

The Storyteller

AN ATLANTIC EPISODE

It was the first ocean voyage of mother and daughter and Miss Waldron, aged twenty-five, found it no whit harder to restrain her excitement than Mrs. Waldron, seventeen years her senior. This trip to Europe had been the dream of both their lives, and the expenses thereof had been saved by many sacrifices. Indeed, they had not dared to let their dream come true too soon, but for a friend with influence in high places, who assured the Waldrons that Matilda would, without doubt, secure a speedy promotion from grammar school to high school teacher if, in addition to certain special courses which she had been taking during the past few years, she would spend her summer vacation in studious visits to European educational centres.

As Matilda would not go without her mother, Papa Waldron had magnanimously offered to close the little house in the Highlands and board in town with Aunt Maria during the ten weeks' absence of his wife and daughter. So, with his urgency, and all scruples dissipated by the prospect of speedily bettered fortunes, mother and daughter fared forth like two children on a holiday. As a family the Waldrons were singularly unworldly, with kindly hearts to every creature, and unexpectant of any measure save that which they would mete.

The intending travellers had talked their trip over many times, and prepared themselves for the pleasant things which might happen. They had resolved to be so 'natural' that the most penetrating would not suspect how awfully new and strange were the broad ocean and the luxuries of a first-class passage. But after papa had left them, with a bottle of champagne discreetly covered with fresh fruit in the bottom of a basket, as a preservative against seasickness, and they had sent back to him a loving letter from Minot's Light, they soon began to realise that their actual or possible experiences were of no moment to the gay and stylish family groups and parties of friends who crowded the decks of the 'Columbia.'

Two slight, simply dressed and timid women whose straitened circumstances and unfamiliarity with the ways of the world 'stood out all over them,' as a rich and slangy girl who vouchsafed them a passing glance, phrased it, were more than likely to be left severely to themselves, though Matilda would resign with amiable some dreams too young for her years, of pleasant friendships made on shipboard, and a more interesting log-book for her father than the record of mere rounds of meals and deck promenades, the occasional sighting of a steamer, and the entertainment for the Sailors' Orphans' Home, on the second last evening out.

They were lingering in the delight of a glorious sunset, after most of their fellow-passengers had gone down to dinner, when Matilda noticed an elderly and infirm-looking man sitting quite alone, a few yards away from them, and gazing absently out to sea. She attracted her mother's attention. 'Poor old gentleman! He seems to be of as little account as ourselves among all these rich people,' she said softly, 'and he certainly does not look fit to travel alone.'

The mother echoed her daughter's compassionate sigh. 'But he might resent our sympathy,' she said, with characteristic diffidence. So, for delicacy, they went by on the other side.

But the following morning, as they were taking a turn on deck before breakfast, they saw him again, in the same place, and in the same dejected attitude. They lingered this time with sympathetic eyes on the old man, who seemed oblivious to all about him.

'You speak to him, Matilda,' urged Mrs. Waldron.

'Oh, mother, you know best what to say.'

'There, like a good girl! Young people can do anything.' And thus adjured, Matilda crossed the deck.

'Good morning, sir,' she said, gently. 'If you are alone, as we are, perhaps we might all go down to breakfast together.'

He turned quickly. Were there tears in his dim and deep-sunken eyes?

'I will be bad company; I am rather hard of hearing,' he answered, 'and none too well, but—if I don't bore you—'

'Nonsense!' exclaimed the young woman, cheerfully. 'We also are strangers in this crowd, and we'll be delighted to have you with us.' Then, 'let me present my mother, Mrs. Waldron.'

His bow was perfect in its old-fashioned courtesy. 'Mr. Maloney,' he responded to the unspoken question. In the saloon, the head waiter assigned these three obscure people who wished henceforth to sit together to the end of a far table; and between her kindly attentions to the lonely old invalid, and the satisfaction of

her own healthy appetite, Miss Waldron enjoyed the distant glimpses of elegant people at tables adorned with the costly floral offerings of the friends who had seen them off.

On the seven succeeding days she devoted herself wholeheartedly to the entertainment of their infirm fellow-traveller, giving him her strong young arm as he slowly paced the deck with her, reading, betimes, to him and her mother from some amusing book, and anon, diverting his mind with stories of her Hebrew and Italian school children, now in the most interesting phase of their making into Americans. Sometimes, too, because he was so sympathetic, she would talk to him of the purpose of her trip, and her hope soon to make life easier for her father.

He told the Waldrons he would leave them at Queens-town. No one would meet him there. He meant to take his relatives by surprise, he added. A sad surprise, thought the kindly woman, to those who had known him in happy days.

They were on deck at six o'clock to bid him farewell and enjoy their first sight of the beautiful Irish shores.

His eyes were misty as he pressed the hands of mother and daughter at parting.

'You'll never lack the friend in need, my child,' he said to Matilda; and she reverently bent her graceful head at his fervent 'God bless you!'

When the tug was beyond their farewell signals, she reached for the card he had slipped into her mother's hands.

'Mr. Michael Maloney,' she read, adding: 'Just a poor lonely old Irishman going home to die.'

'I guessed that from the first,' rejoined the mother, 'but he must have been a long time in America; for he has no accent, and seems familiar with every part of the country. His time is short, I fear, but you can have the satisfaction of knowing that you brightened a lonely week for him.'

In the subsequent excitement of travel and study, the conscientious effort to make every moment and every penny yield their utmost to the ambitious young teacher, the sad old returning exile was forgotten.

September saw the travellers at home again, with note-books and memories crammed and strength renewed. But, alas! clouds are wont to follow fast on life's gleams of sunshine, and they found the husband and father seriously ill, of a disease which for many months demanded unrelenting care and expensive medical treatment. The promise of the influential friend failed them, and the coveted promotion went to a young lady who boasted among her intimates that she had no need to work for her living, her school meant just pocket money! Oh, for the ease with which good fortune is bettered!

Often during the hard and anxious winter following, Matilda and her mother sighed for the 500 dollars so recklessly lost, as it now seemed, in that too confidently ventured trip to Europe.

The balmy June days had come before Mr. Waldron's danger was past, but the physicians protested against his resuming work without a few months' change of air.

'Poor papa never had a vacation in his life,' sighed Matilda, 'and to think of his toiling in the city all last summer long while we were off on that unlucky trip.'

Their small savings had long ago been exhausted. The young teacher's salary was always spent before it was earned, and there were debts—a trouble unknown before.

The convalescent was sad and listless. He was ten years older than his wife, and nearly thirty years of monotonous and poorly paid clerical work had told on him. Against his unselfish will, he craved the change which it would be hard to bring about.

'We might raise something on the house,' suggested Mrs. Waldron, in a conference on ways and means with her daughter. 'We must get enough to pay off our little debts and make your father comfortable at Crescent Beach for the summer.'

The tinkle of the bell broke on their planning and Matilda rose to answer it.

Her parents, sitting in the long twilight, wondered at her delay. The front door closed at last on the departing caller and Matilda returned to the dining-room and lit the lamp.

'Read it,' she said, extending a paper to her mother. Her eyes shone but her voice trembled.

It was an excerpt from the will of the late Michael Maloney, of Cork, Ireland, bequeathing to Miss Matilda Waldron, of Boston, 200 shares of stock in the C.V. Railroad, a total of 20,000 dollars at 6 per cent. 'in remembrance of her kindness to an old and uninteresting stranger, and to help her carry out her plans for the comfort of her father in his declining years.'

'The gentleman who just called, and who will return to meet you both to-morrow, is the lawyer in