

# Hugh Melton!

## CHAPTER I.

CHIMES.

'Come, Melton, lay down your block, and let us have a little chat; I'm sick of whipping the water, as I've been doing the whole morning without success. What do you think of our new quarters?' I was just wading up my line while speaking; for, as I said, I had been fishing the whole morning without success, and had now returned to the place where I had left Melton sketching a few hours before.

We belonged to the detachment that had just been quartered at M—, a pretty town in one of the midland counties, and I being uninitiated about fishing, while my companion was equally so about sketching, we had gone out on an excursion, combining the two objects to our mutual gratification.

It was a lovely day in June, the little river by which we were sitting came tumbling down from a line of hills that rose blue before us in the sunny distance, and the trees in their young bright green dipped their branches into the dark foaming water that had not yet calmed into its ordinarily quiet flow, after falling over a splendid mass of rocks that rose in rugged grandeur a little way above.

It was this fall Melton had been sketching, and as I now looked over his shoulder I could not refrain from an exclamation of surprise and delight. The fall, with its mixture of graceful beauty and wild majesty, was charmingly rendered by his clever hand, the little flecks of light on the foaming water, the gleam that danced on the top of a small larch tree that clung to an overhanging rock in the middle of the torrent, the white upturned surface of the leaves tossed sideways by the gentle breeze, were all given; and there in the still pool at the side you could see the wavering outline of the stones as the water rippled over them. In the foreground, Melton was just putting in, by a few masterly touches, your humble servant, as he appeared winning up his line with an intensely disappointed face that sunny June morning.

'There, I have just finished,' he said, answering my appeal, and putting away his block, washing out his brushes, and otherwise making himself ready for a quiet chat. It was a curious thing about Melton, that he never could get a pencil or a brush, he could not refrain from using it, and if he began to use it he he soon got so absorbed as to be unable to attend to anything else. Therefore he now put brushes and pencils away, so as to enable him to devote his whole attention to the little chat I had desired.

'What do I think of our quarters, you asked me,' he went on. 'I like them; the town is clean and neat, the barracks are comfortable, and, above all, the scenery is very pretty. I shall luxuriate in sketching while we remain here.'

'Yes,' I answered, rather pettishly, 'that's all you think about; but the fishing is best, at least as far as I have seen to-day; and the hunting season is such a long way off that there is no comfort in looking forward to it, while I haven't a chance of getting off after the grouse this year to while away the unproductive time.'

'My dear fellow, I really am sorry for your want of success this morning, and I dare say you'll do better next time; and if you'd take my advice, you'd try again after lunch with a lighter fly. Stay, you have a few feathers with you, pass them over here, and I'll tie you one I think will do.'

I did as he told me, and feeling sorry for having spoken so crossly to him, I watched his nimble fingers as he proceeded to dress a very artistic-looking fly.

'Now,' said he, as he finished, 'try that in the dark pool over there, and I think it will rise something before long; but first let us take our lunch now we are together.'

We lay down in the shade, feeling very lazy and luxurious, and while we are discussing the sandwiches of which our lunch consisted, Melton, who had been sitting on the

ly income and schooling for him for a year or two, so that in time he passed for the army, and was gazetted to the —th. He had been for some years with us now, and his old uncle had purchased two steps for him, so that at the time I am speaking of he was some way up in the list of the captains. Our colonel, however, had never liked him. We were a somewhat fast regiment, and it bored him to have a poor man among us. And Hugh certainly was poor; for though his uncle purchased his steps, he made him no allowance, and evidently considered that he should keep up with all the follies and extravagances of a crack regiment on his pay. So the colonel snubbed him, and was perpetually down on him, trying to force the unfortunate fellow to exchange, which, however, Hugh would not do, partly because he liked some of us very warmly, and chiefly because our home service was nearly up, and he would have had to pay a good sum of money to induce any one to exchange with him. This he had not to give, because, as I have said, he had nothing but his pay, and what he could get for a few cleverly dashed off magazine articles. He managed in this way to keep himself out of debt and make both ends meet; but it was very hard work, and I often pitied him when I saw him consuming the midnight oil over those clever sketches we used to laugh at afterward in the United Service Magazine. He was a capital artist too, and that helped his pocket a little. Still he was kept hard at work to get a little ready cash, and it wasn't much when it did come. As we lay there lazily under the trees, I calmly puffing away at my pipe, he as ever dashing in a hasty sketch of our shady resting-place (he seldom smoked, and he had always a pencil in his hands), I asked him what it was Old Crusty (our irreverent name for Colonel Armstrong) had to say to him that morning, when they were closeted such a long time together.

