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settle this between us," he said. "Name your price—"

"I would not touch a penny of your money," shouted Denver. "I have friends who can give me all the help I need. When I have finished with you I shall go abroad, and if Margaret is willing to share what life is still possible to me— Come! She shall decide for us. Take me to her, or bring her here."

"I shall do neither," said Mr. Tadlow, firmly. "You are mad."

"That's very likely, but that also she shall decide," cried Denver with a laugh. "I am determined now that I will see her, and whatever happens I will not leave you till I do."

Even as he was speaking they were startled by slight sounds of movement somewhere in the building; and whilst they hesitated, dumb and alert, they caught the tap, tap of a light step on the stairs; it came quickly up, and lightly along the passage, and stopped outside the office, and as the handle turned both of them looked at the door, as if they expected it to open.

III.

"George!" the handle rattled again, and the crazy door gave slightly. "George!"

The two men looked at each other. "That's Margaret!" ejaculated Denver.

He rose abruptly, and took a step forward, but, seeing his purpose, Mr. Tadlow accepted the inevitable, and anticipated him.

He removed the chair from the door, and it fell open, and Margaret came in. A sweet-faced, grey-eyed woman, still under forty, and beautiful, with that wonderful spiritual beauty that comes of sorrow patiently endured. She glanced from her husband to Denver, recognised the latter instantly, and understood what had happened.

"John," she faltered, "I did not know that you were here."

She held out her hand to him, and Denver took it, and, taking it, felt all his anger and his madness die within him.

"I wanted to see you before I went, Margaret," he said, quietly. "I asked your husband to send for you, and he would not; but you have come."

"I met Dobson"—she turned, and gave the explanation to Mr. Tadlow—"he was passing our gate, and told me what had taken place here, so I got him to lend me his key and came to see for myself—"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"I wanted you to come. I said I would not go until you came, and that you should judge betwixt me and him." Denver pointed at Mr. Tadlow, who stood with his chin sunk upon his breast, and from this time on said nothing—merely stood and listened as if he had no word to say in his defence, and was willing that they should deal with him as they would. "He says you know the whole truth, but I could not believe this—"

"Yes," she said, "I know it all." "And yet you kept his secret—you shielded him?"

"It was very hard for me to decide." Her lips quivered, and her eyes appealed to him. "I did not know until three years ago, and your term of imprisonment had expired before then; you were serving the new term for the attack on the prison warden. Whatever I may have said could not have shortened that, and I decided, at last, to wait until I could see you, and ask you what I should do. But I was not shielding him—I was shielding my children."

Denver started; he had not thought of that. "You were right, Margaret," he said, softly. "You are too good a woman not to be a good mother. I am not going to blame you. I have never blamed you. You believed me guilty—you were bound to, it was all

so black against me, and if I had been guilty I should never have faced you again, though I know that you loved me, and that guilty or innocent—it made no difference to that."

"It made no difference."

"But life had to be lived, and I was as good as dead," he went on, "and one way or another, you were hurried into marrying this man; but I did not need him to tell me that you do not—and have never—loved him. Your love was mine, and always will be, and now that you have learned the truth, I don't so much care—I am past caring what the rest of the world may think of me. I told him you should judge between us, and that I should ask you, if you still cared for me, to leave him to his sneaking respectability and go away with me; but I had not heard of your children—I sha'n't ask it now, because I know what you would answer. It's the old look in your eyes; you won't go back on your word—you'll stand by him, and be loyal to him to the finish—and since I can't fling him down without flinging you with him—that ends it!"

For a minute nothing was said.

"I begin to see how hard things have been with you, Margaret," he resumed, "and I can't do what would make them harder. I have been hunting him for weeks, and came here directly I managed to get on his track. I found his friend and fellow-knave, Barry, in Liverpool, and stood over him with a revolver whilst he wrote out a detailed confession, giving information that would establish my innocence, and his own and your husband's guilt. I came here to carry out the same plan with him, meaning to hand the two confessions to the police; but at sight of him I lost my head—I was suddenly frantic, and—well, I bungled. And yet, I don't know," he took himself up shortly, "it is better as it is. I should have harmed you, Margaret, and now—I shall not. After all, I could not have begun over again here. I shall go abroad and start afresh, and the trouble of my past here will be of no more moment there than if it had all happened in another life, in another world."

He took a folded paper from his pocket and held it towards her. "That is Barry's confession, Margaret. Take it and destroy it, and my evidence is gone, and he, and you, and your children are safe."

But she shook her head. "I can't," she faltered. "I have no right to do that. It is not just to you."

"I feel as if I had got into a blind road," he said, with a smile. "I meant to have gone on ruthlessly, but I can't go any farther—there is no way through. I would have killed this man because of you, and now, because of you—"

He held the incriminating document over the gas till it blazed, held it till it was burnt down almost to his fingers, dropped it on the floor, and put his foot on the black, feathery ashes of it.

"Oh, but," she cried, weeping bitterly, "I cannot accept such a terrible self-sacrifice."

"I am glad to offer it for your sake," he said decisively, "and you shall accept it, Margaret, for the sake of your children."

Her hand lay in his, her yearning eyes thanked him and blessed him, and he looked the farewell that he could not say.

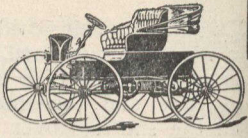
In the doorway he loitered and looked round, and, returning, took her hand again and lifted it to his lips, and then went hurriedly, and without glancing back.

She heard him traverse the dim passage, descend the creaking stairs, cross the shadowy, crowded shop; then a door opened, and shut noisily; and there was silence.

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