

Hugh Melton!

CHAPTER IV

(CONTINUED.)

'I agree with you,' I said; 'trials are all right, but if you face them boldly. Remember that they are many others too, as well as I and those whom you like best, that will stand by you through good report and evil report. However, enough of this now; take a cigar and forget care for a time; there is nothing comforts one like a good smoke.'

Hugh assented languidly, taking a cigar with the air of one who has lost all interest in life; but before long, under the soothing influence of the narcotic, he brightened up a little, and his sad face assumed a more tranquil expression. When we left our retreat no one would have guessed by his face through what an ordeal he had just passed, and the most keen-sighted among his acquaintances could have observed no signs of avoidance or contempt.

So we sped gayly on toward the tropics—gayly at least as regards the sailing of the vessel, for providentially we encountered none but favorable winds the whole way, otherwise we should have died of ennui, as it may well be imagined a certain stiffness reigned in our party, some of whom would neither look at nor speak to Melton; indeed, I was the only one who kept up really friendly relations with him; the few who did not believe Cameron's story could not quite take Melton's innocence for granted when he made no effort to bring forward proofs to establish it. Then, again, I, being his constant companion, came in for some of the odium attached to him, though for that I did not care a straw, as, with the exception of Solace and some few others, they were not worth caring about. Still it was dull, very dull, and thankful indeed I was that we met none of the usual calms that are generally so tiresome near the Line.

At last one evening, when we were about 26 degrees south latitude, a fearful accident occurred, which was near ending fatally for us all. We were on deck, smoking, talking, and reading; Hugh trying to take a faint transcript of one of the most gorgeous Southern sunsets I ever beheld, and I lounging beside him, when glancing carelessly out at the foamy track left by the vessel, as she plowed her way through the rippling wavelets, I saw between me and the glowing sky a thin filmy vapor ascending. Lazily I watched for a while, as it curled and wreathed in fantastic shapes that lent a flickering softness to the brilliant tints beyond. After about ten minutes' lazy enjoyment of the novel effect, a vague wonder crept into my mind as to how it got there. Could some one be smoking, leaning out of the stern windows, or sitting among the cordage and chains? Yes, that was probably the cause of it; some of our fellows no doubt had chosen that place for a quiet chat. But who could it be? They were most of them in groups near us; I did not miss any one. So at last, out of pure curiosity, I determined to look over and see.

'I'll be back in a minute, Hugh,' I said, rising very slowly and, in spite of my curiosity, reluctantly, and making my way aft. When I arrived at the taffrail and leaned over, no one was to be seen; but, what I for a few seconds thought odd, there seemed to be hot vapor cooing through the crevices of the planking, and the air smelled so strangely. What could it be? I sniffed once or twice, and then with overwhelming force the conviction rushed through my mind—the ship was on fire. To run forward and tell the captain was the work of an instant, and a minute later it was found that the large cabin on the stern, in which the ladies usually sat, was on fire.

Our men manned the pumps turned about with the blue-jackets, and we put in our turn with the rest. Hugh throwing aside his unfinished sketch, and working like a horse at whatever came under his hand.

'Where is Captain Cameron?' asked Solomon, coming up hurriedly to where we were working, carrying away all inflammable articles from the proximity of the fire. He appeared to be quite as calm as the rest of us.

'Well, he is better than I thought,' I observed to myself on seeing him; 'he is at least encouraging the men to work, if he won't do it himself.' But as I passed close behind him on my errand, judge of my surprise when I heard him say:

'We can get some of the men, sergeant; in the confusion it will be easy to slip some water and provisions on board, and then we will be off. It is the only way to escape certain death; once the fire gains the powder, it is all up with us.'

'Captain,' answered Green, in the same imperturbable tone he would have used on parade—'captain, there are men of ours on board this vessel, but I hope not one coward; then, with a salute that I fancied, in its exaggerated respect, expressed immeasurable contempt, he turned on his heel and rejoined his comrades.

How proud I felt of that man! I should have liked to have gone over and shaken hands with him, as I turned and hurried aft again, to see what other work there was for willing hands. Plenty there was of it for every one; but in spite of all efforts, the fire seemed to gain ground. Here and there spits and tongues of flame might be seen shooting up through the planks, and gleaming redly through the glass sky-lights let in here and there in the deck, while volumes of smoke would burst out now and then through some unforeseen aperture, half smothering those who might be working near. I had forgotten all about the scene I had just witnessed, when suddenly I heard Hugh's voice, in a loud commanding tone, proceeding from among a knot of men gathered near one of the boats forward.

