

CHAPTER IX.

AUGUSTA TO THE RESCUE.

After breakfast--that is, after Augusta had eaten some biscuit and a wing that remained from the chickens she had managed to cook upon the previous day--Bill and Johnnie, the two sailors, set to work, at her suggestion, to fix up a long fragment of drift-wood on a point of rock, and to bind it on to a flag that they happened to find in the locker of the boat. There was not much chance of its being seen by anybody in that mist-laden atmosphere, even if anybody came there to see it, of which there was still less chance; still they did it as a sort of duty. By the time this task was finished it was midday, and, for a wonder, there was little wind, and the sun shone out brightly. On returning to the huts Augusta got the blankets out to dry, and set the two sailors to roast some of the eggs they had found on the previous day. This they did willingly enough, for they were now quite sober, and very much ashamed of themselves. Then, after giving Dick some more biscuit and four roasted eggs, which he took to wonderfully, she went to Mr. Meeson, who was lying groaning in the hut, and persuaded him to come and sit out in the warmth.

By this time the wretched man's condition was pitiable, for, though his strength was still whole in him, he was persuaded that he was going to die, and could touch nothing but some rum-and-water.

"Miss Smithers," he said, as he sat shivering upon the rocks, "I am going to die in this horrible place, and I am not fit to die! To think of me," he went on with a sudden burst of his old fire, "to think of me dying like a starved dog in the cold, when I have two millions of money waiting to be spent there in England! And I would give them all--yes, every farthing of them--to find myself safe at home again! By Jove! I would change places with any poor devil of a writer in the Hutches! Yes, I would turn author on twenty pounds a month!--that will give you some idea of my condition, Miss Smithers! To think that I should ever live to say that I would care to be a beggarly author, who could not make a thousand a year if he wrote till his fingers fell off!--oh! oh!" and he fairly sobbed at the horror and degradation of the thought.

Augusta looked at the poor wretch and then bethought her of the proud creature she had known, raging terribly through the obsequious ranks of clerks, and carrying desolation to the Hutches and the many-headed editorial department. She looked, and was filled with reflections on the mutability of human affairs.

Alas! how changed that Meeson!

"Yes," he went on, recovering himself a little, "I am going to die in this horrible place, and all my money will not even give me a decent funeral. Addison and Roscoe will get it--confound them!--as though they had not got enough already. It makes me mad when I think of those Addison girls spending my money, or bribing Peers to marry them with it, or

something of that sort. I disinherited my own nephew, Eustace, and kicked him out to sink or swim; and now I can't undo it, and I would give anything to alter it! We quarrelled about you, Miss Smithers, because I would not give you any more money for that book of yours. I wish I had given it to you--anything you wanted. I didn't treat you well; but, Miss Smithers, a bargain is a bargain. It would never have done to give way, on principle. You must understand that, Miss Smithers. Don't revenge yourself on me about it, now that I am helpless, because, you see, it was a matter of principle."

"I am not in the habit of revenging myself, Mr. Meeson," answered Augusta, with dignity; "but I think that you have done a very wicked thing to disinherit your nephew in that fashion, and I don't wonder that you feel uncomfortable about it."

The expression of this vigorous opinion served to disturb Mr. Meeson's conscience all the more, and he burst out into laments and regrets.

"Well," said Augusta at last, "if you don't like your will you had better alter it. There are enough of us here to witness a will, and, if anything happens to you, it will override the other--will it not?"

This was a new idea, and the dying man jumped at it.

"Of course, of course," he said; "I never thought of that before. I will do it at once, and cut Addison and Roscoe out altogether. Eustace shall

have every farthing. I never thought of that before. Come, give me your hand; I'll get up and see about it."

"Stop a minute," said Augusta. "How are you going to write a will without pen or pencil, or paper or ink?"

Mr. Meeson sank back with a groan. This difficulty had not occurred to him.

"Are you sure nobody has got a pencil and a bit of paper?" he asked. "It would do, so long as the writing remained legible."

"I don't think so," said Augusta, "but I will inquire." Accordingly she went and asked Bill and Johnnie: but neither of them had a pencil or a single scrap of paper, and she returned sadly to communicate the news.

"I have got it, I have got it," said Mr. Meeson, as she approached the spot where he lay upon the rock. "If there is no paper or pen, we must write it in blood upon some linen. We can make a pen from the feathers of a bird. I read somewhere in a book of somebody who did that. It will do as well as anything else."

