

The HILLS OF REFUGE

A NOVEL

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**AS SHE NEARED HER HOME THE SUN'S RAYS WERE DYING
OUT OF THE LANDSCAPE AND THE DUSK WAS GATHERING**

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THE HILLS OF REFUGE

PART I

CHAPTER I

The house, a three-story red-brick residence, was on Walnut Street, near Beacon. Its narrow front faced the state Capitol with its gold-sheeted dome; from its stoop one could look down on the Common and, from the corner of the street, see the Public Gardens. It was a Sunday morning and the Browne family were at breakfast in the dining-room in the rear of the first floor, just back of the drawing-room. The two rooms were separated by folding-doors painted white, as was the wainscoting of the dining-room. There was a wide bay window at the end, the sashes of which were up, and the spring air and sunshine came in, feeding the plants which stood in pots on the sill.

William Browne, the head of the family, a banker of middle age, slender, sallow of complexion, partially bald, and of a nervous temperament, his mustache and hair touched with gray, sat reading the *Transcript* of the evening before.

Opposite to him sat his wife, Celeste, a delicate woman somewhat under thirty years of age. She had once been beautiful, and might still be considered so, for her face was a rare one. Her eyes were deeply blue, and now ringed with dark circles which added to the beauty of her olive skin. The hand filling her husband's coffee-cup was thin, tapering, and almost as small as a child's. Her lips had a drawn, sensitive expression when she spoke as he lowered his paper to take the coffee she was holding out to him.

"You have not told me how your business is," she said.

"Why do you want to know?" His irritation was obvious, though he was trying to hide it, as he dropped his paper at his side and all but glared at her over his cup.

"I think I ought to know such things," she answered. "Besides I worry considerably when—when I think you are upset over financial matters."

"Upset?" He stared, it seemed almost fearfully, at her, and then began to eat the brown bread and fish-cakes on his plate. "Why do you think that I am upset?"

"I can always tell," she faltered. "When you are disturbed over business you don't notice Ruth when you come in. You almost pushed her from

your lap last night when she went to you in the library. It hurt the little thing's feelings. She did not know what to make of it."

"A position like mine is full of responsibility," he said, doggedly. "Hundreds of things go wrong. Mistakes are made sometimes. We are handling other people's money. The directors are harsh, puritanical men, and they are very hard to please. They want me to do it all, and they think I am infallible, or ought to be."

"You didn't sleep well last night," Celeste continued, still timidly. "I heard you walking to and fro. I smelled your cigars. I couldn't sleep, for it seemed to me that you were unusually disturbed. You may not remember it, but you ate scarcely anything at supper, and, although I asked you several questions, you did not hear me."

He bolted the mouthful of bread he had broken off. His eyes flashed desperately. "Oh, I can't go into all the details of our ups and downs!" he blurted out, shrugging his shoulders with impatience. "When I leave the bank I try to shut them in behind me. If I go over them with you it is like living through them again."

"Then—then it is not your brother this time," Celeste ventured. "I thought perhaps the directors had spoken of his conduct again."

"Oh no. On my account they allow him to go and come as he likes. When he is not drinking he does splendid work—as much, often, as two men. The directors know he is worth his pay even as it is. Sometimes he gets behind with his work, but soon catches up again. In fact, they all seem to like him. They think he can't help it. It is hereditary, you know. Both of his grandfathers were like that."

"You knew that he was drinking yesterday, did you?" Celeste inquired, with concern in her voice and glance.

"Oh yes. He wasn't at his desk at all. I heard him come in and go to his room about three this morning. I knew by his clatter on the stairs that it was all he could do to get along. I think he came home in a cab; I heard wheels."

"Yes, he came in a cab," Celeste said. "Some friend brought him. I was awake. I heard them saying good night to each other. So it was not *that* that worried you?"

William shrugged his shoulders. "I have given him up," he said. "I almost envy him, though—he has so little to worry about."

"How can you say such things?" his wife demanded. "I shall never give him up. He has such a great heart. He is absolutely unselfish. He has given away a great deal of money to people who needed it. You know that he helped Michael send funds to his mother in New York last month. Michael worships him—actually worships him."

Browne took up his paper again. It was plain that he had dismissed his younger brother from his mind. At this moment the servant just mentioned, Michael Gilbreth, came to remove the plates. He was a stout, red-faced Irishman of middle age and wore the conventional, though threadbare, jacket of a family butler.

"Have you inquired if Mr. Charles wants any breakfast?" Mrs. Browne asked him, softly, as he bent beside her for the coffee-urn.

