

Hugh Meton!

CHAPTER II.

(CONTINUED.)

'Oh, that's just the pith of the whole thing. I believe he's dipped tremendously, and the Jews are down on him; so that if he doesn't do something now, he goes to the wall entirely. As to his not making another book, that is because he fancies himself secure on that horse, and doesn't care for any of the others. Southman's as bad.' Langham recounted all this in an undertone with a rather pleased twinkle in his eye; he did not at all fancy the Cameron and Southman clique.

'But,' said Hugh, who was on the other side of me, and who had been listening attentively, 'can Cameron ride at all? I never fancied he did much in that line.'

'No,' laughed Langham; 'that's what makes it so curious. Some say Spitfire will kill him, others that the horse will be killed; at any rate, Cameron's safe for a crumpler.'

Hugh turned away his head quickly, and appeared to be busy with his dinner; but Southman, from the opposite side of the table, cried out: 'Did you ever hear of such folly as Cameron's wanting to ride that brute Spitfire? He's safe to be killed. I'm as good a rider as he, and I've as much on the rate as he; but if it was as much again, I wouldn't ride that animal.'

'Shows that his physical courage is of a higher order than yours. We won't presume to compare your moral qualities, Southman,' said Langham, laughing quietly. He was a young fellow who had not long joined, universally liked for his gay good humor, but a most inveterate dealer in chaff and badinage, neither friend nor foe escaping his good sallies.

Southman, wrapped safely from all covert stings in an impenetrable armor of self-conceit, answered, quietly: 'No; physical courage is well enough in its way, but without being properly balanced by moral courage it degenerates into scoldhardiness and rashness. Now if Cameron has a degree of moral courage at all apportioned to his physical bravery, he would reflect that it would be much better to bear a little dunning from the Jews, even though that is a disagreeable alternative, to be whitewashed, rather than run the risk of breaking his neck.'

'But suppose he was to be whitewashed out of his rich future's recollection?' said Langham, inquiringly.

'Ah, there now is a case that requires judgment. That is just a situation in which I could show to advantage; I would show you how to steer through those difficulties in a manner that would astonish you,' answered Southman.

'Gentleman,' said the colonel, who at the end of the table was beginning to look rather electrified at Southman's philosophical turn of mind, 'suppose we go out and smoke a cigar, you can resume this interesting discussion at a future period.'

We all rose and dispersed in different directions, I lighting a cigar, and intending to go out for a quiet stroll, to think over some family news I had that day received. I had not gone far, however, before I heard Hugh's voice calling after me, 'Stop, Cairnsford; why are you in such a hurry? I want you to walk with me.'

I turned, and as he came up I noticed a singularly white-set look in his face; the straight dark brows everhung gloomy, unchangeable eyes, in which a kind of restless, troubled look gleamed at intervals, and the thin, determined mouth expressed even more than its ordinary share of indomitable will.

'Come with me to find Hemmings, there's a good fellow, Charlie,' said he, as he came up and took my arm.

'What,' I exclaimed, 'you surely don't mean that you are going to offer to ride that brute Spitfire? That's to save that fellow Cameron the fall he so richly deserves? I'll lay anything.'

'Oh, Cairnsford, began Hugh, in a hurried, troubled manner, 'you don't know how I felt when Southman was talking about it at dinner. I was tempted sorely then; something kept whispering to me: "Leave him alone and let him be killed, and he

'Well, if you really feel inclined to undertake riding him,' interrupted Hemmings, quickly, 'I think you would be about the most likely person I could meet with. I remember seeing you out in the Quorn country once or twice on a very ugly brute of a horse, that would have brought most people to grief; so that if any one but Templeton can make anything of Spitfire, you are the man.'

'Will you ride him, Melton?' asked Cameron. 'That is most kind of you. I have a great deal on him, and it would have put me out dreadfully if he had been scratched. When do you intend to try him?'

'Well, it is rather late now—about half past eight, I should think; still, if you don't mind, Hemmings, I'll take him out now and see how he goes with me. You can come too if you like, Cameron. I know a nice retired spot, where we can get a good gallop without being observed,' answered Hugh; 'and you, Cairnsford, bring out Jocelyn, for I may want you to give me a lead over the first fence. And now let's look at the animal; I may want him saddled and bridled differently from the usual way when I know what his tricks are.'

