

## Hugh Melton!

## CHAPTER VI.

(CONTINUED.)

That little relic will never comfort you or trouble you again; and perhaps you were not aware that the greater part of St. Margaret's was burned down about two months ago, and the vestry, with the books in it, was burned along with the rest.

No clamorous outcry, no passionate burst of weeping, followed this dastardly act; for a few seconds the silence was so dead that I almost thought she must have fainted; but hardly was this idea formed than it was again dispelled by hearing her moan, in a broken plaintive voice that told of more heart-felt suffering than the wildest weeping.

'Oh, Edward, how could you do that! My only safeguard; and I am your wife—you know I am.'

'I never disputed that fact,' he answered, in high good humor, 'nor shall I as long as you keep quiet, and let no one know of your relation to me; but if I find you troublesome, you are without proofs remember, and I shall remember that also; so beware, for no credit will be given to your assertion unbacked by proof.'

She had borne every insult, every stinging sneer, quietly hitherto, but now her spirit rose up against her tyrant and tormentor, the man who, alas for her! she yet loved; she turned on him with defiant words and a tone almost of hate vibrating in her voice; there was no quick-drawn breath, no sobbing, such as other women would be unable to restrain; quietly and distinctly, one by one, her words fell on the soft evening air.

'Very well,' she said, 'let this be a bargain between us; I will say nothing, and keep out of sight and notice as long as you desire, thereby proving myself willing to obey you as a wife should. But if you go near this woman, this heiress, with words of love that belong only of right to me—if you, who are bound by the laws of God and man to me, dare to speak of marriage to her—I swear that I will follow you, even though I had to beg my bread by the way; I would follow you across the ocean that would then separate us, and into her stately home, to expose you in your right character, and to proclaiming rights before all men. Heaven help me then—I, who loved you when I thought you faithful, tender, and noble above all men; I who love you still, when I know you viler than the vilest pariah in the empire—for the way, or spirit, cold and cruel as it is now, will turn tenfold more against me, and I shall fall a victim to your hate, as I did when I married you to your pretended love.'

She paused, overcome by the violence of her emotion; for as she had continued speaking, more passion, more intense misery, were betrayed by her tone; and he, without waiting for her to continue, if she had intended to do so, went on:

'Very well done indeed, Julia. I should advise you, instead of begging your bread when you want to raise the wind, to take to the tragic stage; you would bring down the house if you looked and acted like that; in the mean time it is waste of talent to declaim at me any longer; besides, it is getting late, and those fellows will be coming back. You put up at Booderabad, don't you? Stop there for a day or two, and I will go over and see you. Wait; you must have something to eat before you go, you look really tired. I am afraid, after all, you haven't strength for a tragic queen, you would get done up in no time.'

Talking in this half-sneering, half-affectionate manner, I heard him moving about the room, and presently ordering some refreshment to be brought up. In the mean time I was told my horse was waiting for me. I was in the habit of riding at this hour, and though loathing to hear of any thing more of interest would pass between this curious couple, I thought it best to go out, consoling myself by reflecting that I knew all it was necessary I should know. Hardly thinking where I was going, I turned my pretty Arab's head in the direction of Booderabad, and set off at a rapid pace. It was my object to get as much exercise that evening into as short space of time as possible, so I gave my little steed his head, and away he

behind. I turned and gazed back over the road I had travelled, gleaming white in the moonlight, and presently I fancied I could discern a dark object moving along it with considerable velocity. Prompted by curiosity I turned and rode to meet it; but I had hardly gone a few yards when I became aware that the dark object was a carriage bearing down on me with the rapidity of lightning. A glance sufficed to show that the horse was running away. Indeed, I found out afterward that the driver had been smoking opium, and when the horse took fright he was incapable of either managing it or keeping his seat, and fell off into a heap of dust by the roadside, where he was found next day fast asleep and quite comfortable.

