CHAPTER V.

THE R.M.S. KANGAROO.

It was on a Tuesday evening that a mighty vessel was steaming majestically out of the mouth of the Thames, and shaping her imposing course straight at the ball of the setting sun. Most people will remember reading descriptions of the steamship Kangaroo, and being astonished at the power of her engines, the beauty of her fittings, and the extraordinary speed--about eighteen knots--which she developed in her trials, with an unusually low expenditure of coal. For the benefit of those who have not, however, it may be stated that the Kangaroo, "the Little Kangaroo," as she was ironically named among sailor men, was the very latest development of the science of modern ship-building. Everything about her, from the electric light and boiler tubes up, was on a new and patent system.

Four hundred feet and more she measured from stem to stern, and in that space were crowded and packed all the luxuries of a palace, and all the conveniences of an American hotel. She was a beautiful and a wonderful thing to look on; as, with her holds full of costly merchandise and her decks crowded with her living freight of about a thousand human beings, she steamed slowly out to sea, as though loth to leave the land where she was born. But presently she seemed to gather up her energies and to grow conscious of the thousands and thousands of miles of wide tossing water,

which stretched between her and the far-off harbour where her mighty heart should cease from beating and be for a while at rest. Quicker and quicker she sped along, and spurned the churning water from her swift sides. She was running under a full head of steam now, and the coast-line of England grew faint and low in the faint, low light, till at last it almost vanished from the gaze of a tall, slim girl, who stood forward, clinging to the starboard bulwark netting and looking with deep grey eyes across the waste of waters. Presently Augusta, for it was she, could see the shore no more, and turned to watch the other passengers and think. She was sad at heart, poor girl, and felt what she was--a very waif upon the sea of life. Not that she had much to regret upon the vanished coast-line. A little grave with a white cross over it--that was all. She had left no friends to weep for her, none. But even as she thought it, a recollection rose up in her mind of Eustace Meeson's pleasant, handsome face, and of his kind words, and with it came a pang as she reflected that, in all probability, she should never see the one or hear the other again. Why, she wondered, had he not come to see her again? She should have liked to bid him "Good-bye," and had half a mind to send him a note and tell him of her going. This, on second thoughts, however, she had decided not to do; for one thing, she did not know his address, and--well, there was an end of it.

Could she by the means of clairvoyance have seen Eustace's face and heard his words, she would have regretted her decision. For even as that great vessel plunged on her fierce way right into the heart of the gathering darkness, he was standing at the door of the lodging-house in the little

street in Birmingham.

"Gone!" he was saying. "Miss Smithers gone to New Zealand! What is her address?"

"She didn't leave no address, sir," replies the dirty maid-of-all-work with a grin. "She went from here two days ago, and was going on to the ship in London."

"What was the name of the ship?" he asked, in despair.
"Kan--Kon--Conger-eel," replies the girl in triumph, and shuts the door in his face.

Poor Eustace! He had gone to London to try and get some employment, and having, after some difficulty, succeeded in obtaining a billet as reader in Latin, French and English to a publishing house of good repute, at a salary of £180 a year, he had hurried back to Birmingham for the sole purpose of seeing Miss Augusta Smithers, with whom, if the whole truth must be told, he had, to his credit be it said, fallen deeply, truly, and violently in love. Indeed, so far was he in this way gone, that he had determined to make all the progress that he could, and if he thought that there was any prospect of success, to declare his passion. This was, perhaps, a little premature; but then in these matters people are apt to be more premature than is generally supposed. Human nature is very swift in coming to conclusions in matters in which that strange mixture we call the affections are involved; perhaps because, although the

conclusion is not altogether a pleasing one, the affections, at any rate in the beginning, are largely dependent on the senses.

Pity a poor young man! To come from London to Birmingham to woo one's grey-eyed mistress, in a third-class carriage too, and find her gone to New Zealand, whither circumstances prevented him from following her, without leaving a word or a line, or even an address behind her! It was too bad. Well, there was no remedy in the matter; so he walked to the railway station, and groaned and swore all the way back to London.

