

**Mr. Meesons Will**

**By**

**H. Rider Haggard**

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## CHAPTER I.

### AUGUSTA AND HER PUBLISHER.

"Now mark you, my masters: this is comedy."--OLD PLAY.

Everybody who has any connection with Birmingham will be acquainted with the vast publishing establishment still known by the short title of "Meeson's," which is perhaps the most remarkable institution of the sort in Europe. There are--or rather there were, at the date of the beginning of this history--three partners in Meeson's--Meeson himself, the managing partner; Mr. Addison, and Mr. Roscoe--and people in Birmingham used to say that there were others interested in the affair, for Meeson's was a "company" (limited).

However this may be, Meeson and Co. was undoubtedly a commercial marvel. It employed more than two thousand hands; and its works, lit throughout with the electric light, cover two acres and a quarter of land. One hundred commercial travellers, at three pounds a week and a commission, went forth east and west, and north and south, to sell the books of Meeson (which were largely religious in their nature) in all lands; and five-and-twenty tame authors (who were illustrated by thirteen tame artists) sat--at salaries ranging from one to five hundred a year--in vault-like hutches in the basement, and week by week poured out that hat-work for which Meeson's was justly famous. Then there were editors

and vice-editors, and heads of the various departments, and sub-heads, and financial secretaries, and readers, and many managers; but what their names were no man knew, because at Meeson's all the employees of the great house were known by numbers; personalities and personal responsibility being the abomination of the firm. Nor was it allowed to anyone having dealings with these items ever to see the same number twice, presumably for fear lest the number should remember that he was a man and a brother, and his heart should melt towards the unfortunate, and the financial interests of Meeson's should suffer. In short, Meeson's was an establishment created for and devoted to money-making, and the fact was kept studiously and even insolently before the eyes of everybody connected with it--which was, of course, as it should be, in this happy land of commerce. After all that has been written, the reader will not be surprised to learn that the partners in Meeson's were rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Their palaces would have been a wonder even in ancient Babylon, and would have excited admiration in the corruptest and most luxurious days of Rome. Where could one see such horses, such carriages, such galleries of sculpture or such collections of costly gems as at the palatial halls of Messrs. Meeson, Addison, and Roscoe?

"And to think," as the Mighty Meeson himself would say, with a lordly wave of his right hand, to some astonished wretch of an author whom he has chosen to overwhelm with the sight of this magnificence, "to think that all this comes out of the brains of chaps like you! Why, young man, I tell you that if all the money that has been paid to you scribblers since the days of Elizabeth were added together it would not come up to

my little pile; but, mind you, it ain't so much fiction that has done the trick--it's religion. It's piety as pays, especially when it's printed."

Then the unsophisticated youth would go away, his heart too full for words, but pondering how these things were, and by-and-by he would pass into the Meeson melting-pot and learn something about it.

One day King Meeson sat in his counting house counting out his money, or, at least, looking over the books of the firm. He was in a very bad temper, and his heavy brows were wrinkled up in a way calculated to make the counting-house clerks shake on their stools. Meeson's had a branch establishment at Sydney, in Australia, which establishment had, until lately, been paying--it is true not as well as the English one, but, still, fifteen or twenty per cent. But now a wonder had come to pass. A great American publishing firm had started an opposition house in Melbourne, and their "cuteness" was more than the "cuteness" of Meeson. Did Meeson's publish an edition of the works of any standard author at threepence per volume the opposition company brought out the same work at twopence-halfpenny; did Meeson's subsidise a newspaper to puff their undertakings, the opposition firm subsidised two to cry them down, and so on. And now the results of all this were becoming apparent: for the financial year just ended the Australian branch had barely earned a beggarly net dividend of seven per cent.

No wonder Mr. Meeson was furious, and no wonder that the clerks shook upon their stools.

"This must be seen into, No. 3," said Mr. Meeson, bringing his fist down with a bang on to the balance-sheet.

No. 3 was one of the editors; a mild-eyed little man with blue spectacles. He had once been a writer of promise; but somehow Meeson's had got him for its own, and turned him into a publisher's hack.

"Quite so, Sir," he said humbly. "It is very bad--it is dreadful to think of Meeson's coming down to seven per cent--seven per cent!" and he held up his hands.

"Don't stand there like a stuck pig, No. 3," said Mr. Meeson, fiercely; "but suggest something."

"Well, Sir," said No. 3 more humbly than ever, for he was terribly afraid of his employer; "I think, perhaps, that somebody had better go to Australia, and see what can be done."

"I know one thing that can be done," said Mr. Meeson, with a snarl: "all those fools out there can be sacked, and sacked they shall be; and, what's more, I'll go and sack them myself. That will do No. 3; that will do;" and No. 3 departed, and glad enough he was to go.

