

## Hugh Melton

## CHAPTER VIII.

## SOLACE IN DIFFICULTIES.

(CONTINUED.)

'Well,' he said, 'you all know—or, at least, Cairnsford does not know—that we went up yesterday evening to Cumberbund—Major Crookley's place. You know him—the husband of that hideous woman (Hecate we generally call her) who thinks herself a beauty, and is coquette a *faux peur*. Her husband is jealous of her; and no wonder, as she is always fishing for new followers, though I do not think she is very successful; at which I am not surprised. How Crookley came to marry her is beyond my understanding.'

'Oh, do you not know?' cried Brabazon. 'I heard the whole story the other day from Soames of the 9th. It seems Crookley came here a very green young fellow, and this Miss Loudon—then of course many years younger, though, I believe, not one bit better looking—set her cap at him. She had plenty of money, but she was fearfully plain even then, and had, moreover, a way with her that made most fellows fight shy of her. Crookley was introduced to her, and, once she had got hold of him, she kept him, on some pretext or other, running after her, until one night, at a dance, where he was foolish enough to go without the protection of a superior officer—in which respect, happily for the regiment, Solace was more fortunate—he meddled with her, and she interrupted him quickly with 'Dear Charlie, as you love me so well, and seem so truly to desire it, I am yours. Call on papa tomorrow, early in the morning. For the present, I must say good-night, as we are going. And she slipped off, leaving the unfortunate young fellow too dumfounded to speak or to move. A comfortable night he must have passed, I should fancy; but at last he decided there was nothing for it but to call next day at her home and explain the mistake.'

'Call he did, accordingly, and asked for Miss Loudon. He was shown into the drawing-room, where she was presented to him, apparently only just returned from riding as she was in her hat and habit. She welcomed him with great *empressment*, but he, though feeling a little uneasy, rushed boldly at the matter in hand, and began—'I fear, Miss Loudon, you must have misunderstood some words I made use of last night in requesting the honor of your hand for a dance. What I meant—'

'Oh no—not at all, she interrupted. 'I understood you perfectly, dear Charlie, and have given it to you fully and freely, as you see, at the same time laying her hand on his. 'Some one was saying to me just now that people might say I had misunderstood; but I answered that any one who dared say so to me I should, with my own hand, horse-whip within an inch of his life. And she gave the strong cutting whip she held in her hand a swish through the air, within an inch of his shoulders, as she spoke. 'So you see, Charlie dear, there is not the least need to dread ill-natured remarks, and papa is ready to see you now. I told him all about it, and he will give me handsome settlements, we need not wait for your promotion, but can fix the day at once. I will go with you to papa, as he is sometimes difficult to get on with for those who do not understand him.'

'That is way Crookley was hooked, according to Soames's account, and, to look at her, one would think it likely enough. I hear she keeps the identical riding-whip that conquered the major under a glass case in her own room. The fear of it is what keeps him, in general, in such awe of her, I should imagine. Now, go on, Langham, and tell us what happened to Solace.'

'Where was I?—you have put me out,' said Langham, peevishly. He liked to have all the talking to himself, and felt aggrieved that Brabazon should have interrupted his story. 'Oh, I was telling you we went up to Cumberbund for croquet, with the prospect of

lady I have been describing. I thought I should get more fun out of the thing by strolling about, and now and then looking on; and so, I think, it turned out.'

'Shortly after the game commenced Major Crookley, of whose relationship to Miss Loudon Baby was ignorant, and was consequently fiercely jealous of their evident intimacy, had a run of wonderful good luck, and went flying about the ground, displacing every one, to the triumph of his friends and anger of his foes, who whispered loudly, 'Did you ever see such barefaced spooning?' 'Such a fluke!' etc. At length he approached Miss Loudon's ball, croqueted it, and with one powerful blow sent it flying far over the boundary of the croquet ground.'

'Oh dear!' she cried, plaintively, 'that is me. How could you be so cruel! At any rate, you will bring it back to the edge of the ground.'

'Is it yours? I did not know. You can bring it back yourself, or make Mr. Solace do it for you, if you do not want the trouble,' he answered, carelessly, going on with his game.

'She turned to Solace, who was standing beside her, with an appealing gesture.