"Yes, m'm," he said. "I was up just this minute. He wants coffee and eggs and toast. He said to say that he would not be down to breakfast."

"Is he sober? Is he at himself?" the banker asked, in a surly tone, from behind his paper.

For a bare instant the servant hesitated. His entire bent body seemed to resent the question. "Yes, sir, he is all right; a little sleepy, I think, but that is all. He'll be around later. He is a fine young man, sir; he has a big heart in 'im, sir. He is a friend to the poor as well as the rich."

"A very poor one to himself, and us," Browne retorted, irritably. "But it can't be helped. He is done for. He will keep on till he is in the gutter or a madhouse."

"Take the coffee and warm it again, Michael," Celeste said, a subtle stare of resentment in her eyes. "He was to go to church with Ruth and me, but say to him, please, that we are not going this morning."

"Very well, madam, I'll tell him, though he will be ready to go, I'm sure. He always keeps his engagements. He intended to go, I know, for he had me get out his morning suit and brush it."

"Tell him I have other things to do and won't have time to get ready this morning," Celeste said, firmly. "Remember to say that, Michael."

The butler had just left when a child's voice, a sweet, musical voice, came from the first landing of the stairs in the hall.

"Mother, please let me come as I am. I have my bathrobe on, and my slippers. I have bathed my face and hands and brushed my hair."

"Well, come on, darling—this time!"

"When will you stop that, I wonder?" The banker frowned as he spoke. "What will she grow up like? What sort of manners will she have? You are her worst enemy. A habit like that ought not to fix itself on her, but it will, and it will foster others just as bad."

"Leave her training to me," Celeste said, crisply. "You don't see her once a week. She is getting to be afraid of you. You are upset now by some business or other, and it is making you as surly as a bear."

"Do you think so—do you really think that?" He laid the paper down and gave her a steady, almost anxious look. "I don't want to get that way. I know that hard, mental work and worries do have a tendency to spoil men's moods."

"Oh, it is all right," Celeste said, her eyes on the doorway through which her daughter, a golden-haired, brown-eyed child of five years, was approaching. She was very graceful, in the long pink robe—very dainty and pretty. She had her mother's slender hands and feet, the same sensitive lips and thoughtful brow. She ran into her mother's arms, was fondly, almost passionately embraced, and then she went to her father, timidly, half shrinkingly kissed his lowered cheek, and then pushed a chair close to her mother's side.

"Shall I have coffee this morning?" she whispered.

"Yes, but not strong, dear." Celeste's lips formed the words as they played over the brow of the child. "I must put a lot of milk in it."

Browne bent forward tentatively. It was as if the sight of his child had inspired him with a softer mood, as if her sunlight had vanquished some of the clouds about him. He smiled for the first time that morning.

"Don't you think you could have dressed before you came down?" he gently chided the child, reaching out and putting his hand on her head caressingly. "Naughty, careless little girls act as you are doing."

"I didn't have time," the child said, leaning against her mother's shoulder and causing his hand to fall from her head. "If I had dressed, both of you would have been gone from the table before I got ready, and I don't like to eat alone; besides, Uncle Charles was talking to me."

"Talking to you? Where?" Celeste asked, surprised.

"In my room. What is the matter with him, mother?"

"Matter? Why do you ask that?" Celeste inquired, her face grave, her voice sinking low.

"Because, mother, he acts so strangely. He came in while I was asleep. I don't know how long he was there. When I waked up he was seated on the foot of my bed. He didn't see me looking at him, for he had his hands over his face, pushing his fingers into his eyes, this way." The little girl put her hands to her face, the wide sleeves of her robe falling down to her shoulders and baring her beautiful dimpled arms. "He was talking to himself in the strangest way, almost ready to cry. 'I'd like to be a child!' I heard him say that, mother—I'm sure I heard him say that. I closed my eyes, for I didn't know what to do. Then I think—I think he must have been praying or something. He bent down a minute, and then sat up. I could feel him moving and I heard him groaning. Presently he was still and I peeped at him. He was looking at me with tears in his eyes, mother—great big tears. They came on his cheeks and fell down on his hands. He saw that I was awake, and put his hand on my head and brushed back my hair. Oh, I was so sorry for him, and I don't know why! He kissed me. He took me in his lap and hugged me, holding my face to his. Then he put me back, and I heard him say: 'I have no right to touch her. She is pure, and I am'—he said some word that I do not know. He got my robe and slippers and helped me put them on, awfully sweet and nice, mother. Then I told him I was going down to breakfast. I offered to kiss him, and at first he wouldn't let me. He stood shaking his head and looking so sad and strange. 'You ought not to kiss me, if you *are* my little niece,' he said. 'I am not a good uncle, Ruth. You will be ashamed to own me when you are a young lady and go to balls and parties. People will not mention me to you. But I will go away and never come back. Mother, is he going off? I hugged him and begged him not to leave, and he began to cry again. He was trying not to, and he shook all over. Presently he said he might not go away if I wanted him to stay. Oh, mother, what is the matter with him? What is the matter with *you*? Why, you are crying, too! Don't, mother, don't!"

