

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW AUGUSTA WAS FILED.

That very afternoon Eustace returned to Lady Holmhurst's house in Hanover-square, to tell his dear Augusta that she must attend on the following morning to be filed in the Registry at Somerset House. As may be imagined, though willing to go any reasonable length to oblige her new-found lover, Augusta not unnaturally resisted this course violently, and was supported in her resistance by her friend Lady Holmhurst, who, however, presently left the room, leaving them to settle it as they liked.

"I do think that it is a little hard," said Augusta with a stamp of her foot, "that, after all that I have gone through, I should be taken off to have my unfortunate back stared at by a Doctor some one or other, and then be shut up with a lot of musty old wills in a Registry."

"Well, my dearest girl," said Eustace, "either it must be done or else the whole thing must be given up. Mr. John Short declares that it is absolutely necessary that the document should be placed in the custody of the officer of the Court."

"But how am I going to live in a cupboard, or in an iron safe with a lot of wills?" asked Augusta, feeling very cross indeed.

"I don't know, I am sure," said Eustace; "Mr. John Short says that that is a matter which the learned Doctor will have to settle. His own opinion is that the learned Doctor--confound him!--will order that you should accompany him about wherever he goes till the trial comes off; for, you see, in that way you would never be out of the custody of an officer of the Court. But," went on Eustace, gloomily, "all I can tell him, if he makes that order, is, that if he takes you about with him he will have to take me too."

"Why?" said Augusta.

"Why? Because I don't trust him--that's why. Old? oh, yes; I dare say he is old. And, besides, just think: this learned gentleman has practised for twenty years in the Divorce Court! Now, I ask you, what can you expect from a gentleman, however learned, who has practised for twenty years in the Divorce Court? I know him," went on Eustace, vindictively--"I know him. He will fall in love with you himself. Why, he would be an old duffer if he didn't."

"Really," said Augusta, bursting out laughing, "you are too ridiculous, Eustace."

"I don't know about being ridiculous, Augusta: but if you think I am going to let you be marched about by that learned Doctor without my being there to look after you, you are mistaken. Why, of course he would fall

in love with you, or some of his clerks would; nobody could be near you for a couple of days without doing so."

"Do you think so?" said Augusta, looking at him very sweetly.

"Yes, I do," he answered, and thus the conversation came to an end and was not resumed till dinner-time.

On the following morning at eleven o'clock, Eustace, who had managed to get a few days' leave from his employers, arrived with Mr. John Short to take Augusta and Lady Holmhurst--who was going to chaperon her--to Somerset House, whither, notwithstanding her objections of the previous day, she had at last consented to go. Mr. Short was introduced, and much impressed both the ladies by the extraordinary air of learning and command which was stamped upon his countenance. He wanted to inspect the will at once; but Augusta struck at this, saying that it would be quite enough to have her shoulders stared at once that day. With a sigh and a shake of the head at her unreasonableness, Mr. John Short submitted, and then the carriage came round and they were all driven off to Somerset House. Presently they were there, and after threading innumerable chilly passages, reached a dismal room with an almanack, a dirty deal table, and a few chairs in it, wherein were congregated several solicitors' clerks, waiting their turn to appear before the Registrar. Here they waited for half-an-hour or more, to Augusta's considerable discomfort, for she soon found that she was an object of curiosity and closest attention to the solicitors' clerks, who never took their eyes off her. Presently she

discovered the reason, for having remarkably quick ears, she overheard one of the solicitors' clerks, a callow little man with yellow hair and an enormous diamond pin, whose appearance somehow reminded her of a new-born chicken, tell another, who was evidently of the Jewish faith, that she (Augusta) was the respondent in the famous divorce case of Jones v. Jones, and was going to appear before the Registrar to submit herself to cross examination in some matter connected with a grant of alimony. Now, as all London was talking about the alleged iniquities of the Mrs. Jones in question, whose moral turpitude was only equalled by her beauty, Augusta did not feel best pleased, although she perceived that she instantly became an object of heartfelt admiration to the clerks.

Presently, however, somebody poked his head through the door, which he opened just wide enough to admit it, and bawling out--

"Short, re Meeson," vanished as abruptly as he had come.

"Now, Lady Holmhurst, if you please," said Mr. John Short, "allow me to show the way, if you will kindly follow with the will--this way, please."

In another minute, the unfortunate "will" found herself in a large and lofty room, at the top of which, with his back to the light, sat a most agreeable-looking middle-aged gentleman, who, as they advanced, rose with a politeness that one does not generally expect from officials on a fixed salary, and, bowing, asked them to be seated.