'You hear what he says. I do not want to go all that way. Would you go and get it for me? And do you think you could manage to put it in good position without being observed? I am such a bad hand at croquet, I shall never get on without being helped.'

'He ought to do it himself when he sends a lady's ball so far off the ground,' answered Solace; 'but I am glad he did not, for my own sake, as it gives me the opportunity of being useful to you.'

'With which touching speech he picked up the ball, and, with great adroitness, contrived to place it in an excellent position, as he thought, unseen by any one. Major Crookley was, however, too devoted to his game and too proud of his success not to be very well aware of the exact spot where he had left each ball, and just as Solace had settled Miss Loudon's ball to her liking, Crookley called out,

'Why, what is that? I say, Solace, where are you putting that ball? It has no business there.'

'Oh yes, I assure you that is its place,' Solace answered, trying to look unconcerned.

'And I assure you that is not its place, and I will not have it there,' said the major, angrily. 'I must request you to allow people to move their own balls on this ground, and not to infringe the rules of the place.'

'I was not aware that bringing back a lady's ball when it had been sent over the boundary was an infringement of the rules,' replied Solace, sulkily, 'under the circumstances, I think you should have fetched it yourself, which would have obviated all this.'

'Oh, you think so, do you? I wonder who asked your opinion,' said Major Crookley, insultingly. (He is rather hasty, and his temper was now thoroughly up.) 'I think ladies are as well able to fetch their balls as gentlemen; and I shall make it a rule in future, on my ground, that they do so.'

'Then I should think very few ladies will honor your ground with their presence,' said Solace, whose 'back was up' as the Yankees say.

'Might I ask what you mean by that speech?' asked the major.

'I mean what I say,' replied Solace.

'I suppose you wish to insinuate by it that I am no gentleman,' continued Crookley, getting more and more excited as his opponent became sulky and uncompromising.

'You may put what interpretation you like on it,' answered Solace. 'Anything will suit, I dare say.'

'Come, come, this will not do,' said Melton, stepping forward (he was there, too, for a wonder). 'Solace, you should not have transgressed the rules of the ground; and you, major, are, I am sure, putting an interpretation on his words Solace never would have given them. Do not let us spoil a pleasant party by such a foolish dispute. I want to join in the game, and I cannot get a wicket. Solace, give me yours, and take a stroll with Langham. He will show you all the beauties of the place, while the major and I will see which is the best man at croquet.'

'I should get more fun out of the thing by strolling about, and now and then looking on; and so, I think, it turned out.'

a ladies' committee room, the noise and chatter are so great. Silence there, gentlemen, and let me continue,' cried Langham.

Order being restored immediately on this appeal, he went on, disregarding the plaintive looks of Solace, who would evidently have been just as well pleased had no farther disclosures been made of his yesterday's proceedings.

'After croquet,' continued the indefatigable Langham, 'it was proposed that we should dance, and I need not tell you Baby lost no time in obtaining the first dance from Miss Loudon. Not content with one, he asked for another, which was readily granted. As she gave it she said, 'If I am not in the room when our dance begins, I shall be in the garden near the ruined temple, it is a favorite seat of mine; it is so pleasant to steal away between the dances, and rest in the cool evening air, among the ruins all covered with plants and flowers.'

Solace muttered something I did not hear quite, though I was close by at the time, about her being the fairest flower of all; but I suppose she heard it, as she smiled brightly, and went off with her partner. Now comes the dreadful part of the story, Cairnsford. I am sorry I have been so long coming to it, but it was necessary to explain everything.

'When the time drew near for his dance, Solace, not seeing the lady anywhere in the rooms, went to the garden to look for her. There she was, sitting in the appointed place. He could not see if she was pleased at his punctuality as he approached, as there was no moon that night, and the stars, though brilliant, did not light up the garden sufficiently for him to observe the expression of her face. She did not speak, and he began. 'I knew I should find you here when I saw you were not in the dancing room. I have been counting the minutes till our turn should come round again.'

'Do you really, then, like dancing with me so much?' she replied. 'But it is only the nonsense people like you talk. You think, because you are here to-day and there to-morrow like a butterfly, you are privileged to show in your character all the inconstancy usually ascribed to that insect.'