Augusta, on board the Kangaroo, was, however, in utter ignorance of this act of devotion on the part of her admirer; indeed, she did not even know that he was her admirer. Feeling a curious sinking sensation within her, she was about to go below to her cabin, which she shared with a lady's-maid, not knowing whether to attribute it to sentimental qualms incidental to her lonely departure from the land of her birth, or to other qualms connected with the first experience of life upon the ocean wave. About that moment, however, a burly quarter-master addressed her in gruff tones, and informed her that if she wanted to see the last of "hold Halbion," she had better go aft a bit, and look over the port side, and she would see the something or other light. Accordingly, more to prove to herself that she was not sea-sick than for any other reason, she did so, and, standing as far aft as the second-class passengers were allowed to go, stared at the quick flashes of the light-house, as second by second, they sent their message across the great waste of sea.

As she stood there, holding on to a stanchion to steady herself, for the vessel, large as she was, had begun to get a bit of a roll on, she was suddenly aware of a bulky figure of a man which came running or rather reeling against the bulwarks alongside of her, where it--or rather he--was instantly and violently ill. Augusta was, not unnaturally, almost horrified into following the figure's example, when, suddenly growing faint or from some other cause, it loosed its hold and rolled into the scuppers, where it lay feebly swearing. Augusta, obeying a tender impulse of humanity, hurried forward and stretched out the hand of succour, and presently, between her help and that of the bulwark netting, the man struggled to his feet. As he did so his face came close to hers, and in the dim light she recognised the fat, coarse features, now blanched with misery, of Mr. Meeson, the publisher. There was no doubt about it, it was her enemy; the man whose behavior had indirectly, as she believed, caused the death of her little sister. She dropped his hand with an exclamation of disgust and dismay, and as she did so he recognised who she was.

"Hullo!" he said, with a faint and rather feeble attempt to assume his fine old crusted publishing-company manners. "Hullo! Miss Jemima--Smithers, I mean; what on earth are you doing here?"

"I am going to New Zealand, Mr. Meeson," she answered sharply; "and I certainly did not expect to have the pleasure of your company on the voyage."

"Going to New Zealand," he said, "are you? Why, so am I; at least, I am

going there first, then to Australia. What do you mean to do there--try and run round our little agreement, eh? It won't be any good, I tell you plainly. We have our agents in New Zealand, and a house in Australia, and if you try to get the better of Meeson's there, Meeson's will be even with you, Miss Smithers--Oh, Heavens! I feel as though I were coming to pieces."

"Don't alarm yourself, Mr. Meeson," she answered, "I am not going to publish any more books at present."

"That is a pity," he said, "because your stuff is good selling stuff. Any publisher would find money in it. I suppose you are second-class, Miss Smithers, so we shan't see much of each other; and, perhaps, if we should meet, it might be as well if we didn't seem to have any acquaintance. It don't look well for a man in my position to know second-class passengers, especially young lady passengers who write novels."

"You need not be afraid, Mr. Meeson: I have no wish to claim your acquaintance," said Augusta.

At this point, her enemy was taken violently worse again, and, being unable to stand the sight and sound of his writhing and groaning, she fled forward; and, reflecting on this strange and awkward meeting, went down to her own berth, where, with lucid intervals, she remained helpless and half stupid for the next three days. On the fourth day, however, she reappeared on deck quite recovered, and with an excellent appetite. She

had her breakfast, and then went and sat forward in as quiet a place as she could find. She did not want to see Mr. Meeson any more, and she did want to escape from the stories of her cabin-mate, the lady's-maid. This good person would, after the manner of her kind, insist upon repeating to her a succession of histories connected with members of the families with whom she had lived, many of which were sufficient to make the hair of a respectable young lady like Augusta stand positively on end. No doubt they were interesting to her in her capacity of a novelist; but, as they were all of the same colour, and as their tendency was absolutely to destroy any belief she might have in virtue as an inherent quality in highly developed woman or honour in man, Augusta soon wearied of these chroniques scandaleuses. So she went forward, and was sitting looking at the "white horses" chasing each other across the watery plain, and reflecting upon what the condition of mind of those ladies whose histories she had recently heard would be if they knew that their most secret, and in some cases disgraceful and tragic, love affairs were the common talk of a dozen servants' halls, when suddenly she was astonished by the appearance of a splendid official bearing a book. At first, from the quantity of gold lace with which his uniform was adorned, Augusta took him to be the captain; but it presently transpired that he was only the chief steward.

