

CHAPTER III.

AUGUSTA'S LITTLE SISTER.

When Augusta left Meeson's she was in a very sad condition of mind, to explain which it will be necessary to say a word or two about that young lady's previous history. Her father had been a clergyman, and, like most clergymen, not overburdened with the good things of this world. When Mr. Smithers--or, rather, the Rev. James Smithers--had died, he left behind him a widow and two children--Augusta, aged fourteen, and Jeannie, aged two. There had been two others, both boys, who had come into the world between Augusta and Jeannie, but they had both preceded their father to the land of shadows. Mrs. Smithers, had, fortunately for herself, a life interest in a sum of £7000, which, being well invested, brought her in £350 a year: and, in order to turn this little income to the best possible account and give her two girls the best educational opportunities possible under the circumstances, she, on her husband's death, moved from the village where he had for many years been curate, into the city of Birmingham. Here she lived in absolute retirement for some seven years and then suddenly died, leaving the two girls, then respectively nineteen and eight years of age, to mourn her loss, and, friendless as they were, to fight their way in the hard world.

Mrs. Smithers had been a saving woman, and, on her death, it was found that, after paying all debts, there remained a sum of £600 for the two

girls to live on, and nothing else; for their mother's fortune died with her. Now, it will be obvious that the interest arising from six hundred pounds is not sufficient to support two young people, and therefore Augusta was forced to live upon the principal. From an early age, however, she (Augusta) had shown a strong literary tendency, and shortly after her mother's death she published her first book at her own expense. It was a dead failure and cost her fifty-two pounds, the balance between the profit and loss account. After awhile, however, she recovered from this blow, and wrote "Jemima's Vow," which was taken up by Meeson's; and, strange as it may seem, proved the success of the year. Of the nature of the agreement into which she entered with Meeson's, the reader is already acquainted, and he will not therefore be surprised to learn that under its cruel provisions Augusta, notwithstanding her name and fame, was absolutely prohibited from reaping the fruits of her success. She could only publish with Meesons's, and at the fixed pay of seven per cent on the advertised price of her work. Now, something over three years had elapsed since the death of Mrs. Smithers, and it will therefore be obvious that there was not much remaining of the six hundred pounds which she had left behind her. The two girls had, indeed, lived economically enough in a couple of small rooms in a back street; but their expenses had been enormously increased by the serious illness, from a pulmonary complaint, of the little girl Jeannie, now a child between twelve and thirteen years of age. On that morning, Augusta had seen the doctor and been crushed into the dust by the expression of his conviction, that, unless her little sister was moved to a warmer climate, for a period of at least a year, she would not live through the winter, and might die

at any moment.

Take Jeannie to a warmer climate! He might as well have told Augusta to take her to the moon. Alas, she had not the money and did not know where to turn to get it! Oh! reader, pray to Heaven that it may never be your lot to see your best beloved die for the want of a few hundred pounds wherewith to save her life!

It was in this terrible emergency that she had--driven thereto by her agony of mind--tried to get something beyond her strict and legal due out of Meeson's--Meeson's that had made hundreds and hundreds out of her book and paid her fifty pounds. We know how she fared in that attempt. On leaving their office, Augusta bethought her of her banker. Perhaps he might be willing to advance something. It was a horrible task, but she determined to undertake it; so she walked to the bank and asked to see the manager. He was out, but would be in at three o'clock. She went to a shop near and got a bun and glass of milk, and waited till she was ashamed to wait any longer, and then she walked about the streets till three o'clock. At the stroke of the hour she returned, and was shown into the manager's private room, where a dry, unsympathetic looking little man was sitting before a big book. It was not the same man whom Augusta had met before, and her heart sank proportionately.

What followed need not be repeated here. The manager listened to her faltering tale with a few stereotyped expressions of sympathy, and, when she had done, "regretted" that speculative loans were contrary to the

custom of the bank, and politely bowed her out.

It was nearly four o'clock upon a damp, drizzling afternoon--a November afternoon--that hung like a living misery over the black slush of the Birmingham streets, and would in itself have sufficed to bring the lightest hearted, happiest mortal to the very gates of despair, when Augusta, wet, wearied, and almost crying, at last entered the door of their little sitting-room. She entered very quietly, for the maid-of-all-work had met her in the passage and told her that Miss Jeannie was asleep. She had been coughing very much about dinner-time, but now she was asleep.

