, although I feel as if I had known you both such a long time. Well, then, Penelope," and he smiled and nodded at her, as he crossed the room to the front window and drew back the curtain, "how would you like to have one end of this porch enclosed with glass, so that you could sit out there with your wraps on, all winter, even on days like this, and feel almost as if you were out of doors? It wouldn't seem quite so shut in as the house, would it?"

She leaned back with a sigh and then smiled. "Yes, it would be pleasant. But it is now some years since I quit wishing for the things I can't have."

"Ah, but you're going to have this," he exclaimed, his face beaming. "Felix is preparing a little surprise for you, but he gave me permission to tell you about it."

The expression upon the faces of both women and their little exclamations told Gordon, as he glanced from one to the other, that their surprise was as great as their pleasure.

"Felix is going to have it done for you," he went on, "as soon as he returns. I forgot to tell you, and perhaps, as he went away rather unexpectedly, he didn't write you, that he was called out of the city a few days ago on pressing business. I saw him when he was leaving and I know you may expect to hear from him about the porch as soon as he returns. I'll tell him how pleased you are about it."

They gave him messages of gratitude and love and the three of them discussed the little improvement with the intimacy of old friends. Several books, one of them still open at the page where Penelope had been reading, were on a table beside the window. Gordon took them up one by one and ran over their titles. "Ah, poetry – and fiction – and biography – how catholic your interests are, Penelope! But I knew that already. Sociology, too. Yes, I knew that is your favorite study. It is mine, too, but I haven't had as much time yet to read along that line as I would like. What have you lately read on that subject?"

She told him of some of the recent books that had interested her most and mentioned the titles of others that she thought would be worth while.

"After you read them," he said, in his quick, decisive way, "I'd like very much to know what you think of them."

“I’d be glad to talk them over with you, but it’s not likely I can have the opportunity of reading them very soon. I take books from the town library, and so many people always want the new ones that sometimes my turn is a long time coming.”

He was making a note of their titles. “I’ll tell Felix you’re interested in them,” he rejoined casually, “and I’m sure he’ll send them to you.”

Wonderment filled the minds of both mother and daughter and showed in their faces.

“You and my brother must be great friends,” Penelope hastened to say, “although you seem to be so different from him. You resemble him a little – yes, a good deal, physically, but in manner, expression and, I should think, in mind and temperament and character, you must be very different. But perhaps that only makes you the better friends. You see,” she went on, smiling frankly, “mother and I are already talking with you as if we knew you as well as Felix does.”

“I hope that you will, and that very soon,” he responded, and his manner reminded her for a fleeting instant of the winning deference, the slightly ceremonious politeness, of her brother’s habitual demeanor.

“That was just a little like Felix,” she thought. “Perhaps he has been with Felix so much that he has unconsciously caught something of his manner. Felix has a very pleasing manner, but – I like this man’s better.”

“I don’t think Mr. Gordon so very unlike Felix,” her mother was saying, “that is, unlike Felix used to be. Naturally, he has changed a good deal of late years. It’s to be expected that a young man will change as he grows up and enters upon his life’s work. But Mr. Gordon looks more as I used to think Felix would when he grew up, and something as my husband did when we were married, but still more – ” she paused, searching his countenance with puzzled eyes. He started a little, as if pulling himself together.

“Now I know,” she exclaimed. “Penelope, Mr. Gordon looks like your Grandfather Brand! If you wore your hair longer, Mr. Gordon, and had no mustache, you’d look very like an old picture I have of him when he was young. He was such a good man and I admired and respected him so much! I used to hope, when Felix was a little boy, that he would grow up to be like his grandfather.”

“He has grown up to be a very able man,” Gordon responded gravely. “He has opened the way toward being a famous one, and he has the capacity to go far in it. He has much more talent than I.”

“Are you an architect, too?” asked Mrs. Brand.

“No, I have not done anything, yet. But it is only now becoming possible for me to do anything of consequence.” His manner and expression grew suddenly even more earnest and serious. “And there is so much that I want to do, that needs to be done, so much that urges one to action, if he feels his responsibility toward others.”

Mrs. Brand was looking at him with startled, swimming eyes. “Oh, you are so like Father Brand!” she exclaimed. “How often have I heard him speak in just that way! He was rather a stern man, because he wanted to hold people to a high standard. But he fairly burned to do good in the world and make it better. I used to hope, when Felix was a little boy, that he’d have the same kind of spirit when he became a man.”

