CHAPTER II.

HOW EUSTACE WAS DISINHERITED.

There was a pause--a dreadful pause. The flash had left the cloud, but the answering thunder had not burst upon the ear. Mr. Meeson gasped. Then he took up the cheque which Augusta had thrown upon the table and slowly crumpled it.

"What did you say, young man?" he said at last, in a cold, hard voice.

"I said that you ought to be ashamed of yourself," answered his nephew, standing his ground bravely; "and, what is more, I meant it!"

"Oh! Now will you be so kind as to explain exactly why you said that, and why you meant it?"

"I meant it," answered his nephew, speaking in a full, strong voice, "because that girl was right when she said that you had cheated her, and you know that she was right. I have seen the accounts of 'Jemima's Vow'--I saw them this morning--and you have already made more than a thousand pounds clear profit on the book. And then, when she comes to ask you for something over the beggarly fifty pounds which you doled out to her, you refuse, and offer her three pounds as her share of the translation rights--three pounds as against your eleven!"

"Go on," interrupted his uncle; "pray go on."

"All right; I am going. That is not all: you actually avail yourself of a disgraceful trick to entrap this unfortunate girl into an agreement, whereby she becomes a literary bondslave for five years! As soon as you see that she has genius, you tell her that the expense of bringing out her book, and of advertising up her name, &c., &c., &c., will be very great--so great, indeed, that you cannot undertake it, unless, indeed, she agrees to let you have the first offer of everything she writes for five years to come, at somewhere about a fourth of the usual rate of a successful author's pay--though, of course, you don't tell her that. You take advantage of her inexperience to bind her by this iniquitous contract, knowing that the end of it will be that you will advance her a little money and get her into your power, and then will send her down there to the Hutches, where all the spirit and originality and genius will be crushed out of her work, and she will become a hat-writer like the rest of them--for Meeson's is a strictly commercial undertaking, you know, and Meeson's public don't like genius, they like their literature dull and holy!--and it's an infernal shame! that's what it is, uncle!" and the young man, whose blue eyes were by this time flashing fire, for he had worked himself up as he went along, brought his fist down with a bang upon the writing table by way of emphasising his words.

"Have you done?" said his uncle.

"Yes, I've done; and I hope that I have put it plain."

"Very well; and now might I ask you, supposing that you should ever come to manage this business, if your sentiments accurately represent the system upon which you would proceed?"

"Of course they do. I am not going to turn cheat for anybody."

"Thank you. They seem to have taught you the art of plain speaking up at Oxford--though, it appears," with a sneer, "they taught you very little else. Well, then, now it is my turn to speak; and I tell you what it is, young man, you will either instantly beg my pardon for what you have said, or you will leave Meeson's for good and all."

"I won't beg your pardon for speaking the truth," said Eustace, hotly: "the fact is that here you never hear the truth; all these poor devils creep and crawl about you, and daren't call their souls their own. I shall be devilish glad to get out of this place, I can tell you. All this chickery and pokery makes me sick. The place stinks and reeks of sharp practice and money-making--money-making by fair means or foul."

The elder man had, up till now, at all events to outward appearance, kept his temper; but this last flower of vigorous English was altogether too much for one whom the possession of so much money had for many years shielded from hearing unpleasant truths put roughly. The man's face grew like a devil's, his thick eyebrows contracted themselves, and his pale

lips quivered with fury. For a few seconds he could not speak, so great was his emotion. When, at length, he did, his voice was as thick and laden with rage as a dense mist is with rain.

"You impudent young rascal!" he began, "you ungrateful foundling! Do you suppose that when my brother left you to starve--which was all that you were fit for--I picked you out of the gutter for this: that you should have the insolence to come and tell me how to conduct my business? Now, young man, I'll just tell you what it is. You can be off and conduct a business of your own on whatever principles you choose. Get out of Meeson's, Sir; and never dare to show your nose here again, or I'll give the porters orders to hustle you off the premises! And, now, that isn't all. I've done with you, never you look to me for another sixpence! I'm not going to support you any longer, I can tell you. And, what's more, do you know what I'm going to do just, now? I'm going off to old Todd--that's my lawyer--and I'm going to tell him to make another will and to leave every farthing I have--and that isn't much short of two millions, one way and another--to Addison and Roscoe. They don't want it, but that don't matter. You shan't have it--no, not a farthing of it; and I won't have a pile like that frittered away in charities and mismanagement. There now, my fine young gentleman, just be off and see if your new business principles will get you a living."