'Indeed you wrong me,' Baby replied, earnestly, 'you do not know how I have looked forward to this dance. But even if you do not believe what I say, do me one favor. Give me one flower out of you bouquet, that I may keep it in remembrance of this evening; you can not refuse me this little request. Just that one rose-bud, you will not, I am sure, be so cruel as to refuse it; there is no harm in it.'

'No harm in it, indeed!' said a man's voice behind them. 'I like that. Sir, I say there is harm in it; and you will have to do without a flower from this lady, as I shall not allow her to give you one.'

'And what business have you to interfere between me and any lady to whom I may make such a harmless request, I should like to know?' asked Solace, haughtily.

'I will very soon show you what right I have to interfere,' roared the Major, for it was none other than he, springing forward in an ungovernable passion, at the same time flinging away a cigar he had until that moment carried lighted in his hand, and aiming a blow at Solace's face with the white kid glove he had just been about to put on before returning to the dancing room. Solace, seeing his intent, stepped back quickly, and escaped untouched; but the insult was too marked, and turning away, he said, 'You shall hear from me again on this matter, Major Crookley. A friend of mine will come to you here immediately, as the affair had better be settled at once before it gets wind, when the authorities would interfere.'

'Very well, Sir,' answered the major, becoming calm enough when he perceived his insult had been taken up in the way he wished. 'I shall wait here for half an hour for your friend. If he does not come before that time expires, I shall think even worse of you than I at present do.'

'Almost beside himself with rage, Solace walked off to me, and related what had occurred, begging me to act as his second, and to appoint a meeting at half past four o'clock in a secluded spot just outside the garden, on the banks of the river.'

'I tried at first to reason our friend Baby out of this absurd idea, representing that duels were forbidden by the regulations of

and I will give the young puppy a lesson that will teach him not to meddle with other men's wives in future.'

'As the major mentioned that it was his wife from whom Solace had begged the flowers, Melton started, and laid his hand on my arm to prevent my speaking; when the account was finished he said, 'You certainly had great provocation, Major Crookley, and I regret that any officer of 'ours' should have given you such grave cause of complaint, but tell me, if it could be proved that Solace imagined he was addressing another lady, while he was in reality speaking to Mrs. Crookley—I, I say, it could be proved that he was thus mistaken, and had no intention of annoying you in any way, I suppose you would have no objection to apologize for your insulting act to him, in which case he would, of course, withdraw his challenge, and all might be settled amicably.'

'Well, certainly,' the major answered, 'if it could be proved that the young fellow had mistaken my wife for any other lady, which in this dim light is just possible, I suppose I ought to ask his pardon for my offensive gesture; yet I hardly think he could have made such a mistake.'

'Well, I can not be sure about,' replied Melton; 'only my impression is that he took your wife for another lady, for whom I know he entertains a great admiration. The best plan, however, will be for us to meet at the appointed place at half past four o'clock, when, if an accommodation is possible, I will arrange it; if not, Mr. Langham and I will act as the friends of Solace; you, I suppose, will bring your own.' So saying, we turned and walked back toward the dancing room; but we had not gone a half a dozen yards when Melton went into a fit of quiet laughter, so violent that we were obliged to stand still for a few minutes till he got over it a little. 'Oh, it is too good, Langham! Is it not splendid? Think of that foolish Baby making pretty speeches to that old Hecate, Mrs. Crookley! And then his fighting a duel for love of her *beaux yeux*! Our fellows will die laughing when they hear of it; I tell you what we ought to do. It will be a good thing to give that foolish youth a little fright; it may break him of the habit of indiscriminate flirtation he has allowed himself to contract, and it is sure to give us some fun, when he knows for whose sake he has been risking his precious person under the major's fire, for he is a A 1 with pistols. We will not let him know about the mistake until they are on the ground face to face; then imagine how he will look when he finds Mrs. Crookley is the fair case of strife.'

'I thought the idea good, and readily agreed to work it; but we were near failing in the beginning from the dreadful difficulty we experienced in keeping grave faces while we told the unhappy Baby the hour and place of meeting, with other arrangements, ending by requesting him not to allow people to see anything unusual about him, but to keep up dancing with his customary spirit till the guests separated, which they did about four o'clock. As soon as they were gone we seized on Solace, and dragged him off to the place of meeting.'

'We can sit here and smoke a quiet cigar,' observed Melton, 'until the time is up. We have only half an hour to wait; and in the mean time, old fellow, if you have any message to leave for any of your friends, tell me, for though I do not think matters will be as bad as that, still it is the correct thing to do, and we may as well do the proper thing as we are about it.'