As he went a clerk arrived, and gave a card to the great man.



"Miss Augusta Smithers," he read; then with a grunt, "show Miss Augusta Smithers in."

Presently Miss Augusta Smithers arrived. She was a tall, well-formed young lady of about twenty-five, with pretty golden hair, deep grey eyes, a fine forehead, and a delicate mouth; just now, however, she looked very nervous.

"Well, Miss Smithers, what is it?" asked the publisher.

"I came, Mr. Meeson--I came about my book."

"Your book, Miss Smithers?" this was an affectation of forgetfulness; "let me see?--forgive me, but we publish so many books. Oh, yes, I remember; 'Jemima's Vow.' Oh, well, I believe it is going on fairly."

"I saw you advertised the sixteenth thousand the other day," put in Miss Smithers, apologetically.

"Did we--did we? ah, then, you know more about it than I do," and he looked at his visitor in a way that conveyed clearly enough that he considered the interview was ended.

Miss Smithers rose, and then, with a spasmodic effort, sat down again.

"The fact is, Mr. Meeson," she said--"The fact is, that, I thought that, perhaps, as 'Jemima's Vow' had been such a great success, you might,

perhaps--in short, you might be inclined to give me some small sum in addition to what I have received."

Mr. Meeson looked up. His forehead was wrinkled till the shaggy eyebrows nearly hid the sharp little eyes.

"What!" he said. "What!"

At this moment the door opened, and a young gentleman came slowly in. He was a very nice-looking young man, tall and well shaped, with a fair skin and jolly blue eyes--in short, a typical young Englishman of the better sort, aetate suo twenty-four. I have said that he came slowly in, but that scarcely conveys the gay and *dégagé* air of independence which pervaded this young man, and which would certainly have struck any observer as little short of shocking, when contrasted with the worm-like attitude of those who crept round the feet of Meeson. This young man had not, indeed, even taken the trouble to remove his hat, which was stuck upon the back of his head, his hands were in his pockets, a sacrilegious whistle hovered on his lips, and he opened the door of the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Meeson establishment with a kick!

"How do, uncle?" he said to the Commercial Terror, who was sitting there behind his formidable books, addressing him even as though he were an ordinary man. "Why, what's up?"

Just then, however, he caught sight of the very handsome young lady who

was seated in the office, and his whole demeanour underwent a most remarkable change; out came the hands from his pockets, off went the hat, and, turning, he bowed, really rather nicely, considering how impromptu the whole performance was.

"What is it, Eustace?" asked Mr. Meeson, sharply.

"Oh, nothing, uncle; nothing--it can bide," and, without waiting for an invitation, he took a chair, and sat down in such a position that he could see Miss Smithers without being seen of his uncle.

"I was saying, Miss Smithers, or rather, I was going to say," went on the elder Meeson, "that, in short, I do not in the least understand what you can mean. You will remember that you were paid a sum of fifty pounds for the copyright of 'Jemima's Vow.'"

"Great Heavens!" murmured Master Eustace, behind; "what a do!"

"At the time an alternative agreement, offering you seven per cent on the published price of the book, was submitted to you, and, had you accepted it, you would, doubtless, have realized a larger sum," and Mr. Meeson contracted his hairy eyebrows and gazed at the poor girl in a way that was, to say the least, alarming. But Augusta, though she felt sadly inclined to flee, still stood to her guns, for, to tell the truth, her need was very great.

"I could not afford to wait for the seven per cent, Mr. Meeson," she said humbly.

"Oh, ye gods! seven per cent, when he makes about forty-five!" murmured Eustace, in the background.

"Possibly, Miss Smithers; possibly;" went on the great man. "You must really forgive me if I am not acquainted with the exact condition of your private affairs. I am, however, aware from experience that the money matters of most writing people are a little embarrassed."

Augusta winced, and Mr. Meeson, rising heavily from his chair, went to a large safe which stood near, and extracted from it a bundle of agreements. These he glanced at one by one till he found what he was looking for.

"Here is the agreement," he said; "let me see? ah, I thought so--copyright fifty pounds, half proceeds of rights of translation, and a clause binding you to offer any future work you may produce during the next five years to our house on the seven per cent agreement, or a sum not exceeding one hundred pounds for the copyright. Now, Miss Smithers, what have you to say? You signed this paper of your own free will. It so happens that we have made a large profit on your book: indeed, I don't mind telling you that we have got as much as we gave you back from America for the sale of the American rights; but that is no ground for your coming to ask for more money than you agreed to accept. I never

heard of such a thing in the whole course of my professional experience; never!" and he paused, and once more eyed her sternly.

