

Hugh Melton!

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERY.

(CONTINUED.)

If we manage well, he may not start immediately for Calcutta, as I am sure he will do when he knows where I have gone, on purpose to try and destroy any record that may exist. I shall be able to find the proofs before he suspects we are on the scent.

How can I thank you, Cairnsford? Melton replied. 'You are too good to me, taking all this trouble for one who can do so little for you in return. Do you know that I never thought till now what hearing of such dreadful villainy could make my heart so light? It has given me hope, and I shall live now with more purpose than I have done for months past. If ever I have it in my power to revenge on that man his wickedness to her, I will do so, cost what it may, be it soon or late. To him who can wait, vengeance will come.'

His tone was vindictive, and a sullen light shone in his eyes as he spoke that showed my friend was not the perfect self-controlled being I had imagined him. However, the time for action had come, and, only waiting to impress on him the necessity of dissimulating before Captain Cameron, I left to seek out the colonel and apply for leave.

It was granted without difficulty. I do not know that I can assert that I was a favorite with the old fellow, but he had a most nineteenth century veneration for riches, and would always bow down and worship my golden calf that might be set up before him. Now Fortune had favored me in this respect, so I never found any trouble in getting my request granted by old Armstrong, and this occasion was no exception to the rule.

Having obtained leave I set about preparations for an early start next morning. At three o'clock in the night or morning, or whatever you like to call it, I set out without having seen Cameron since our parting at Gooderabad. I was not even aware whether he had yet returned. It was a horribly long and tiresome journey, and, though I made the best speed I could, took me nearly a week to accomplish. At such times how slowly life seems to move! I felt like one reading an interesting novel, who longs to skip the intermediate pages and arrive at the end of the story. I had an intense curiosity to see how this romance, to which I had suddenly become a spectator, would terminate. I felt as if every little exertion on my part to discover proofs of Cameron's guilt was the turning over of a leaf in the life's story up to before me. But it was slow work, waiting, even though working, it might take years before the denouement came, and the question was, would my interest then survive, would it not probably have died out ages before, and though Hugh would still be my friend, would not his love and its success have ceased, from a too familiar acquaintance with all its details, to be a matter of interest to me? Very likely it would. In the meantime the journey was dull, and I had nothing else to think of; so I thought of that till I worked myself into a perfect fever of impatience, and longed to leap over two or three years of my life, and see how matters would stand then. In these sultry summer days when we rested under the shade of the banana-trees, and I listlessly watched the Hindoos cooking their rice, I felt that with an intolerable overpowering sense of helplessness to make it otherwise I should, no doubt, have felt it even more but for the miserable old fellows of all its species that nearly drove me distracted, and made any thing else as tedious thought out of the question.

At last I reached Calcutta, but I hope no one ever has to read an account of how I passed my time during the week I spent there, resting from the fatigues of my previous journey, and preparing for the one before me. As I had suspected, the story of the case was a canard, and I found it on first inspection an unsuspecting wit. The vestry

I had believed his assertions that the lady I had rescued was not his wife, and that my friend being now out of the way, I should not consider it worth my while to interfere. In that supposition he was mistaken; knowing what I did about him, it was imperative on me to let the girl's parents understand what kind of man they would be son-in-law was. Accordingly home I went with a year's sick-leave, and as Cairns Hall, where my mother and sisters resided, was not far from Abbot's Park, one of the places held by Miss Meares during the time the terms of the will remained unsettled, I went over one morning to call on Mr. Meares, and to acquaint him with my discoveries.

He received me alone in the library, and seemed both distressed and shocked at the news I had to communicate. No doubt the thought of the comparative poverty they would be called upon to endure, after their brief taste of wealth and the pleasures it can purchase, was not agreeable; but he was a brave old man, and in a few minutes rose superior to any regrets he might have felt, and thanked me heartily for what he was pleased to term my very friendly conduct in letting him know the danger that menaced his daughter in connection with that man. 'And now,' he continued, rising, 'it is just luncheon time; let me persuade you to join the ladies and take something before setting out on your walk home. It is warm to-day, though no doubt after the heat of India you do not feel so.'