She stopped and her worn face flushed at the thought that she had almost spoken slightly of her son, had at least hinted disappointment in him. She fidgeted with embarrassment as silence fell upon them and she felt Gordon’s eyes upon her. She could not resist his steady gaze, and as her eyes met his the look in them stirred her mother-heart to its depths and set her to trembling. She saw in it wistfulness and loneliness and felt behind it the persistent heart-hunger of the grown man for the mother in woman, for maternal understanding and solicitude and affection.

“I knew right away,” she said afterward to Penelope, “that he’d never known a mother’s love and that he was homesick for it and it made my heart warm toward him more than ever. He looks so young, even younger than Felix, and that minute he seemed as if he were just a boy.”

“I hope you will let me come again,” said Gordon as he bade them good-bye. He took Mrs. Brand’s toil-worn hand in both of his and with gravely earnest face looked down into hers as he went on: “And if you should hear – if I should do anything that seems – well, not friendly, toward Felix, I hope you will try to believe that I am not doing it to injure him, but because it seems to me right and because I truly think it for his good.”

Mrs. Brand was still trembling and she felt strangely moved. But her usual shyness was all gone and she did not even notice that she was finding it easy to talk with this stranger, easier, indeed, than it had been, of late years, to talk with Felix. Her heart swelled and throbbed with yearning over him.

“I am quite sure,” she said, “that you will not do anything unless you are convinced that it is right and for the best. No matter how it may seem to others, I shall know that you expect good to come of it.”

“Thank you!” His voice was low and it shook a little. He bent over her hand and raised it to his lips. “If I had a mother I should want her to be just like you! Will you try to think of me, sometimes, no matter what I do, as being moved, perhaps, by the same spirit, at least the same kind of spirit, as that of – of Felix’s and Penelope’s grandfather?”

Her patient face and her brown eyes glowed with the emotions that thrilled and fluttered in her heart. Belief in him, the sudden, sweet intimacy into which their brief acquaintance had flowered, his seeming need of her, and her own ardent wish to respond with all her mother-wealth, filled her breast with new, strange life and stirred her imagination.

“I shall think of you,” she answered with sweet earnestness, “as if you were the boy – a man – I don’t know how to say just what I mean, but perhaps you’ll understand – as if you were the man who had grown up out of the dreams I used to have about my boy.

“Don’t think,” she added hastily, “that I’m displeased or dissatisfied with Felix, because I’m not, though what I’ve said might give that impression. He is a good son and I am proud and glad to be his mother. But a mother has so many dreams about a son when he is little that no boy could possibly fulfill all of them. He must follow his own bent, and the other things she has dreamed for him must be left behind. So I’ll just feel as if, in some mysterious way, those dreams had come alive in you. And – oh, Penelope! Do you remember what I said a little while ago, when we saw Mr. Gordon coming toward us out of the storm, that it was just like someone taking form and shape in a dream? I’ll think of you as my dream son, Mr. Gordon – Hugh!”

Impulsively he seized her hand again and held it closely clasped in both of his. “Will you do that? Will you think of me in that way?”

Penelope, in her wheel chair beside them, fidgeted her weak, misshapen body. Her nerves were tense with an excitement which she knew was not all due merely to an unexpected call from a stranger. Unaccustomed emotions, strong but undefined, were filling her breast and tugging at her heart. To her sharpened perception it seemed almost as if something uncanny were hovering in the room. She shivered and leaned back wearily. What spell was coming over them? Were those two beside her, strangers until an hour ago, about to sink sobbing into each other’s arms? And was she, Penelope, the calm and self-mastered, about to shriek hysterically?

“How ghostly you two are becoming,” she exclaimed, with an effort at vivacity, “with your dreams and your spirits! You make me afraid that Mr. Gordon, substantial as he looks, will melt away into thin air before our very eyes!”

“We are getting wrought up, aren’t we?” Gordon assented as he turned to her. “And you are pale, Penelope! I hope I haven’t tired you too much. Seeing you both, and your being so kind, have meant a lot to me, more than you can guess. And if your mother is going to be my dream mother, Penelope, you’ll be my dream sister, won’t you?”

He smiled as he said this, then all three laughed a little, more to lessen the tension which all of them felt than because they were amused, and presently the two women were alone again. Afterward, as they talked over all the incidents of the afternoon, they recalled that it was the only time during

his long call that Gordon had laughed, and they wondered that a young man who seemed so full of vigor and life should have so serious a demeanor.