"All right, uncle; I'm going," said the young man, quietly. "I quite understand what our quarrel means for me, and, to tell you the truth, I am not sorry. I have never wished to be dependent on you, or to have

anything to do with a business carried on as Meeson's is. I have a hundred a year my mother left me, and with the help of that and my education, I hope to make a living. Still, I don't want to part from you in anger, because you have been very kind to me at times, and, as you remind me, you picked me out of the gutter when I was orphaned or not far from it. So I hope you will shake hands before I go."

"Ah!" snarled his uncle; "you want to pipe down now, do you? But that won't do. Off you go! and mind you don't set foot in Pompadour Hall," Mr. Meeson's seat, "unless it is to get your clothes. Come, cut!"

"You misunderstand me," said Eustace, with a touch of native dignity which became him very well. "Probably we shall not meet again, and I did not wish to part in anger, that was all. Good morning." And he bowed and left the office.

"Confound him!" muttered his uncle as the door closed, "he's a good plucked one--showed spirit. But I'll show spirit, too. Meeson is a man of his word. Cut him off with a shilling? not I; cut him off with nothing at all. And yet, curse it, I like the lad. Well, I've done with him, thanks to that minx of a Smithers girl. Perhaps he's sweet on her? then they can go and starve together, and be hanged to them! She had better keep out of my way, for she shall smart for this, so sure as my name is Jonathan Meeson. I'll keep her up to the letter of that agreement, and, if she tries to publish a book inside of this country or out of it, I'll crush her--yes, I'll crush her, if it cost me five thousand to do it!" and,

with a snarl, he dropped his fist heavily upon the table before him.

Then he rose, put poor Augusta's agreement carefully back into the safe, which he shut with a savage snap, and proceeded to visit the various departments of his vast establishment, and to make such hay therein as had never before been dreamt of in the classic halls of Meeson's.

To this hour the clerks of the great house talk of that dreadful day with bated breath--for as bloody Hector raged through the Greeks, so did the great Meeson rage through his hundred departments. In the very first office he caught a wretched clerk eating sardine sandwiches. Without a moment's hesitation he took the sandwiches and threw them through the window.

"Do you suppose I pay you to come and eat your filthy sandwiches here?" he asked savagely. "There, now you can go and look for them; and see you here: you needn't trouble to come back, you idle, worthless fellow. Off you go! and remember you need not send to me for a character. Now then--double quick!"

The unfortunate departed, feebly remonstrating, and Meeson, having glared around at the other clerks and warned them that unless they were careful--very careful--they would soon follow in his tracks, continued his course of devastation.

Presently he met an editor, No. 7 it was, who was bringing him an

agreement to sign. He snatched it from him and glanced through it.

"What do you mean by bringing me a thing like this?" he said: "It's all wrong."

"It is exactly as you dictated to me yesterday, Sir," said the editor indignantly.

"What, do you mean to contradict me?" roared Meeson. "Look here No. 7, you and I had better part. Now, no words: your salary will be paid to you till the end of the month, and if you would like to bring an action for wrongful dismissal, why, I'm your man. Good morning, No. 7; good morning."

Next he crossed a courtyard where, by slipping stealthily around the corner, he came upon a jolly little errand boy, who was enjoying a solitary game of marbles.

Whack came his cane across the seat of that errand boy's trousers, and in another minute he had followed the editor and the sandwich-devouring clerk.

And so the merry game went on for half an hour or more, till at last Mr. Meeson was fain to cease his troubling, being too exhausted to continue his destroying course. But next morning there was promotion going on in the great publishing house; eleven vacancies had to be filled.

