

## Hugh Melton!

CHAPTER X.

(CONTINUED.)

She was talking rapidly, in a wild, impassioned manner, Maud listening, with a half-frightened, half-pitying look in her sweet face, and now and then, I could see, trying to soothe and comfort her excited visitor. They neither of them saw me, and for a minute or two I watched them unobserved; then the unknown, suddenly turning, revealed to my astonished eyes the beautiful features of Mrs. Cameron, now distorted by jealousy and pain, while her fine eyes seemed to gleam with an unnatural light. Though watching them, I could not overhear their conversation; nor did I care to do so, for, although surprised at seeing Mrs. Cameron, I thought she could tell Maud nothing she did not already know, or that would render my interference necessary. What passed between them Maud related to me afterward; and as I think it will tend to make my narrative clearer, I relate it at the time it occurred, as if I had myself been present. Maud had gone out alone that morning, as I said, and was wounding her way toward her favorite seat, which was on that side of the river farthest from the house, and, be it remembered, on the opposite bank to that on which I stood watching them. She had crossed a little rustic bridge a few hundred yards from where she now stood, and had arrived at the Robber's Leap, as the narrow part of the river is here described was called—from some old family tradition, I believe—when a lady, very handsomely attired, though her dress bore evident marks of wear and travel on it, stepped out from among the trees, and advancing toward her, said,

'Am I right in supposing I am addressing Miss Meares?'

'I am Miss Meares, certainly,' replied Maud, rather taken by surprise. 'But you have the advantage of me, as I can not remember ever having met you before.'

'Neither have you,' answered the stranger. 'I come from a far land, lady, to beg you to do me a favor and save yourself from a life of shame and trouble.'

Maud tossed her head with her old proud, impatient grace.

'I do not understand you,' she said. 'Trouble we must all have in this life—God sends it for our good, if we look at it rightly, and not for our punishment—but only sin brings shame; and, through God's grace helping me, the stain of disgrace shall never rest on my name through any act of mine.'

'O lady, beautiful, cold, proud English lady,' cried this strange visitor, and Maud fancied her voice and accent had a foreign unfamiliar sound, 'have you ever loved? Do you know what it is to have one man enthroned in your heart—his love the sole earthly good you covet, his smile dearer to you than the summer sunlight, the lingering tones of his voice pleasanter to your ear than the most enchanting music? Do you know what it is to dream of him by night and watch for his step by day—to feel, the morning his presence is not with you, blacker and sadder than the gloom of the wild monsoon? Have you loved like this, lady, and then felt that another eye, brighter perhaps than yours, a smile more sparkling and mirthful, was drawing the heart you loved, the one treasure you craved for, from you? Do you know what it is to suffer thus?'

'Poor thing,' Maud answered, tenderly, 'it is indeed a fearful fate that you describe. The man who could treat you thus is not worthy of you. Give your love only to the noble and true, it will never be thrown back as a worthless gift into your bosom. A true heart knows always the value of a true love, even when it can not return it, it sees the worth of the prize and is grateful. If a poor soul, have been deceived by the glitter of a man's affection, your fate is indeed sad; but what can I do to help you? An empty pity is worthless, and you have desired something from me if you are so far to see me.'

and she felt that her strength was no match for the frenzied force of the madwoman.

'Wait a minute,' she said calmly, while every pulse beat wildly. 'I can not go into the water with her boots on; I dislike the feeling of wet leather so much. You must allow me to sit down and unlace them first; and I should advise you to do the same, that then we may go alike.'

She had not seen me on the other side as she made this excuse to gain time; it was only with the faint hope the maniac might accede to her request, and help might arrive before she had finished, that she suggested it.

The madwoman happily appeared to approve of the proposal, for she sat down also and prepared to remove her boots.

