

CHAPTER VI.

MR. TOMBEY GOES FORWARD.

From that day forward, the voyage on the Kangaroo was, until the last dread catastrophe, a very happy one for Augusta. Lord and Lady Holmhurst made much of her, and all the rest of the first-class passengers followed suit, and soon she found herself the most popular character on board. The two copies of her book that there were on the ship were passed on from hand to hand till they would hardly hang together, and, really, at last she got quite tired of hearing of her own creations. But this was not all; Augusta was, it will be remembered, an exceedingly pretty woman, and melancholy as the fact may seem, it still remains a fact that a pretty woman is in the eyes of most people a more interesting object than a man, or than a lady, who is not "built that way." Thus it came to pass that what between her youth, her beauty, her talent, and her misfortunes--for Lady Holmhurst had not exactly kept that history to herself--Augusta was all of a sudden elevated into the position of a perfect heroine. It really almost frightened the poor girl, who had been accustomed to nothing but sorrow, ill-treatment and grinding poverty, to suddenly find herself in this strange position, with every man on board that great vessel at her beck and call. But she was human, and therefore, of course she enjoyed it. It is something when one has been wandering for hour after hour in the wet and melancholy night, suddenly to see the fair dawn breaking and burning overhead, and to know that the worst is over, for

now there will be light whereby to set our feet. It is something, too, to the most Christian soul, to utterly and completely triumph over one who had done all in his power to crush and destroy you; whose grasping greed has indirectly been the cause of the death of the person you loved best in the whole world round. And she did triumph. As Mr. Meeson's conduct to her got about, the little society of the ship--which was, after all a very fair example of all society in miniature--fell away from this publishing Prince, and not even the jingling of his money-bags could lure it back. He the great, the practically omnipotent, the owner of two millions, and the hard master of hundreds upon whose toil he battered, was practically cut. Even the clerk, who was going out on a chance of getting a place in a New Zealand bank, would have nothing to say to him. And what is more, he felt it more even than an ordinary individual would have done. He, the "Printer-devil," as poor little Jeannie used to call him, he to be slighted and flouted by a pack of people whom he could buy up three times over, and all on account of a wretched authoress--an authoress, if you please! It made Mr. Meeson very wild--a state of affairs which was brought to a climax when one morning Lord Holmhurst, who had for several days been showing a growing dislike to his society, actually almost cut him dead; that is, he did not notice his outstretched hand, and passed him with a slight bow.

"Never mind, my Lord--never mind!" muttered Mr. Meeson after that somewhat pompous but amiable nobleman's retreating form. "We'll see if I can't come square with you. I'm a dog who can pull a string or two in the English press, I am! Those who have the money and have got a hold of

people, so that they must write what they tell them, ain't people to be cut by any Colonial Governor, my Lord!" And in his anger he fairly shook his fist at the unconscious Peer.

"Seem to be a little out of temper, Mr. Meeson," said a voice at his elbow, the owner of which was a big young man with hard but kindly features and a large moustache. "What has the Governor been doing to you?"

"Doing, Mr. Tombey? He's been cutting me, that's all--me, Meeson!--cutting me as dead as offal, or something like it. I held out my hand and he looked right over it, and marched by."

"Ah!" said Mr. Tombey, who was a wealthy New Zealand landowner; "and now, why do you suppose he did that?"

"Why? I'll tell you why. It's all about that girl."

"Miss Smithers, do you mean?" said Tombey the big, with a curious flash of his deep-set eyes.

"Yes, Miss Smithers. She wrote a book, and I bought the book for fifty pounds, and stuck a clause in that she should give me the right to publish anything she wrote for five years at a price--a common sort of thing enough in one way and another, when you are dealing with some idiot who don't know any better. Well, as it happened this book sold like

wild-fire; and, in time the young lady comes to me and wants more money, wants to get out of the hanging clause in the agreement, wants everything, like a female Oliver Twist; and when I say, 'No, you don't,' loses her temper, and makes a scene. And it turns out that what she wanted the money for was to take a sick sister, or cousin, or aunt, or someone, out of England; and when she could not do it, and the relation died, then she emigrates, and goes and tells the people on board ship that it is all my fault."

"And I suppose that that is a conclusion that you do not feel drawn to, Mr. Meeson?"

"No Tombey, I don't. Business is business; and if I happen to have got to windward of the young woman, why, so much the better for me. She's getting her experience, that's all; and she ain't the first, and won't be the last. But if she goes saying much more about me, I go for her for slander, that's sure."