He laughed—his gay careless laugh. 'Poor Old Crusty, how he hates me! I quite feel for him. It really is a pity to have a fine corps like this spoiled by one penniless vauren; but really it is just my being so penniless that keeps me home, else I think I would try and oblige him. However,' he added, 'what do you think he was saying this morning? You'd never guess, so I may as well tell you. It seems my mother, who is still handsome, and goes out a good deal, is thinking of marrying again. Now the person she has chosen is a merchant in the City, very wealthy; but the connection does not suit my uncle's taste, and he has sent me a message through the colonel, who is a great friend of his (being doubtless afraid to broach the subject himself), that if I will write to my mother, refusing my consent to her marriage, and farther saying that in the event of her persisting in her determination I must decline having anything more to say to her, he will then not only purchase all my future steps, and make me the very handsome allowance of £800 per annum, but also declare me his heir. That's a bribe worth having, Charlie,' he continued, turning toward me, and speaking in a light tone that belied the fierce flash in his eye and the dark frown on his broad brow.

'What did you say?' is the question, I replied, thinking, however, that I know the answer pretty well.

'I told the colonel,' answered Hugh, 'that it was very well my uncle had sent his message by him; for if he had come in person, I doubted much if I could have refrained from the pleasure of throwing him out of the window. The request alone would have deserved such an answer, still more the bribe.'

'And what did Armstrong say?'

'Oh, he pooh-poohed my sentimentalism, as he was pleased to call it, and laid before me all the advantages of being friends with my uncle and pocketing his £800; what a figure it would enable me to make in the regiment, and all the rest of it. Then, seeing me unmoved by that, he went on to state that in the event of my refusing to do as he wished, my uncle had determined to have nothing more to do with me, but to leave me in future to sink or swim, as best I could. To this I replied, that while I repudiated the charge of sentimentalism, it was my earnest wish to try and do what I saw manifestly to be my duty, and that in no way could I feel it to be my duty to prevent my mother providing herself with a comfortable home in

'Yes, I shall enjoy taking that fellow down a peg or two. I can't stand his airs; neither for that that matter can Old Crusty, though the fellow is made of gold I do believe; which shows that after all our colonel has some sense in him, if he'd let it get an airing now and then.' With which complimentary speech I shouldered my basket; and Hugh having already got his traps together, we set out on our way back to town.

I went into Melton's room on our return to barracks and while he was washing out his brushes and palette, setting his brushes and paint-box, and otherwise fiddling about—like the old bachelor I always told him he would be—I amused myself looking over a portfolio of sketches which stood on a chair by the window. They were most of them views of places where we had been stationed lately, and I knew by a cross in the corner of many of them that Hugh had copied them for sale; for, as I said before, Melton eked out his scanty pay by the produce of his art, as he was wont proudly and fondly to call it. At last I came to a more finished picture, which riveted my attention for some time; so that I did not observe Hugh, who came quietly up behind me, and looked over my shoulder for a little while without speaking. It was a portrait of a young girl that had so taken my fancy, and underneath was written in dear old Hugh's handwriting, '*Fas ce que dois adienne que pourra.*' The face itself was very pretty, with an expression half earnest, half laughing, great sweetness in the smile, and a very *malin* twinkle in the eye. To crown all, the head was surrounded by a perfect halo of deep golden hair, not in any way approaching red, but pure sunny golden, with a dash of brown in the shadows.

As I have said, Melton came and looked over my shoulder, without my being aware of his approach; so that I was rather startled when I heard his voice beside me saying, 'Did you never see that before? what do you think of it?'

'It is a charming face,' I answered. 'Tell me who was the original, and why you have appended such a very sage motto to so fascinating a beauty.'