"Well, what can I do for you? Mr.--ah! Mr."--and he put on his eye-glasses and referred to his notes--"Mr. Short--you wish to file a will, I understand; and there are peculiar circumstances of some sort in the case?"

"Yes, Sir; there are," said Mr. John Short, with much meaning. "The will to be filed in the Registry is the last true will of Jonathan Meeson, of Pompadour Hall, in the county of Warwick, and the property concerned amounts to about two millions. Upon last motion day, the death of Jonathan Meeson, who was supposed to have sunk in the Kangaroo, was allowed to be presumed, and probate has been taken out. As a matter of fact, however, the said Jonathan Meeson perished in Kerguelen Land some days after the shipwreck, and before he died he duly executed a fresh will in favour of his nephew, Eustace H. Meeson, the gentleman before you. Miss Augusta Smithers"--

"What," said the learned Registrar, "is this Miss Smithers whom we have been reading so much about lately--the Kerguelen Land heroine?"

"Yes; I am Miss Smithers," she said with a little blush; "and this is Lady Holmhurst, whose husband"--and she checked herself.

"It gives me much pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Smithers," said the learned Doctor, courteously shaking hands, and bowing to Lady Holmhurst--proceedings which Eustace watched with the jaundiced eye of suspicion. "He's beginning already," said that ardent lover to himself.

"I knew how it would be. Trust my Gus into his custody?--never! I had rather be committed for contempt."

"The best thing that I can do, Sir," went on John Short, impatiently, for, to his severe eye, these interruptions were not seemly, "will be to at once offer you inspection of the document, which, I may state, is of an unusual character," and he looked at Augusta, who, poor girl, coloured to the eyes.

"Quite so, quite so," said the learned Registrar. "Well, has Miss Smithers got the will? Perhaps she will produce it."

"Miss Smithers is the will," said Mr. John Short.

"Oh--I am afraid that I do not quite understand"--

"To be more precise, Sir, the will is tattooed on Miss Smithers."

"What?" almost shouted the learned Doctor, literally bounding from his chair.

"The will is tattooed upon Miss Smithers's back," continued Mr. John Short, in a perfectly unmoved tone; "and it is now my duty to offer you inspection of the document, and to take your instructions as to how you propose to file it in the Registry"--

"Inspection of the document--inspection of the document?" gasped the astonished Doctor; "How am I to inspect the document?"

"I must leave that to you, Sir," said Mr. John Short, regarding the learned Registrar's shrinking form with contempt not unmixed with pity. "The will is on the lady's back, and I, on behalf of the plaintiff, mean to get a grant with the document annexed."

Lady Holmhurst began to laugh; and as for the learned Doctor, anything more absurd than he looked, intrenched as he was behind his office chair, with perplexity written on his face, it would be impossible to imagine.

"Well," he said at length, "I suppose that I must come to a decision. It is a painful matter, very, to a person of modest temperament. However, I cannot shrink from my duty, and must face it. Therefore," he went on with an air of judicial sternness, "therefore, Miss Smithers, I must trouble you to show me this alleged will. There is a cupboard there," and he pointed to the corner of the room, "where you can make--'um--make the necessary preparations."

"Oh, it isn't quite so bad as that," said Augusta, with a sigh, and she began to remove her jacket.

"Dear me!" he said, observing her movement with alarm, "I suppose she is hardened," he continued to himself: "but I dare say one gets used to this sort of thing upon desert islands."

Meanwhile poor Augusta had got her jacket off. She was dressed in an evening dress, and had a white silk scarf over her shoulder: this she removed.

"Oh," he said, "I see--in evening dress. Well, of course, that is quite a different matter. And so that is the will--well, I have had some experience, but I never saw or heard of anything like it before. Signed and attested, but not dated. Ah! unless," he added, "the date is lower down."

"No," said Augusta, "there is no date; I could not stand any more tattooing. It was all done at one sitting, and I got faint."

"I don't wonder at it, I am sure. I think it is the bravest thing I ever heard of," and he bowed with much grace.

"Ah," muttered Eustace, "he's beginning to pay compliments now, insidious old hypocrite!"