"At any rate, there ought to be something to come to me from the rights of translation--I saw in the paper that the book was to be translated into French and German," said Augusta, faintly.

"Oh! yes, no doubt--Eustace, oblige me by touching the bell."

The young gentleman did so, and a tall, melancholy-looking clerk appeared.

"No. 18," snarled Mr. Meeson, in the tone of peculiar amiability that he reserved for his employee's, "make out the translation account of 'Jemima's Vow,' and fill up a cheque of balance due to the author."

No. 18 vanished like a thin, unhappy ghost, and Mr. Meeson once more addressed the girl before him. "If you want money, Miss Smithers," he said, "you had better write us another book. I am not going to deny that your work is good work--a little too deep, and not quite orthodox enough, perhaps; but still good. I tested it myself, when it came to hand--which is a thing I don't often do--and saw it was good selling quality, and you see I didn't make a mistake. I believe 'Jemima's Vow' will sell twenty thousand without stopping--here's the account."

As he spoke the spectre-like clerk put down a neatly-ruled bit of paper

and an unsigned cheque on the desk before his employer, and then smiled a shadowy smile and vanished.

Mr. Meeson glanced through the account, signed the cheque, and handed it, together with the account to Augusta, who proceeded to read it. It ran thus:--

AUGUSTA SMITHERS in account with MEESON & Co.

	£	s	d
To Sale of Right of Translation of	7	0	0
"Jemima's Vow" into French.....			
Do. do. do. into German	7	0	0
	-----		
	£14	0	0
	=====		
	£	s	d
Less amount due to Messrs. Meeson, being	7	0	0
one-half of net proceeds			
Less Commission, &c	3	19	0
	-----		
	£10	19	0
	=====		
Balance due to Author, as per cheque	£3	1	0
herewith.	-----		

Augusta looked, and then slowly crumpled up the cheque in her hand.

"If I understand, Mr. Meeson," she said, "you have sold the two rights of translation of my book, which you persuaded me to leave in your hands, for £14; out of which I am to receive £3 1s.?"

"Yes, Miss Smithers. Will you be so kind as to sign the receipt; the fact is that I have a good deal of business to attend to."

"No, Mr. Meeson," suddenly said Augusta, rising to her feet and looking exceedingly handsome and imposing in her anger. "No; I will not sign the receipt, and I will not take this cheque. And, what is more, I will not write you any more books. You have entrapped me. You have taken advantage of my ignorance and inexperience, and entrapped me so that for five years I shall be nothing but a slave to you, and, although I am now one of the most popular writers in the country, shall be obliged to accept a sum for my books upon which I cannot live. Do you know that yesterday I was offered a thousand pounds for the copyright of a book like 'Jemima's Vow'?--it's a large sum; but I have the letter. Yes, and I have the book in manuscript now; and if I could publish it I should be lifted out of poverty, together with my poor little sister!" and she gave a sob. "But," she went on, "I cannot publish it, and I will not let you have it and be treated like this; I had rather starve. I will publish nothing for five years, and I will write to the papers and say

why--because I have been cheated, Mr. Meeson!"

"Cheated!" thundered the great man. "Be careful, young lady; mind what you are saying. I have a witness; Eustace, you hear, 'cheated'! Eustace, 'cheated'!"

"I hear," said Eustace, grimly.

"Yes, Mr. Meeson, I said 'cheated'; and I will repeat it, whether I am locked up for it or not. Good morning, Mr. Meeson," and she curtsied to him, and then suddenly burst into a flood of tears.

In a minute Eustace was by her side.

"Don't cry, Miss Smithers; for Heaven's sake don't I can't bear to see it," he said.

She looked up, her beautiful grey eyes full of tears, and tried to smile.

"Thank you," she said; "I am very silly, but I am so disappointed. If you only knew--. There I will go. Thank you," and in another instant she had drawn herself up and left the room.

"Well," said Mr. Meeson, senior, who had been sitting at his desk with his great mouth open, apparently too much astonished to speak. "Well, there is a vixen for you. But she'll come round. I've known them to do



that sort of thing before--there are one or two down there," and he jerked his thumb in the direction where the twenty and five tame authors sat each like a rabbit in his little hutch and did hat-work by the yard, "who carried on like that. But they are quiet enough now--they don't show much spirit now. I know how to deal with that sort of thing--half-pay and a double tale of copy--that's the ticket. Why, that girl will be worth fifteen hundred a year to the house. What do you think of it, young man, eh?"

"I think," answered his nephew, on whose good-tempered face a curious look of contempt and anger had gathered, "I think that you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"