

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST OF MR. MEESON.

Augusta turned from the old man with a gesture of impatience not unmixed with disgust. His selfishness was of an order that revolted her.

"I suppose," she said sharply to Bill, "that I must have this will tattooed upon my shoulders."

"Yes, Miss; that's it," said Bill. "You see, Miss, one wants space for a doccymint. If it were a ship or a flag, now, or a fancy pictur of your young man, I might manage it on your arm, but there must be breadth for a legal doccymint, more especially as I should like to make a good job of it while I is about it. I don't want none of them laryers a-turning up their noses at Bill Jones' tattooing."

"Very well," said Augusta, with an inward sinking of the heart; "I will go and get ready."

Accordingly she adjourned into the hut and removed the body of her dress and turned down the flannel garment underneath it in such a fashion as to leave as much of her neck bare as is to be seen when a lady has on a moderately low dress. Then she came out again, dressed, or rather undressed, for the sacrifice. Meanwhile, Bill had drawn out the ink-bag

of the cuttle, had prepared a little round fragment of wood which he sharpened like a pencil by rubbing it against a stone, and had put a keen edge on to a long white fishbone that he had selected.

"Now, Mr. Bill, I am ready," said Augusta, seating herself resolutely upon a flat stone and setting her teeth.

"My word, Miss; but you have a fine pair of shoulders!" said the sailor, contemplating the white expanse with the eye of an artist. "I never had such a bit of material to work on afore. Hang me if it ain't almost a pity to mark 'em! Not but what high-class tattooing is an orniment to anybody, from a Princess down; and in that you are fortunite, Miss, for I larnt tattooing from them as can tattoo, I did."

Augusta bit her lip, and the tears came into her eyes. She was only a woman, and had a woman's little weakness; and, though she had never appeared in a low dress in her life, she knew that her neck was one of her greatest beauties, and was proud of it. It was hard to think that she would be marked all her life with this ridiculous will--that is, if she escaped--and, what was more, for the benefit of a young man who had no claim upon her at all.

That was what she said to herself; but as she said it, something in her told her that it was not true. Something told her that this young Mr. Eustace Meeson had a claim upon her--the highest claim that a man could have upon a woman, for the truth must out--she loved him. It seemed to

have come home to her quite clearly here in this dreadful desolate place, here in the very shadow of an awful death, that she did love him, truly and deeply. And that being so, she would not have been what she was--a gentle-natured, devoted woman--had she not at heart rejoiced at this opportunity of self-sacrifice, even though that self-sacrifice was of the hardest sort, seeing that it involved what all women hate--the endurance of a ridiculous position. For love can do all things: it can even make its votaries brave ridicule.

"Go on," she said sharply, "and let us get it over as soon as possible."

"Very well, Miss. What is it to be, old gentleman? Cut it short, you know."

"I leave all my property to Eustace H. Meeson, ' that's as short as I can get it; and, if properly witnessed, I think that it will cover everything," said Mr. Meeson, with a feeble air of triumph. "Anyhow, I never heard of a will that is to carry about two millions being got into nine words before."

Bill poised his fishbone, and, next second, Augusta gave a start and a little shriek, for the operation had begun.

"Never mind, Miss," said Bill, consolingly; "you'll soon get used to it."

After that Augusta set her teeth and endured in silence, though it really

hurt her very much, for Bill was more careful of the artistic effect and the permanence of the work than of the feelings of the subject. Fiat experimentum in corpore vili, he would have said had he been conversant with the Classics, without much consideration for the corpus vile. So he pricked and dug away with his fishbone, which he dipped continually in the cuttle-ink, and with the sharp piece of wood, till Augusta began to feel perfectly faint.

For three hours the work continued, and at the end of that time the body of the will was finished--for Bill was a rapid worker--being written in medium-sized letters right across her shoulders. But the signatures yet remained to be affixed.

Bill asked her if she would like to let them stand over till the morrow?--but this, although she felt ill with the pain she declined to do. She was marked now, marked with the ineffaceable mark of Bill, so she might as well be marked to some purpose. If she put off the signing of the document till the morrow, it might be too late, Mr. Meeson might be dead, Johnnie might have changed his mind, or a hundred things. So she told them to go on and finish it as quickly as possible, for there was only about two hours more daylight.