His face fell perhaps ever so slightly as he replied, 'You often laugh at me for what you call my high principles and strict adherence to what I conceive to be my duty; you will perhaps be surprised when you learn that I owe those ideas to her.'

'I should never have guessed it,' I replied; 'the face looks mirthful rather than serious. How came she by such methodical opinions?'

'I don't mind telling you all about it, Cairnsford, though I would not tell every one, but this is how I became acquainted with her, and how she came to give me advice. A good many years ago now, soon after I first joined, I was quartered near M—, in Ireland, and as there were never many officers in that part a time, the few who did go there were entertained very hospitably and made much of. There was in particular one gentleman, a Mr. Meares, who lived in a small place near M—; he had one daughter, this girl whose portrait you see here.'

'What,' I exclaimed, interrupting him, 'is that Miss Meares the heiress, of whom I have heard so much?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'At that time they were poor enough; since then, however, she has come into a large property, and is one of the richest heiresses in England. However, as I was saying, at that time they lived near M—, and I was a frequent visitor at her father's house. I need hardly tell you the owner of that face was clever, original, spirited, without being in the least fast; she could dance and ride quite as perfectly as most Irish girls do—some, indeed, thought she excelled most of them in those accomplishments—and besides many other talents possessed no mean skill with her pencil. You may imagine that I, then young and impressionable, easily fell under the spell of her beauty and accomplishments; I spent almost my whole time at Belvor (their place), and her mother, a charming, handsome woman, seemed to see no harm in our intimacy. Day by day we went out sketching about the place, never going far from the house, but as the scenery around was lovely, always finding plenty to do. I, though acting as instructor, oftentimes found it difficult to equal my pupil's productions, and from day to day her winning, sprightly ways and clever, amusing conversation made me more and more deeply

'that you are never inclined to walk out now, or sketch either, even those views are close to the house? Have I done anything to annoy you? You are so changed to me lately.'

'No, indeed,' she replied earnestly, 'You have never annoyed me;' and then she turned to a rose-bush beside her and began cutting off the withered leaves and putting them into a basket that hung on her arm.

'If I have not annoyed you, why, then, are you so altered of late?' I persisted. 'You don't know what pain the least coldness in your voice and look causes me. I will not bear it any longer; I will speak and tell you.'

'Hush!' she said, turning round so as to face me, while holding up her hand with a warning gesture—'hush! I know what you are going to say. Don't think me unwomanly or forward because I tell you before you speak that I know what you intended to say. For some days I have seen that it must come to this, and I have been turning over in my mind how I could best spare you the pain of saying—myself the pain of listening to—what will do neither of us any good, and must cause us trouble and grief. Stay,' she continued, with a pretty imperious gesture, as I was about to interrupt her eagerly, 'you must hear me to the end patiently: I won't keep you long. I think the best thing for both of us will be for you to know a little more of my past life than you at present do. It is—here she paused for a moment, and I thought a tinge of color crept into her pale cheeks; but with an effort she after a minute tossed her head with a pretty impatience I had often admired, and went on—'it is this: Years ago, when I was a very little child, an old friend of my father's died, and on opening his will it was found that he had bequeathed the whole of his immense property to me when I should have attained the age of twenty-one years, on condition I should marry a nephew of his, a Mr. Cameron by name; until then the property is rigidly tied up, not a penny being spent on me, but everything being allowed to accumulate. About a week ago my father told me this Mr. Cameron, who has until lately been out with his regiment in India, is on his way home to claim the fulfillment of the compact entered into years ago by his father and mine. I shall be twenty-one in a few weeks now, and my father, who has long been obliged to live in great poverty to provide me with a good education and those few comforts which our means afford, is now naturally anxious to enter on the enjoyment of this fortune, and insists on my giving this young man such a promise as shall insure our possession of the property, though it will not be necessary for me to marry at once. I can now only beg of you, Mr. Melton, not to judge hardly of me for having in this matter taken the initiative, and overstepped those boundaries of reserve usually observed by women; my only excuse is that I hoped to save you pain.'