In the mean time I, on the opposite side, had been alarmed by the strangeness of their actions, and had at last partly guessed the woman's intention. Their lust act puzzled me; still there was no time to be lost. The bridge was some way off; was it possible to leap the river? In that part it was but fourteen feet or so. At its narrowest a good leaper could do it easily, and in my young days I had been accounted one of the best; besides tradition told me it had been done before. At any rate the case was one of life or death; I must try. The place at which the leap was most practicable about a hundred yards from where the two ladies were. Mrs. Cameron had already risen to her feet, and was holding out her hand to Maud, who lingered over the unlacing of her dainty Balmorals. I took this in at a glance as I went back a few yards for a run. As I came down to the leap Mrs. Cameron perceived me, and cried wildly,

'He shall not save you! Come! You shall not live to be happy with Edward when I am gone!' Seizing Maud—who, seeing me, remained seated, and clinging with the strength of despair to the herbage around—she dragged her toward the edge.

There was not much time to spare. As I cleared the river and landed safely on their side, Maud was but three yards from the overhanging cliff; but she had caught hold of a small sapling with one hand and held for her life. At my best speed I ran toward them. Never even in my school days had I got over the ground so fast; but Maud's strength had failed her, and she was already on the edge. One spring more, and I grasped her dress as the maniac, pulling her fiercely forward, sprang off the bank into the chasm below. Maud was carried over the edge by that last wild effort, but the dress held firm for an instant, though it seemed to give way in every direction; the next minute I had my arm round her, and drew her on the bank, scarcely looking in my agony at the rings of light floating wide over the spot where the wretched madwoman had sunk.

As soon as I had placed Maud in safety I returned again to the water. A little way down the river I saw for an instant the poor woman's light dress floating, but before I could get to the spot it had sunk again. Hastily I threw off my coat and plunged in, but had scarcely done so when she rose a little way farther down. I followed, but she again sank out of sight; though I dived again and again, and spent a long time in search of the body, it was in vain, and I was at last compelled to desist until I could send men with drags to continue the search. I then returned to where I had left Maud, and found her quite unconscious. She had borne up bravely while the danger lasted, but the sudden revulsion of feeling on finding herself safe had overpowered her. I carried her to the house, and leaving her in charge of my mother, hurried back with the necessary men and implements to continue the search. After many hours fruitless anxiety and toil darkness forced us to leave off; and though we continued for several days seeking the body it was never found. We supposed the current had carried it down to the Severn, and that in the depths of that river it had been lost beyond all hope of recovery.

This was the fate of the lovely and unfortunate woman who had been so foolishly trustful as to repose confidence in the faith and love of such a man Captain Cameron. I, who had seen her in her beauty and confidence, felt deep pity for her sad end, and it only added on more motive to try

now to bestow on me; but they say love begets love, and mine is so true, so faithful, that I know some day I shall have yours in return. With that hope I will be content if you will give yourself to me, trusting one who knows the state of your heart, yet longs only for you. I shall have no fear of the result. You shall never, while I live, repent the day when you yielded to my entreaties.'

'Impossible,' she said again, trying to release herself. 'I can not marry without love, and that is dead in me forever. Leave me, I entreat you, Major Cairnsford. You can not think how it grieves me to deny you anything; but this can not be.'

But I was half mad with despair, and held her hands as she tried to withdraw them.

'I will not give you up!' I cried. 'I have lived a solitary life from my youth, and now when the cup of happiness seemed about to be presented to me, it is to be dashed from my lips? Is there no way in which I can move you, nothing that can induce you to alter your determination?'

'Nothing, Mr. Major Cairnsford,' she answered, rather haughtily; 'and I must insist on your leaving me. You are not acting like yourself, and are annoying and paining me more than I ever thought you would do.'

'Then go,' I cried, releasing her hand, and stepping from her. 'Go, since you are so cold-hearted that all my passionate prayers and pleadings can not persuade you to reward the man whom you yourself assert has saved your life.'

It was a mean speech, and I felt it to be so at the time; but despair forced it from me, in the vague hope that it might induce her to reconsider her resolution. She stopped, looked at me fixedly for a minute, and then answered,

'If you claim my life as due to you because saved by you, I give it, having no right to withhold it; only I did not know you sought it on those terms.'

At that moment she despised me. I heard it in her tone; but I was like a shipwrecked mariner perishing from thirst, who drinks of the salt water around him, and dies mad from the fatal draught. I leaned breathlessly forward.

