

CHAPTER XIV.

AT HANOVER-SQUARE.

Eustace could never quite remember how he got through the evening of that eventful day. Everything connected with it seemed hazy to him. As, however, fortunately for the reader of this history, we are not altogether dependent on the memory of a young man in love, which is always a treacherous thing to deal with, having other and exclusive sources of information, we may as well fill the gap. First of all he went to his club and seized a "Red-book," in which he discovered that Lord Holmhurst's, or, rather, Lady Holmhurst's, London house was in Hanover-square. Then he walked to his rooms in one of the little side-streets opening out of the Strand, and went through the form of eating some dinner; after which a terrible fit of restlessness got possession of him, and he started out walking. For three solid hours did that young man walk, which was, no doubt, a good thing for him, for one never gets enough exercise in London; and at the end of that time, having already been to Hammersmith and back, he found himself gravitating towards Hanover-square. Once there, he had little difficulty in finding the number. There was a light in the drawing-room floor, and, the night being warm, one of the windows was open, so that the lamp-light shone softly through the lace curtains. Eustace crossed over to the other side of the street, and, leaning against the iron railings of the square, looked up. He was rewarded for his pains, for, through the filmy curtain,

he could make out the forms of two ladies, seated side by side upon an ottoman, with their faces towards the window, and in one of these he had no difficulty in recognising Augusta. Her head was leaning on her hand, and she was talking earnestly to her companion. He wondered what she was talking of, and had half a mind to go and ring, and ask to see her. Why should he wait till to-morrow morning? Presently, however, better counsels prevailed, and, though sorely against his will, he stopped where he was till a policeman, thinking his rapt gaze suspicious, gruffly requested him to move on.

To gaze at one's only love through an open window is, no doubt, a delightful occupation, if a somewhat tantalising one; but if Eustace's ears had been as good as his eyes, and he could have heard the conversation that was proceeding in the drawing-room, he would have been still more interested.

Augusta had just been unfolding that part of her story which dealt with the important document tattooed upon her shoulders, to which Lady Holmhurst had listened "ore rotundo."

"And so the young man is coming here to-morrow morning," said Lady Holmhurst; "how delightful! I am sure he looked a very nice young man, and he had very fine eyes. It is the most romantic thing that I ever heard of."

"It may be delightful for you, Bessie," said Augusta, rather tartly, "but

I call it disgusting. It is all very well to be tattooed upon a desert island--not that that was very nice, I can tell you; but it is quite another thing to have to show the results in a London drawing-room. Of course, Mr. Meeson will want to see this will, whatever it may be worth; and I should like to ask you, Bessie, how I am to show it to him? It is on my neck."

"I have not observed," said Lady Holmhurst, drily, "that ladies, as a rule, have an insuperable objection to showing their necks. If you have any doubt on the point, I recommend you to get an invitation to a London ball. All you will have to do will be to wear a low dress. The fact of being tattooed does not make it any more improper for you to show your shoulders, than it would be if they were not tattooed."

"I have never worn a low dress," said Augusta, "and I do not want to show my shoulders."

"Ah, well," said Lady Holmhurst, darkly; "I daresay that that feeling will soon wear off. But, of course, if you won't, you won't; and, under those circumstances, you had better say nothing about the will--though," she added learnedly, "of course that would be compounding a felony."

"Would it? I don't quite see where the felony comes in."

"Well, of course, it is this way: you steal the will--that's felony; and if you don't show it to him, I suppose you compound it; it is a double

offence--compound felony."

"Nonsense!" answered Augusta to this exposition of the law, which was, it will be admitted, almost as lucid and convincing as that of an average Q.C. "How can I steal my own shoulders? It is impossible."

"Oh, no; not at all. You don't know what funny things you can do. I once had a cousin whom I coached for his examination for the Bar, and I learnt a great deal about it then. Poor fellow! he was plucked eight times."

"I am sure I don't wonder at it," said Augusta, rudely. "Well, I suppose I must put on this low dress; but it is horrid--perfectly horrid! You will have to lend me one, that is all."