Though I was not at the first minute aware there was no driver, yet I saw plainly that unless help was speedily rendered, carriage, occupants, and horse must all go into the river, which was deep enough there to make the mere idea of such a contingency unpleasant. I turned, therefore, and as the runaway approached, put my little Arab into a brisk canter, increasing gradually to a quicker pace; when the vehicle came up with me, I, galloping beside the horse, seized his rein. We were now so close to the river, going so fast and so straight at it, that there was no possibility of our stopping before we should get to the brink. However, by a great exertion of strength, and thanks to the excellent training of my steed, we swung round the curve of the road so close to the water that the outside wheel must have been on the verge of the bank. That danger past, I breathed freely; and although it took me some time to stop the furious animal, I succeeded at last, and when he was fairly at a stand, it seemed to me he was not likely to run away again soon. He was covered with foam from head to foot, reeking with sweat, and seemed so done up that his limbs trembled under him. He was not a bad-looking beast, and I dare say when fresh had a temper of his own, which accounted for the scene in which I had just played a part. Leaving my gallant little Sultan at liberty, but still holding fast the reins of the runaway, I approached the door of the vehicle. It was one of those curious covered conveyances with curtains drawn all round, resembling the arabas of the Turkish women, and it seemed somehow familiar to my eyes. Yes, as I looked at it again I became convinced that it was the same curious vehicle that had excited my wonder that evening as it drove up to the barracks. With more eagerness than I had yet felt, I approached the curtained aperture that served for a door, and drawing back the screen peered anxiously in. I had hardly looked in when a dark form darted forward from the interior, and said, in Hindoostanee:

'Are we safe, Mahmoud? What was the matter? I thought we should have been killed.'

The voice was the same sweet voice I had heard in Cameron's room, but it trembled now a little from fear, as it then had from passion. It was evident she did not know that her servant had been to blame, and also that no had disappeared—where or how I could not at that time tell. I stepped back a little to let the moonlight stream into the carriage, and answered:

'Mahmoud is not here, madam; I am a stranger. I happened to be passing, and was fortunate enough to be able to stop your horse, which was running away. Where your driver can be I am unable to imagine, but I hope you will allow me to assist you in any way you may desire. If you will tell me where you live, I will conduct you home.'

She seemed frightened on hearing a strange voice, and at first shrank back into the dark recesses of the carriage; as I went on, however, curiosity mastered fear, and I could see her lean forward eagerly to catch sight of my face in the moonlight. I bore her scrutiny calmly, though it was long and keen; indeed I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, not knowing what to say next, when she answered: 'I will trust you; I think I may; your face looks kind, and I have no one here to help me. I do not live here, but I am staying at Booderabad. I am stopping in one of the bungalows on this side of the town; Mrs. Camden's. You can ask some one to direct you to it when we get near there, if it is not troubling you too much to ask you to drive me.'

'Not any trouble at all; I shall be most happy,' I answered, though wondering a

fully halt an hour later before I found myself housed at last in a hot and not over-comfortable lodging. I might have been worse off, however, and besides was tired; so that I was soon fast asleep, and forgot for a time the startling discoveries of the day and Ali's anxieties at my non-appearance.

## CHAPTER VII.

## AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

When I awoke the next day the sun was too high for me to think of returning until the evening. I accordingly determined to call and inquire after my acquaintance of the previous evening before returning to A—. At about six o'clock, therefore, I sallied forth, and soon found myself at the bungalow where I had stood knocking for so long in vain the night before. This time I was not kept waiting, but was immediately admitted. Mrs. Cameron—for so I knew her to be, though of course I did not so address her—was reclining on a sofa near the window, languidly embroidering flowers on a piece of silk. She looked thoroughly worn out by her long vigil of the past night, and I thought there was a more broken-hearted expression in her pale face than could be accounted for by any one who had not overheard, as I had done, her yesterday's dialogue with her brutal husband.

She seemed pleased to see me, and roused herself into something like animation while she thanked me again fervently for my assistance the night before. After she had done, I ventured to ask her name, saying that I hoped she would excuse me taking such a liberty in consideration of the services she was pleased to say I rendered her. At this she colored violently, and fidgeted nervously with the work she still held in her fingers; but at length replied: 'I can not tell you how sorry I am not to be able to answer your question; one, too, which I think you have quite a right to ask, after having been put to so much inconvenience and trouble by me. It is not my secret, however; it is my—husband's.' She paused before saying the last word, and added it in so low a tone that I could hardly catch it.