'That way, or any way,' I cried; 'I have your promise. You will love me in time, my own one, if devotion like mine can gain affection, as people say it can.'

She shrank a little from me as I drew her toward me, and said, faintly,

'Only give me a little time. It is so sudden, and I was unprepared. You will give me a year, will you not? Surely you will not ask me to marry you for a year? She drew back a little from me as she said this, and pressed her trembling hand to her forehead, saying, as if to herself, 'His friend! Have you forgotten so soon? I can never forget.'

There was intense pain in her tone, reproach to me, who dared utter words of love to her; reproach to herself, if she had in any way, by word or deed, encouraged my infatuation. But I was blind and mad, and cried, bitterly,

'O love, let the dead bury their dead! We are young and strong, and have years of life before us. Shall we pass them in lonely misery because death has carried off the best and noblest? My love is as true and earnest as his was, though I can never be loved as he; yet what I desire, what I pray for, is that the love he won, and might, had he lived, have worn so proudly. No; I crave only what remains, the last faint embers of a fire too sacred to burn afresh on another shrine. The year you ask I should be heartless indeed to refuse; till then I will wait in patient hope, having faith that my love will win yours at last.'

And so it was settled. I knew by the tone of her voice that she hoped long ere the year had passed I would have forgotten her; but I felt that, even had my love been less deep than it was, such a woman, once known, could never be forgotten. She was so different from the girls one meets generally in society—so gay, yet so tender, so fearless, yet so gentle, so careless of herself, so true to others. I said nothing of this to her, but urged her to remain with her parents at Cairns till I should again see her; for I had made up my mind at once to return for that weary year to my regiment in India, to try among its wildest scenery to pass away the

few charms when I reflected how many weary months lay between me and happiness. One slight chill my bright dreams did receive, it is true, though it affected me little at the time—in fact, only afforded me a faint and half-contemptuous sensation of amusement.

We were doing the Pyramids, as is the custom of travelers in this land. I went along with others. I had seen them before, but to avoid singularity went in for them a second time. When there I roamed away from my party, and occupied myself picturing what Maud (so I called her in my thoughts with consciousness of right) might be doing in the old house at Cairns. I was sitting on a block of stone lying at some little distance from the Great Pyramid on the golden sand of the desert. I had selected this position as commanding a good view collectively of those monuments of man's skill and patience, and mused, as I have said, while smoking and gazing absently on the wondrous scene. Suddenly there arose before me, I know not how, an old withered hag, such an object as is never seen out of an Arab village, and that makes one wonder if it could ever have been young, graceful, and fawn like as the maidens one sees moving about the same encampment with water-jugs on their heads and soft gazelle-like eyes.

'You are happy now, noble Sir,' she croaked, in her hoarse guttural Arabic; 'happy as a dream. But joy is like dew; it fades before the morning. Shall I tell your excellency's fortune?'

The sound of her words had a mournful ring in them that jarred on my golden visions. I shook myself impatiently.

'There,' I said, throwing her a few piasters; 'I know my fortune. You could tell me no better. Leave me now.'

She gathered the coins up eagerly enough, but answered:

'If I tell you your fortune now, noble Sir, it may save you many a bitter hour afterward. The bright morning sun does not always betoken a glorious mid-day, and many a fair rose-bud is cankered ere it blooms.'

'What is it you want with me?' I answered. 'I have given you money. Can not you leave me?'

'The money is very welcome,' she replied, 'and the Arab woman does not refuse it; but because your face is fair and your hand open, she would tell you a little of what lies behind the veil of the future, that when the hour comes the blow may be less overwhelming.'

'Say on, then, good woman,' I replied, carelessly, feeling that it was quite hopeless to try and get rid of her while she thought she had anything to communicate. 'Not that I believe in the fortune you tell me,' I added, 'for mine is clear and open, one that those who run may read, but because you seem to wish it, I allow you.'