"My dear," answered Lady Holmhurst, with a glance at her widow's weeds. "I have no low dresses: though, perhaps, I can find some among the things I put away before we sailed," and her eyes filled with tears.

Augusta took her hand, and they began to talk of that great bereavement and of their own wonderful survival, till at last she led the conversation round to little Dick, and Bessie Holmhurst smiled again at the thought that her darling boy, her only child, was safe asleep up stairs, and not, as she had believed, washing to and fro at the bottom of the ocean. She took Augusta's hand and kissed it, and blessed her for having saved her child, till suddenly, somewhat to the relief of the latter, the butler opened the door and said that two gentlemen wanted

very particularly to speak to Miss Smithers. And then she was once more handed over to her old enemies, the interviewers; and after them came the representatives of the company, and then more special reporters, and then an artist from one of the illustrated papers, who insisted upon her giving him an appointment in language that, though polite, indicated that he meant to have his way; and so on till nearly midnight, when she rushed off to bed and locked her door.

Next morning Augusta appeared at breakfast dressed in an exceedingly becoming low dress, which Lady Holmhurst sent up to her with her hot water. She had never worn one before, and it certainly is trying to put on a low dress for the first time in full daylight--indeed, she felt as guilty as does a person of temperate habits when he is persuaded to drink a brandy and soda before getting up. However, there was no help for it; so, throwing a shawl over her shoulders, she descended.

"My dear, do let me see," said Lady Holmhurst, as soon as the servant had left the room.

With a sigh Augusta uncovered her shoulders, and her friend ran round the table to look at them. There, on her neck, was the will. The cuttle ink had proved an excellent medium, and the tattooing was as fresh as the day on which it had been done, and would, no doubt, remain so till the last hour of her life.

"Well," said Lady Holmhurst, "I hope the young man will be duly grateful.

I should have to be very much in love," and she looked meaningly at Augusta, "before I would spoil myself in that fashion for any man."

Augusta blushed at the insinuation, and said nothing. At ten o'clock, just as they were half through breakfast, there came a ring at the bell.

"Here he is," said Lady Holmhurst, clapping her hands. "Well, if this isn't the very funniest thing that I ever heard of! I told Jones to show him in here."

Hardly were the words out of her mouth when the butler, who looked as solemn as a mute in his deep mourning, opened the door and announced "Mr. Eustace Meeson," in those deep and commanding tones which flunkeys, and flunkeys alone, have at their command. There was a moment's pause. Augusta half rose from her chair, and then sat down again; and, noticing her embarrassment, Lady Holmhurst smiled maliciously. Then came in Eustace himself, looking rather handsome, exceedingly nervous, and beautifully got up--in a frock-coat, with a flower in it.

"Oh! how do you do?" he said to Augusta, holding out his hand, which she took rather coldly.

"How do you do, Mr. Meeson," she answered. "Let me introduce you to Lady Holmhurst. Mr. Meeson, Lady Holmhurst." Eustace bowed, and put his hat down on the butter-dish, for he was very much overcome.

"I hope that I have not come too early," he said in great confusion, as he perceived his mistake. "I thought that you would have done breakfast."

"Oh, not at all Mr. Meeson," said Lady Holmhurst. "Won't you have a cup of tea? Augusta, give Mr. Meeson a cup of tea."

He took the tea, which he did not want in the least, and then there came an awkward silence. Nobody seemed to know how to begin the conversation.

"How did you find the house, Mr. Meeson?" said Lady Holmhurst, at last.

"Miss Smithers gave you no address, and there are two Lady Holmhursts--my mother-in-law and myself."

"Oh, I looked it out, and then I walked here last night and saw you both sitting at the window."

"Indeed!" said Lady Holmhurst. "And why did you not come in? You might have helped to protect Miss Smithers from the reporters."

"I don't know," he answered confusedly. "I did not like to; and, besides, a policeman thought I was a suspicious character and told me to move on."

"Dear me, Mr. Meeson; you must have been having a good look at us."

