

CHAPTER XIII.

EUSTACE BUYS A PAPER.

In due course the train that bore Augusta and her fortunes, timed to reach Waterloo at 5.40 p.m., rolled into the station. The train was a fast one, but the telegraph had been faster. All the evening papers had come out with accounts, more or less accurate, of their escape, and most of them had added that the two survivors would reach Waterloo by the 5.40 train. The consequence was, that when the train drew up at the platform, Augusta, on looking out, was horrified to see a dense mass of human beings being kept in check by a line of policemen.

However, the guard was holding the door open, so there was nothing for it but to get out, which she did, taking Dick by the hand, a proceeding that necessarily put her identity beyond a doubt. The moment she got her foot on to the platform, the crowd saw her, and there arose such a tremendous shout of welcome that she very nearly took refuge again in the carriage. For a moment she stood hesitating, and the crowd, seeing how sweet and beautiful she was (for the three months of sea air had made her stouter and even more lovely), cheered again with that peculiar enthusiasm which a discerning public always shows for a pretty face. But even while she stood bewildered on the platform she heard a loud "Make way--make way there!" and saw the multitude being divided by a little knot of officials, who were escorting somebody dressed in widow's weeds.

In another second there was a cry of joy, and a sweet, pale faced little lady had run at the child Dick, and was hugging him against her heart, and sobbing and laughing both at once.

"Oh! my boy! my boy!" cried Lady Holmhurst, for it was she, "I thought you were dead--long ago dead!"

And then she turned, and, before all the people there, clung about Augusta's neck and kissed her and blessed her, because she had saved her only child, and half removed the deadweight of her desolation. Whereat the crowd cheered, and wept, and yelled, and swore with excitement, and blessed their stars that they were there to see.

And then, in a haze of noise and excitement, they were led through the cheering mob to where a carriage and pair were standing, and were helped into it, Mrs. Thomas being placed on the front seat, and Lady Holmhurst and Augusta on the back, the former with the gasping Dick upon her knee.

And now little Dick is out of the story.

Then another event occurred, which we must go back a little to explain.

When Eustace Meeson had come to town, after being formally disinherited, he had managed to get a billet as Latin, French, and Old English reader in a publishing house of repute. As it happened, on this very afternoon

he was strolling down the Strand, having finished a rather stiff day's work, and with a mind filled with those idle and somewhat confused odds and ends of speculation with which most brain workers will be acquainted. He looked older and paler than when we last met him, for sorrow and misfortune had laid their heavy hands upon him. When Augusta had departed, he had discovered that he was head over heels in love with her in that unfortunate way--for ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it is unfortunate--in which many men of susceptibility do occasionally fall in love in their youth--a way that brands the heart for life in a fashion that can no more be effaced than the stamp of a hot iron can be effaced from the physical body. Such an affection--which is not altogether of the earth--will, when it overcomes a man, prove either the greatest blessing of his life or one of the heaviest, most enduring curses that a malignant fate can heap upon his head. For if he achieves his desire, even though he serve his seven years, surely for him life will be robbed of half its evil. But if he lose her, either through misfortune or because he gave all this to one who did not understand the gift, or one who looked at love and on herself as a currency wherewith to buy her place and the luxury of days, then he will be of all men among the most miserable. For nothing can give him back that which has gone from him.

Eustace had never seen Augusta but twice in his life; but then passion does not necessarily depend upon constant previous intercourse with its object. Love at first sight is common enough, and in this instance Eustace was not altogether dependent upon the spoken words of his adored, or on his recollection of her very palpable beauty. For he had

her books. To those who know something of the writer--sufficient, let us say, to enable him to put an approximate value on his or her sentiments, so as to form a more or less accurate guess as to when, he is speaking from his own mind, when he is speaking from the mind of the puppet in hand, and when he is merely putting a case--a person's books are full of information, and bring that person into a closer and more intimate contact with the reader than any amount of personal intercourse. For whatever is best and whatever is worst in an individual will be reflected in his pages, seeing that, unless he is the poorest of hack authors, he must of necessity set down therein the images that pass across the mirrors of his heart.