'But,' said I, when she had finished speaking, 'do you consider this for one worth more than the love I have to offer you? You guessed aright what I had to say. I do love you; but if you prefer a miser's gold to the earnest, faithful affection I feel for you, then I would not utter one word to induce you to alter your choice, for in that case you are not worthy to be my wife, or to take the first place by right in my heart, which you have already usurped there.' I spoke defiantly and bitterly, for it seemed to me from the firm, decisive way in which she spoke that she had made her choice, and that loving me as much as her cold heart could, she yet preferred the gold.

'She answered faintly, 'Sit down; I want to talk this over with you. I have no one to whom I can go for counsel; my father and mother both have but one opinion on the matter; now I will hear yours, and try to decide between them. My earnest desire is to do what is right; but now I don't see the right. I am like a person wandering in a strange place in thick darkness—I see nothing, and when I stretch out my hands for something to lean on, I find only empty space.'

'How can you hesitate a minute!' I answered, boldly and hotly, thinking I was sure of victory, and pressing on with an eagerness that perhaps caused my failure. 'Is it not your duty if you love me, and knowing I love you, to give up everything for the sake of completing and

spoke with you any more on this subject? Good-by, Mr. Melton. Some time, when you have ceased to regret this—and you will soon do so, for you are still young—then you may come and see me, and we shall be the good friends I would wish us to be; but until you feel you can regard me in that light it would be better we should not meet again. She held out her hand to me, but I, maddened by jealousy and disappointed love, bowed coldly to her and turned away. In this insult I saw, as I turned slowly from her, her large eyes filled with tears, and a pitiful pleading expression came into her face as she made one step toward me. I would have turned again, but before I could do so she had run quickly away, and was already disappearing among the thick shrubberies surrounding the house.

Long afterward, when I could think calmly over the whole affair, I began to see that perhaps looked at from her point of view, she had been more in the right than I had first thought; and it was then I painted the picture with the motto underneath, and the motto I have ever since tried to follow as my guide. I fear I followed it but badly, for she said then, one so often finds it difficult to know the right. A faint glimmer of light, however, there generally is, which guides one in some degree, and for the rest that must make up for the deed.'

## CHAPTER II.

THE STEEPLE CHASE.

Some time after this we were ordered to headquarters at Aldershot, and found there a Captain Cameron, who had lately joined, and who took care soon to let us know that Miss Meares, the heiress, was his promised bride. Even if I had not heard Hugh's story I should have disliked this man, who was not only insignificant in appearance, but seemed equally contemptible in mind. A little fair man, with scanty yellow whiskers and moustache, and dapper person, always neatly dressed; not bad-looking, perhaps, but for the sinister underhand expression in his light blue eyes. I often wondered why Hugh felt toward him, as he sat glowering at him from under his bent brows across the table at mess, but, indeed, I need not have wondered, for his feelings were often plainly visible on his face to need any expression in words, and the new arrival very soon became aware that for some reason or other 'that dark looking fellow, Hugh Melton' (as he called him), bore him no good-will. The time now drew near when we were to have the steeple-chases which he had got up with us to come off, and throughout the whole week nothing was talked of but the merits of the respective horses and their riders. There was one horse in especial that all the judges declared must win, if only his abominable temper could be kept under, or got rid of for the day; but even his greatest admirers were afraid to trust their money on so ill-tempered a brute. Templeton of our own was to ride him, and in this fact lay the consolation to his backers for they thought if any man in the service could master him it was that dashing 'light weight.'

Every one who had once seen Templeton sitting back on his chestnut thoroughbred, his hands well down and his head up, rising in the first flight with the Pytchley, or better still, flying along in the front of the Grand Military, will recollect him: a small, spare, boyish-looking young fellow, with pale, fair complexion, large, prominent blue eyes, drooping moustache, and a mild, unassuming expression of countenance. But to those of my lady friends who may not have seen him in his favorite career, let me recall the same slight figure leaning languidly against the wall in a ball-room, looking so intensely bored that you are reminded of a death-head at a feast, and long to ask him why he came there, when the festive scene seems so little to his taste. You must have seen and pitied him, gentle reader; recall him to your mind's eye now, and have before you the intended rider of Spitfire (so the horse was called).

Cameron, who, by-the-way, hardly knew a horse from a cow, had a pot of money on him, so had Southam and one or two more. I didn't like his temper, and so backed Jack Masterman, the second favorite, for a small