Here Augusta interposed, fearing least her admirer--for with an unerring instinct, she now guessed how matters stood--should say something

foolish. A young man who is capable of standing to stare at a house in Hanover-square is, she thought, evidently capable of anything.

"I was surprised to see you yesterday," she said. "How did you know we were coming?"

Eustace told her that he had seen it in the Globe. "I am sure you cannot have been so surprised as I was," he went on, "I had made sure that you were drowned. I went up to Birmingham to call on you after you had gone, and found that you had vanished and left no address. The maid-servant declared that you had sailed in a ship called the 'Conger Eel'--which I afterwards found out was Kangaroo. And then she went down; and after a long time they published a full list of the passengers and your name was not among them, and I thought that after all you might have got off the ship or something. Then, some days afterwards, came a telegram from Albany, in Australia, giving the names of Lady Holmhurst and the others who were saved, and specially mentioning 'Miss Smithers--the novelist' and Lord Holmhurst as being among the drowned, and that is how the dreadful suspense came to an end. It was awful, I can tell you."

Both of the young women looked at Eustace's face and saw that there was no mistaking the real nature of the trial through which he had passed. So real was it, that it never seemed to occur to him that there was anything unusual in his expressing such intense interest in the affairs of a young lady with whom he was outwardly, at any rate, on the terms of merest

acquaintance.

"It was very kind of you to think so much about me," said Augusta, gently. "I had no idea that you would call again, or I would have left word where I was going."

"Well, thank God you are safe and sound, at any rate," answered Eustace; and then, with a sudden burst of anxiety, "you are not going back to New Zealand just yet, are you?"

"I don't know. I am rather sick of the sea just now."

"No, indeed, she is not," said Lady Holmhurst; "she is going to stop with me and Dick. Miss Smithers saved Dick's life, you know, when the nurse, poor thing, had run away. And now, dear, you had better tell Mr. Meeson about the will."

"The will. What will?" asked Eustace.

"Listen, and you will hear."

And Eustace did listen with open eyes and ears while Augusta, getting over her shyness as best she might, told the whole story of his uncle's death, and of the way in which he had communicated his testamentary wishes.

"And do you mean to tell me," said Eustace, astounded, "that you allowed him to have his confounded will tattooed upon your neck?"

"Yes," answered Augusta, "I did; and what is more, Mr. Meeson, I think that you ought to be very much obliged to me; for I daresay that I shall often be sorry for it."

"I am very much obliged," answered Eustace; "I had no right to expect such a thing, and, in short, I do not know what to say. I should never have thought that any woman was capable of such a sacrifice for--for a comparative stranger."

Then came another awkward pause.

"Well, Mr. Meeson," said Augusta, at last rising brusquely from her chair, "the document belongs to you, and so I suppose that you had better see it. Not that I think that it will be of much use to you, however, as I see that 'probate had been allowed to issue,' whatever that may mean, of Mr. Meeson's other will."

"I do not know that that will matter," said Eustace, "as I heard a friend of mine, Mr. Short, who is a barrister, talk about some case the other day in which probate was revoked on the production of a subsequent will."

"Indeed!" answered Augusta, "I am very glad to hear that. Then, perhaps, after all I have been tattooed to some purpose. Well; I suppose you had

better see it," and with a gesture that was half shy and half defiant she drew the lace shawl from her shoulders, and turned her back towards him so that he might see what was inscribed across it.

Eustace stared at the broad line of letters which with the signatures written underneath might mean a matter of two millions of money to him.

"Thank you," he said at last, and, taking up the lace shawl, he threw it over her again.

"If you will excuse me for a few minutes, Mr. Meeson," interrupted Lady Holmhurst at this point; "I have to go to see about the dinner," and before Augusta could interfere she had left the room.

Eustace closed the door behind her, and turned, feeling instinctively that a great crisis in his fortunes had come. There are some men who rise to an emergency and some who shrink from it, and the difference is, that difference between him who succeeds and him who fails in life, and in all that makes life worth living.

Eustace belonged to the class that rises and not to that which shrinks.

CHAPTER XV.