Fortunately Mr. Meeson was more or less acquainted with the formalities that are necessary in the execution of a will, namely: that the testator and the two witnesses should all sign in the presence of each other. He also knew that it was sufficient, if, in cases of illness, some third

person held the pen between the testator's fingers and assisted him to write his name, or even if someone signed for the testator in his presence and by his direction; and, arguing from this knowledge, he came to the conclusion--afterwards justified in the great case of Meeson v. Addison and Another--that it would be sufficient if he inflicted the first prick of his signature, and then kept his hand upon Bill's while the rest was done. This accordingly, he did, clumsily running the point of the sharp bone so deep into the unfortunate Augusta that she fairly shrieked aloud, and then keeping his hand upon the sailor's arm while he worked in the rest of the signature, "J. Meeson." When it was done, the turn of Johnnie came. Johnnie had at length aroused himself to some interest in what was going on, and had stood by watching all the time, since Mr. Meeson having laid his finger upon Augusta's shoulder, had solemnly declared the writing thereon to be his last will and testament. As he (Johnnie) could not tattoo, the same process was gone through with reference to his signature, as in the case of Mr. Meeson. Then Bill Jones signed his own name, as the second witness to the will; and just as the light went out of the sky the document was finally executed--the date of the execution being alone omitted. Augusta got up off the flat stone where she had been seated during this torture for something like five hours, and staggering into the hut, threw herself down upon the sail, and went off into a dead faint. It was indeed only by a very strong exercise of the will that she had kept herself from fainting long before.

The next thing she was conscious of was a dreadful smarting in her back, and on opening her eyes found that it was quite dark in the hut. So

weary was she, however, that after stretching out her hand to assure herself that Dick was safe by her side, she shut her eyes again and went fast asleep. When she woke, the daylight was creeping into the damp and squalid hut, revealing the heavy form of Mr. Meeson tossing to and fro in a troubled slumber on the further side. She got up, feeling dreadfully sore about the back; and, awaking the child, took him out to the stream of water and washed him and herself as well as she could. It was very cold outside; so cold that the child cried, and the rain clouds were coming up fast, so she hurried back to the hut, and, together with Dick, made her breakfast off some biscuit and some roast penguin's eggs, which were not at all bad eating. She was indeed, quite weak with hunger, having swallowed no food for many hours, and felt proportionately better after it.

Then she turned to examine the condition of Mr. Meeson. The will had been executed none too soon, for it was evident to her that he was in a very bad way indeed. His face was sunken and hectic with fever, his teeth were chattering, and his talk, though he was now awake, was quite incoherent. She tried to get him to take some food; but he would swallow nothing but water. Having done all that she could for him, she went out to see the sailors, and met them coming down from the flagstaff. They had evidently been, though not to any great extent, at the rum cask again, for Bill looked sheepish and shaky, while the ill-favored Johnnie was more sulky than ever. She gazed at them reproachfully, and then asked them to collect some more penguin's eggs, which Johnnie refused point-blank to do, saying that he wasn't going to collect eggs for landlubbers to eat;

she might collect eggs for herself. Bill, however, started on the errand, and in about an hour's time returned, just as the rain set in in good earnest, bearing six or seven dozen fresh eggs tied up in his coat.

Augusta, with the child by her, sat in the miserable hut attending to Mr. Meeson; while outside the pitiless rain poured down in a steady unceasing sheet of water that came through the wretched roof in streams. She did her best to keep the dying man dry, but it proved to be almost an impossibility; for even when she succeeded in preventing the wet from falling on him from above, it got underneath him from the reeking floor, while the heavy damp of the air gathered on his garments till they were quite sodden.

As the hours went on his consciousness came back to him, and with it his terror for the end and his remorse for his past life, for alas! the millions he had amassed could not avail him now.

"I am going to die!" he groaned. "I am going to die, and I've been a bad man: I've been the head of a publishing company all my life!"

Augusta gently pointed out to him that publishing was a very respectable business when fairly and properly carried on, and not one that ought to weigh heavy upon a man at the last like the record of a career of successful usury or burgling.

He shook his heavy head. "Yes, yes," he groaned; "but Meeson's is a

company and you are talking of private firms. They are straight, most of them; far too straight, I used always to say. But you don't know Meeson's--you don't know the customs of the trade at Meeson's."

Augusta reflected that she knew a good deal more about Meeson's than she liked.

"Listen," he said, with desperate energy, sitting up upon the sail, "and I will tell you--I must tell you."