"Please, Miss," he said, touching his hat and holding out the book in his hand towards her, "the captain sends his compliments and wants to know if you are the young lady who wrote this."

Augusta glanced at the work. It was a copy of "Jemima's Vow." Then she replied that she was the writer of it, and the steward vanished.

Later on in the morning came another surprise. The gorgeous official again appeared, touched his cap, and said that the captain desired him to say that orders had been given to have her things moved to a cabin further aft. At first Augusta demurred to this, not from any love of the lady's-maid, but because she had a truly British objection to being ordered about.

"Captain's orders, Miss," said the man, touching his cap again; and she yielded.

Nor had she any cause to regret doing so; for, to her huge delight, she found herself moved into a charming deck-cabin on the starboard side of the vessel, some little way abaft the engine-room. It was evidently an officer's cabin, for there, over the head of the bed, was the picture of a young lady he adored, and also some neatly fitted shelves of books, a rack of telescopes, and other seaman-like contrivances.

"Am I to have this cabin to myself?" asked Augusta of the steward.

"Yes, Miss; those are the captain's orders. It is Mr. Jones's cabin. Mr. Jones is the second officer; but he has turned in with Mr. Thomas, the first officer, and given up the cabin to you."

"I am sure it's very kind of Mr. Jones," murmured Augusta, not knowing what to make of this turn of fortune. But surprises were not to end there. A few minutes afterwards, just as she was leaving the cabin, a gentleman in uniform came up, in whom she recognized the captain. He was accompanied by a pretty fair-haired woman very becomingly dressed.

"Excuse me; Miss Smithers, I believe?" he said, with a bow.

"Yes."

"I am Captain Alton. I hope you like your new cabin. Let me introduce you to Lady Holmhurst, wife of Lord Holmhurst, the New Zealand Governor, you know. Lady Holmhurst, this is Miss Smithers, whose book you were talking so much about."

"Oh! I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Smithers," said the great lady in a manner that evidently was not assumed. "Captain Alton has promised that I shall sit next to you at dinner, and then we can have a good talk. I don't know when I have been so much delighted with anything as I was with your book. I have read it three times, what do you think of that for a busy woman?"

"I think there is some mistake," said Augusta, hurriedly and with a slight blush. "I am a second-class passenger on board this ship, and therefore cannot have the pleasure of sitting next to Lady Holmhurst."

"Oh, that is all right, Miss Smithers," said the captain, with a jolly laugh. "You are my guest, and I shall take no denial."

"When we find genius for once in our lives, we are not going to lose the opportunity of sitting at its feet," added Lady Holmhurst, with a little movement towards her which was neither curtsey nor bow, but rather a happy combination of both. The compliment was, Augusta felt, sincere, however much it exaggerated the measure of her poor capacities, and, putting other things aside, was, coming as it did from one woman to another, peculiarly graceful and surprising. She blushed and bowed, scarcely knowing what to say, when suddenly, Mr. Meeson's harsh tones, pitched just now in a respectful key, broke upon her ear. Mr. Meeson was addressing no less a person than Lord Holmhurst, G.C.M.G. Lord Holmhurst was a stout, short, dark little man, with a somewhat pompous manner, and a kindly face. He was a Colonial Governor of the first water, and was perfectly aware of the fact.

Now, a Colonial Governor, even though he be a G.C.M.G. when he is at home, is not a name to conjure with, and does not fill an exclusive place in the eye of the English world. There are many Colonial Governors in the present and past tense to be found in the purlieus of South Kensington, where their presence creates no unusual excitement. But when one of this honourable corps sets foot upon the vessel destined to bear him to the shores that he shall rule, all this changes. He puts off the body of the ordinary betitled individual and puts on the body of the celestial brotherhood. In short, from being nobody out of the common he becomes,

and very properly so, a great man. Nobody knew this better than Lord Holmhurst, and to a person fond of observing such things nothing could have been more curious to notice than the small, but gradual increase of the pomposity of his manner, as the great ship day by day steamed further from England and nearer to the country where he was King. It went up, degree by degree, like a thermometer which is taken down into the bowels of the earth or gradually removed into the sunlight. At present, however, the thermometer was only rising.

