

Hugh Melton!

CHAPTER II.

(CONTINUED.)

Cameron was in his gayest humor; he was standing beside the acknowledged belle of the day, who was, besides, one of the richest heiresses in England, for whose smile he was willing to go through any amount of danger, and to stand beside whom with the right that Cameron possessed would have made more than one heart there present throb with a rapture beside which all other joys would be cold and lifeless. More than all this, he had won largely; his creditors would be quieted, at least for the time, as I don't believe that gentleman ever had the least intention of liquidating his debts in full; however, he would pay as much as would render him safe, and that was all he wanted.

We were having a large luncheon party that day, and on entering the room with some lady friends, I found Mr. and Miss Meares were also among the number of the guests. They sat opposite me, so that I had a very good opportunity for observing the young lady; and the more I saw of her the more I liked her. I felt, indeed, as though the peculiar charm of manner Melton had spoken of was exercising its influence over me, and I am sure my many friends must have found me rather more preoccupied than was pleasant or flattering. Hugh sat on one side of her, and I heard him say, in the careless manner under which he sometimes hid deep feeling, 'Do you remember some very good advice you gave me the last time I saw you, Miss Meares?'

The color flushed a little over that clear, pale face of hers as she answered, 'I don't remember ever giving you any good advice; but if I did, I hope it has been profitable to you.'

'Yes, it was just about that I wanted to tell you,' he replied. 'I have ever since tried to act up to it, and though in some things I think that *le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle*, still in others it pays; for instance, you would be surprised to see how I have improved in my art. Don't you remember telling me I ought to have a fixed object in life? Well, I have chosen painting for my object, and have followed it up closely ever since. I thought you would be pleased to hear what your good advice has done for me; I hope your own practice of it has been equally successful.'

Again I saw the tears rise slowly in the depths of her lovely violet eyes as she turned away pained and annoyed at his frivolous and impertinent tone; his gaze, which followed her every motion, saw it too, and in an instant penitence followed his cruel speech. He leaned toward her and said, hurriedly and brokenly, into a low voice that none but I overheard him, 'Forgive me; I don't know what I say or do. The sight of you has brought back hopes and longings I had thought long of me. I would never have come near you had I thought I should have been betrayed into saying any thing that could have caused you a moment's pain. My heart is sore, and I have passed to-day through the bitterest trial life can bring me; but do not fear, I will distress you no more.'

She heard him, and gave him one timid, hurried, upward glance that spoke pardon, and I almost thought love, in its lingering tenderness; then turned away and busied herself with what was before her.

Hugh, after this, spoke no more to her, but I could see his gaze lingering on her every now and then, when he thought she was engaged with Captain Cameron, who sat on the other side of her father, with a look that revealed too plainly to my anxious eyes how utterly every hope and affection of his noble and still young life, with all its abundant promise of daring deeds and conquering triumphs of art, was bound up in this young heiress, with her sweet pure beauty, her clever radiant smile, her love-lit tender eyes, her halo of golden hair, and all its dainty adornments of modern fashion and taste in their careful, tasteful arrange-

I mean the anguish of unavailing regret, of bitter remorse. I saw you looking at me to-day at luncheon, Charlie; and no wonder; you must have been truly ashamed of your friend, when any distress, even such as I had to bear, could have made me utter a covert taunt to one so good and true as she. When I saw the pained, startled look in her sweet face, and the unshed tears glistening in her gentle eyes, then I knew that I had been a brute, and felt that I should never forgive myself; but the words had been spoken, words such as I should have uttered to no woman, least of all to her, who has acted all through this matter, not for her own happiness, but for that of her parents; and no apology, no repentance can efface from my mind the painful surprise that looked out of her startled eyes as she turned them on me, with the mute inquiry, 'And you too, you whom I trusted, and thought would have known me better?'

Axious to turn his thoughts from so painful a subject, I interrupted him saying, 'At any rate, Hugh, I am convinced that if you had allowed Cameron to imperil his neck by riding that horse, she would, to say the least, not have blamed you for any accident that might have happened. I fancy the gallant captain is hardly appreciated in that quarter.'