Curious to see what was the matter, and thinking I might be of use I ran over. When I reached the spot his back was toward me, and I waited to hear what might be the matter before interfering. Two sailors, whom I recognized as among the black sheep of the crew, were lowering the boat over the side, while round them stood a knot of men, about ten all, some soldiers, some sailors, but all of them well known to me as possessing an indifferently reputation with their respective officers.

In the centre of the group stood Hugh and Cameron, face to face with each other. Hugh was speaking loudly, and in an authoritative manner, with his head up and his eyes flashing.

'I tell you, Captain Cameron,' he was saying as I approached, 'that you shall not do this thing if I can prevent it; and you,' he added, turning to the men, 'return every one of you to your duty, or I shall report you to your officers. Have you no shame that you should try to leave the ship before all hope is lost? Think of your comrades toiling till the very life is worn out of them to save themselves and the ship. Are you not ashamed to stand here concocting a villainous scheme that must deprive some at least of the chance of safety if you succeed, and that if you do not succeed will not be less cover you with infamy.'

'That is all very fine,' sneered Cameron, a feeble spark of energy roused in him by hate and fear; 'but if I prefer to save myself rather than stick by this cursed tub till the flames reach the powder, and if these brave fellows choose to make an effort for their lives, none shall prevent us; you, if you make another attempt to stop us, shall be pitched into the sea; I can promise you that much, I think.'

Hugh laughed scornfully, and springing on the bulwarks caught hold of one of the davits to support himself, at the same time opening a large clasp knife, with which he intended to cut the rope if obliged; at least, as he told me afterward, he intended to try and cut the rope, though well aware that his knife was a very weak weapon for such an undertaking.

As he opened the knife, Cameron, goaded to fury by the idea that his carefully prepared scheme was about to fail through Hugh's agency, aimed a blow at him with all his force. Involuntarily I sprang forward intending to catch Cameron's arm, but before I could reach him the blow had been delivered, missing his mark, Cameron overbalanced and fell heavily against the bulwarks, cutting himself pretty severely about the face and head. Then I caught Hugh by the arm and dragged him down.

'What are you about,' I said, breathlessly, 'standing up there, where a touch would knock you over into the water? Let us take that madman, Cameron, and shut him up

appeared to my eyes; but beyond this feeble attempt at merriment he seemed to make no effort to shake off his depression, and presently began to busy himself setting things as much to rights as circumstances permitted.

Next time we were alone, however, he said, 'Could you have believed Cameron was such a mean-spirited ruffian? I never saw a more thorough poltroon. It adds to the perplexity I was in before. How I am to act with regard to that man I can not tell. It would be better for a woman to die than to marry a man so utterly dead to every noble and honorable feeling.'

From this remark I saw his thoughts had again reverted to Miss Meares, so I made no reply, and he pursued the subject no farther.

Though the fire placed us in rather unpleasant circumstances, from the amount of loss it entailed on many of us, and from the discomfort of the temporary accommodations we had to contrive to replace things destroyed, still it had one good effect, others besides myself had seen Cameron's behavior, and were no longer inclined to pay so much attention to his insinuations against Hugh, whose conduct had been as worthy of praise as his was of blame.

Sergeant Green had also indulged himself in making a fine story out of Cameron's proposition to him and his answer, which story rapidly spread, and soon became known to every one on board; so that gentleman, now thoroughly sobered by finding the estimation in which his conduct was held, found himself presently left pretty much to his own resources.

This fire was the only event of importance that occurred to break the monotony of our life during the voyage out. When we arrived at the Cape we made ourselves more comfortable, and replaced the most necessary of those articles that had been destroyed, but our stay was short notwithstanding, and we were soon dancing over the waves of the Indian Ocean on our way to Calcutta.

How pleased we all were when, after a fearfully tedious, though on the whole rapid, voyage, we found ourselves at last slowly sailing up the Hooghly, with its gay villas and shady gardens, presenting pleasant pictures to eyes so wearied by gazing over the monotonous expanse of ocean; how intense was our delight as we once more stood on dry land! and how really enjoyable was the week we spent in Calcutta, before proceeding up the country to the little town of A—, where we were to be stationed!