Hugh's spirits seemed to have risen as soon as the perilous offer had been accepted, and I could not help thinking that though in the first instance duty had made him volunteer, yet now the excitement of approaching danger was beginning to exert its influence on his spirit, and he would not have backed out of the scrape if he could. We now entered the stable where this redoubtable animal was to be seen. There he was in a commodious loose box; and in truth, though knowing what I did of him, I could hardly restrain myself from echoing Hugh's cry of delight. He was a magnificent liver-colored chestnut, with tawny mane and tail, small blood-like head, a broad forehead conspicuously marked by a large white star, tall, clear, wild eyes with a wicked roll in them, large wide-open nostrils, and long restless ears. Altogether his face was a picture, beautiful to look at, but promising bad times to his adventurous rider. Add to this a neck fine and light where it joined the head, but swelling into a massive crest and running into a powerful sloping shoulder; broad oval hind-quarters of immense power, a magnificently developed chest, and flat sinewy legs completed the *coup d'oeil* of the finest horse I ever saw. No wonder Cameron felt sure of his money on him; no wonder Hugh felt a thrill of delight at the thought of riding such a superb creature, and began to think his sacrifice no sacrifice at all.

There he stood, looking wonderfully at his unknown visitors, turning now and then as if for protection, to the stable-man, who stood near him with the clothing, that had just been removed, over his arm. Hugh, after a few minutes' admiring pause, advanced to take him by the headstall; to this Spitfire, though he retreated a little before him at first, offered no great objection, and Hugh proceeded to examine him more closely. After a few seconds he asked, 'What bit do you ride him with?'

'A twisted snaffle, Sir,' answered the man; 'he's an orderly temper, Sir, and pull's like a good un when he gets his spirit up, though at times his mouth is too fine. This is the way of it, Sir; if you pull him he'll rear up and fall atop of you, as sure as eggs is eggs; but if he pulls you, and you can't manage to stop him some way, he'll take you wherever he chooses to go, and that's most like to be the shortest way home.'

'Ah, very likely,' answered Hugh; 'but I don't intend to let him get his own way. I shall try a plan of my own with him.' He then proceeded to give his own directions for the bridling of this formidable mount.

'Now, he said, when he had finished his instructions, 'we'll see how he will work in that tackle.'

'Well,' said Hemmings, when he had done speaking, 'I think you intend to break your neck, Melton; I hardly like to let you ride him in that gear.'

'Make yourself easy, my dear fellow,' answered Hugh. 'I rode one like him before, who had puzzled a good many people. I found my plan perfectly successful with Rough Diamond, the horse you saw me riding in the Quorn country, and I can at least try it on this one, who seems to have a similar temper.'

This explanation satisfied Hemmings, and

next fence he took capitally, going in the middle between our two horses; but the one after I began to think might prove a puzzler, and I felt rather anxious when we drew near it. When we were quite close to it, however, Spitfire crept forward a little, and, forgetful of his former bad temper, took it splendidly; his rider, then keeping him in a quiet canter, continued up the hill.

'Well done!' I exclaimed as I came up. 'If he goes as well in the race he is safe to win. What do you say, Melton?'

'I think he'll go,' he answered. 'I don't fancy I'll have any trouble can make him take the first fence well; in order to do that I must accustom him to obey me; and so I think if you and Cameron would return home I will give him a little schooling about here for an hour or so; by that time I shall be able to tell you where to put your money.'

Cameron, greatly pleased at Hugh's wonderful success, readily assented to this proposal, and we rode off together. I did not fancy my companion, though just now he was in one of his pleasant moods, rattling away about his private affairs, telling me for how much he was dipped, and if the state of his affairs reached the ears of his intended bride's father, there was no knowing whether being very straight-laced in his ideas, he might not take exception at the manner in which some of the debts had been incurred. All this low scheming selfishness was disgusting to listen to, and I could not help wondering how any girl such as Hugh had described Miss Meares to be could care for such a man. I was more and more drawn to the conclusion, the more I thought on the matter that Hugh was risking his life for a mere fancy of his own, as, not to charge Miss Meares with anything worse, I was sure she would not feel any deep grief at hearing of her future's death, if indeed he had not succeeded in killing himself in the race, which I permitted myself to doubt, for the reason that 'he that's born to be,' etc.—you know the rest, and will, I am sure, agree with me when you have a closer acquaintance with the individual in question.

At ten o'clock Hugh came in; it was still that soft perfumed twilight of the height of summer, and there was light enough for me to see his face, on looking at which I was not surprised to find he was fearfully tired.