Thus Mr. Meares stopped me as I was about to leave, and bringing me into the dining room, introduced me to his wife, whom I had never before seen, and his daughter, who recollected me perfectly, but, somewhat to my astonishment, made no enquiry after Hugh, as I thought, knowing our friendship she might have done. Of course it was pleasant to me not to have so painful a subject touched upon; but while admiring her beautiful features and clear deep eyes, I could not help mentally calling her a heartless flirt, wondering whether she would be annoyed that her marriage was broken off, and dislike me as the bearer of bad tidings. Not that it would matter much to me; doubtless they would soon leave Abbot's Park, and then any unobtrusive intercourse that my mother might have had with them would cease, unless they remained somewhere near.

As I walked slowly home that day I felt little pity for the downfall of the heiress, though some curiosity as to how she would bear it. I had a conviction—whence derived I know not—that her proud beautiful head would never equal unworthily before any reverse of fortune.

For a day or two I heard nothing farther about them; then one morning, on my entering the breakfast room, my mother looked up from a pile of letters before her, and said:

'I hear, Charlie, the Meareses are leaving Abbot's Park. Miss Meares has refused to marry that Captain Cameron, to whom she was bound to be so long, and therefore, according to the terms of the will, all the money that was to have been hers in the event of the marriage goes to a number of different charities. I am sorry for them; they were nice people and pleasant neighbors. I think of writing and asking them here until they have settled their plant, and made up their minds what to do next. Have you any objection?'

Of course I said that I had not, and the two girls, Lillia and May, were in ecstasies of delight at the thought of having Miss Meares with them, hoping, no doubt, to make a bosom friend of her, as the manner of some girls is. I did not want to disappoint them, so I did not tell them my impression, which was, that Miss Meares would very likely receive all their confidences and sympathies to any amount, but would give none herself in return. Something about her face gave me the idea that, though she had a surface of friendliness very taking to strangers, there was beneath it a very reserved nature that would never reveal its dearest thoughts and wishes but to one beloved object, and that to the one she loved there would be no reserve, no concealment. The passion of her life would be steady, absorbing, expanding, if rightly placed and worthily returned, intense, secret, and self-consuming, if unrequited or mis-

placed. I had been doing to discover the truth about Melton's fate, and that after a fortnight's strict search no more was known than when he was first missing. Of course, though satisfied that they had done their best, I could not rest without receiving the news that on the 11th of June that, guided by

I had time to scan the delicate outlines of her face, and I imagined that she looked paler and more thoughtful than usual. When I got near, a branch cracked under my foot; she started, and turned hastily, but without any signs of fear on her fair open brow. Recognizing me she held out her hand frankly, and exclaimed:

'Oh, Major Cairnsford (I had gained a step lately), how very fortunate I have met you! I have lost my way, and am afraid I shall be late for breakfast.'

'No fear of that, Miss Meares; we are in plenty of time. I can show you a short way back to the house.' So saying, we walked on together.

We had not gone far, and while I was still thinking of some remark to make—for, to tell the truth, I both feared and mistrusted this young beauty, and felt silent and uncomfortable in her presence, she on her part being equally abstracted and thought—when suddenly she exclaimed, without preface or leading up to the subject, 'By-the-by, the Major Cairnsford, I saw an account of the mysterious disappearance and supposed death of Captain Melton, of your regiment, while you were at A—. Would you tell me all about it? I knew him years ago, and feel interested in his melancholy fate.'

She tried to utter the words in a matter-of-fact, unemphatic manner, but a glance at her half-averted face showed me that her eyelids trembled and her lips quivered as she spoke. Of course, painful as the subject was, I could not refuse to gratify her request, knowing that Hugh would have wished me to comply with anything she might desire. I felt that in making such a demand she evinced an interest, weak and tardy though it was, in the man who had loved her, and who would have given worlds to have heard even that expression of interest from her lips.

I told her all that I knew about my friend's fate, not concealing my own early suspicions of Captain Cameron, who, I said, nourished, as I well knew, a very bitter dislike to his comrade Melton. She listened in silence till I had finished, and then exclaimed, abruptly:

'You were right, Major Cairnsford, Captain Cameron is in some way implicated in Captain Melton's disappearance. I do not say he has killed him—in fact, I hardly believe that he is dead—but that I have been made away with in some way, by Captain Cameron's agency, I am convinced. It remains for us to find out what has really happened—whether he is still alive, or indeed dead—and whichever be the case, to punish the man who has worked this wickedness.'

She looked at me boldly now, with her head up, her cheeks flushed, and her deep flashing eyes meeting mine frankly and bravely.