A couple of glasses of brown sherry and a few sandwiches, which he hastily swallowed at a neighboring restaurant, quickly restored him, however; and, jumping into a cab, he drove post haste to his lawyers', Messrs. Todd and James.

"Is Mr. Todd in?" he said to the managing clerk, who came forward bowing obsequiously to the richest man in Birmingham.

"Mr. Todd will be disengaged in a few minutes, Sir," he said. "May I offer you the Times?"

"Damn the Times!" was the polite answer; "I don't come here to read newspapers. Tell Mr. Todd I must see him at once, or else I shall go elsewhere."

"I am much afraid Sir"--began the managing clerk.

Mr. Meeson jumped up and grabbed his hat. "Now then, which is it to be?" he said.

"Oh, certainly, Sir; pray be seated," answered the manager in great alarm--Meeson's business was not a thing to be lightly lost. "I will see Mr. Todd instantly," and he vanished.

Almost simultaneously with his departure an old lady was unceremoniously

bundled out of an inner room, clutching feebly at a reticule full of papers and proclaiming loudly that her head was going round and round. The poor old soul was just altering her will for the eighteenth time in favor of a brand new charity, highly recommended by Royalty; and to be suddenly shot from the revered presence of her lawyer out into the outer darkness of the clerk's office, was really too much for her.

In another minute, Mr. Meeson was being warmly, even enthusiastically, greeted by Mr. Todd himself. Mr. Todd was a nervous-looking, jumpy little man, who spoke in jerks and gushes in such a way as to remind one of a fire-hose through which water was being pumped intermittently.

"How do you do, my dear Sir? Delighted to have this pleasure," he began with a sudden gush, and then suddenly dried up, as he noticed the ominous expression on the great man's brow. "I am sure I am very sorry that you were kept waiting, my dear Sir: but I was at the moment engaged with an excellent and most Christian testator."--

Here he suddenly jumped and dried up again, for Mr. Meeson, without the slightest warning, ejaculated: "Curse your Christian testator! And look here, Todd, just you see that it does not happen again. I'm a Christian testator too; and Christians of my cut aren't accustomed to be kept standing about just like office-boys or authors. See that it don't happen again, Todd."

"I am sure I am exceedingly grieved. Circumstances"--

"Oh, never mind all that--I want my will."

"Will--will--Forgive me--a little confused, that's all. Your manner is so full of hearty old middle-age's kind of vigour"--

Here he stopped, more suddenly even than usual, for Mr. Meeson fixed him with his savage eye, and then jerked himself out of the room to look for the document in question.

"Little idiot!" muttered Meeson; "I'll give him the sack, too, if he isn't more careful. By Jove! why should I not have my own resident solicitor? I could get a sharp hand with a damaged character for about £300 a year, and I pay that old Todd quite £2000. There is a vacant place in the Hutches that I could turn into an office. Hang me, if I don't do it. I will make that little chirping grasshopper jump to some purpose, I'll warrant," and he chuckled at the idea.

Just then Mr. Todd returned with the will, and before he could begin to make any explanations his employer, cut him short with a sharp order to read the gist of it.

This the lawyer proceeded to do. It was very short, and, with the exception of a few legacies, amounting in all to about twenty thousand pounds, bequeathed all the testator's vast fortune and estates, including his (by far the largest) interest in the great publishing house, and his

palace with the paintings and other valuable contents, known as Pompadour Hall, to his nephew, Eustace H. Meeson.

"Very well," he said, when the reading was finished; "now give it to me."

Mr. Todd obeyed, and handed the document to his patron, who deliberately rent it into fragments with his strong fingers, and then completed its destruction by tearing it with his big white teeth. This done, he mixed the little pieces up, threw them on the floor, and stamped upon them with an air of malignity that almost frightened jerky little Mr. Todd.

"Now then," he grimly said, "there's an end of the old love; so let's on with the new. Take your pen and receive my instructions for my will."

Mr. Todd did as he was bid.

"I leave all my property, real and personal, to be divided in equal shares between my two partners, Alfred Tom Addison and Cecil Spooner Roscoe. There, that's short and sweet, and, one way and another, means a couple of millions."