Thus it seemed to Eustace, who knew "Jemima's Vow" and also her previous abortive work almost by heart, that he was very intimately acquainted with Augusta, and as he was walking home that May evening, he was reflecting sadly enough of all that he had lost through that cruel shipwreck. He had lost Augusta, and, what was more, he had lost his uncle and his uncle's vast fortune. For he, too, had seen the report of the application re Meeson in the Times, and, though he knew that he was disinherited, it was a little crushing. He had lost the fortune for Augusta's sake, and now he had lost Augusta also; and he reflected, not without dismay, on the long dreary existence that stretched away before him, filled up as it were with prospective piles of Latin proofs. With a sigh he halted at the Wellington-street crossing in the Strand, which, owing to the constant stream of traffic at this point, is one of the worst in London. There was a block at the

moment, as there generally is, and he stood for some minutes watching the frantic dashes of an old woman, who always tried to cross it at the wrong time, not without some amusement. Presently, however, a boy with a bundle of unfolded Globes under his arm came rushing along, making the place hideous with his howls.

"Wonderful escape of a lady and her infant!" he roared. "Account of the survivors of the Kangaroo--wonderful escape--desert island--arrival of the Magnolia with the criminals."

Eustace jumped, and instantly bought a copy of the paper, stepping into the doorway of a shop where they sold masonic jewels of every size and hue, in order to read it. The very first thing that his eye fell on was an editorial paragraph.

"In another column," ran the paragraph, "will be found a short account, telegraphed to us from Southampton just as we are going to press, of the most remarkable tale of the sea that we are acquainted with. The escape of Miss Augusta Smithers and of the little Lord Holmhurst--as we suppose that we must now call him--from the ill-fated Kangaroo, and their subsequent rescue, on Kerguelen Land, by the American whaler, will certainly take rank as the most romantic incident of its kind in the recent annals of shipwreck. Miss Smithers, who will be better known to the public as the authoress of that charming book 'Jemima's Vow,' which took the town by storm about a year ago, will arrive at Waterloo Station by the 5.40 train, and we shall then--"

Eustace read no more. Sick and faint with an extraordinary revulsion of feeling, he leant against the door of the masonic shop, which promptly opened in the most hospitable manner, depositing him upon his back on the floor of the establishment. In a second he was up, and had bounded out of the shop with such energy that the shopman was on the point of holloaing "Stop thief!" It was exactly five o'clock, and he was not more than a quarter of a mile or so from Waterloo Station. A hansom was sauntering along in front of him, he sprang into it. "Waterloo, main line," he shouted, "as hard as you can go," and in another moment he was rolling across the bridge. Five or six minutes' drive brought him to the station, to which an enormous number of people were hurrying, collected together partly by a rumour of what was going on, and partly by that magnetic contagion of excitement which runs through a London mob like fire through dry grass.

He dismissed the hansom, throwing the driver half-a-crown, which, considering that half-crowns were none too plentiful with him, was a rash thing to do, and vigorously shouldered his way through the crush till he reached the spot where the carriage and pair were standing. The carriage was just beginning to move on.

"Stop!" he shouted at the top of his voice to the coachman, who pulled up again. In another moment he was alongside, and there, sweeter and more beautiful than in ever, he once more saw his love.

She started at his voice, which she seemed to know, and their eyes met. Their eyes met and a great light of happiness shot into her sweet face and shone there till it was covered up and lost in the warm blush that followed.

He tried to speak, but could not. Twice he tried, and twice he failed, and meanwhile the mob shouted like anything. At last, however, he got it out--"Thank God!" he stammered, "thank God you are safe!"

For answer, she stretched out her hand and gave him one sweet look. He took it, and once more the carriage began to move on.

"Where are you to be found?" he had the presence of mind to ask.

"At Lady Holmhurst's. Come to-morrow morning; I have something to tell you," she answered, and in another minute the carriage was gone, leaving him standing there in a condition of mind which really "can be better imagined than described."