Here was an idea, indeed, and one that Augusta jumped at. But in another moment her enthusiasm received a check. Where was there any linen to write on?

"Yes," she said, "if you can find some linen. You have got on a flannel shirt, so have the two sailors, and little Dick is dressed in flannel, too."

It was a fact. As it happened, not one of the party had a scrap of linen on them, or anything that would answer the purpose. Indeed, they had only one pocket-handkerchief between them, and it was a red rag full of holes. Augusta had had one, but it had blown overboard when they were in the boat. What would they not have given for that pocket-handkerchief now!

"Yes," said Mr. Meeson, "it seems we have none. I haven't even got a bank-note, or I might have written in blood upon that; though I have got a hundred sovereigns in gold--I grabbed them up before I bolted from the cabin. But I say--excuse me, Miss Smithers, but--um--ah--oh! hang modesty--haven't you got some linen on, somewhere or other, that you could spare a bit of? You shan't lose by giving it to me. There, I promise that I will tear up the agreement if ever I get out of this--which I shan't--which I shan't--and I will write on the linen that it is to be torn up. Yes, and that you are to have five thousand pounds legacy too, Miss Smithers. Surely you can spare me a little bit--just off the skirt, or somewhere, you know, Miss Smithers? It never will be missed, and it is so very important."

Augusta blushed, and no wonder. "I am sorry to say I have nothing of the sort about me, Mr. Meeson--nothing except flannel," she said. "I got up

in the middle of the night before the collision, and there was no light in the cabin, and I put on whatever came first, meaning to come back and dress afterwards when it got light."

"Stays!" said Mr. Meeson, desperately. "Forgive me for mentioning them, but surely you put on your stays? One could write on them, you know."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Meeson," she answered, "but I did not put any on."

"Not a cuff or a collar?" he said, catching at a last straw of hope.

Augusta shook her head sadly.

"Then there is an end of it!" groaned Mr. Meeson. "Eustace must lose the money. Poor lad! poor lad! I have behaved very badly to him."

Augusta stood still, racking her brain for some expedient, for she was determined that Eustace Meeson should not lose the chance of that colossal fortune if she could help it. It was but a poor chance at the best, for Mr. Meeson might not be dying, after all. And if he did die, it was probable that his fate would be their fate also, and no record would remain of them or of Mr. Meeson's testamentary wishes. As things looked at present, there was every prospect of their all perishing miserably on that desolate shore.

Just then the sailor Bill, who had been up to the flagstaff on the rock

on the chance of catching sight of some passing vessel, came walking past. His flannel shirt-sleeves were rolled up to the elbows of his brawny arms, and as he stopped to speak to Augusta she noticed something that made her start, and gave her an idea.

"There ain't nothing to be seen," said the man, roughly; "and it is my belief that there won't be neither. Here we are, and here we stops till we dies and rots."

"Ah, I hope not," said Augusta. "By-the-way, Mr. Bill, will you let me look at the tattoo on your arm?"

"Certainly, Miss," said Bill, with alacrity, holding his great arm within an inch of her nose. It was covered with various tattoos: flags, ships, and what not, in the middle of which, written in small letters along the side of the forearm, was the sailor's name--Bill Jones.

"Who did it, Mr. Bill?" asked Augusta.

"Who did it? Why I did it myself. A chap made me a bet that I could not tattoo my own name on my own arm, so I showed him; and a poor sort of hand I should have been at tattooing if I could not."

Augusta said no more till Bill had gone on, then she spoke.

"Now, Mr. Meeson, do you see how you can make your will?" she said

quietly.

"See? No." he answered, "I don't."

"Well, I do: you can tattoo it--or, rather get the sailor to tattoo it.

It need not be very long."

"Tattoo it! What on, and what with?" he asked, astonished.

"You can have it tattooed on the back of the other sailor, Johnnie, if he will allow you; and as for material, you have some revolver cartridges; if the gunpowder is mixed with water, it would do, I should think."

"Pon my word," said Mr. Meeson, "you are a wonderful woman! Whoever would have thought of such a thing except a woman? Go and ask the man Johnnie, there's a good girl, if he would mind my will being tattooed upon his back."

"Well," said Augusta; "it's a queer sort of message; but I'll try."

Accordingly, taking little Dick by the hand, she went across to where the two sailors were sitting outside their hut, and putting on her sweetest smile, first of all asked Mr. Bill if he would mind doing a little tattooing for her. To this Mr. Bill, finding time hang heavy upon his hands, and wishing to be kept out of the temptation of the rum-cask, graciously assented, saying that he had seen some sharp fish-bones lying about which would be the very thing, though he shook his head at the idea

of using gunpowder as the medium. He said it would not do at all well, and then, as though suddenly seized by an inspiration, started off down to the shore.

