

# BRENTWOOD

by Grace Livingston Hill



## First Installment

Marjorie Wetherill had always known she was an adopted child. She had been told when she was so young that it meant nothing at all to her. And as the years went by and she was surrounded by love and luxury, she thought little of it.

Once when she was in high school she had asked about her own people casually, more out of curiosity than because of any felt need for them, and she had been told that they were respectable people who had been unfortunate and couldn't afford to bring her up as they would like to have her brought up. It had all been very vague. But Marjorie was happy, and her foster mother greatly stressed the fact that Marjorie had not been born her own, she had been chosen because they loved her at first sight, and that meant more even than if she had been born theirs.

Mrs. Wetherill was a devoted parent, and she and Marjorie were dear companions.

When Mr. Wetherill died Marjorie was still in her school life, and she and the mother were brought even more closer together, so that when Mrs. Wetherill was suddenly stricken with an illness that they both knew would be swift and fatal, the girl spent the last months of her foster mother's life in utmost devotion to her. When it was over and she was alone, she felt utterly desolate and life seemed barren indeed.

There were many friends of course, for the Wetherills had a large pleasant social circle, and there were instant invitations for prolonged visits here and there, but Marjorie had no heart to go. She longed for someone of her own. The world seemed empty and uninteresting.

Then one morning about ten days before Christmas, because she could not settle to anything else, and because she had been almost dreading to go over her beloved foster mother's intimate papers, she went bravely to Mrs. Wetherill's desk in the living room, unlocked it, and began to look over the papers in the pigeon holes.

She went from drawer to drawer, emptying every pigeon-hole, and burning in the fireplace such things as had to be destroyed, she came finally to the little secret drawer, and there she found among several other important papers, a thick letter for herself.

"Dearest Marjorie," it read, "I have never told you much about your own people. I did not really know much myself to tell, until about two years ago. My husband arranged everything about the adoption.

I never told you that you were one of twins. You were a very beautiful baby, and so was your twin sister, yet she had a frazier look than you, and we found upon questioning that she had little chance to live unless she could have an operation and special treatment, which your parents were unable to give her.

But the neither of you were candidates for adoption, yet I had set my heart upon you. After seeing you, all the other babies looked common to me. So, my husband set about it to see what he could do. He discovered that your father was not strong and needed to get away to the country where he could have light work and be out of doors. My husband finally put it up to your mother while she was still in the hospital, that she should give her consent to our adopting you, Mr. Wetherill agreeing to finance the treatment of both your father and little sister.

Once, when you were about three months old, your mother wrote me, begging that she might come and see you, but I persuaded her that it would be better for us all if she did not.

But then, about a year ago, just as you were graduating from Miss Evans' School, your mother came to see me.

I really felt very sorry for her. She looked so much like you that I began to feel like a criminal. She wanted to see you. But I would not let her. I felt it would be a catastrophe for you at your time of life. Your big photograph taken in your graduating dress was on the desk and I showed it to her, and finally she gave it to her.

She went away sobbing and I have not forgotten it.

And now that I am about to die I feel that I should leave behind me this information so that you may do what you wish in the matter. Per-

haps you will want to do something for your own mother. You will have quite a fortune, my dear, and you are free to do what you wish with it, of course.

So I am giving you your mother's name and address. Do whatever your heart dictates.

Your loving Mother,  
May D. Wetherill."

Below was an address in an eastern city:

"Mrs. John Gay, 1465 Aster St." And below that, in pencil, had been written uncertainly, as if with an idea of erasing it:

"The name by which they called you was Dorothy."

She bowed her head on the letter, and wept. First for the only mother she had known, and then for the mother she had not known. How pitiful it all seemed! So many little babies in the world without homes, and yet she should have been loved so intensely by two mothers.

Then suddenly a thrill came to her heart. But they were her very own, whatever they were! How wonderful that would be! And her mother had wanted her, enough to come a long distance to see her!

That night she could not sleep and lay staring about in the darkness of her room—the room that Mrs. Wetherill had made so beautiful for her—realizing how safe and sweet and quiet it all was here, and how many complications there might be if she broke the long silence between herself and her own family.

Yet the longing in her heart increased, to see them, even to find out the worst possible about them, just to have them for her own. Not to be alone in the great world.

There was a sister, too, and how wonderful it would be to have a sister! She had always wished for a sister. Or—perhaps the sister had not lived after all!

Suddenly Marjorie buried her face in her pillow and wept. The morning mail brought two invitations to spend Christmas week with friends.

Christmas was only ten days off and it loomed large and gloomy. The thought of Christmas without the only mother she had ever known seemed intolerable.

But when she reasoned that perhaps forgetting was best for the present, and tried to decide which invitation she should accept, she realized that she didn't feel like going to either place.