Celeste, her handkerchief to her eyes, had turned her face aside.

"Oh, why do you do this?" Browne asked, impatiently. "Don't you see how emotional the child is? All this can't be good for her. Charles ought to be kicked, the rascal! Why doesn't he keep his remorse to himself? He is like this after every spree, and he will do it all over again."

Celeste, as if regretting her show of emotion, wiped her eyes, straightened up, and forced a smile. "You must eat an egg this morning, darling," she

said to her daughter. "Don't worry about your uncle. He is not very well, but he will be all right soon."

"And he won't go away?" Ruth asked, anxiously.

"No, he won't go away, dear," Celeste said. "We'll keep him. You must love him and be kind to him."

CHAPTER II

With a tray holding the breakfast of the other member of the family, Michael ascended the stairs, the heavy carpet muffling his steps. In a room at the end of the house, on the second floor, he found the younger brother of his master nervously walking to and fro across the room. He was tall, strongly built, and had a well-shaped head. He was clean-shaven, blue-eyed, and had a fine shock of brown hair through which he was constantly pushing his splaying fingers.

"Come in, come in! Thank you, Mike!" he said, drawing his long gray robe about him and retying the silken cord at the waist. "I can't eat a bite, but I want the coffee. Wait; I'll clear the table."

He made an effort to move some books from the small table, but he fumbled them and they slid from his trembling hands to the floor, where he let them lie in a heap. The servant heard him sigh dejectedly and then he said:

"I'm all in, Mike; I'm done for."

"Oh no, sir!" Michael said, with emotion, as he put the tray on the table and proceeded to gather up the books. "You feel bad, I know, sir, but it will wear off by to-morrow."

A low groan escaped the young man's lips. "No, it is too late now, Mike. Give me a cup of coffee, please—strong and hot. Oh, Mike, you can't imagine how I feel. Mike, I am at the end of my rope. I am the greatest failure in Boston. My old college friends shun me. Ladies I used to know drop their eyes when I pass, as if they are afraid of me. The other day I insulted one by staring in her face, not conscious of what I was doing. Her brother resented it yesterday in a café before several people. He struck me—I struck him. We went to the police court. I was fined, and scolded like a dirty street loafer."

"Here is your coffee, sir," Michael said, sympathetically. "Drink it right down, sir. You are nervous again."

Charles obeyed, as a child might. "Thank you. You are too good to me, Mike," he said, returning the empty cup and beginning to stride back and forth again. The butler was about to leave, but he stopped him. "Don't go yet," he pleaded. "Oh, I must talk to somebody—I must get it out. It is killing me. I've been awake here since three o'clock. I can't sleep."

Yesterday they turned me out of my club. I'm no longer a member. I am the only man who has ever been expelled. I've been a gambler, Mike. I've been everything except dishonest. I'm rotten. I don't blame the club. I deserved it long ago. I ought to have had the common decency to send in my resignation."

"You need money, I'm sure," Michael broke in, "and I owe you five hundred dollars. I've been hoping—"

"Don't mention that," Charles broke in. "I'm glad I lent it to you. If I'd had it it would have been thrown away, and, as it was, it helped your mother, you say. No, no, never bring it up again. Let it go."

"I'll never let it go," the servant gulped. "I'll pay that debt if I work my fingers to the bone to do it. Everybody else refused to let me have it; even your brother didn't have it to spare. My oldest and best friends turned me down."

"Cut it out! cut it out!" Charles frowned. "Give me another cup of coffee. Yes, I thought it all out here this morning, Mike. I am imposing on William. They keep me at the bank only on his account. He used to protest against the way I am acting, but he has given me up—actually given me up."

"I've heard him say you did a lot of work," objected the servant. "Don't underrate yourself. It isn't right."