'You are mistaken, Charlie; indeed you are,' he replied, earnestly. 'Miss Meares is not a girl to go before God with a lie on her lips; she will try to love him, if she has not already succeeded in doing so, in order that she may fulfil the conditions of the will, and thereby provide her parents with a happy home in their old age. But if she does not love him, she will never marry him; I know her well enough to be sure of that, *coute que coute*, she will abide by the right.'

I saw it was useless to say more on the subject, and so drew him gradually off by a series of well-contrived questions about the race, the merits of the horses, the style of the riders, the size of the leaps, etc., though all the while I could not help wondering how it was that such a clever fellow as Hugh could have succumbed so entirely to that charming and dangerous beauty. Yet, after all, there was more reason in his infatuation than there is in most men's; it was not alone beauty of face, form, color, or the charm of a sweet manner, and a silvery musical voice, that had enslaved him; it was something far higher and rarer than these—the spell of a noble intellect, a fervid imagination, the attraction of a kindred soul in art, a mind that could enter into and sympathize with the slightest shades and inflections of feeling in his; while above all and over all was shed the clear unwavering light of lofty principles and unswerving loyalty to them. It was not so hard to understand after all, looking at it in this light, and I heartily wished that Hugh had never seen her, rather than that he should have been allured into a passion which, taking his nature and her character into consideration, I had every reason to believe he would never conquer. However, for the time being I contrived to divert him from his troubles, but was not surprised when he announced his intention of not going to the ball that evening. I thought he was right, as seeing her again would only pain him afresh; so bidding him good night, I hurried off to the ball-room, where, as one of the committee, I was obliged to put in an early appearance.

CHAPTER III.

A THIEF IN THE DARK.

'Such an extraordinary thing has happened to me,' said Captain James at mess a few weeks after the race. 'Tell me, did any of you fellows see any one going into or out of my room yesterday while I was out?' He addressed the table generally, and looked ruffled and annoyed as he spoke, a most unusual thing with that laziest and most good-tempered of men.

We all looked up, and Melton, from the other end of the table, called out, 'I was in your room for a minute or two yesterday afternoon, to fetch a book you told me I would find there. Why, what's up?'

'Oh, it wasn't you I meant; but any of the servants or people of that kind? You

'But what might be,' continued Hugh, still with a slight shade of embarrassment, 'because what would be unusual in other rooms would not be unusual there.'

This remark was greeted with a general suppressed smile, and was thought to be a bit at the captain; but notwithstanding that, a certain uneasiness in Hugh's manner might have led one to think that his mind was occupied with more important matters than a friend's disorderly habits.

James, however, with other it was meant as a hit or not, took it with his usual good humor, saying, 'Ah, true, I dare say my room is not quite as dandified as those of you other fellows; but now what do you advise me to do about my money?'

Every one was eager offering advice, some urging one plan, some another; not that any of their plans seemed likely to tend to the ultimate object of securing the thief, but at least it made the speaker be listened to with a certain amount of attention while enunciating his opinion, and afterward—why, it was another's turn to speak, and he was forgotten. However, after nearly an hour's excited talk, it was found we were no nearer hitting on a plan for the recovery of the money or the discovery of the robber, as we were all strongly against bringing in a detective from Scotland Yard on account of the scandal it would give rise to; and it was determined only that each one among us should keep a watch on all articles of value in our possession, with the idea that if there was any thief, one such successful haul would not satisfy him, and he would soon be at it again.

Days passed away, but nothing transpired that could in any way give a clue to this most disagreeable business; and then days passed into weeks, but still every thing remained in just as unsatisfactory a state as at first. At last one day, about two weeks after the event, as I was sitting looking at the papers in the news-room, I heard several young fellows using Hugh's name in a way I didn't quite like, though at first I hardly caught what they meant. I stopped reading, and listened.

'At any rate, you'll admit,' said young Tufton, a newly joined ensign of the most cubbish appearance—at any rate, you'll admit it was odd, Melton's being in the room that afternoon.'