She was still in her unsettled state of mind when evening came, and Evan Brower arrived to call upon her.

The Browsers were one of the best old families, and among the closest friends of the Wetherills. Evan Brower was three or four years older than Marjorie, and she had known him practically all her life, it had not been until the last year that he had paid her much attention.

"You are looking tired and white," he said scrutinizing her face sharply. "You need a change, and I've come to offer one. Mother wants you to come over and stay a couple of weeks with her. She thought you might like to help her get ready for the family gathering at Christmas time. It will take your mind off your loneliness."

Marjorie's heart sank. Here was the question again. And a family gathering! The hardest kind of a thing to go thru with this thought of her own unknown family in the back of her mind.

"Oh, that is dear of your mother, Evan," she said. "I do appreciate it a lot, and some other time I'd love to come, but just now I don't feel I could."

He settled down comfortably to combat her, just as if he had expected to have to do so.

"You're very kind," said Marjorie with troubled gaze, but more and more certain that she wasn't going to accept. Then suddenly she lifted frank eyes to his:

"You see, Evan, there's something I have to do first before I can go anywhere and begin life again."

"Something you have to do? What do you mean?" He turned puzzled, dominating eyes upon her.

"You know I'm an adopted child, don't you? You've always known that, haven't you, Evan?"

"Why—yes, of course, but what has that got to do with it?"

They were sitting on the deep couch, Marjorie at one end, Evan near the other, but now he leaned across with a comforting manner and looked into her eyes.

"It's my family. My own family, I mean. They are my own people, Evan!"

"Nonsense! Nothing of the kind" said Evan lifting his well-modeled chin haughtily. "You are no more connected with them than I am. They gave you up! I should think you would never want to see or hear of them!"

Something in the harshness of his tone made Marjorie give a little shiver and draw her hand quietly away from under his.

"I don't feel that way, Evan!" she said gently, marveling that after her hours of doubt she suddenly felt clear in her mind about the matter.

"You don't know all about it, or you wouldn't say that either, I'm quite sure. Mother left a letter telling me about my people and suggesting that I might want to hunt them up and see if there was anything I could do for them."

"And I still say 'Let sleeping dogs lie,'" said Evan coldly. And then he laid his hand once more on hers in a possessive way as if he owned her.

"They never cared anything for you or they wouldn't have sold you in the first place. And now you are a being of another world than theirs and they have no right to intrude into your life and try to get you property away from you! I insist—"

Marjorie drew her hand decidedly away from under his again and stood up, her own chin lifted defiantly, her eyes bright and indignant.

"Evan! You must not talk that way! You simply don't understand at all."

"But, darling, be reasonable!" said Evan softening his voice. Marjorie didn't even notice he had called her darling. It was such a common phrase of the day, and Evan was a very close friend. But his voice was less aggressive now, more gentle.

He got up and stood beside her, taking her hands in his and drawing her nearer to him. "Listen, little girl! If you are really serious about this thing, of course it will have to be investigated. I still think it would be better not, but if you have set your conscience to it, I beg you will let me do the investigating for you. I am a lawyer. I know how to protect your interests, and I will do whatever you want don't conscientiously. I am sure you can trust me, Marjorie. I love you, don't you know it, little girl?"

She looked up at him, startled. It was the first time he had ever spoken of love. He had just been a good friend, somewhat as she supposed a brother might be, only more polite than some brothers.

She drew back and tried gently to take her hands away from his clasp, but he held them firmly and drew her closer.

"Dear little girl!" he said suddenly, putting his face down and laying his cheek against hers, seeking her lips with his own and pressing a kiss upon them.

For an instant she yielded herself to that embrace, her lips to that kiss but only an instant so brief it might scarcely have been recognized by the man as yielding. For suddenly she sprang away, and put out her hands in protest.

"No, please, not now! I can't think of such things now!"

He snatched at her hands again, trying to draw her back quietly to his embrace.

"Poor child!" he said stooping and kissing her fingers gently. "Don't you realize that this is where you belong, in my arms? Don't you love me?"

"I don't know!" said Marjorie turning unhappy eyes away from him. "I haven't ever thought of you in this way. And my heart is full of so many other things now."

And he suddenly drew her close again and pressed hot kisses on her lips.

But now she sprang away again, covering her face with her hands.

"No! No!" she cried out. "I will not let you kiss me until I am sure, and I am not now! Please, won't you go away and let me think? My mind is so tired and all mixed up!"

"Poor child," he said gently. "I am sorry if I have seemed to hurry you. I only wanted to show you that I am your natural protector. But I am willing to wait, to go slow, till your sorrow is not so sharp. I only ask one thing of you and that is that you will not make any move in this matter of your family till you have talked with me again. That you will think it over, and if anything has to be done you will let me handle it for you. Will you promise?"