The little town lay near the Himalayas, and was at this period used as an outpost, on account of the lawless, predatory habits of the mountain chieftains, which rendered the constant supervision of the British Government and a tolerably powerful executive necessary.

It was not a bad quarter, after all; and some of us managed to make ourselves very comfortable. There was plenty of sport, and many a good day Hugh and I had among the hills. Though at the foot of hills, our station was intensely hot, and most tantalizing it was to see far away the summits of endless mountains rising one above the other in endless confusion, until their snowy peaks seemed to pierce the blue vault above. Hugh revealed in the endless beauties they spread out before him of form and color, while I took every opportunity of getting a ramble over their unexplored pathways, with my gun on my shoulder and a pleasant companion by my side.

CHAPTER VI.

CAMERON'S VISITOR.

There are drawbacks to every place, and the drawback to A— was, as far as I was concerned, that it did not agree with me. The intense heat brought on a kind of low fever, which, though it did not quite lay me up, yet made every pursuit, whether in connection with my duty or otherwise, a burden to me. Our doctor assured me I should soon get over it; in the meantime I had better keep quiet, and avoid all exertion during the heat of the day.

So it chanced that one day, as I was lounging in an easy chair by my window, getting the benefit of the cool breeze that at that hour (it was half past seven in the evening) was beginning to steal down from the mountains, I heard a vehicle approaching the bar-

smiled the most perfect teeth, had it not been for the indescribable expression, more visible in the mouth than elsewhere, that we call want of refinement—imagine such a face surrounded by a profusion of raven hair, which was ornamented with the daintiest tulle bonnet, the head set gracefully on the most queenly form, and you will have some idea of the personal appearance of Cameron's strange visitor.

As she entered the doorway she spoke, and her voice sounded soft and sweet, 'that most excellent thing in a woman,' as it reached me; while her laugh, in answer to some remark of Cameron's, was clear and silvery; very pleasant to listen to, I thought, as I lay back in my chair thinking of that perfect face, and deciding that whatever want of refinement it indicated, it must be in mind and not in manner, as her voice and laugh convinced me that outwardly at least she was all a lady ought to be. I lay lazily in my chair by the open window, listening dreamily to the hum of voices in Cameron's room, next mine, and feeling a kind of vague pleasure in the sound of low laughter that stole out now and then on the evening air.

Presently they moved near the window, which was beside mine, not more than a yard distant at most, and I heard the woman's voice say, in persuasive accents that I am sure would have found their way round any man's heart:

'And now, dear, tell me all about this Maud Meares, that some one said you were going to marry. I only laughed when I heard it; I couldn't doubt you; still I thought when I saw you I would ask you about it.'

As the name of Cameron's betrothed fell on my ears I began to listen attentively; in fact, the whole sentence was so extraordinary, and this fascinating being's relation to Cameron seemed so equivocal, that I had little difficulty in persuading myself that for Miss Meares' sake, even if not for Hugh's, I was quite right to play the part of eavesdropper. Besides, I argued, if I find there is nothing wrong, it can not matter my having listened or not. If, on the contrary, there is anything not quite as it ought to be, the sooner it is found out and that fellow's little game put a stop to the better. Drawing my easy-chair, therefore, nearer to the window, and leaning a little outside, I prepared myself for what, even when making the best of it, I felt to be an honorable occupation.

Cameron laughed a little at her question, and answered in more cynical manner than I could have fancied any man would have used to such a woman:

'You were right not to mind what any fellow might report about me. You know we are married; so you are safe whatever may happen, though no one knows how we stand with regard to one another. You have kept our secret, I hope?' he added, with some sternness.

'Indeed, Edward, I have,' she replied, earnestly, 'though why I should do so I can't see. And when I hear such things said of you I do long to hold up my head boldly, looking people in the face, as I have a right to do, and saying, "Your stories are false; I am his wife, and no woman shall come between us while I live."'

