

## CHAPTER IV.

### AUGUSTA'S DECISION.

On the second day following the death of poor little Jeannie Smithers, Mr. Eustace Meeson was strolling about Birmingham with his hands in his pockets, and an air of indecision on his decidedly agreeable and gentlemanlike countenance. Eustace Meeson was not particularly cast down by the extraordinary reverse of fortune which he had recently experienced. He was a young gentleman of a cheerful nature; and, besides, it did not so very much matter to him. He was in a blessed condition of celibacy, and had no wife and children dependant upon him, and he knew that, somehow or other, it would go hard if, with the help of the one hundred a year that he had of his own, he did not manage, with his education, to get a living by hook or by crook. So it was not the loss of the society of his respected uncle, or the prospective enjoyment of two millions of money, which was troubling him. Indeed, after he had once cleared his goods and chattels out of Pompadour Hall and settled them in a room in an Hotel, he had not given the matter much thought. But he had given a good many thoughts to Augusta Smithers' grey eyes and, by way of getting an insight into her character, he had at once invested in a copy of "Jemima's Vow," thereby, somewhat against his will, swelling the gains of Meeson's to the extent of several shillings. Now, "Jemima's Vow," though simple and homely, was a most striking and powerful book, which fully deserved the reputation that it had gained, and it affected

Eustace--who was in so much different from most young men of his age that he really did know the difference between good work and bad--more strongly than he would have liked to own. Indeed, at the termination of the story, what between the beauty of Augusta's pages, the memory of Augusta's eyes, and the knowledge of Augusta's wrongs, Mr. Eustace Meeson began to feel very much as though he had fallen in love. Accordingly, he went out walking, and meeting a clerk whom he had known in the Meeson establishment--one of those who had been discharged on the same day as himself--he obtained from him Miss Smithers' address, and began to reflect as to whether or no he should call upon her. Unable to make up his mind, he continued to walk till he reached the quiet street where Augusta lived, and, suddenly perceiving the house of which the clerk had told him, yielded to temptation and rang.

The door was answered by the maid-of-all-work, who looked at him a little curiously, but said that Miss Smithers was in, and then conducted him to a door which was half open, and left him in that kindly and agreeable fashion that maids-of-all-work have. Eustace was perplexed, and, looking through the door to see if anyone was in the room, discovered Augusta herself dressed in some dark material, seated in a chair, her hands folded on her lap, her pale face set like a stone, and her eyes gleaming into vacancy. He paused, wondering what could be the matter, and as he did so his umbrella slipped from his hand, making a noise that rendered it necessary for him to declare himself.

Augusta rose as he advanced, and looked at him with a puzzled air, as

though she was striving to recall his name or where she had met him.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, "I must introduce myself, as the girl has deserted me--I am Eustace Meeson."

Augusta's face hardened at the name. "If you have come to me from Messrs. Meeson and Co."--she said quickly, and then broke off, as though struck by some new idea.

"Indeed no," said Eustace. "I have nothing in common with Messrs. Meeson now, except my name, and I have only come to tell you how sorry I was to see you treated as you were by my uncle. You remember I was in the office?"

"Yes," she said, with a suspicion of a blush, "I remember you were very kind."

"Well, you see," he went on, "I had a great row with my uncle after that, and it ended in his turning me out of the place, bag and baggage, and informing me that he was going to cut me off with a shilling, which," he added reflectively, "he has probably done by now."

"Do I understand you, Mr. Meeson, to mean that you quarrelled with your uncle about me and my books?"

"Yes; that is so," he said.

"It was very chivalrous of you," she answered, looking at him with a new-born curiosity. Augusta was not accustomed to find knights-errant thus prepared, at such cost to themselves, to break a lance in her cause. Least of all was she prepared to find that knight bearing the hateful crest of Meeson--if, indeed, Meeson had a crest.

"I ought to apologise," she went on presently, after an awkward pause, "for making such a scene in the office, but I wanted money so dreadfully, and it was so hard to be refused. But it does not matter now. It is all done with."

There was a dull, hopeless ring about her voice that awoke his curiosity. For what could she have wanted the money, and why did she no longer want it?

"I am sorry," he said. "Will you tell me what you wanted it so much for?"

She looked at him, and then, acting upon impulse rather than reflection, said in a low voice,

"If you like, I will show you."

He bowed, wondering what was coming next. Rising from her chair, Augusta led the way to a door which opened out of the sitting-room, and gently turned the handle and entered. Eustace followed her. The room was a small

bed-room, of which the faded calico blind had been pulled down; as it happened, however, the sunlight, such as it was, beat full upon the blind, and came through it in yellow bars. They fell upon the furniture of the bare little room, they fell upon the iron bedstead, and upon something lying on it, which he did not at first notice, because it was covered with a sheet.

Augusta walked up to the bed and gently lifted the sheet, revealing the sweet face, fringed round about with golden hair, of little Jeannie, in her coffin.

Eustace gave an exclamation, and started back violently. He had not been prepared for such a sight; indeed it was the first such sight that he had ever seen, and it shocked him beyond words. Augusta, familiarised as she was herself with the companionship of this beauteous clay cold Terror, had forgotten that, suddenly and without warning to bring the living into the presence of the dead, is not the wisest or the kindest thing to do. For, to the living, more especially to the young, the sight of death is horrible. It is such a fearsome comment on their health and strength. Youth and strength are merry; but who can be merry with yon dead thing in the upper chamber? Take it away! thrust it underground! it is an insult to us; it reminds us that we, too, die like others. What business has its pallor to show itself against our ruddy cheeks?