"Well," went on the innocent and eminently respectable object of his suspicions, "of course the absence of a date does not invalidate a will--it is matter for proof, that is all. But there, I am not in a position to give any opinion about the case; it is quite beyond me, and besides, that is not my business. But now, Miss Smithers, as you have once put yourself in the custody of the Registry in the capacity of a

will, might I ask if you have any suggestion to make as to how you are to be dealt with. Obviously you cannot be locked up with the other wills, and equally obviously it is against the rules to allow a will to go out of the custody of the Court, unless by special permission of the Court. Also it is clear that I cannot put any restraint upon the liberty of the subject and order you to remain with me. Indeed, I doubt if it would be possible to do so by any means short of an Act of Parliament. Under these circumstances I am, I confess, a little confused as to what course should be taken with reference to this important alleged will."

"What I have to suggest, Sir," said Mr. Short, "is that a certified copy of the will should be filed, and that there should be a special paragraph inserted in the affidavit of scripts detailing the circumstances."

"Ah," said the learned Doctor, polishing his eye-glasses, "you have given me an idea. With Miss Smithers' consent we will file something better than a certified copy of the will--we will file a photographic copy. The inconvenience to Miss Smithers will be trifling, and it may prevent questions being raised hereafter."

"Have you any objections to that, my dear?" asked Lady Holmhurst.

"Oh, no, I suppose not," said Augusta mournfully; "I seem to be public property now."

"Very well, then; excuse me for a moment," said the learned Doctor.

"There is a photographer close by whom I have had occasion to employ officially. I will write and see if he can come round."

In a few minutes an answer came back from the photographer that he would be happy to wait upon Doctor Probate at three o'clock, up to which hour he was engaged.

"Well," said the Doctor, "it is clear that I cannot let Miss Smithers out of the custody of the Court till the photograph is taken. Let me see, I think that yours was my last appointment this morning. Now, what do you say to the idea of something to eat? We are not five minutes drive from Simpson's, and I shall feel delighted if you will make a pleasure of a necessity."

Lady Holmhurst, who was getting very hungry, said that she should be most pleased, and, accordingly, they all--with the exception of Mr. John Short, who departed about some business, saying that he would return at three o'clock--drove off in Lady Holmhurst's carriage to the restaurant, where this delightful specimen of the genus Registrar stood them a most sumptuous champagne lunch, and made himself so agreeable, that both the ladies nearly fell in love with him, and even Eustace was constrained to admit to himself that good things can come out of the Divorce Court. Finally, the doctor wound up the proceedings, which were of a most lively order, and included an account of Augusta's adventures, with a toast.

"I hear from Lady Holmhurst," he said, "that you two young people are

going to take the preliminary step--um--towards a possible future appearance in that Court with which I had for many years the honor of being connected--that is, that you are going to get married. Now, matrimony is, according to my somewhat extended experience, an undertaking of a venturesome order, though cases occasionally come under one's observation where the results have proved to be in every way satisfactory; and I must say that, if I may form an opinion from the facts as they are before me, I never knew an engagement entered into under more promising or more romantic auspices. Here the young gentleman quarrels with his uncle in taking the part of the young lady, and thereby is disinherited of vast wealth. Then the young lady, under the most terrible circumstances, takes steps of a nature that not one woman in five hundred would have done to restore to him that wealth. Whether or no those steps will ultimately prove successful I do not know, and, if I did, like Herodotus, I should prefer not to say; but whether the wealth comes or goes, it is impossible but that a sense of mutual confidence and a mutual respect and admiration--that is, if a more quiet thing, certainly, also, a more enduring thing, than mere 'love'--must and will result from them. Mr. Meeson, you are indeed a fortunate man. In Miss Smithers you are going to marry beauty, courage, and genius, and if you will allow an older man of some experience to drop the official and give you a word of advice, it is this: always try to deserve your good fortune, and remember that a man who, in his youth, finds such a woman, and is enabled by circumstances to marry her, is indeed--

Smiled on by Joy, and cherished of the Gods.

"And now I will end my sermon, and wish you both health and happiness and fulness of days," and he drank off his glass of champagne, and looked so pleasant and kindly that Augusta longed to kiss him on the spot, and as for Eustace, he shook hands with him warmly, and then and there a friendship began between the two which endures till now.

And then they all went back to the office, and there was the photographer waiting with all his apparatus, and astonished enough he was when he found out what the job was that he had to do. However, the task proved an easy one enough, as the light of the room was suitable, and the dark lines of cuttle ink upon Augusta's neck would, the man said, come out perfectly in the photograph. So he took two or three shots at her back and then departed, saying that he would bring a life-sized reproduction to be filed in the Registry in a couple of days.

And after that the learned Registrar also shook hands with them, and said that he need detain them no longer, as he now felt justified in allowing Augusta out of his Custody.

And so they departed, glad to have got over the first step so pleasantly.