'Well,' he said, throwing himself into an arm chair, 'I had a dreadful scene after you left; but I fancy I have conquered him at last. If I had staid there all night I should have done so before I would have let him go home without doing what I wanted; he wished to follow you back to camp. Give me a glass of beer Charlie; I'm too done up to speak till I have restored exhausted nature.'

I gave him what he asked for, and then he described to me the terrible battle, where the fighting was all on one side, through which he had passed, ending by saying,

'And now, Charley, if you have any money to spare, put it all on him; for I think when I have given him one or two more lessons I shall be able to make him do as I like, and there is nothing that can beat him in Alder-shot.'

The day of the steeple-chase at last came and I, being one of the stewards, went over early, and round the course to see that every thing was as it should be. We had put up some very good jumps; one good wet ditch; a stone wall that, though nothing to an Irishman, I fancy many in camp would not have liked to negotiate: one or two fences of the kind they call double ditches in the sister isle; and some flights of stout ox palings. Altogether it was a course demanding pluck and good riding, though I saw nothing that a good horse, properly handled, could not get safely over, indeed, the committee had expressly desired that nothing of a break-neck character should be attempted. Hugh looked very well in green and silver, and doubtless many an admiring glance was cast at him by the fair denizens of the grand stand; but he never seemed to look that way, or to notice the pretty faces and brilliant toilets which it displayed. Not so Gerald Courtown, the rider of Jack Masterman; that dandy ensign in his scarlet jacket formed a conspicuous object among the throng, and might be seen improving the few minutes left before mounting in sitting from one bevy of beauties to the other, receiving with evident delight an immense amount of chaff and complimentary bandiage. Then there was Powell, in black and orange, rider of the O'Donoghue, a horse that might with good riding become an awkward

Charlie? Did you ever see so magnificent an animal before?'

Nevertheless the beauty thus apostrophized did not look amiable, though to my surprise, on Hugh's approaching him and petting him he became considerably more quiet, and allowed the saddling process to proceed without any violent efforts to prevent it. At last all was ready; the second bell rang; the riders sprang into their seats, and set off in a quiet canter up the gentle hill past the stand. I rode quietly up a little distance behind them, watching Hugh with admiring eyes; his perfect easy seat, his little active figure, that moved in unison with the motion of his horse, his hand well down, restraining with light but firm touch the impetuosity of the powerful steed he rode; altogether he formed a picture of a perfect horseman, and, to my mind, out of the twelve men cantering at that moment up the green together, there was not one to be compared to him as regards the perfection of his riding. Just as they passed the stand I saw Hugh glance quickly toward it and bow. I was surprised, I did not know he had any lady friends near Alder-shot, and I was on the point of riding up to try and find out who she was, when Templeton, when the young fellow who was to have ridden Spitfire if he had not sprained his wrist at such an inconvenient time, strolled up to me in his usual languid way, holding out his uninjured hand as though it cost him a powerful effort to make such exertion.

'Morning Cairnsford. I say Spitfire will win; don't you think so? Splendid fellow that Melton! Always knew he could ride if he chose, though he never would take the loan of a horse from me. He's got a hand that will keep that beast's temper cool, if any one can. I watched him passing up now; not an ounce weight resting on his mouth though the brute was mad with impatience. That's the way to ride; he gives those fellows a lesson, I'm thinking. Good-bye; see you at luncheon, I suppose?' And so saying, the dandy horseman strolled away.

I moved up near the starting-post and watched the arrangements with anxious eyes; a few false starts would so completely rouse Spitfire's temper that I doubted if even Hugh would then succeed in getting anything out of him. The flag at length fell, and the twelve horses bounded away together; a beautiful sight they were, the riders with their gay-colored jackets, the horses with their beautifully shaped bodies glistening in the brilliant July sun, as though clothed in satin, springing over the elastic turf in rapid, regular bounds, tossing their delicate heads, and straining on the bit in impatience to be free. I was surprised to see at the first few bounds that Hugh kept behind all the rest, going quietly. I imagined he must be doing it with a view to getting a lead over the first fence, but still I could not help thinking it an error in judgment to allow the whole field in front of him, as among so many there might be one who would set the example of balking, and then it would be all up with Spitfire. Scarcely had I begun to think thus, however, and before they neared the fence, the chestnut darted to the front, and increasing his speed at every stride, went galloping at the stout plying in front. 'He must be mad,' I thought, alluding to Hugh; 'he should never take that horse at a fence without a lead;' and mentally cursing his stupidity, I watched anxiously for the result. To my surprise, however, just as he neared the fence, the horse slackened his racing speed into a quick steady gallop, then rose like a bird at the post and rails, and the next instant was sailing along evidently held well in hand, to allow the others coming up. Gerald Courtown and Jack Masterman popped over next, followed by Powell on the Irish horse The O'Donoghue; but Beresford, sad to relate, cannoned against Sims of the 28th, and came to ignominious grief before Lady Blanche's eyes. He picked himself up, however, but his horse had picked itself up first, and was now galloping wildly over the course, for some time resisting all attempts to catch it; so that when at last it was secured the race was virtually over, and I quite crest-fallen his gay rider returned to the stand, where, however, he found Lady Blanche very ready to heap any amount of opprobrious epithets on poor Sims's devoted head, and condole with him to his heart's content. In the mean time the riders held on their course; one by one the outsiders fell off, all but one.