"I beg your pardon," whispered Augusta, realising something of all this in a flash, "I forgot, you do not know--you must be shocked--Forgive me!"

"Who is it?" he said, gasping to get back his breath.

"My sister," she answered. "It was to try and save her life that I wanted the money. When I told her that I could not get it, she gave up and died. Your uncle killed her. Come."

Greatly shocked, he followed her back into the sitting-room, and then--as soon as he got his composure--apologised for having intruded himself upon her in such an hour of desolation.

"I am glad to see you," she said simply, "I have seen nobody except the doctor once, and the undertaker twice. It is dreadful to sit alone hour after hour face to face with the irretrievable. If I had not been so foolish as to enter into that agreement with Messrs. Meeson, I could have got the money by selling my new book easily enough; and I should have been able to take Jeannie abroad, and I believe that she would have lived--at least I hoped so. But now it is finished, and cannot be helped."

"I wish I had known," blundered Eustace, "I could have lent you the money. I have a hundred and fifty pounds."

"You are very good," she answered gently, "but it is no use talking about it now, it is finished."

Then Eustace rose and went away; and it was not till he found himself in the street that he remembered that he had never asked Augusta what her plans were. Indeed, the sight of poor Jeannie had put everything else out of his head. However, he consoled himself with the reflection that he could call again a week or ten days after the funeral.

Two days later, Augusta followed the remains of her dearly beloved sister to their last resting place, and then came home on foot (for she was the only mourner), and sat in her black gown before the little fire, and reflected upon her position. What was she to do? She could not stay in these rooms. It made her heart ache every time her eyes fell upon the empty sofa opposite, dented as it was with the accustomed weight of poor Jeannie's frame. Where was she to go, and what was she to do. She might get literary employment, but then her agreement with Messrs. Meeson stared her in the face. That agreement was very widely drawn. It bound her to offer all literary work of any sort, that might come from her pen during the next five years, to Messrs. Meeson at the fixed rate of seven per cent, on the published price. Obviously, as it seemed to her, though perhaps erroneously, this clause might be stretched to include even a newspaper article, and she knew the malignant nature of Mr. Meeson well

enough to be quite certain that, if possible, that would be done. It was true she might manage to make a bare living out of her work, even at the beggarly pay of seven per cent, but Augusta was a person of spirit, and determined that she would rather starve than that Meeson should again make huge profits out of her labour. This avenue being closed to her, she

turned her mind elsewhere; but, look where she might, the prospect was equally dark.

Augusta's remarkable literary success had not been of much practical advantage to her, for in this country literary success does not mean so much as it does in some others. As a matter of fact, indeed, the average Briton has, at heart, a considerable contempt, if not for literature, at least for those who produce it. Literature, in his mind, is connected with the idea of garrets and extreme poverty; and, therefore, having the national respect for money, he in secret, if not in public, despises it. A tree is known by its fruit, says he. Let a man succeed at the Bar, and he makes thousands upon thousands a year, and is promoted to the highest offices in the State. Let a man succeed in art, and he will be paid one or two thousand pounds apiece for his most "pot-boilery" portraits. But your literary men--why, with a few fortunate exceptions, the best of them barely make a living. What can literature be worth, if a man can't make a fortune out of it? So argues the Briton--no doubt with some of his sound common sense. Not that he has no respect for genius. All men bow to true genius, even when they fear and envy it. But he thinks a good deal more of genius dead than genius living. However this may be, there is no doubt but that if through any cause--such, for instance, as the sudden discovery by the great and highly civilized American people that the seventh commandment was probably intended to apply to authors, amongst the rest of the world--the pecuniary rewards of literary labor should be put more upon an equality with those of other trades, literature--as a profession--will go up many steps in popular esteem. At present, if a



member of a family has betaken himself to the high and honourable calling (for surely, it is both) of letters, his friends and relations are apt to talk about him in a shy and diffident, not to say apologetic, way; much as they would had he adopted another sort of book-making as a means of livelihood.

Thus it was that, notwithstanding her success, Augusta had nowhere to turn in her difficulty. She had absolutely no literary connection. Nobody had called upon her, and sought her out in consequence of her book. One or two authors in London, and a few unknown people from different parts of the country and abroad, had written to her--that was all. Had she lived in town it might have been different; but, unfortunately for her, she did not.

The more she thought, the less clear did her path become; until, at last, she got an inspiration. Why not leave England altogether? She had nothing to keep her here. She had a cousin--a clergyman--in New Zealand, whom she had never seen, but who had read "Jemima's Vow," and written her a kind letter about it. That was the one delightful thing about writing books; one made friends all over the world. Surely he would take her in for a while, and put her in the way of earning a living where Meeson would not be to molest her? Why should she not go? She had twenty pounds left, and the furniture (which included an expensive invalid chair), and books would fetch another thirty or so--enough to pay for a second-class passage and leave a few pounds in her pocket. At the worst it would be a change, and she could not go through more there than she did here, so

that very night she sat down and wrote to her clergyman cousin.