"I was repeating, my Lord," said the harsh voice of Mr. Meeson, "that the principle of an hereditary peerage is the grandest principle our country has yet developed. It gives us something to look forward to. In one generation we make the money; in the next we take the title which the money buys. Look at your Lordship. Your Lordship is now in a proud position; but, as I have understood, your Lordship's father was a trader like me."

"Hum!--well, not exactly, Mr. Meeson," broke in Lord Holmhurst. "Dear me, I wonder who that exceedingly nice-looking girl Lady Holmhurst is talking to can be!"

"Now, your Lordship, to put a case," went on the remorseless Meeson, who, like most people of his stamp, had an almost superstitious veneration for the aristocracy, "I have made a great deal of money, as I do not mind telling your Lordship; what is there to prevent my successor--supposing I have a successor--from taking advantage of that money, and rising on it

to a similar position to that so worthily occupied by your Lordship?"

"Exactly, Mr. Meeson. A most excellent idea for your successor. Excuse me, but I see Lady Holmhurst beckoning to me." And he fled precipitately, still followed by Mr. Meeson.

"John, my dear!" said Lady Holmhurst, "I want to introduce you to Miss Smithers--the Miss Smithers whom we have all been talking about, and whose book you have been reading. Miss Smithers, my husband!"

Lord Holmhurst, who, when he was not deep in the affairs of State, had a considerable eye for a pretty girl--and what man worthy of the name has not?--bowed most politely, and was proceeding to tell Augusta, in very charming language, how delighted he was to make her acquaintance, when Mr. Meeson arrived on the scene and perceived Augusta for the first time. Quite taken aback at finding her, apparently, upon the very best of terms with people of such quality, he hesitated to consider what course to adopt; whereon Lady Holmhurst in a somewhat formal way, for she was not very fond of Mr. Meeson, mistaking his hesitation, went on to introduce him. Thereupon, all in a moment, as we do sometimes take such resolutions, Augusta came to a determination. She would have nothing more to do with Mr. Meeson--she would repudiate him then and there, come what would of it.

So, as he advanced upon her with outstretched hand, she drew herself up, and in a cold and determined voice said, "I already know Mr. Meeson, Lady

Holmhurst; and I do not wish to have anything more to do with him. Mr. Meeson has not behaved well to me."

"'Pon my word," murmured Lord Holmhurst to himself, "I don't wonder she has had enough of him. Sensible young woman, that!"

Lady Holmhurst looked a little astonished and a little amused. Suddenly, however, a light broke upon her.

"Oh! I see," she said. "I suppose that Mr. Meeson published 'Jemima's Vow.' Of course that accounts for it. Why, I declare there is the dinner bell! Come along, Miss Smithers, or we shall lose the place the captain has promised us." And, accordingly, they went, leaving Mr. Meeson, who had not yet realized the unprecedented nature of the position, positively gasping on the deck. And on board the Kangaroo there were no clerks and editors on whom he could wreck his wrath!

"And now, my dear Miss Smithers," said Lady Holmhurst when, dinner being over, they were sitting together in the moonlight, near the wheel, "perhaps you will tell me why you don't like Mr. Meeson, whom, by-the-way, I personally detest. But don't, if you don't wish to, you know."

But Augusta did wish to, and then and there she unfolded her whole sad story into her new-found friend's sympathetic ear; and glad enough the poor girl was to find a confidant to whom she could unbosom her sorrows.

"Well, upon my word!" said Lady Holmhurst, when she had listened with tears in her eyes to the history of poor little Jeannie's death, "upon my word, of all the brutes I ever heard of, I think that this publisher of yours is the worst! I will cut him, and get my husband to cut him too. But no, I have a better plan than that. He shall tear up that agreement, so sure as my name is Bessie Holmhurst; he shall tear it up, or--or"--and she nodded her little head with an air of infinite wisdom.