

as she swept across to the window, and read with incredible wonder that ragged superscription which the lawyer's pen had veiled but not obliterated—read with dazed eyes and number faculties—read and read again what looked so impossible, so tragically like Barton's own handwriting!

What could it be but sheer madness, Margaret thought, that could tempt her for one minute to think that dead Ralph—No! she was brain-sick and heart-sick, and would not give way to it; she smiled through her frightened tears, and tearing the letter open turned to the signature at the end—it was John Barton's, she saw with a stifled cry, clear and fresh; not two months' old; then back to the date at the top, her eyes sped with a fierce defiant readiness to be cheated somehow, a reckless expectation of having this mad fancy shattered, and herself hurled back into the plain world of dull prosaic patience, and read with eyes that scarcely saw, and heart that scarcely beat, on top of that letter the very date of the day when, as Barton in Australia had sat writing it to Standish, Standish was being buried by Barton's dead "wife" in England!

There was nothing wonderful in the letter save its existence. It was a plain, emotionless message of friendship between two men long parted; full of figures and details of the "run" and the record of the fortune the writer had made out of it—the mere fact of the letter was so wonderful to the woman who sat mechanically reading it again and again, that when Barton went on to say a great thirst for a sight of the Old Country possessed him, and he was coming back for a few months' holiday—indeed, that he would be in England shortly after this letter had arrived—naming the very ship by which he had taken passage, poor bewildered Margaret had hardly enough comprehension left to be more astonished.

She had scarcely read the letter through a fourth time when in came her daughter, and to that marvellous girl the mother poured out her troubled soul. It was a story to move even those less closely affected by it than the two who sat there hand in hand thinking it over, now that the first shock had passed, in silent amazement. And of the two, the younger was the more collected. She suggested presently that they should get a paper, and see when the ship, meaning so much for them, would arrive. The paper was fetched, the telegram was found, and as the girl looked up from it with finger on the passage and wonder in her eyes, "Why, mother," she said, "the ship will be here to-morrow morning!"

And on the morrow they went down to the quay; the big ship came, true to her time, and they were rowed on board of her. But Barton was not amongst the noisy crowd struggling on deck, and Margaret, who had suffered so much already, sank frightened and weary upon a bench, and could seek no further.

"Go down below, dearest," she said to the girl, "see if he is there; and if you meet him tell him gently, or it will kill him, my courage and strength give out together—"

But that dubious messenger hesitated. "Oh, mother," she said, "must I go, alone, to find him—think, mother! I, of all people in the world, to greet him first in England!" But the much tried wife could not think, and seeing that that was so, Madge (for she bore her mother's name) sighed, and started on the act of restitution fate had decreed for her.

She went down below, and wandered through corridors and past empty cabins in all the disarray of their new desolation, seeing nobody until, just at the entrance of the main saloon, she came face to face all on a sudden with a stalwart man of downcast eyes and grizzled beard, handsome still in spite of his sadness—she knew him in a minute from many a description of her mother's, and stepping back with a start and a half stifled cry—the meeting was so sudden—she grasped the brass handrail and stood staring at him. And that man who would have passed her unnoticed but for the movement also looked up, and, starting in turn, looked again, staring harder than she did, and so they stood for a minute, until Barton, for it was he, made an effort, and said with deep emotion:—

"I am sorry, madam, if I should seem rude, but indeed you startled me—you are so like to one I once knew—and lost."

"And lost, sir?"

"Yes, and lost—the very face, and

hair, and bearing, the same voice—in mercy, madam, let me pass—"

"Oh, wait sir; wait a minute. How long ago was it you lost that friend who was so like me?" Madge asked, standing manfully in the way, with her brown eyes full of great pity.

"Eighteen years all but," he answered, hardly daring to look at her.

"And I have known a woman, sir, for near so many years," burst out that fair, tall girl, "the gentle woman who is my mother, oh, sir, a woman so faithful, and steadfast, and simple—she who has given me of her face with scarce a portion of her worth or sweetness—sir! If it were but the same one you had loved and lost—if, perhaps, some horrible mistake, or wickedness, had, happened—"

"Woman! woman," cried Barton in an agony, "you know not what you say; you torture me; there, let me hide my eyes and pass you—and forget and forgive, I beg, the rudeness of a poor fool, whose mind the sight of English shore, and all it recalls, unhinges—"

"Ay, but, sir, wait a moment," cried Madge, swiftly drawing him into the empty saloon, and seating him on a chair, and there, bending over the strong man, who buried his face in his hands, she laid her light touch upon his shoulder, and said in a voice whose very accent thrilled into his soul, "Oh, Mr. Barton, that woman still lives; she is near—no, no, do not cry out and look at me like that—she is here, here on this very ship—Mr. Barton! Mr. Barton!" cried she, dropping on her knees beside him in the excess of emotion, and pull-

ing down his hands from his face. "She is here, I say, ready and waiting to come to you—she, your wife—oh, let me fetch her, sir; let me do but that one thing that I can do atone for the wrong I represent!" and without waiting for permission the girl sprang to her feet and sped across the cabin. At the curtain she paused a moment, looking back to be assured Barton was ready for that meeting; then fled down the passage, and up the gangway, and found the other one.

"Mother, mother," she cried, "it is well; he is below—waiting for you!" and with a single kiss pointed the way, and sent the dazed happy woman to that wondrous meeting, then sank down herself breathless on a seat on deck.

When, ten minutes later, she stole into the saloon, one glance told her all was well. There was Barton and his recovered wife sitting hand in hand together upon a couch at the further end, so radiantly happy it was a pleasure merely to look at them. Then it was poor Madge's turn to cry, and, all too conscious of her sweet invidiousness, she sat down, remote and humble, by the door, and, not venturing even to look at them, fell to weeping silent, bitter tears of shame for a dead man's fault behind the white screen of her hands.

And before she had wept a single minute, generous John Barton, who now knew everything, strode over to her, and taking both her hands in his, looked down into her eyes for a space, then drew her silently to him, and kissed her twice in friendship and forgiveness upon the forehead!

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