There was a fire in the grate, a small one, for the coal was economised by means of two large fire-bricks, and on a table (Augusta's writing table), placed at the further side of the room, was a paraffin-lamp turned low. Drawn up in front, but a little to one side of the fire, was a sofa, covered with red rep, and on the sofa lay a fair-haired little form, so thin and fragile that it looked like the ghost or outline of a girl, rather than a girl herself. It was Jeannie, her sick sister, and she was asleep. Augusta stole softly up to look at her. It was a sweet little face that her eyes fell on, although it was so shockingly thin, with long, curved lashes, delicate nostrils, and a mouth shaped like a bow. All the lines and grooves which the chisel of Pain knows so well how to carve were smoothed out of it now, and in their place lay the shadow of a smile.

Augusta looked at her and clenched her fists, while a lump rose in her throat, and her grey eyes filled with tears. How could she get the money to save her? The year before a rich man, a man who was detestable to her, had wanted to marry her, and she would have nothing to say to him. He had gone abroad, else she would have gone back to him and married him--at a price. Marry him? yes she would marry him: she would do anything for money to take her sister away! What did she care for herself when her darling was dying--dying for the want of two hundred pounds!

Just then Jeannie woke up, and stretched her arms out to her.

"So you are back at last, dear," she said in her sweet childish voice.

"It has been so lonely without you. Why, how wet you are! Take off your jacket at once, Gussie, or you will soon be as ill as"--and here she broke out into a terrible fit of coughing, that seemed to shake her tender frame as the wind shakes a reed.

Her sister turned and obeyed, and then came and sat by the sofa and took the thin little hand in hers.

"Well, Gussie, and how did you get on with the Printer-devil" (this was her impolite name for the great Meeson); "will he give you any more money?"

"No, dear; we quarrelled, that was all, and I came away."

"Then I suppose that we can't go abroad?"

Augusta was too moved to answer; she only shook her head. The child buried her face in the pillow and gave a sob or two. Presently she was quiet, and lifted it again. "Gussie, love," she said, "don't be angry, but I want to speak to you. Listen, my sweet Gussie, my angel. Oh, Gussie, you don't know how I love you! It is all no good, it is useless struggling against it, I must die sooner or later; though I am only twelve, and you think me such a child, I am old enough to understand that. I think," she added, after pausing to cough, "that pain makes one old: I feel as though I were fifty. Well, so you see I may as well give up fighting against it and die at once. I am only a burden and anxiety to you--I may as well die at once and go to sleep."

"Don't, Jeannie! don't!" said her sister, in a sort of cry; "you are killing me!"

Jeannie laid her hot hand upon Augusta's arm, "Try and listen to me, dear," she said, "even if it hurts, because I do so want to say something. Why should you be so frightened about me? Can any place that I can go be worse than this place? Can I suffer more pain anywhere, or be more hurt when I see you crying? Think how wretched it has all been. There has only been one beautiful thing in our lives for years and years, and that was your book. Even when I am feeling worst--when my chest aches, you know--I grow quite happy when I think of what the papers wrote about you: the Times and the Saturday Review, and the Spectator,

and the rest of them. They said that you had genius--true genius, you remember, and that they expected one day to see you at the head of the literature of the time, or near it. The Printer-devil can't take away that, Gussie. He can take the money; but he can't say that he wrote the book; though," she added, with a touch of childish spite and vivacity, "I have no doubt that he would if he could. And then there were those letters from the great authors up in London; yes, I often think of them too. Well, dearest old girl, the best of it is that I know it is all true. I know, I can't tell you how, that you will be a great woman in spite of all the Meesons in creation; for somehow you will get out of his power, and, if you don't, five years is not all one's life--at least, not if people have a life. At the worst, he can only take all the money. And then, when you are great and rich and famous, and more beautiful than ever, and when the people turn their heads as you come into the room, like we used to at school when the missionary came to lecture, I know that you will think of me (because you won't forget me as some sisters do), and of how, years and years before, so long ago that the time looks quite small when you think of it, I told you that it would be so just before I died."

Here the girl, who had been speaking with a curious air of certainty and with a gravity and deliberation extraordinary for one so young, suddenly broke off to cough. Her sister threw herself on her knees beside her, and, clasping her in her arms, implored her in broken accents not to talk of dying. Jeannie drew Augusta's golden head down on her breast and stroked it.

"Very well, Gussie, I won't say any more about it," she said; "but it is no good hiding the truth, dear. I am tired of fighting against it; it is no good--none at all. Anyhow we have loved each other very much, dear; and perhaps--somewhere else--we may again."--And the brave little heart again broke down, and, overcome by the prescience of approaching separation, they both sobbed bitterly there upon the sofa. Presently came a knock at the door, and Augusta sprang up and turned to hide her tears. It was the maid-of-all-work bringing the tea; and, as she came blundering in, a sense of the irony of things forced itself into Augusta's soul.