"On the legal ground that the greater the truth, the greater the libel, I presume?"

"Confound her!" went on Meeson, without noticing his remark, and contracting his heavy eyebrows, "there's no end to the trouble she has brought on me. I quarrelled with my nephew about her, and now she's dragging my name through the dirt here, and I'll bet the story will go all over New Zealand and Australia."

"Yes," said Mr. Tombey, "I fancy you will find it take a lot of choking; and now, Mr. Meeson, with your permission I will say a word, and try and throw a new light upon a very perplexing matter. It never seems to have occurred to you what an out-and-out blackguard you are, so I may as well put it to you plainly. If you are not a thief, you are, at least, a very well-coloured imitation. You take a girl's book and make hundreds upon hundreds out of it, and give her fifty. You tie her down, so as to provide for successful swindling of the same sort, during future years, and then, when she comes to beg a few pounds of you, you show her the door. And now you wonder, Mr. Meeson, that respectable people will have nothing to do with you! Well, now, I tell you, my opinion is that the only society to which you would be really suited is that of cow-hide. Good morning," and the large young man walked off, his very moustachios curling with wrath and contempt. Thus, for a second time, did the great Mr. Meeson hear the truth from the lips of babes and sucklings, and the worst of it was that he could not disinherit Number Two as he had Number One.

Now this will strike the reader as being very warm advocacy on the part of Mr. Tombey, who, being called in to console and bless, cursed with such extraordinary vigour. It may even strike the discerning reader--and all readers, or, at least, nearly all readers, are of course discerning: far too much so, indeed--that there must have been a reason for it; and the discerning reader will be right. Augusta's grey eyes had been too much for Mr. Tombey, as they had been too much for Eustace Meeson before

him. His passion had sprung up and ripened in that peculiarly rapid and vigorous fashion that passions do on board ship. A passenger steamer is Cupid's own hot-bed, and in this way differs from a sailing-ship. On the sailing-ship, indeed, the preliminary stages are the same. The seed roots as strongly, and grows and flowers with equal vigour; but here comes the melancholy part--it withers and decays with equal rapidity. The voyage is too long. Too much is mutually revealed. The matrimonial iron cannot be struck while it is hot, and long before the weary ninety days are over it is once more cold and black, or at the best glows with but a feeble heat. But on the steamship there is no time for this, as any traveller knows. Myself--I, the historian--have, with my own eyes seen a couple meet for the first time at Maderia, get married at the Cape, and go on as man and wife in the same vessel to Natal. And, therefore, it came to pass that very evening a touching, and, on the whole melancholy, little scene was enacted near the smoke-stack of the Kangaroo.

Mr. Tombey and Miss Augusta Smithers were leaning together over the bulwarks and watching the phosphorescent foam go flashing past. Mr. Tombey was nervous and ill at ease; Miss Smithers very much at ease, and reflecting that her companion's moustachios would very well become a villain in a novel.

Mr. Tombey looked at the star-spangled sky, on which the Southern Cross hung low, and he looked at the phosphorescent sea; but from neither did inspiration come. Inspiration is from within, and not from without. At last, however, he made a gallant and a desperate effort.

"Miss Smithers," he said in a voice trembling with agitation.

"Yes, Mr. Tombey," answered Augusta, quietly; "what is it?"

"Miss Smithers," he went on--"Miss Augusta, I don't know what you will think of me, but I must tell you, I can't keep it any longer, I love you!"

Augusta fairly jumped. Mr. Tombey had been very, even markedly, polite, and she, not being a fool, had seen that he admired her; but she had never expected this, and the suddenness with which the shot was fired was somewhat bewildering.

"Why, Mr. Tombey," she said in a surprised voice, "you have only known me for a little more than a fortnight."

"I fell in love with you when I had only known you for an hour," he answered with evident sincerity. "Please listen to me. I know I am not worthy of you! But I do love you so very dearly, and I would make you a good husband; indeed I would, I am well off; though, of course that is nothing; and if you don't like New Zealand, I would give it up and go to live in England. Do you think that you can take me? If you only knew how dearly I love you, I am sure you would."