## CHAPTER VI

### Who Is Hugh Gordon?

Felix Brand did not appear at his office the next day after his call at the home of his secretary, and she inferred that he had gone on the journey of which he had spoken. The week went by and he did not return. It was longer than any previous absence had been, but Henrietta, being prepared for it, was able to keep his affairs in order. Nevertheless, as the days slipped by and no message came from him, she began to feel solicitous. On Monday and Tuesday of the next week, Mildred Annister made apprehensive inquiry concerning him over the telephone. On Wednesday, big headlines in all the newspapers told a city not yet so cynical but that it could read the news with surprise, that Felix Brand, its successful and promising young architect, was charged with having won his appointment upon the municipal art commission by means of bribery.

An investigating committee had been secretly feeling about in another city department with no thought of uncovering corruption, or even of looking for it, in a body of city servants whose character, occupations and ideals lifted them so far above suspicion.

Then they received an intimation that even there all was not as pure as it might be and had called before them the man from whom the hint had come. Guided by his information they had followed a devious trail, apparently quite clean at first, but showing undoubted befoulment as they neared its source. And finally they had traced it to its beginnings in an unsavory local politician, Flaherty by name, who was powerful in his own district and therefore had influence in his party organization. And Flaherty, they had discovered, had been well rewarded for efficient work in engineering the matter and inspiring those above him to suggest and secure the appointment.

Scarcely had Henrietta reached her office on the morning of this publication when Mildred Annister rushed in, anxious, excited and indignant.

“Harry, dear, have you heard from him? Do you know where he is? I know he would write to me, if he could write at all, before he would to any one else, but, oh, do tell me if you know whether anything has happened to him!”

“No, Mildred, dear, I don’t suppose I know much, if any, more than you do. But certainly nothing serious could have happened or some message would have been sent here.”

“You’re not keeping anything from me?” the girl demanded, staring at Henrietta with wild, suspicious eyes. “Oh, Harry, you don’t know what all this means to me! I’ve hardly slept for the last two nights! You must tell me everything! Oh, I know you are his confidential secretary and you must not betray his trust, but – you don’t know – I’ve never told you – I’m almost the same as his wife. We’re engaged, and we’d have been married before this but for some notion father has. So I’ve the right to know, Harry – you must tell me all you can!”

Henrietta bent toward the girl sympathetically. “I don’t think you need to be so anxious,” she said reassuringly, although her own heart misgave her. “I’m so glad to know about your happiness,” she went on, stroking Mildred’s clenched hand where it lay upon her desk, “and I’m sure this will come out all right. He went away very suddenly. Did – did you know that he was going?”

Mildred nodded and wiped some hysterical tears from her eyes. It was a moment before she could control her voice: “Yes. He had promised to come to our house on Sunday evening. But instead he sent me a note – the dearest little letter – ” and her hand involuntarily moved to her breast as she paused and smiled. Her listener marveled at the light that played over her countenance for a moment. “He said he had been suddenly called out of the city and might be away several days, but would see me again as soon as he could get back, and in the meantime I must not be anxious. But I can’t help it, Harry! I’m wild with anxiety! Oh, if anything should happen to him I couldn’t bear it – I couldn’t live!”

“There, there, dear, don’t be so alarmed. Calm yourself and I’ll tell you all I know.” Mildred was hysterically weeping and Henrietta moved to her side and with an arm about her shoulders soothed her and went on:

“Sunday morning he motored over to my house to tell me that he might have to be out of the city for a few days and to give me some directions about matters here in case he should have to go. He said he didn’t know how long he would be gone but hoped he would be back inside of a week.”

“Sunday – then you saw him after I did. Did he seem well? Was he all right?”

“Yes, except that he looked anxious and disturbed.”

“Oh, I knew there was something wrong! Why didn’t he come to me and tell me all about it! I would have comforted him! I’d have done anything for him – I’d have gone at once and been married, whatever father might say, if he had wanted me to!”

“I don’t think it could have been anything very serious, dear, nothing more than just a temporary depression of spirits, because – well, you know what a merry little piece my sister is and how she jokes and laughs and says nonsensical things until you can’t help being cheered up and laughing, too. She seemed to amuse Mr. Brand and he was very kind and took us all for a ride in his auto. And, oh, Mildred, you should have seen how lovely he was with my poor, frail mother! He insisted that she must go, that it would do her good, and he carried her in his arms out to the auto and back, and was as tender and careful with her as a son could have been!”