Here they were plunged into the most terrible sorrow, weeping at the inevitable approach of that chill end, and still appearances must be kept up, even before a maid-of-all-work. Society, even when represented by a maid-of-all-work, cannot do away with the intrusion of domestic griefs, or any other griefs, and in our hearts we know it and act up to it. Far gone, indeed, must we be in mental or physical agony before we abandon the attempt to keep up appearances.

Augusta drank a little tea and ate a very small bit of bread-and-butter. As in the case of Mr. Meeson, the events of the day had not tended to increase her appetite. Jeannie drank a little milk but ate nothing. When this form had been gone through, and the maid-of-all-work had once more made her appearance and cleared the table, Jeannie spoke again.

"Gus," she said, "I want you to put me to bed and then come and read to me out of 'Jemima's Vow'--where poor Jemima dies, you know. It is the

most beautiful thing in the book, and I want to hear it again."

Her sister did as she wished, and, taking down "Jemima's Vow," Jeannie's own copy as it was called, being the very first that had come into the house, she opened it at the part Jeannie had asked for and read aloud, keeping her voice as steady as she could. As a matter of fact, however, the scene itself was as powerful as it was pathetic, and quite sufficient to account for any unseemly exhibitions of feeling on the part of the reader. However, she struggled through it till the last sentence was reached. It ran thus:--"And so Jemima stretched out her hand to him and said 'Good-bye.' And presently, knowing that she had now kept her promise, and being happy because she had done so, she went to sleep."

"Ah!" murmured the blue-eyed child who listened. "I wish that I was as good as Jemima. But though I have no vow to keep I can say 'Good-bye,' and I can go to sleep."

Augusta made no answer, and presently Jeannie dozed off. Her sister looked at her with eager affection. "She is giving up," she said to herself, "and, if she gives up, she will die. I know it, it is because we are not going away. How can I get the money, now that that horrible man is gone? how can I get it?" and she buried her head in her hand and thought. Presently an idea struck her: she might go back to Meeson and eat her words, and sell him the copyright of her new book for £100, as the agreement provided. That would not be enough, however; for travelling with an invalid is expensive; but she might offer to bind herself over to

him for a term of years as a tame author, like those who worked in the Hutches. She was sure that he would be glad to get her, if only he could do so at his own price. It would be slavery worse than any penal servitude, and even now she shudders at the prospect of prostituting her great abilities to the necessities of such work as Meeson's made their thousands out of--work out of which every spark of originality was stamped into nothingness, as though it were the mark of the Beast. Yes, it would be dreadful--it would break her heart; but she was prepared to have her heart broken and her genius wrung out of her by inches, if only she could get two hundred pounds wherewith to take Jeannie away to the South of France. Mr. Meeson would, no doubt, make a hard bargain--the hardest he could; but still, if she would consent to bind herself for a sufficient number of years at a sufficiently low salary, he would probably advance her a hundred pounds, besides the hundred for the copyright of the new book.

And so having made up her mind to the sacrifice, she went to bed, and, wearied out with misery, to sleep. And even as she slept, a Presence that she could not see was standing near her bed, and a Voice that she could not hear was calling through the gloom. Another mortal had bent low at the feet of that Unknown God whom men name Death, and been borne away on his rushing pinions into the spaces of the Hid. One more human item lay still and stiff, one more account was closed for good or evil, the echo of one more tread had passed from the earth for ever. The old million-numbered tragedy in which all must take a part had repeated itself once more down to its last and most awful scene. Yes; the grim

farce was played out, and the little actor Jeannie was white in death!

Just at the dawn, Augusta dreamed that somebody with cold breath was breathing on her face, and woke up with a start and listened. Jeannie's bed was on the other side of the room, and she could generally hear her movements plainly enough, for the sick child was a restless sleeper. But now she could hear nothing, not even the faint vibration of her sister's breath. The silence was absolute and appalling; it struck tangibly upon her sense, as the darkness struck upon her eye-balls and filled her with a numb, unreasoning terror. She slipped out of bed and struck a match. In another few seconds she was standing by Jeannie's white little bed, waiting for the wick of the candle to burn up. Presently the light grew. Jeannie was lying on her side, her white face resting on her white arm. Her eyes were wide open; but when Augusta held the candle near her she did not shut them or flinch. Her hand, too--oh, Heavens! the fingers were nearly cold.

Then Augusta understood, and lifting up her arms in agony, she shrieked till the whole house rang.