Marjorie was still for several seconds, looking down at her hands clasped tightly before her, then she said slowly, seriously:

"I will promise to think over what you said. Everything that you have said."

She looked up at him quietly, and smiled a cold little wistful smile. Then she added:

"I'm sorry to seem so—uncertain—and so—unappreciative—of your love. But I just can't seem to think tonight!"

He was a wise young man and he saw that he couldn't get any further tonight.

He studied her for a moment and then his lips set in a firm line of determination.

"Very well," he said quite cheerfully. "I am just your friend for now, but a very special friend, you know. One whom you can call upon for anything. Will you feel that?"

She smiled with relief.

"Yes," she said. "Thank you! Good night!" and she put out her hand and gave his a brief impersonal clasp.

Marjorie found she was too excited to sleep when she laid her head on her pillow. But strangely enough it was not on the eager protests of love that her mind dwelt most during that night's vigil, but more on his insistence that she should not search out her people. And the more she thought of it, the less she thought of Evan.

She awoke in the morning with the definite purpose in her heart to get the matter over with at once. She would start right away before anything else could possibly delay her. If any more people came in and tried to turn her from her purpose she would become bewildered again.

She called up the station and made her reservations on a train that left the city a little after six that night.

She took her check book and plenty of money, carefully stowed as she had been taught to do when traveling. She left no address with anybody. She did not want anyone coming after her to try and hinder her in whatever she should decide to do.

And so at last she was on her way, quite worn out with the tumult of her decision and her preparations.

The next morning she arrived in the strange city and went to a hotel. After attempting a sketchy breakfast she took a taxi and drove to the address she had been given in the letter.

It seemed a very long drive, out thru a scrubby part of the city, and then into a sordid street of little cheap houses with wooden porches in an endless row, block after block, with untidy vacant lots across the street, ending in unpleasant ash heaps. It was before the last house in the row that the taxi stopped.

The driver handed her her check, opened the door, and she got out her purse.

"I think perhaps you had better wait for me a minute or two until I make sure this is the right place," she said hesitatingly, as she eyed the house with displeasure.

So, on feet that were strangely unsteady, she got out and went slowly up the two wooden steps to the door that sadly needed paint. There was no bell so she knocked timidly, and then again louder as she heard no sound of life within. She was about to turn away, almost hoping there were gone, and she would have no clue to search further, when she heard hurried steps on a bare floor and the door was opened, sharply, almost impatiently. Then she found herself face to face with a replica of herself.

"Does Mrs. George Gay live here?" She said the words because she had prepared them on her lips to say, but she was so startled at the apparition of herself in the flesh standing before her that she did not realize she had asked the question. She just stood there and stared and stared at this other girl who was so like and yet so unlike herself.

The other girl had the same cloud of golden hair, only it was flying in every direction, not smoothly waved in the way it ought to lie; the same brown eyes, only they were full of bitterness and trouble, and a kind of fright in the depths of them; the same delicate lips, only they were set in hard lines as if the grim realities of life had been too close for her.

"Well," she said with a final little shiver, opening the door a trifle wider, "I suppose you must be my twin sister! Will you come in?" Her voice was most ungracious, but she stood aside in the tiny hall to let the other girl pass in.

"Oh! Are you—? That is—I didn't know—" said Marjorie in confusion. Then she turned suddenly to the taxi and nodded brightly.

"It's all right," she said. "They still live here!"

"But they probably won't for long," added the other girl grimly. "Oh, are you going to move?"

Then I'm glad I came before you find you."

"Yes," said the other girl unsmilingly.

ing, "you probably would." Then she motioned toward a single wooden chair in the middle of the room.

Won't you sit down? We still have one chair left, tho' I believe Ted is going to take it to the pawn shop this afternoon. There isn't any heat here. Will you take cold?" There was something contemptuous in the tone of this hostile sister. Marjorie gave her a quick troubled glance.

"Are you really my sister?"

"I suppose I must be," said the other girl listlessly, as if it didn't in the least matter, "there's your picture up there on the mantel. Maybe you'll recognize it. If you had waited till afternoon that would have been gone too."

"You know, I didn't even know I had a sister until day before yesterday!"

The other looked at her with hard unbelieving eyes.

"That's odd, isn't it? How did that come about?"

"No one told me," she answered sadly.

"Oh yes? Then how did you find out?"

"I found a letter—from Mother—that is from my adopted mother—after she died. She left a letter to tell me about my people."

"You mean Mr. and Mrs. Wetherill are both dead?" The tone was incredulous.

"Yes. I am alone in the world now, except for you—my own family."

The other girl's face grew very hard and bitter now.