Augusta collected her wits as well as she could. The man evidently did

love her; there was no doubting the sincerity of his words, and she liked him and he was a gentleman. If she married him there would be an end of all her worries and troubles, and she could rest contentedly on his strong arm. Woman, even gifted woman, is not made to fight the world with her own hand, and the prospect had allurements. But while she thought, Eustace Meeson's bonny face rose before her eyes, and, as it did so, a faint feeling of repulsion to the man who was pleading with her took form and colour in her breast. Eustace Meeson, of course, was nothing to her; no word or sign of affection had passed between them; and the probability was that she would never set her eyes upon him again. And yet that face rose up between her and this man who was pleading at her side. Many women, likely enough, have seen some such vision from the past and have disregarded it, only to find too late that that which is thrust aside is not necessarily hidden; for alas! those faces of our departed youth have an uncanny trick of rising from the tomb of our forgetfulness. But Augusta was not of the great order of opportunists. Because a thing might be convenient, it did not, according to the dictates of her moral sense, follow that it was lawful. Therefore, she was a woman to be respected. For a woman who, except under most exceptional circumstances, gives her instincts the lie in order to pander to her convenience or her desire for wealth and social ease, is not altogether a woman to be respected.

In a very few seconds she had made up her mind.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Tombey," she said; "you have done me a great honour, the greatest honour man can do to a woman; but I cannot

marry you."

"Are you sure?" gasped the unfortunate Tombey, for his hopes had been high. "Is there no hope for me? Perhaps there is somebody else!"

"There is nobody else, Mr. Tombey; and, I am sorry to say, you don't know how much it pains me to say it, I cannot hold out any prospect that I shall change my mind."

He dropped his head upon his hands for a minute, and then lifted it again.

"Very well," he said slowly; "it can't be helped. I never loved any woman before, and I never shall again. It is a pity "--(with a hard, little laugh)--"that so much first-class affection should be wasted. But, there you are; it is all part and parcel of the pleasant experiences which make up our lives. Good-bye, Miss Smithers; at least, good-bye as a friend!"

"We can still be friends," she faltered.

"Oh, no," he answered, with another laugh; "that is an exploded notion. Friendship of that nature is not very safe under any circumstances, certainly not under these. The relationship is antagonistic to the facts of life, and the friends, or one or other of them, will drift either into indifference and dislike, or--something warmer. You are a novelist,

Miss Smithers; perhaps some day you will write a book to explain why people fall in love where their affection is not wanted, and what purpose their distress can possibly serve. And now, once more, good bye!" and he lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed it, and then, with a bow, turned and went.

From all of which it will be clearly seen that Mr. Tombey was decidedly a young man above the average, and one who took punishment very well. Augusta looked after him, and sighed deeply, and even wiped away a tear. Then she turned and walked aft, to where Lady Holmhurst was sitting enjoying the balmy southern air, through which the great ship was rushing with outspread sails like some huge white bird, and chatting to the captain. As she came up, the captain made his bow and departed, saying that he had something to see to, and for a minute Lady Holmhurst and Augusta were left alone.

"Well, Augusta?" said Lady Holmhurst, for she called her "Augusta" now. "And what have you done with that young man, Mr. Tombey--that very nice young man?" she added with emphasis.

"I think that Mr. Tombey went forward," said Augusta.

The two women looked at each other, and, womanlike, each understood what the other meant. Lady Holmhurst had not been altogether innocent in the Tombey affair.

"Lady Holmhurst," said Augusta, taking the bull by the horns, "Mr. Tombey has been speaking to me and has"--

"Proposed to you," suggested Lady Holmhurst, admiring the Southern Cross through her eyeglasses. "You said he went forward, you know."

"Has proposed to me," answered Augusta, ignoring the little joke. "I regret," she went on hurriedly, "that I have not been able to fall in with Mr. Tombey's plans."

"Ah!" said Lady Holmhurst; "I am sorry, for some things. Mr. Tombey is such a very nice young man, and so very gentlemanlike. I thought that perhaps it might suit your views, and it would have simplified your future arrangements. But as to that, of course, while you are in New Zealand, I shall be able to see to that. By-the-way, it is understood that you come to stay with us for a few months at Government House, before you hunt up your cousin."

"You are very good to me, Lady Holmhurst," said Augusta, with something like a sob.

"Suppose, my dear," answered the great lady, laying her little hand upon Augusta's beautiful hair, "that you were to drop the 'Lady Holmhurst' and call me 'Bessie?' it sounds so much more sociable, you know, and, besides; it is shorter, and does not waste so much breath."

Then Augusta sobbed outright, for her nerves were shaken: "You don't know what your kindness means to me," she said; "I have never had a friend, and since my darling died I have been so very lonely!"