

CHAPTER XXIII.

MEESON'S ONCE AGAIN.

A month had passed--a month of long, summer days and such happiness as young people who truly love each other can get out of a honeymoon spent under the most favourable circumstances in the sweetest, sunniest spots of the Channel Islands. And now the curtain draws up for the last time in this history, where it drew up for the first--in the inner office of Meeson's huge establishment.

During the last fortnight certain communications had passed between Mr. John Short, being duly authorized thereto, and the legal representatives of Messrs. Addison and Roscoe, with the result that the interests of these gentlemen in the great publishing house had been bought up, and that Eustace Meeson was now the sole owner of the vast concern, which he intended to take under his personal supervision.

Now, accompanied by John Short, whom he had appointed to the post of his solicitor both of his business and his private affairs, and by Augusta, he was engaged in formally taking over the keys from the head manager, who was known throughout the establishment, as No. 1.

"I wish to refer to the authors' agreements of the early part of last year," said Eustace.

No. 1 produced them somewhat sulkily. He did not like the appearance of this determined young owner upon the scene, with his free and un-Meeson-like ways.

Eustace turned them over, and while he did so, his happy wife stood by him, marvelling at the kaleidoscopic changes in her circumstances. When last she had stood in that office, not a year ago, it had been as a pitiful suppliant begging for a few pounds wherewith to try and save her sister's life, and now--

Suddenly Eustace stopped turning, and drawing a document from the bundle, glanced at it. It was Augusta's agreement with Meeson and Co. for "Jemima's Vow," the agreement binding her to them for five years which had been the cause of all her troubles, and, as she firmly believed, of her little sister's death.

"There, my dear," said Eustace to his wife, "there is a present for you. Take it!"

Augusta took the document, and having looked to see what it was, shivered as she did so. It brought the whole thing back so painfully to her mind.

"What shall I do with it," she asked; "tear it up?"

"Yes," he answered. "No, stop a bit," and taking it from her he wrote

"cancelled" in big letters across it, signed and dated it.

"There," he said, "now send it to be framed and glazed, and it shall be hung here in the office, to show how they used to do business at Meeson's."

No. 1 snorted, and looked at Eustace aghast. What would the young man be after next?

"Are the gentlemen assembled in the hall?" asked Eustace of him when the remaining documents were put away again.

No. 1 said that they were, and accordingly, to the hall they went, wherein were gathered all the editors, sub-editors, managers, sub-managers of the various departments, clerks, and other employees, not forgetting the tame authors, who, a pale and mealy regiment, had been marched up thither from the Hutches, and the tame artists with flying hair--and were now being marshalled in lines by No. 1, who had gone on before. When Eustace and his wife and John Short got to the top of the hall, where some chairs had been set, the whole multitude bowed, whereon he begged them to be seated--a permission of which the tame authors, who sat all day in their little wooden hutches, and sometimes a good part of the night also, did not seem to care to avail themselves of. But the tame artists, who had, for the most part, to work standing, sat down readily.

"Gentlemen," said Eustace, "first let me introduce you to my wife, Mrs.

Meeson, who, in another capacity, has already been--not greatly to her own profit--connected with this establishment, having written the best work of fiction that has ever gone through our printing-presses"--(Here some of the wilder spirits cheered, and Augusta blushed and bowed)--"and who will, I hope and trust, write many even better books, which we shall have the honour of giving to the world." (Applause.) "Also, gentlemen, let me introduce you to Mr. John Short, my solicitor, who, together with his twin brother, Mr. James Short, brought the great lawsuit in which I was engaged to a successful issue.

"And now I have to tell you why I have summoned you all to meet me here. First of all, to say that I am now the sole owner of this business, having bought out Messrs. Addison and Roscoe"--("And a good job too," said a voice)--"and that I hope we shall work well together; and secondly, to inform you that I am going to totally revolutionise the course of business as hitherto practised in this establishment"--(Sensation)--"having, with the assistance of Mr. Short, drawn up a scheme for that purpose. I am informed in the statement of profits on which the purchase price of the shares of Messrs. Addison and Roscoe was calculated, that the average net profits of this house during the last ten years have amounted to fifty-seven and a fraction per cent on the capital invested. Now, I have determined that in future the net profits of any given undertaking shall be divided as follows:--Ten per cent to the author of the book in hand, and ten per cent to the House. Then, should there be any further profit, it will be apportioned thus: One-third--of which a moiety will go towards a pension fund--to the

employee's of the House, the division to be arranged on a fixed scale"--(Enormous sensation, especially among the tame authors)--"and the remainder to the author of the work. Thus, supposing that a book paid cent per cent, I shall take ten per cent., and the employees would take twenty-six and a fraction per cent, and the author would take sixty-four per cent."

And here an interruption occurred. It came from No. 1, who could no longer retain his disgust.

"I'll resign," he said; "I'll resign! Meeson's content with ten per cent, and out-of-pocket expenses, when an author--a mere author--gets sixty! It's shameful--shameful!"

"If you choose to resign, you can," said Eustace, sharply; "but I advise you to take time to think it over. Gentlemen," went on Eustace, "I daresay that this seems a great change to you, but I may as well say at once that I am no wild philanthropist. I expect to make it pay, and pay well. To begin with, I shall never undertake any work that I do not think will pay--that is, without an adequate guarantee, or in the capacity of a simple agent; and my own ten per cent will be the first charge on the profits; then the author's ten. Of course, if I speculate in a book, and buy it out and out, subject to the risks, the case will be different. But with a net ten per cent certain, I am, like people in any other line of business, quite prepared to be satisfied; and, upon those terms, I expect to become the publisher of all the best writers in

England, and I also expect that any good writer will in future be able to make a handsome income out of his work. Further, it strikes me that you will most of you find yourselves better off at the end of the year than you do at present" (Cheers). "One or two more matters I must touch on. First and foremost the Hutches, which I consider a scandal to a great institution like this, will be abolished"--(Shouts of joy from the tame authors)--"and a handsome row of brick chambers erected in their place, and, further, their occupants will in future receive a very permanent addition to their salaries "--(renewed and delirious cheering). "Lastly, I will do away with this system--this horrid system--of calling men by numbers, as though they were convicts instead of free Englishmen. Henceforth everybody in this establishment will be known by his own name." (Loud cheers.)