"Oh," she said shortly. "I wondered why you came after all these years when you haven't paid the slightest attention to us. You with your grand home and your aristocratic parents, and your fine education! What could you possibly want with us? But I see it now. They have died and left you penniless, I suppose, after all their grand pretensions, and you have come back on us to live. Well, we'll take you in, of course. Mother wouldn't have it otherwise, but I'll say it's something like the end of a perfect day to have you turn up just now."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Marjorie distressed at once. "I ought to have telephoned to see if it was convenient, but I was so eager to find you. And you don't at all realize anything about it. I've not come home to be a burden on you. I thought maybe I could spend Christmas with you. I know how you must feel. You are moving and I'm frightfully busy but you'll let me help, won't you?"

"Moving?" sneered her sister. "Yes, we'd be moving right away to-day if we had any place to move to! And any money to move with! And anything to move! Christmas! I didn't know there was such a thing any more!" And suddenly she dropped down in the vacant chair, jerking her hands from the ragged pockets of her old coat, put them up to her face and burst into tears, sobbing until her slender body shook with the force of the sobs. Yet it was all done very quietly as if there was some reason why she must not make a noise.

Marjorie went close and put her arms about her, her face down against the other's wet cheek.

"Ch, my dear!" she said brokenly. "My dear!" And then her own tears were falling, and she held the weeping girl close. "But you are cold! So cold you are trembling! Can't we go into another room where it is warm and let me tell you how you have misunderstood me? Come!"

Then the girl lifted her face and spoke fiercely again.

"Come?" she said. "Where shall we come? Don't you know there hasn't been a teaspoonful of coal in this house for two days, and that we've burned up all the chairs that aren't sold to try and keep from freezing—except this one that has to be sold to get some medicine for Mother? Don't you know Father hasn't had any work for nine months and Mother is sick upstairs in bed with all the blankets we own piled around her and a hot-water bag at her feet? She's getting pneumonia, I'm afraid, and I had to lose my job to stay home and take care of her. Don't you know that Dad is sick himself, but he had to go out and beg the landlord to let us stay a few days until Mother is better—? And I guess Ted has lost his newspaper route, and I've had to take the children to the neighborhood nursery, to keep them warm and fed? If you stay here with us you'll have to pawn that fur coat to get enough to eat!"

Suddenly the sister's head went down again and more silent sobs shook her. It was terrible to look upon. Marjorie felt it was the most awful sight she had ever seen.

Suddenly she stood back and unbuttoned her coat, slid out of it and wrapped it warmly around her sister.

"There! There! You precious sister!" she said softly, laying her lips on the other girl's.

But her sister struggled up fiercely, her pride blazing in her eyes, her

arms flinging off the coat. "No!" she said, "no I won't wear your coat even for a minute!"

But Marjorie caught it together about her again and held it there. "Look here!" she said with authority. "Stop acting this way! I'm your sister and I've come to help you! You can't fling me off this way! And we haven't time to fight. We've got to get busy. What's the first thing to do? Make a fire! Where can I find a man to send for coal?"

"You can't," she said sullenly, "they won't trust us till the bill is paid, and we've nothing to pay it with." Her eyes were smoldering like slow fires, and her face was filled with shame as she confessed this, but Marjorie's eyes lit with joy.

"Oh, but I have!" she cried eagerly, and put her hand into her purse, pulling out a nice fat roll of bills and slipping them into her sister's hand.

"There," she said, "go quick and pay the bill and get the coal!"

The other girl looked down at her hand, saw the large denomination of the bills she was holding, and looked up in wonder. Then her face changed and an alert look came, pride stole slowly up, and the faint color that had come into her cheeks faded, leaving her ghastly white again.

"We couldn't take it!" she said fiercely. "We couldn't ever pay it back. There's no use, and she held it out to Marjorie.

"Nonsense!" said Marjorie. "You are my family, aren't you? It's my mother who is cold, isn't it?"

"After all these years? You staying away and never sending us any word? No! You're adopted and belong to that other woman, and it's her money, not ours. We can't take it!"

"Look here!" said Marjorie, her own eyes flashing now till they resembled her sister's even more strongly than at first, "I didn't ask to be adopted, did I? I didn't have any choice in the matter, did I? I was adopted before I knew what was going on, and I didn't know anything about you. You have no right to blame me that way!"

Then suddenly the other girl jumped up and flung Marjorie's coat back at her.

"All right!" she said. "Put on your own coat. Maybe it's all true. I don't know. I've hated you and the Wetherill's so long that I don't know whether I can ever get over it or not, but I've got to try and save my mother's life, even if it is with that other woman's money!"

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

"Talk about Napoleon! That fellow Johnson is something of a strategist himself."

"As to how?"

"Got his salary raised six months ago, and his wife hasn't found it out yet."

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