'It would have been still more odd,' said I, rising, while I restrained with a violent effort my inclination to take the young snob by the neck and pitch him out of the room—it would have been still more odd had he been in the room and had not mentioned it. And now once for all, gentlemen, whoever dares to breathe a word of the kind you have just been uttering before me must recollect that I shall consider all such speeches as direct insults to myself, and shall take measures accordingly.'

'No, Cairnsford, this is my affair,' said a grave voice behind me, while a hand was laid on my shoulder. 'I heard what these gentlemen were saying as I came into the room, and I warn them that any remarks reflecting on my honor will require to be vindicated and upheld in a way that they may not wish.'

'You forget,' said Tufton, with a sneer, 'that to people suspected of appropriating what does not belong to them it is not considered necessary to offer satisfaction. Indeed, as gentlemen we couldn't do it.'

I was looking at Hugh, and saw the blood mount in a hot flush over his face, and a steel-blue light gleam in his dark eyes, as with a bound like a panther he sprang forward, and before the impudent youth could stir, he was held fast by the collar in Hugh's muscular grasp. Melton carried in his hand a strong cutting whip (he had just come in from riding Spitfire), and raising it, while the frightened youth vainly struggled to get free, he appeared about to administer a correction which, however severe, the cub had certainly merited. I was, however, for his own sake about to interfere, and beg him not to yield to an impulse of passion, when, dropping his whip, Melton flung the struggling sub violently from him, saying:

'You are not worth it, the lesson would be lost on such as you. Stay,' he added, in a commanding voice, as thoroughly crest-fallen Tufton was trying to sneak out of the room, 'let me hear who put this honorable idea into your head, for I don't believe you would have been so easily tempted without

them quickly out of sight and looked up impatiently.

'Cameron,' began Hugh, 'that young snob Tufton has been making some very offensive insinuations about me, and he gives you out as the person from whom he heard them. He said just now in the reading-room, before Cairnsford and others, that you had said it was a suspicious circumstance my being the only person in James' room the day those notes were stolen. I was very near giving the young fellow the hiding he richly deserved, and I promised the others you would explain your words to have been either entirely altered or their meaning taken up in a way you did not intend.'

'And why shouldn't I intend it?' answered Cameron, impudently. 'I do think it a suspicious circumstance; and if you're innocent, by Jove you're awfully unlucky, for no one would believe it.'

Hugh stepped forward and seized him by the arm, turning his face as he did so full to the light; it was an accidental movement, but for all that it helped the denouement of the scene.

'You can't think that,' he said, sternly; 'you know me too well to credit such an accusation, even if you dared make it.'

Here he stopped, for a sudden, and to Melton's upright heart an awful change came over the face turned full to his; it was a look of guilt and terror and abject cowardice, that brought at once conviction to the beholder's mind. Melton drew away his hand from Cameron's arm with a kind of loathing wonder depicted on his expressive face.

'You were the thief!' he exclaimed. 'You! Oh, I had not thought of anything so bad as this; it is too terrible;' and he turned away, partly that he might not see the cringing, terror-stricken being before him, partly that he might have time to collect his thoughts on a course of action.

'Oh,' cried Cameron, mistaking his movement, and fearing he was about to go off and proclaim his discovery, 'for the love of Heaven don't tell! I was in sore need; all the money I had won did not quite pay my debts, and there was one man to whom I owed £400 who would have arrested me in a day or two more, and then, though my marriage would perhaps hardly have been broken off, it would have caused a scandal that would have pained Maud; and indeed her father might have taken any measures. I could not bear it; and knowing where this money was, I was unable to resist the temptation, and took it. He could well spare it, and I intended to pay it back on my marriage; indeed I did; he added, with vehement assertion, seeing, no doubt, in Hugh's face that he did not believe this last statement.

'My duty is only too clear,' answered Hugh; 'I must tell James what I know. I could never have believed it, Cameron, and am indeed sorry for you; but I must do what I feel to be right.'

'Yes, and be asked for your proofs,' sneered Cameron, who, driven to desperation, now determined to put a bold face on it and brazen the matter out. 'I think you forget all about them, but they are very necessary, I can assure you. My word is as good as yours, and I have taken good care you should be under suspicion already. Any thing you may say of me will only confirm the rumors afloat about yourself, as every one will think you accuse me to try and divert attention from your own proceedings.'