I shook my head and answered, 'You are mistaken, Miss Meares, and for once wrong Captain Cameron, whom Heaven knows it is not easy to wrong, for he is as bad a man as the sun ever shone on; but in this, at least, he is innocent. I thought as you do at first, and, guided by the light of my suspicions, I scrutinized his every act, in the endeavor to obtain a clue to my comrade's fate; but I was forced at last, after many a long and weary search, to arrive at what I am convinced is the true conclusion, namely, that poor Hugh was devoured by a tiger, as my brother officers at first supposed.'

'I wish I could think with you,' she answered in an unconvinced tone. 'That Captain Melton is dead must, I fear, be true; that Captain Cameron had no hand in his death I can hardly bring myself to believe. For a long time I struggled against my own convictions to believe Captain Cameron such a man as Captain Melton was—such a man; in fact, as I could have wished him to be; but now his baseness has been so fully revealed to me, and I remember so many little things, that used to annoy me in him, which tend now to throw a clear light on his character, that nothing seems to me too bad to accuse him of. I can not feel as if I could wrong him by any charge I brought against him.'

Thus as we walked homeward we fell into conversation on subjects all more or less connected with that first started. She told me how they had first met Melton in Ireland; of their poor dwelling and frugal mode of living;

ly, 'I shall try to find some one weak enough to intrust me with the education of the rising generation. I have no doubt I shall make a very skillful governess; and something must be done, I am sure.'

I looked at her as she spoke, and saw from her heightened color and sparkling eyes that she was determined to face the world boldly and fight the battle of life bravely; but alas! poor girl, she little knew what was before her, and I could not think of the trials and humiliations that bright spirit would be called upon to endure without an inward thrill of pain. My mother tried hard to dissuade our visitors from this plan, and to make them remain longer with us, at least until some better expedient might be discovered; but they were impracticable, and a length resolved to speak to Miss Meares my self about it, and try to bring her over to our side, when I felt sure her parents' objection would soon vanish. We had become great friends by this time: she would let me now and then get a glimpse of her kindly, honest, upright heart, and would not scruple to propound her queer unworldly theories to me on any subject on which we might be talking. She met me always as a man might meet a friend, with full frank look and glad smiling welcome; and I—alas! I had begun to think there was nothing better in the world to live for than the soft friendly glance of those deep violet eyes, the gentle welcoming smile on that lovely face, the touch of her soft white hand at morning's opening. I never wondered now at my friend's infatuation; I only wondered how guessing, or knowing rather, that her heart was with him, he had not taken her by force of the stronger will and held her against the world. It was what I would do, I told myself, if only I could be sure she felt for me she had once felt for him; but that affection for my lost friend was the barrier between us, as it was also the connecting link. I knew well I should never have occupied the position I now did in her regard had I been Hugh's friend; and our longest and most intimate conversations were always of some act of his life, or some trait of his noble character.

Was it not possible, I asked myself, that this pearl above all price that I so ardently desired could be won again? If he had been but a girlish fancy, my rhapsody might; but if the whole of her true woman's heart had been given to Hugh, I feared I had no hope. There are some women who love but once, whose first girlish fancy is also the love of their womanhood. I feared, I gloried to believe, that my peerless Melton was one of these. I could not but have shed me leave us, though I dared tell her nothing of this, and met her always with us, as if the imitation of her own fearless friendship could assume. But she must not go away into those squallid London lodgings; on that point I was determined. Rather than that should happen I would conquer my feverish passion, pour all my passionate prayers and longings into her pitying ears, and if it were possible, nay, if it were impossible, win from her promise that one day at least I should be a right to protect and shelter her from the hardships and cares of the strange world into which she was about to enter.

CHAPTER X.

AND THUS IT CAME TO PASS.

I remember well the lovely morning in June when I opened my heart before her, who so entirely possessed it; not, as I intended, with deliberate purpose, and prepared at all points with prayers and entreaties against the denials I dreaded, in broken, disjointed, vague words, that made themselves better understood than I had so often thought or would probably have done. So was to leave the next day, yet I had not spoken, and though intending to speak, could not summon courage to do so. But accident broke in at last the opportunity for which I waited, and the words that could not be uttered broke from my heart before I knew they were uttered.

She was out somewhere about the park that morning quite alone; the girls and I