I was now quite at a loss how to proceed; for you may well imagine I had come to call with the full intention of telling Mrs. Cameron all that I had overheard, and also that I intended to repeat it to both Hugh Melton and Miss Meares. When I saw her in her pale fragile beauty before me, looking so sad and sorrowful, I felt almost as if I should be committing a crime by saying anything to agitate and annoy her; yet I knew that it must be done, and that it would be better for her to know the worst, that she might prepare herself for meeting her husband when he should know his wicked plans were discovered. I therefore continued in as cool and unconcerned manner as I could assume: 'It does not matter; I only asked for form's sake, as I know your name, Mrs. Cameron.'

She started violently as I pronounced her name, and turned on me a white despairing face as she exclaimed: 'You know it! How did you discover it? Oh, for heaven's sake tell me! What shall I do? He will never forgive me!'

She did not cry hysterically or loudly; but I could see from the trembling of her slender fingers as she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes that her grief was more intense and painful than more noisily expressed emotion. I tried to comfort her as best I could, saying that it was from her husband quite as much as from herself I had heard it, and that I should not have mentioned my discovery to her, knowing well her desire to keep it secret, only for the fact that I was bound to tell it to my friend Captain Melton, who was interested very nearly in the matter, and to Miss Meares, whom Captain Cameron had designed to be the sufferer by his crime. Beyond us three the story should not go, and Captain Cameron might feel himself perfectly safe if only he would renounce his designs. I then went on to explain how I became acquainted with the fact of her relation to Captain Cameron, at first hearing without intending, afterward listening long and earnestly from design; my motive I considered being such as to absolve me of all wrongdoing in the matter. On hearing how I became acquainted with her story all traces of grief and sorrow were for a moment smothered in the fierce blaze of resentment and

yet only served to render her a mark for the machinations of scheming villains. As for me, if you think I design to profit by any assistance you might render to break off her engagement to Captain Cameron, I will willingly promise once she knows all never to see her again.'

'Then,' she said, with wide astonished eyes, 'you do not love her? Are you not Captain Melton, of whom I have heard Captain Cameron speak?'

'No, indeed,' I answered; 'he is the friend of whom I spoke, as dear to me as my own life. It is for his happiness, not my own, I solicit your help. Surely you will not refuse my request.'

'And does he love the girl?' she asked, in a dreamy, irrelevant manner, as though she had only half heard my answer.

'He does,' I replied, 'as you love Edward Cameron, as you once fancied he loved you.' I thought I saw signs of relenting in her mood as she stood, half turned away from me, in a pensive attitude, evidently pondering all she had just heard.

'In that case he will deceive her and make her miserable, as Edward has done me,' she answered, impulsively; then, seeing she had made an admission she never intended to have made, she went on with the view of changing the subject: 'Why do you love Captain Melton so dearly? Is he nobler and wiser and truer than other men? He should be to merit your devotion.'

'He is all that, and more,' I replied, eagerly, feeling that I had, without knowing it, touched some hidden chord in her heart, and anxious to pursue any advantage; 'he is a man whose life is noble and upright before the world, generous and tender to his friends, who has helped many a wandering soul back into the right path, and who even in his conduct towards your husband, his rival, has shown himself worthy of all praise.'

'Then he can not love her,' she answered, quickly, 'or, noble though he might be, he would have stood his ground and struggled for her against all comers, be they who they might, notwithstanding and in spite of any previous engagements. I can not feel pity for your friend; he is a cold-blooded, cold-hearted lover, not one who would serve for the woman he loved through life to death, as true love should, overbearing and overcoming all obstacles.'

'That is one kind of love,' I answered, moved in spite of myself by her earnestness; 'and do not think but that a man like my friend, ardent, passionate, impulsive, must have longed, as only such bold natures can long, to set the world at defiance and obtain his love, in spite of her parents' wishes, her plighted troth, and her own qualms of conscience. But there is another nobler and purer love—surely you know it—a love that desires the good of the beloved object only, and is content to suffer if that object may be happy. Melton hoped long, hopes still perhaps, that he acted for her good in yielding to Cameron's claim; but how can I, knowing what I know, allow him to continue in this belief; when surely sooner or later the truth will come to light, and he will see that, far from securing her happiness, he has only brought about her shame? They were made for each other. Think what happiness you may confer on them by standing forward now and releasing them from their self-imposed misery.'