"And now one more thing: I hope to see you all at dinner at Pompadour Hall this day next week, when we will christen our new scheme and the new firm, which, however, in the future as in the past, will be known as Meeson & Co., for, as we are all to share in the profits of our undertaking, I consider that we shall still be a company, and I hope a prosperous and an honest company in the truest sense of the word." And then amidst a burst of prolonged and rapturous cheering, Eustace and his wife bowed, and were escorted out to the carriage that was waiting to drive them to Pompadour Hall.

In half-an-hour's time they were re-entering the palatial gates from which, less than a year before, Eustace had been driven forth to seek his

fortune. There, on either side, were drawn up the long lines of menials, gorgeous with plush and powder (for Mr. Meeson's servants had never been discharged), and there was the fat butler, Johnson, at their head, the same who had given his farewell message to his uncle.

"Good gracious!" said Augusta, glancing up the marble steps, "there are six of those great footmen. What on earth shall I do with them all"--

"Sack them," said Eustace, abruptly; "the sight of those overfed brutes makes me sick!"

And then they were bowed in--and under the close scrutiny of many pairs of eyes, wandered off with what dignity they could command to dress for dinner.

In due course they found themselves at dinner, and such a dinner! It took an hour and twenty minutes to get through, or rather the six footmen took an hour and twenty minutes to carry the silver dishes in and out. Never since their marriage had Eustace and Augusta, felt so miserable.

"I don't think that I like being so rich," said Augusta rising and coming down the long table to her husband, when at last Johnson had softly closed the door. "It oppresses me!"

"So it does me," said Eustace; "and I tell you what it is, Gussie," he went on, putting his arm round her, "I won't stand having all these

infernal fellows hanging round me. I shall sell this place, and go in for something quieter."

And at that moment there came a dreadful diversion. Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, the doors at either end of the room opened.

Through the one came two enormous footmen laden with coffee and cream, etc., and through the other Johnson and another powdered monster bearing cognac and other liquors. And there was Augusta with Eustace's arm round her, absolutely too paralysed to stir. Just as the men came up she got away somehow, and stood looking like an idiot, while Eustace coloured to his eyes. Indeed, the only people who showed no confusion were those magnificent menials, who never turned a single powdered hair, but went through their solemn rites with perfectly unabashed countenances.

"I can't stand this," said Augusta, feebly, when they had at length departed. "I am going to bed; I feel quite faint."

"All right," said Eustace, "I think that it is the best thing to do in this comfortless shop. Confound that fellow, Short, why couldn't he come and dine? I wonder if there is any place where one could go to smoke a pipe, or rather a cigar--I suppose those fellows would despise me if I smoked a pipe? There was no smoking allowed here in my uncle's time, so I used to smoke in the house-keeper's room; but I can't do that now"--

"Why don't you smoke here?--the room is so big it would not smell," said Augusta.

"Oh, hang it all, no," said Eustace; "think of the velvet curtains! I can't sit and smoke by myself in a room fifty feet by thirty; I should get the blues. No, I shall come upstairs, too, and smoke there"--

And he did.

Early, very early in the morning, Augusta woke, got up, and put on a dressing-gown.

The light was streaming through the rich gold cloth curtains, some of which she had drawn. It lit upon the ewers, made of solid silver, on the fine lace hangings of the bed, and the priceless inlaid furniture, and played round the faces of the cupids on the frescoed ceiling. Augusta stared at it all and then thought of the late master of this untold magnificence as he lay dying in the miserable hut in Kerguelen Land. What a contrast was here!

"Eustace," she said to her sleeping spouse, "wake up, I want to say something to you."

"Eh! what's the matter?" said Eustace, yawning.

"Eustace, we are too rich--we ought to do something with all this money."

"All right," said Eustace, "I'm agreeable. What do you want to do?"

"I want to give away a good sum--say, two hundred thousand, that isn't much out of all you have--to found an institution for broken-down authors."

"All right," said Eustace; "only you must see about it, I can't be bothered. By-the-way," he added, waking up a little, "you remember what the old boy told you when he was dying? I think that starving authors who have published with Meeson's ought to have the first right of election."

"I think so, too," said Augusta, and she went to the buhl writing-table to work out that scheme on paper which, as the public is aware, is now about to prove such a boon to the world of scribblers.

"I say, Gussie!" suddenly said her husband. "I've just had a dream!"

"Well!" she said sharply, for she was busy with her scheme; "what is it?"

"I dreamt that James Short was a Q.C., and making twenty thousand a year, and that he had married Lady Holmhurst."

"I should not wonder if that came true," answered Augusta, biting the top of her pen.

Then came another pause.

"Gussie," said Eustace, sleepily, "are you quite happy?"

"Yes, of course I am, that is, I should be if it wasn't for those footmen and the silver water-jugs."

"I wonder at that," said her husband.

"Why?"

"Because"--(yawn)--"of that will upon your neck"--(yawn). "I should not have believed that a woman could be quite happy"--(yawn)--"who could--never go to Court."

And he went to sleep again; while, disdainingly, Augusta worked on.

THE END.