“How like him!” the girl beamed. “He is so good and kind! Harry, there isn’t another man like him in this whole world! It would kill me to lose him!”

“We had a delightful ride and Mr. Brand seemed to enjoy Bella’s merry talk. She sat with him, and when we came back and he returned to the city he was looking quite himself again.”

“Oh!” said Mildred, drawing back and looking at Henrietta with narrowing eyes. She was too absorbed in her own intense emotions to perceive the embarrassment which suddenly gripped her companion. Henrietta, wildly groping about in her own mind for something to say which would relieve the momentary strain, chanced upon what her employer had said about Hugh Gordon and her own subsequent suspicions, which had been made sharper by the charges in the morning newspapers.

“Mildred, dear!” she exclaimed. “Has Mr. Brand ever said anything to you about a man called Hugh Gordon?”

“Hugh Gordon!” The girl straightened up, her color rising and her eyes flashing with indignation. “Why, he’s that dreadful creature who is responsible for all that horrid mess in the papers this morning, isn’t he?”

“The committee’s report says that he gave them their first information and told them how to get the rest of it.”

“Horrid creature! I know it’s all a mess of lies! No, I never heard of him before. Why do you ask? Do you know anything about him? Did Felix ever speak of him to you?”

“Only once – last Sunday,” Henrietta hesitated.

“What was it?” the other demanded. “What did he say? Oh, I knew you were keeping something from me! Tell me, Harry!”

“Truly, dear, it wasn’t anything of any consequence. It wasn’t about himself, or his business, so I suppose it’s all right for me to tell you. He only asked me, if any letters should come signed ‘Hugh Gordon,’ not to read them but to put them aside for him when he should return, because this man was likely to write confidentially about his own affairs. That’s all Mr. Brand ever said to me about him – the only time he’s ever mentioned the man’s name. But I thought maybe – it was just my own conjecture, you know – that maybe this Gordon is some dissipated relative, some black sheep of his family, whom Mr. Brand is trying to help.”

“Oh, I see through it all! It’s as plain as day!” cried Mildred impetuously. “This Gordon is a blackmailer who is trying to force money from Felix! I knew all the time there wasn’t a word of truth in that disgusting story! Felix has been helping him – perhaps he’s a cousin, or something, and he

has demanded more and more money, and Felix has refused, and now in revenge he has done this! And he's got Felix shut up somewhere to make him give in! That's why I haven't heard from him! Oh, it's perfectly plain! The thing to do now is to find this horrible Hugh Gordon and make him tell where Felix is!"

The office boy entered to say that some reporters wanted to see Mr. Brand's secretary. Henrietta was about to send back the message that as she knew nothing whatever of any consequence it was not worth while for her to see them, when Miss Annister interposed.

"No, Harry, let them come in," she said. "Perhaps they will know something that we don't."

While the reporters questioned Henrietta they stole many a covert glance at Mildred Annister, who sat beside her, dignified and beautiful, her cheeks glowing and eyes brilliant with excitement, listening with intense interest.

Henrietta soon told them the little that she knew about the matter. Mildred waited until they had asked all the questions they could think of and then, leaning forward in her absorption and gazing intently at one of the group, she said: "Now tell us all that you know about this Hugh Gordon. I want to know all you can tell me, because I have a theory about him."

Her intensity and eagerness roused the hope that perhaps here they might find something with which to embellish a story in which, so far, they had uncovered little to add to that of yesterday. But first they must know who this lovely girl was.

"You are a relative of Mr. Brand?" one of them hazarded.

"I am Mildred Annister, Dr. Philip Annister's daughter, and I am Felix Brand's promised wife."

The instant ripple of interest among the reporters caused Mildred to shrink back in sudden self-consciousness, her face scarlet.

"But please don't put that in the papers," she went on. "It's of no interest to anybody but us, and we don't want the engagement announced yet. I told you so you would understand how much right I have to be interested. I am perfectly sure this dreadful creature, Hugh Gordon, is at the bottom of the whole business, that these charges in the papers this morning are nothing but revenge for his failure to blackmail Mr. Brand, and it is just as certain as can be that he has got Mr. Brand imprisoned somewhere, maybe drugged, and the thing for you to do now is to find this Gordon and make him tell where Felix is. Oh, please do!" she ended, with a sudden drop in her manner, her voice choking.

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