"Oh yes! I work when I am at it," Charles admitted. "Remorse is a great force at times, but it is the other thing, Mike. The damnable habit gets hold of me. For hours, days, and weeks I fight against it. I've even prayed for release, but to no purpose. Last night I was consorting with the lowest of the low. I had the money and they had the rags, the dirt, and the thirst. A friend found me and brought me home, or God only knows where I would have been by this time. They say it is in my blood; two grandfathers fell under it—one killed himself. Yes, I've decided—at last I've decided."

"Decided what, sir?" anxiously questioned Michael, as he took the empty cup and placed it on the tray.

"I've decided to be man enough to leave Boston forever. I shall not inflict myself longer on William and his wife and that angel child. Listen to me, Mike. There is such a thing as a conscience, and at times it burns in a man like the fires of hell itself. Do you know—you must know it, though—I practically killed my mother? She used to spend night after night awake on my account. Worry over me actually broke her down. She was always awake when I was out like I was last night. Mike, I was drunk the day she

was buried—too drunk to go to the service. Yes, I am going to leave Boston before I am discharged from the bank, and I shall go away never to return. I want to—to blot my name from the memories of all living men. I am a drunkard and I may as well live like one. I am a disgrace to every one of my family. Uncle James, when he was here last, told me that he had cut me out of his will and was praying for my death. Great God! I was drinking at the time and I told him I didn't want his money, and I don't, Mike, for I am unworthy of it. He is a harsh old Puritan, but he is nearer right than I am or ever can be. Yes, don't be surprised if you miss me some day. This cannot go on."

"Surely—surely you can't be in earnest, sir—"

"Oh yes, I am. Mike, do you believe in dreams—in visions, or anything of that sort?"

"I think I do, sir—to some extent, at least. Have I never told you? Well, when I was trying to get the money for my mother, and was so miserable about it, I went to bed one night and prayed to the Lord to help me, and do you know, sir, I dreamed that a young girl all dressed in pure white, and shining all over with light, came and handed me the money. And it seemed to come true, for you gave me the money at breakfast the very next morning. Do you have dreams, sir?"

"Always, always, Mike. I am always dreaming that I am alone among strangers, away from kindred and friends, but always happy and care-free. I can't describe the feeling; it is wonderful! I know what I want to say, but I can't express it. Say, Mike, William is a good old chap. You may not believe it, but I love him. He has other troubles besides me. I don't know what they are—financial, I think. He never speaks to me of his ventures. In fact, I think he tries to keep me from knowing about them. I find him at the bank late in the night, sometimes. Yes, he is all right, Mike. I would have been kicked out of my job long ago but for him. Yes, Mike, I'll turn up missing one of these days. I've had enough."

"You'll feel differently by to-morrow, sir," the servant said, gently. "You are nervous and upset now, as you always are after—"

"After making a hog of myself," Charles said. "No, I'll not feel better, Mike. It is my very soul that is disgusted. I know that I'll never change, and I shall not inflict myself on my family any longer. Don't speak of this, Mike—it is just between you and me. Oh, they will be glad that I've left! Ruth will miss me for a little while, maybe, for the child seems to love me, but children soon forget, and I don't want her to grow up and know me as I really am. If

I stay she will hear about me and blush with shame. Think of what a crime that would be, Mike—killing the ideals of a sweet, innocent child. Yes, I'm going, old man. It will be best all around. I'll be dead to everybody that has ever known me. I've lacked manhood up till now, Mike, but I'll use all I have left in trying to make restitution. Obliteration—annihilation! that is the idea, and somehow a soothing one."

The kind-hearted servant was deeply moved and he turned his face toward the open window, through which the cries of the newsboys came from the streets below.

"Anything I can do for you before I go down?" he asked.

"Nothing, thank you," was the answer. "I shall stay here all day, Mike. I don't want to show myself in town. The news of my expulsion from the club will be known everywhere. I don't want to look in the faces of my old friends. Some of them have tried to save me. This will be the last straw. They will give me up now—yes, they will be bound to."

"You will be all right by to-morrow, sir," Michael said, huskily. "Lie down and sleep. You need it. You are shaking all over."

When the servant had left the room, closing the door behind him, Charles began to walk to and fro again. Presently he paused before the old mahogany bureau and stood hesitating for a moment. "I must—I must," he said. And opening a drawer, he took out a flask of whisky and, filling a glass, he drank. Then holding the flask between him and the light, he muttered, "Oh, you yellow demon of hell, see what you have done for one spineless creature!"

Restoring the flask to the drawer, he sat down in an easy-chair, put his hands over his face and remained still for a long time.

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