As I ceased speaking she turned toward me with a smile.

'I have heard of Orestes and Pylades,' she said, 'but never could form any idea of what their friendship was like until now; but for the sake of argument we will suppose for a moment (what, remember, I have never admitted) that Captain Cameron is my husband. Am I to prefer the happiness of those two strangers to my husband's good? I think your creed somewhat curious. I am to be faithful to the cause of true love as exemplified by this interesting couple, while to my love for my own husband I may be as false as I please.' She paused here, the flush dying out of her cheeks; then, with a face set and as rigid as marble, she went on: 'But I entirely deny the truth of what you have overheard, and in support of what I say I refer you to Captain Cameron himself, who will doubtless satisfy your mind upon the matter.'

As she finished speaking she tottered a few paces forward, groping like a blind person for some support on which to lean, and had I not caught her and led her to the sofa she would have fallen.

I felt that I could do nothing more than I

'My wife!' he said, laughing scornfully as I finished. 'Why, Cairnsford, who would ever have thought you soft enough to believe such a story? What you say about Miss Meares is perfectly true, and therefore, I see, I can not have a wife already, though you are so blind as to present to me one so lovely as the lady before us.'

His sneering, cynical manner and jeering smile enraged me. I felt somehow that the man, who had not truth or good intention on his side, was more than a match for me though I was doing what I thought right the best of my ability. Exasperated beyond all bounds of circumspection and self-control I turned to his wife and endeavored to obtain her witness.

'Do you hear, Mrs. Cameron,' I said, 'what this man, your husband, says? Your lot is indeed sad; but consider how much more terrible it will be if you allow him to work out his villainous scheme, and bring dishonor not on you alone, but on other. Do not be afraid to speak the truth boldly. I will protect you, and see that no harm shall befall you from his baffled rage.'

'Cairnsford, you are mad!' said Cameron, interrupting her, as she raised her head from her hands and turned toward me about to speak. 'You have been deceived by appearances, though how a man of the world like you could have been so deceived I don't know. I have known this lady since she was a child, certainly; indeed, her father's death-bed commended her to my care, being the only friend that remained to him but it is false that she is my wife, as, who ever interest the pitiful circumstances which she was left may have inspired in me I could not consent to give up my brilliant prospects and forego my marriage with Miss Meares, whose fortune, after all, is only a small portion of her attractions. And now as I have done my best to explain the matter to you, I will not detain you any longer.' He looked toward the door as he finished the speech in an easy, impudent manner; but pretended not to hear him, and turning to the lady, said:

'Mrs. Cameron, have you nothing to say to all this?'

Then she rose and stepped forward a pace or two, looking bewildered, like one in a dream. At last with an effort she spoke, and her voice though low was clear, as she said:

'Why do you torture me farther? Has I not told you that whatever Captain Cameron tells you of me you must believe? Will it only to force me to acknowledge my misdeeds that you saved me last night from the waters of the Boodra? You meant well, I doubt, but you have only caused me anguish and shame. Captain Cameron's explanation you must accept as the truth, and do not think me ungrateful if I beg that our acquaintance may come to an end from this moment.' As she finished speaking she threw herself once more on the couch, as if she seemed no longer to be aware of our presence.

Cameron laughed lightly.

'Julia, you see, is a woman of good sense and she knows she can not lay claim to a position your knight-errantry would place her in. You understand, Cairnsford, though I do not intend to quarrel with you this time, I don't like this kind of thing, a man beg you will not repeat it. I do believe that mad fellow Melton put you up to it; as like his confounded impudence, and know he is dying to cheat me out of the heiress. However, I won't keep you any longer. Good-bye; I dare say I shall see you to-morrow at A—.'

Disgusted with them both, and, above all, with myself, I left the house, and mounted Sultan was soon a good way on my return to A—.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## SPACE IN DIFFICULTIES.

Sultan and I did not let the grass grow under our feet on our way back to A—. It seemed that rapid motion relieved the tumult of angry feelings which raged within me, while my little Arab had, no doubt, his own motives for exertion in the thoughts of comfortable stable and good feed that before him. So it chanced that when I rived I found our fellows only just sitting down to dinner. They were late that d