It was too true, and for a moment Hugh was almost overwhelmed by the desperate situation in which he found himself. He had too great command over himself, however, to show how deeply his enemy's arrows had penetrated, and after a moment's silence, during which time he reflected that he must dare all or lose all, he resolved from his knowledge of Cameron's antecedents to draw a bow at a venture, and see what success would follow his audacity.

'Proofs!' he repeated, with a light, confident laugh that had a touch of cynicism in its tone. 'I haven't got them now, but I can have them before night-fall. It will only be necessary to frighten your friend Mr. Sulomons into letting us look among his entries for your last payment. The amount was £400, I think, and the time about ten days ago—' He would have gone on, but Cameron interrupted him.

the shock, of finding out that the man she loved was branded with the stigma of theft.'

As Cameron, in hurried, breathless words, drew this picture of Maud Meares' affection for him and her anguish at his shame, Hugh turned away with a half-uttered sob that was heard only too distinctly by the man beside him, who mentally registered a vow that, when his opportunity occurred, he would make the fellow pay well for his audacity in daring to love his (Cameron's) betrothed. For this time, however, his eloquence prevailed, for after a pause Hugh turned slowly, and facing him, said, 'I could despise myself for being in any way partner in your guilt, and in not telling what I know I am in a way partner in it. But because you have prayed me by a power I cannot resist, I spare you this once, on condition that you shall not marry Miss Meares before the expiration of two years; and if before that time has elapsed I hear of any other such acts on your part, I shall proclaim all I know, which will have the effect of at once putting an end to your engagement; for however well Miss Meares may love you, her principles would never consent to marry a man accused of such a crime as yours. In the meantime, I shall procure the money and send it anonymously to Captain James, you giving me your note of hand for the sum, to be paid before this time next year; also, I must insist on your explaining publicly at mess those words relative to myself, overheard by young Tufton, which have been going the round of the camp greatly to my prejudice. You will easily find some plausible way for giving them an innocent meaning. Give me your acknowledgement for £500. That will do, James shall have it to-morrow. Remember our conditions.'

Then, without deigning to bestow a glance on his crest-fallen companion, Hugh left the room, and presently rejoined me, saying all was right; notwithstanding which assertion, his grave, and looks raised a doubt in my mind that all was as right as he said.

That day at mess, Cameron, whose face bore no evidence of the crisis he had just passed through, said, carelessly, 'By-the-way, Tufton, you must have strangely misconceived a remark you heard me make the other day, or else you can not have heard it properly. I said that I considered it strange that Captain Melton, having been some little time in the room looking for a book, should neither have disturbed the thief nor seen any appearance of the desk having been tampered with, and I certainly wonder Captain James had not questioned him more closely as to the aspect of the room and the time at which he went there, with a view of finding out what people were likely to be about at that particular hour. It seems you have been drawing disagreeable conclusions from those very harmless and natural remarks. I trust you will not do so in future, and I hope Melton will accept my apology for having unintentionally given rise to slanderous reports.'

Melton muttered something about "certainly," and "Pray say no more about it;" but his face was grave and annoyed; while Tufton looked wretchedly sat upon, and didn't seem to know whether to leave the room or remain where he was.

So that matter was, or ought to have been, settled; but as we all know, it is far easier to set bad reports going than to stop them once they get afloat; and more than once I perceived after this some of the younger fellows, who had not yet learned to know and esteem Melton's character, and others who, though older and knowing better, yet hated him because his pure and noble life shamed theirs, whispering together in a mysterious manner, always stopping suddenly when either Hugh or I approached them; a precaution which was certainly wise, as I doubt whether either of us would have heard their discourse with patience.

The golden autumn days flew by quickly I had one or two good days among the stubble and turnips, while Hugh worked away with unrelenting vigor at his beloved art; it was his companion and friend, his solace in trouble, his inspiration in joy. Always busy, his fingers seemed never to lag, his mind never to weary of it; and I often envied the marvelous power of forgetting his griefs in a fairy-land of his own crea-