'Well, well,' he answered, in an impatient bored manner—for which I felt it in my heart to kick him, so much had my sympathies been enlisted by the sweet wifely words and tender caressing manner of the beautiful stranger—'you know I don't like declamation or heroics; they bore me; and you are getting a little into that style now and then. Try and get out of it, dear. As to why our marriage should be kept a secret, I told you long ago that my embarrassments would not permit me to declare it; as to this report, why, you must encourage it as much as you can, as at present it is my only help in keeping my head above-water. The Jews will wait, in hopes of reaping a golden harvest when it comes off, as this Miss Meares is a great heiress. Indeed, I have been thinking that it would not be a bad move for either you or me could it be accomplished.'

There was a pause after this sentence; during which interval of silence a feeling of horror stole over me of this fair, calm-looking man, with his quiet, gentle ways, his smooth, persuasive voice, and his womanish attention to personal appearance, who concealed a soul so vile, a mind so base, as not only to plan such a scheme, but to dare to talk

interrupted him.

'Oh, Edward, Edward, don't say that! What is the matter with you to-day? Don't you know that you are proposing a fearful crime? If you love me, how can you think for a moment of marrying this other woman, and letting her usurp my rightful place, no matter how great her wealth? And if you do not love me, or have found the love of your childhood dearer and sweeter than mine, how have you forewarned yourself and deceived me! Tell me, what is she like, this English heiress, with a store of gold vast enough to buy men's affection, or at least the semblance of it?'

The piteous tone died out of her voice as she asked this last question in eager jealous accents that quivered, in spite of a brave effort to be calm.

'What is she like?' he asked, lazily; and I heard him strike a fusee, preparatory to lighting a cheroot. 'Well, that is a more sensible question than the tragedy-queen performance you began with, so I'll answer it. Let me see: she is small and slight; a beautiful little figure; very fair, with lots of lovely golden hair, all in loose waves like yours, but the most delicious gold-color. Indeed, her whole coloring is very brilliant and delicate, quite like one of the dainty little figures one sees sometimes in Sevres china. As a rule, heiresses are ugly and vulgar-looking, but she's a remarkable exception to the rule.'

He ceased speaking with the same lazy sangroid; but she went on, passionately:

'Oh, why did you ever tell me you loved me! Your heart is with this blonde beauty, born to a happier fate than mine; for you love her, as she doubtless loves you, but not as I loved you—not as I love you, she corrected herself—I, a child of this burning climate, with warmer love and fiercer hate, more intense affections, more cruel jealousy, than her cold Northern nature can feel. Was not my future dark enough, without my paltry beauty catching your idle fancy, to be the toy of a fleeting passion, and to be flung aside when you are wearied of it?'

'Hugh!' he said, impatiently, interrupting her. 'Now you are raving, and making a fool of yourself besides. If, as you elegantly express it, you were the toy of a fleeting passion, you would not be my wife; and that you are certainly, though perhaps now I might be as well pleased if I had not been in such a hurry to put the noose round my neck. As to my loving her, believe me dearest, you are a thousand times sweeter and more charming to me than any other woman who ever breathed. I don't care a fig for her, but I want her money; and as for her, I don't think she likes me, though I believe she tries to persuade herself she does; and I am pretty sure she cares a good deal for that hang-dog fellow, Hugh Melton, curse him!'

'Then, Edward darling,' said the beauty, in a calmer voice, 'how can you wish so to wrong both her and me? Of myself I will say nothing; you must know all I have to say as well as I; but only think of her. What has the poor girl done that this sin and shame should be brought upon her? Let her marry that man, if she can cure for him after being engaged to you. Are you sure she doesn't love you?' she added. 'Are you only telling me that about the other man to turn my suspicions aside, because you love her yourself? Swear to me you are telling me the truth. Only a little while ago, and I should not have asked you to swear—I should have believed your word; but now you are so strange I almost fear you. Why did you tell me all this, and say those dreadful things? I know you were only trying me, but I can't bear it. Promise me not to talk so any more, won't you?'

With the most coaxing and persuasive voice, in which there was still a tremor of fear and passion, she uttered these words, and I could fancy how, as she said it, her white hands wound themselves around his neck, and her beautiful lustrous eyes looked pleadingly up into his.

But blandishments and prayers were alike wasted on him; he had begun his subject, and he meant to go through with it; he continued, therefore:

'The reason she don't marry Hugh Melton is that he is a beggar, with nothing but his pay, and her fine fortune goes to the dogs, or somewhere equally satisfactory, if she does not marry me; and marry her I will