Then Augusta, as gently and nicely as she could, approached the question with Johnnie, who was sitting with his back against the hut, his battered countenance wearing a peculiarly ill-favored expression, probably owing to the fact that he was suffering from severe pain in his head, as a result of the debauch of the previous night.

Slowly and with great difficulty, for his understanding was none of the clearest, she explained to him what was required; and that it was suggested that he should provide the necessary corpus vile upon which it was proposed that the experiment should be made. When at last he understood what it was asked that he should do, Johnnie's countenance was a sight to see, and his language was more striking than correct. The upshot of it was, however, that he would see Mr. Meeson collectively, and Mr. Meeson's various members separately, especially his eyes, somewhere first.

Augusta retreated till his wrath had spent itself, and then once more returned to the charge.

She was sure, she said, that Mr. Johnnie would not mind witnessing the document, if anybody else could be found to submit to the pain of the tattooing. All that would be necessary would be for him to touch the hand

of the operator while his (Johnnie's) name was tattooed as witness to the will. "Well," he said, "I don't know how as I mind doing that, since it's you as asked me, Miss, and not the d----d old hulks of a Meeson. I would not lift a finger to save him from 'ell Miss, and that's a fact!"

"Then that is a promise, Mr. Johnnie?" said Augusta, sweetly ignoring the garnishing with which the promise was adorned; and on Mr. Johnnie stating that he looked at it in that light, she returned to Mr. Meeson. On her way she met Bill, carrying in his hands a loathsome-looking fish, with long feelers and a head like a parrot, in short, a cuttle-fish.

"Now, here's luck, Miss," said Bill, exultingly; "I saw this gentleman lying down on the beach there this morning. He's a cuttle, that's what he is; and I'll have his ink-bag out of him in a brace of shakes; just the ticket for tattooing, Miss, as good as the best Indian-ink--gunpowder is a fool to it."

By this time they had reached Mr. Meeson, and here the whole matter, including Johnnie's obstinate refusal to be tattooed was explained to Bill.

"Well," said Augusta at length, "it seems that's the only thing to be done; but the question is, how to do it? I can only suggest, Mr. Meeson, that the will should be tattooed on you."

"Oh!" said Mr. Meeson, feebly, "on me! Me tattooed like a

savage--tattooed with my own will!"

"It wouldn't be much use, either, governor, begging your pardon," said Bill, "that is, if you are agoing to croak, as you say; 'cause where would the will be then? We might skin you with a sharp stone, perhaps, after you've done the trick, you know," he added reflectively. "But then we have no salt, so I doubt if you'd keep; and if we set your hide in the sun, I reckon the writing would shrivel up so that all the courts of law in London could not make head or tail of it."

Mr. Meeson groaned loudly, as well he might. These frank remarks would have been trying to any man; much more were they so to this opulent merchant prince, who had always set the highest value on what Bill rudely called his "hide."

"There's the infant," went on Bill, meditatively. "He's young and white, and I fancy his top-crust would work wonderful easy; but you'd have to hold him, for I expect that he'd yell proper."

"Yes," said Mr. Meeson; "let the will be tattooed upon the child. He'd be some use that way."

"Yes," said Bill; "and there'd allus be something left to remind me of a very queer time, provided he lives to get out of it, which is doubtful. Cuttle-ink won't rub out, I'll warrant."

"I won't have Dick touched," said Augusta, indignantly. "It would frighten the child into fits; and, besides, nobody has a right to mark him for life in that way."

"Well, then, there's about an end of the question," said Bill; "and this gentleman's money must go wherever it is he don't want it to."

"No," said Augusta, with a sudden flush, "there is not. Mr. Eustace Meeson was once very kind to me, and rather than he should lose the chance of getting what he ought to have, I--I will be tattooed."

"Well, bust me!" said Bill, with enthusiasm, "bust me! if you ain't a good-plucked one for a female woman; and if I was that there young man I should make bold to tell you so."

"Yes," said Mr. Meeson, "that is an excellent idea. You are young and strong, and as there is lots of food here, I dare say that you will take a long time to die. You might even live for some months. Let us begin at once. I feel dreadfully weak. I don't think that I can live through the night, and if I know that I have done all I can to make sure that Eustace gets his own, perhaps dying will be a little easier!"