Solace of "ours." A small slight fellow rid, be-

about six hundred yards of racing ground before reaching the winning-post. Solace's riding was greatly inferior to Melton's; there was a want of hand and a great desire to interfere with his horse's performances that put the little Irish man at a disadvantage; still, to the intense astonishment of every one, she not only held her ground, but actually appeared to gain slightly on the show horse of the regiment, and indeed one might say of the army—the one of whom it had been said that it would be impossible to beat him if only he did not lose his temper. And he had not lost it; on the contrary, he was going splendidly, his stretching stride, yet never able to shake for an instant the wiry, lean form that with springing, bounding action kept pace with him.

Every one in that great crowd held his breath as they reached the last fence; the pace was fearful, and the keenest judge could not have guessed which would win.

Suddenly, as they approached at a breathless pace the fence before them, a woman's long white cloak fluttered out on the breeze from the other side of the hedge; Firefly, held negligently by her inexperienced rider, swerved wildly, while Spitfire, kept straight with a firm yet gentle hand, flew to the front, clearing the leap in splendid style, and then laying himself down, advanced with lightning speed to the winning-post. It was but a moment that Firefly swerved from the track, but in that moment Spitfire gained the opposite side; close on his heels, however, the gallant mare, set right by her excited rider, bounded over with the spring and elasticity of a roebuck, and then stretching herself for the first time, and letting for the first time her marvelous speed be seen, she flew rather than galloped after her opponent. Very small was the advantage Spitfire had gained, and with the first two bounds she reached his girths; then for the first time Melton called on his noble steed, that responded gamely with every muscle exerted to the utmost. Breathless the crowd looked on, as the brown mare's head crept up to his shoulder. Was it possible? Could he hold his own to the winning-post? Two springs more would do it; but already the dark head stretched beside the chestnut's foaming neck. Another bound, another—and they shot past the winning-post, Melton the winner, by about half a head, of perhaps the closest race ever run in "ours," and certainly one that astonished the judges more than anything that had been seen for a long time at Alder-shot.

The excitement was intense. So close was the race that some fancied one the winner, some the other; and it was not until the judge had formally proclaimed Spitfire's success that some even of his backers could be induced to believe in it. After a congratulatory shake of the hand to Melton, the winner was almost wholly disregarded, while every one crowded round the little brown mare that had come in such a splendid second, and that every one knew well could have won so easily if it had been ridden as the favorite had been.

'Why, Solace,' said Templeton, in a rather more excited tone than his usual languid drawl, 'where in the world did you pick up that animal, and how did you keep her so dark? She's a flyer, and no mistake; but for that shy the race was yours easily, and if you had held her well in hand you would not have lost it by that.'

'I know,' answered Solace, laughing good-humoredly. 'I don't pretend to be a first class horseman like Melton; still, you know, I told you all I had got a mare that would beat the favorite even with my bad riding; and so she would if it hadn't been for a fluke. I bought her in the west of Ireland; saw her there and liked her when she was over fishing a few months ago, and have been trying to ride her ever since. She's a rough one and no mistake to ride when she's fresh.'

Courtown and Powell had come in close together third and fourth; all the others were nowhere, and now came straggling in one by one, greatly disgusted no doubt at their position, and as much astonished at any one else at the unforeseen termination of the race.

While we were looking at Firefly, and talking over her splendid success, Melton stole off; and when I again came toward the grand stand I was astonished to see him standing beside a lady, to whom he was

and after