Asterisks, so dear to the heart of the lady novelist, will best represent the confession that followed; words are not equal to the task.

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Augusta listened with rising hair, and realised how very trying must be the life of a private confessor.

"Oh, please stop!" she said faintly, at last. "I can't bear it--I can't, indeed."

"Ah!" he said, as he sunk back exhausted. "I thought that when you understood the customs at Meeson's you would feel for me in my present position. Think, girl, think what I must suffer, with such a past, standing face to face with an unknown future!"

Then came a silence.

"Take him away! Take him away!" suddenly shouted out Mr. Meeson, staring around him with frightened eyes.

"Who?" asked Augusta; "who?"

"Him--the tall, thin man, with the big book! I know him; he used to be Number 25--he died years ago. He was a very clever doctor; but one of his patients brought a false charge against him and ruined him, so he had to take to writing, poor devil! We made him edit a medical encyclopaedia--twelve volumes for £300, to be paid on completion; and he went mad and died at the eleventh volume. So, of course, we did not pay his widow anything. And now he's come for me--I know he has. Listen! he's talking! Don't you hear him? Oh, Heavens! He says that I am going to be an author, and he is going to publish for me for a thousand years--going to publish on the quarter-profit system, with an annual account, the usual trade deductions, and no vouchers. Oh! oh! Look!--they are all coming!--they are pouring out of the Hutches! they are going to murder me!--keep them off! keep them off!" and he howled and beat the air with his hands.

Augusta, utterly overcome by this awful sight, knelt down by his side and tried to quiet him, but in vain. He continued beating his hands in the air, trying to keep off the ghostly train, till, at last, with one awful howl, he fell back dead.

And that was the end of Meeson. And the works that he published, and the money that he made, and the house that he built, and the evil that he did--are they not written in the Book of the Commercial Kings?

"Well," said Augusta faintly to herself when she had got her breath back a little, "I am glad that it is over; anyway, I do hope that I may never be called on to nurse the head of another publishing company."

"Auntie! auntie!" gasped Dick, "why do the gentleman shout so?"

Then, taking the frightened child by the hand, Augusta made her way through the rain to the other hut, in order to tell the two sailors what had come to pass. It had no door, and she paused on the threshold to prospect. The faint foggy light was so dim that at first she could see nothing. Presently, however, her eyes got accustomed to it, and she made out Bill and Johnnie sitting opposite to each other on the ground. Between them was the breaker of rum. Bill had a large shell in his had, which he had just filled from the cask; for Augusta saw him in the act of replacing the spigot.

"My go!--curse you, my go!" said Johnnie, as Bill lifted the shell of spirits to his lips. "You've had seven goes and I've only had six!"

"You be blowed!" said Bill, swallowing the liquor in a couple of great gulps. "Ah! that's better! Now I'll fill for you, mate: fair does, I

says, fair does and no favour," and he filled accordingly.

"Mr. Meeson is dead," said Augusta, screwing up her courage to interrupt this orgie.

The two men stared at her in drunken surprise, which Johnnie broke.

"Now is he, Miss?" he said, with a hiccough: "is he? Well, a good job too, says I; a useless old landlubber he was. I doubt he's off to a warmer place than this 'ere Kerguelen Land, and I drinks his health, which, by-the-way, I never had the occasion to do before. Here's to the health of the departed," and he swallowed the shellfull of rum at a draught.

"Your sentiment I echoes," said Bill. "Johnnie, the shell; give us the shell to drink the 'ealth of the dear departed."

Then Augusta returned to her hut with a heavy heart. She covered up the dead body as best she could, telling little Dick that Mr. Meeson was gone by-by, and then sat down in that chill and awful company. It was very depressing; but she comforted herself somewhat with the reflection that, on the whole, Mr. Meeson dead was not so bad as Mr. Meeson in the animated flesh.

Presently the night set in once more, and, worn out with all that she had gone through, Augusta said her prayers and went to sleep with little Dick

locked fast in her arms.

Some hours afterwards she was awakened by loud and uproarious shouts, made up of snatches of drunken songs and that peculiar class of English that hovers ever round the lips of the British Tar. Evidently Bill and Johnnie were raging drunk, and in this condition were taking the midnight air.

The shouting and swearing went reeling away towards the water's edge, and then, all of a sudden, they culminated in a fearful yell--after which came silence.

What could it mean? wondered Augusta and whilst she was still wondering dropped off to sleep again.