'Yes,' interrupted Solace at this juncture, 'and a most heartless fellow I thought you Melton. You looked so cool and easy over it all, and asked me had I made my will in such a matter-of-fact manner that I thought you the most unfeeling monster I had ever met, and longed to be able to proclaim to the regiment what an unnatural ruffian you really were, instead of the kind, good-hearted fellow we had all thought you.'

'That will do, Solace,' said Langham, waving his hand serenely; your thoughts were very visible on your face, and I could repeat them all exactly as they passed through your mind if I considered them worth repeating. I only wonder how I ever kept my countenance; I am sure I have injured myself internally in my struggles to keep from laughing outright.'

'Time went on Solace was worked into a white heat by Melton's friendly offers and my instructions and comforting assurances, and I was beginning to think we should have

must have got my keys to take these. Pretty doings, indeed!'

'The major looked from one to another of us as though imploring protection and pity; then slowly and reluctantly handed the pistol over to his wife, who returned it to its case, and who, as he turned to leave, called out after him: 'Stay a minute, and tell me what this is all about.'

'I only wished to give that young fellow a lesson about interfering with other people's wives. He is the one who was begging flowers from you last evening,' said the major, sulkily.

'Oh, is that all?' answered the lady, benignly. 'He did not mean any harm by it; it was only a little gallant speech that meant nothing.'

'All this time Solace had been listening with open-mouthed wonder: now he whispered to Melton, 'You do not mean to say they think I asked her for flowers?'

'Indeed they do,' laughed Melton; 'and I much fear you were guilty of it—unknowningly, I believe, but still guilty you were. Tell them who it was you went to meet at the temple, and perhaps the matter may be set right.'

'Thus urged, Solace stepped forward. 'Was it you, Mrs. Crookley, I met at the temple last night? I went there to find your sister, Miss Loudon, who told me she would probably be there when our dance came round; and I thought I was addressing her when I begged for flowers. I should never have ventured to make so presumptuous a request to you.'

'You went to meet my sister,' replied Mrs. Crookley. 'I knew from what you said you were mistaking me for some one else, though I could not guess whom I was taken for. We will call Amelia, and see why she was not there as she promised, thus causing this stupid mistake. Ali!' she continued, raising her voice. A black servant came out from among the bushes and approached her. 'Go and call Misses Loudon—I want her; or stay, we will return to the house, but tell her I want to see her.'

'If the Mem Sahib will not be angry, Ali will tell where Misses Loudon gone away to,' answered the black, with a cunning look in his dark eyes. 'Misses Loudon she run off with Mister Spot, the young leetle Sahib come so often to see the Mem Sahib. Ali hear Misses Loudon say they go off to be married.'

'Ensign Spot, of the 101st Native Infantry' screamed Mrs. Crookley. 'The ungrateful girl! is that the way she treats me? She will have nothing to live on. He has not a penny, and she need not expect any thing from me, as she has not married to please me. I always intended her to make a good match, and now she has gone and spoiled all my plans. The ungrateful lussy!'

'Melton and I looked at each other, and went into internal convulsions of laughter; while the major sidled up to Solace, who was looking very glum, and holding out his hand, said:

'Well, it was a mistake, after all, and I am sorry for my part in it, and still more sorry that the girl has gone and made a fool of herself. You will forgive my hastiness, will you not? I really thought you were using me badly, and my temper is unfortunately soon put up. I must go now and see where that foolish couple have got to, as I should be sorry if Amelia got into trouble; but you will come in and take something before you go?'

'We declined this, however, and set off on our way back to A—; and if Solace does not know what it is to be chaffed by this time, I am much mistaken.'

'Bravo, Baby!' I cried, when Langham had finished. 'You got out of it splendidly, though I think that was more through good luck than good guidance. I hope your next flirtation will not have quite so exciting a termination.'

'Oh, I never flirt, I assure you,' answered Baby, gravely; 'and it's a great shame of all of you to be so eternally accusing me of it.'

'No, indeed, you never do flirt, and you never will, until the next time; but take care you do not do it once too often, and find yourself hooked some day before you know where you are. Now, Melton, come up into my room, for I want to have a chat with you.'