"Good heavens! Sir," jerked out Mr. Todd. "Why, do you mean to quite cut out your nephew--and the other legatees?" he added by way of an afterthought.

"Of course I do; that is, as regards my nephew. The legatees may stand

as before."

"Well all I have to say," went on the little man, astonished into honesty, "Is that it is the most shameful thing I ever heard of!"

"Indeed, Mr. Todd, is it? Well now, may I ask you: am I leaving this property, or are you? Don't trouble yourself to answer that, however, but just attend. Either you draw up that will at once, while I wait, or you say good-bye to about £2000 a year, for that's what Meeson's business is worth, I reckon. Now you take your choice."

Mr. Todd did take his choice. In under an hour, the will, which was very short, was drawn and engrossed.

"Now then," said Meeson, addressing himself to Mr. Todd and the managing clerk, as he took the quill between his fingers to sign, "do you two bear in mind that at the moment I execute this will I am of sound mind, memory, and understanding. There you are; now do you two witness."

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It was night, and King capital, in the shape of Mr. Meeson, sat alone at dinner in his palatial dining-room at Pompadour. Dinner was over, the powdered footman had departed with stately tread, and the head butler was just placing the decanters of richly coloured wine before the solitary lord of all. The dinner had been a melancholy failure. Dish after dish,

the cost of any one of which would have fed a poor child for a month, had been brought up and handed to the master only to be found fault with and sent away. On that night Mr. Meeson had no appetite.

"Johnson," he said to the butler, when he was sure the footman could not hear him, "has Mr. Eustace been here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, Sir. He came to fetch his things, and then went away in a cab."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, Sir. He told the man to drive to Birmingham."

"Did he leave any message?"

"Yes, Sir, he bade me say that you should not be troubled with him again; but that he was sorry that you had parted from him in anger."

"Why did you not give me that message before?"

"Because Mr. Eustace said I was not to give it unless you asked after him."

"Very good. Johnson!"

"Yes, Sir."

"You will give orders that Mr. Eustace's name is not to be mentioned in this house again. Any servant mentioning Mr. Eustace's name will be dismissed."

"Very good, Sir"; and Johnson went.

Mr. Meeson gazed round him. He looked at the long array of glass and silver, at the spotless napery and costly flowers. He looked at the walls hung with works of art, which, whatever else they might be, were at least expensive; at the mirrors and the soft wax-lights; at the marble mantelpieces and the bright warm fires (for it was November); at the rich wall paper and the soft, deep-hued carpet; and reflected that they were all his. And then he sighed, and his coarse, heavy face sank in and grew sad. Of what use was this last extremity of luxury to him? He had nobody to leave it to, and to speak the truth, it gave him but little pleasure. Such pleasure as he had in life was derived from making money, not from spending it. The only times when he was really happy were when he was in his counting house directing the enterprises of his vast establishment, and adding sovereign by sovereign to his enormous accumulations. That had been his one joy for forty years, and it was still his joy.

And then he fell to thinking of his nephew, the only son of his brother, whom he had once loved, before he lost himself in publishing books and making money, and sighed. He had been attached to the lad in his own coarse way, and it was a blow to him to cut himself loose from him. But Eustace had defied him, and--what was worse--he had told him the truth, which he, of all men, could not bear. He had said that his system of trade was dishonest, that he took more than his due, and it was so. He knew it; but he could not tolerate that it should be told him, and that his whole life should thereby be discredited, and even his accumulated gold tarnished--stamped as ill-gotten; least of all could he bear it from his dependent. He was not altogether a bad man; nobody is; he was only a coarse, vulgar tradesman, hardened and defiled by a long career of sharp dealing. At the bottom, he had his feelings like other men, but he could not tolerate exposure or even contradiction; therefore he had revenged himself. And yet, as he sat there, in solitary glory, he realized that to revenge does not bring happiness, and could even find it in his heart to envy the steadfast honesty that had defied him at the cost of his own ruin.

Not that he meant to relent or alter his determination. Mr. Meeson never relented, and never changed his mind. Had he done so he would not at that moment have been the master of two millions of money.