

Hugh Melton!

CHAPTER IV.

(CONTINUED.)

The croquet went off in much the usual way; a great amount of flirtation, leavened by the smallest possible modicum of croquet. By the way, if there is anything I detect, it is that habit of pretending to do one thing, while all the time you are doing another, and would not for the world give an iota of attention to the object on which you are supposed to be engaged.

Why not call an entertainment like the one in question a flirtation party? It would be a great deal more true than its present name, and would at least afford people the satisfaction of knowing what they were going for. Now if a real lover of croquet goes for croquet's sake, he finds nothing is farther from the thoughts of most of the company than attending to their game; and if he goes for the one thing, it is an awful bore to be interrupted in the midst of his most flattering speech by, 'It's the red ball to play now,' or, 'Come now C—, it's your turn.'

At five o'clock we went in to tea, in the little room that overlooks the croquet ground, and which you enter thence by the window. The evening was lovely; the air balmy as in June, the blue shadows settling down so peacefully on the surrounding landscape, the purple and gold clouds of sunset casting their burnished light on wood and hill in such changeful and gorgeous beauty that I could not tear myself from the scene, and remained outside leaning against the open window listening to the *bavardage* inside, and feasting my eyes in a kind of delicious lazy dream. I was standing sideways, so that I could, by a very slight movement of the head, either see into the room or gaze at will over the wide expanse of country spread out before me. Suddenly I heard a voice I knew and disliked (it belonged to a young lady of the neighborhood, fast, and a good croquet player, with whom it was rumored Solace was desperately smitten) exclaim:

"Isn't there a Captain Melton in your regiment, Captain Cameron?" The man there are all those curious stories about, I mean?"

There is a Captain Melton, he answered, but to what stories do you refer, Miss Bruce?"

Oh, you know very well, she replied, though I suppose you who are in the same regiment don't like repeating them. I mean those stories about some money he took, or at least is strong suspected of having taken, out of Captain James's room. They say the money has been returned since, and I dare say that is true, for when he found himself suspected, he was no doubt afraid to keep it.

I remained stupefied, unable to utter a word for a minute, so great was my astonishment, first at such a rumor being for a minute believed and repeated, and secondly, at its having attained such notoriety. Before, however, Cameron could answer, or I could interpose, a clear musical voice from the other end of the room, said distinctly:

It is false, the vilest fabrication ever invented by slanderous tongues. None but those who envy Captain Melton his good reputation would have dared to coin so base a calumny.

I turned whence the voice proceeded, and there, with her head erect, her dark eyes flashing, and her whole face flushed with generous and indignant feeling, sat Miss Meares. I had not observed her on the croquet ground, and yet she must have been out, as a lace shawl was thrown across her shoulders, and a dainty hat, that seemed composed almost entirely of white curving feathers, lay beside her on the sofa.

Cameron's face was not pleasant to look at as he glanced at his betrothed; but before he could speak, Miss Bruce, said with the nearest approach to a sneer she could venture on when addressing a lady of so much importance as Miss Meares:

Dear me, how very fortunate Captain Melton is in having such an advocate! But those things are said of him notwithstanding."

Miss Meares is right, interrupted Cameron. Hugh Melton is a very good sort of

most intimate friends,' I answered. 'Ever since he joined we have kept together, and every day only increases my liking for him.'

'Ah, then you must be Captain Carinsford, of whom I have heard him speak. I am very glad to make your acquaintance. Captain Melton has talked so much about you, I had quite a curiosity to see you.'

As she said this she glanced at me somewhat critically, so much so that I felt inclined to ask her if she approved of his choice of a friend, when I saw Hugh enter the room, having just driven over; and thinking it better he should not become immediately taken up by Miss Meares' presence, I went over to where he was talking to our hostess, and persuaded him to come out for a stroll through the grounds, which were very prettily laid out, and looked most inviting that mild October evening. We strolled about for some time, I smoking, Hugh rhapsodizing over the beauties of the gorgeous autumnal landscape, with its brilliant tints and hazy distance, till at length, finding a most inviting moss-covered seat near the house and commanding a beautiful view, though itself hidden from observation, we sat down for a few minutes before returning to dine and begin the business of the evening—flirtation and dancing.

Suddenly we heard voices talking, which I immediately recognized as those of Miss Meares and Captain Cameron. My companion knew them also, as I saw from the contraction of his brow and the quivering of his firmly compressed lips. They were passing along a path at the foot of the hill, on the top of which we were seated; but as we were under the shadow of the trees, and the evening was already darkening, they did not see us. Their voices rang out distinctly on the evening air, so that we could not help hearing every word they were saying. We would have beaten a retreat, but that was not possible without confronting them, which neither Hugh nor I wished to do. The best thing under the circumstances seemed to be sitting still, as they would soon pass out of ear-shot. She was saying, 'Why did you not speak out more boldly for your comrade Captain Melton, to-day? Only that I believe you honorable and upright as the day, I should have thought you did not wish to clear him from the imputation, your vindication was so feeble. I know well it was surprise at the charge, and not any unworthy motive, that made your reply so unsatisfactory; but tell me, what did Captain Carinsford mean by saying that some foolish remarks of yours had given rise to the reports?'