'Yes, yes,' she replied; 'your future indeed seems to lie before you clear and open—an ancient name, a princely fortune, a fair wife who does not yet love you best of all, but may, and most likely will, do so when love has time to beget love. All that you have before you now, and you think it will only grow brighter with years; but the old Arab woman sees more. She sees a miserable slave toiling in a far-distant country; he has been straight and tall as you, but in face far fairer—such a face as women love to look on. Toil and pain and grief have bent his stalwart form and lined his broad open brow, but yet he shall step between you and happiness, and mar your fortunes. Be wise, be warned in time. Return to your own country and watch over your love.'

Sue turned to go, but I, half amused, half frightened at I knew not what vague danger her words seemed to point to, called on her to stop.

'Tell me, where is he, and who is he, this slave of whom you speak? My race are not wont to fear slaves.'

'True,' she answered, without looking back, and gliding away more nimbly than I could have believed possible—'true; yet they may fear this one, for he is one who will return from the dead.'

As she uttered the last word she disappeared suddenly behind a rocky bowlder, and when I rose to look for her, excited even out of my calm laziness by her mystic and

nection with me or with any one else. You may as well take this advice in a friendly spirit and be guided by it, as otherwise I shall get you kicked out of the regiment in a way that you will not like. I know a little more about you than the other fellows, and caution you for your good.'

Cameron literally glared at me for a minute or two, then thinking discretion the better part of valor, turned on his heel and walked off.

'Take care you do not get a knife in your back some dark night, Carinstord,' said Solace, looking up from his paper; 'that fellow looks as if he would do for you.'

'Pooh!' I answered. 'I do not think he has daring enough to put a fellow out of the way; he is too great a coward, and dreads being found out. By-the-by, didn't you tell me Eames was selling out? Who is looking for the step? Will it do you any good?'

Certainly the climate does not agree with me, for I had not been five months back at A—before the doctors found it necessary to order me a complete change of air. They wished me to return home; but that I had determined not to do till my term of probation had expired, and therefore adopted the other alternative they prescribed, which was to go up to the hills, far up into a really cool climate, and there pass my time until I found my health re-established. This plan suited me well enough. I was desirous of going after big game among the hills, and determined to strike out quite a new line of my own in the wildest and least known part of the Himalays. My preparations did not take long to make; I did not wish to have too much roughing, so took some natives to carry ammunition, tent, and baggage, with a few other little luxuries I did not care to be without; and last, but not least, I brought with me my trusty soldier-servant, Adams, a man who had been in my service almost ever since I had joined, and who was not only active and enterprising, but understood the ways of the natives much better than is at all usual among that class of men.

I am not going to give a detailed account of all my ramblings; indeed I think far too much space is already occupied by my personal adventures; but it would be almost impossible to relate events, so as to give a correct idea of them, without a strong admixture of unavoidable egotism.

Day by day we penetrated farther into the mountains, and our success in hunting was very fair—one or two splendid bearskins still attest our luck; but our trophies would doubtless have been far more numerous but for the incident I am about to relate.

One evening we found ourselves near a large and populous village—town I suppose I ought to call it—inhabited by a people who seemed hardly to understand any men's dialect, and who evidently had seen few white people before. My men declared that they appeared to have heard very little of our victorious English nation, and did not seem to feel the awe they should have done at beholding representatives of so powerful an empire.

Adams did not think it prudent to remain near them; they looked with such covetous eyes on our arms and implements, of which, however, they did not know the power or the use; so that I felt safe in the pleasant conviction that the discharge of my revolver would put to flight an army of them. As it was not convenient to go farther that night I camped in a pleasant valley outside the town, and sent a messenger to their chief of head man that I would pay him a visit next morning. He appeared inclined to be friendly, and responded to this by sending me a goat and a bag of rice, which furnished a good supper to my whole party—rather a happy circumstance as we had but little game with us that night, and would otherwise have been on short commons.

Next morning I was still early, and by way of passing the time till ten o'clock, when the great man held his levee, I determined to stroll through the town, and see what kind of a place it was, and how the inhabitants lived. I found the houses well and strongly built—I suppose on account of the cold at night, which is often very intense—but the