I should think Cameron's face must have been a study for a physiognomist at this question. However, he answered in his most silky tones:

'Carinsford alluded to my having said I wondered Captain James had not questioned Melton as to the hour in which he was in his room, and so on, with a view to finding out who were likely to be about at that particular time. I was overheard saying this, which was surely innocent enough, by Tufton, a young snob lately joined, who chose to build a whole host of slanderous rumors on it, and set them floating about the camp; but I was not to blame for it.'

'Of course not,' she answered; 'I am so glad you have been able to explain that, for I may now confess that I had a kind of uneasy feeling from your manner. I don't think I doubted you, and yet I feared if, after all, you might not be such a man as I fancied you; for you know well my determination never to marry one in whose truth and honor I have not the most implicit confidence.'

As she said this Melton seized my arm and said, hoarsely:

'Come away; I can not hear any more, or I shall think myself a villain for not telling her at once what I know about this man, and I can not, for I am bound by a promise.'

He dragged me away after him, taking the direction that led from the house, so that after about ten minutes' hurried stumbling through the tangled shrubbery and long damp grass we arrived at the demense wall, on the outside of which ran the high road. Here he stopped and turned toward me, his face pale with contending passions and quivering with emotion, still visible in the now deepening twilight, as he said:

'I can't go back to that house to-night, Charlie; make my excuses to Lady A—. Then, seeing I was about to urge him, he added, 'Don't ask me. I can not look in that innocent face and think that I am con-

the most sensible man talks at a ball, and what an appalling number of flirtations the most stony-hearted individual plunges into to the music of a swinging waltz, or under the still more potent influence of Champagne and lobster salad!

I fancy I did as much in that line as any body else that night, though I don't now remember very clearly who most attracted my attention; but I do know that I left Lady A—'s at five o'clock a. m., with a very distinct idea that it was the pleasantest ball I had ever been at, and that if all my partners resembled Miss M. Roger I should not find dancing such a bore as I sometimes did. Any thing so delightful as that ball must of necessity be followed up by unmitigated disagreeables; so that, though intensely disgusted, I was hardly surprised, when I made my appearance at three o'clock p. m. that day, to hear we had received the route for India, and were to embark in a day or two on board H. M. S. Echo at Gravesend.

CHAPTER V.

OUT TO INDIA.

Now all was bustle and confusion, rushing here and there to say farewell, distracting one's brains to frame adieux that, while sufficiently sorrowful, should not be enough so to excite suspicion of more tender sentiments than it was prudent to avow. I had a good many acquaintances about, and was so taken up by paying farewell visits and receiving farewell invitations that I saw little or nothing of Hugh until the day when we found ourselves all on board the Echo. I might have obtained leave, and followed the regiment out by the Overland Route if I had chosen to do so; however, I had preferred keeping along with the rest, especially as Hugh could not have remained behind with me.

Our quarters were tolerably comfortable; and I have no doubt the voyage would have been a pleasant one if only Cameron had been moved by some good spirit to stay behind and follow us overland. I had heard him talking of it before we left, but for some reason he had altered his mind; and there he was, with his sneaking, self-complacent smile and his creeping, insidious ways. Percy Langham, Templeton, and one or two others of the nicest set were not with us; they would come out afterward. But their absence contributed greatly, no doubt, to the disagreeable nature of the voyage. We had been only four or five days at sea, and going well before the wind as we were, Hugh and I found it not unpleasant. Those who had been seasick were recovering, and beginning to crawl about, reminding one of sickly caterpillars, with their feeble gait and enormous appetites.

Hugh and I were standing leaning over the taffrail in the stern—I smoking, Hugh gazing idly over the blue expanse of water, sparkling under the crisp clear sunlight of an autumnal morning, and ruffled by a gentle breeze into innumerable foam-tipped wavelets—when, turning suddenly toward me with a kind of half-resentful, half-appealing look, he said:

'Charlie, have you noticed anything odd in the manner of our fellows toward me lately?'

I turned with a surprised negative on my lips, when, as I did so, I saw at a little distance Cameron talking to Brabazon, a nice young fellow, not long joined, to whom both Hugh and I had taken rather a fancy. They were both looking at us, but perceiving that I was watching them, they turned away with a kind of confused manner, and walked off. I then remembered that for the last day or two Brabazon never seemed to have time to come and chat with us in the stern as he used at first; and whenever we had tried to stop him for a minute, he had hurried away, saying, "Excuse me, I am busy." My answer, therefore, died away on my lips; for I began to feel that perhaps it might be as Hugh had suggested, though I had not yet remarked anything. He continued:

'I see, your silence tells me that you have noticed it. I am convinced Cameron is at the bottom of it. Wait and watch; you will see I am right; and if I am, I will tell you something I have hitherto kept concealed, greatly against my will, for I much wanted your counsel. A promise kept me silent

face at this juncture. Tell Melton everything; it will give him a chance of contradicting those vile stories which he has never before had, as he has never heard them clearly yet. As for me, I don't believe them and so I told you when you repeated them to me.'

Thus encouraged, Brabazon, still greatly terrified, began:

'Cameron says he saw you enter Captain James' room, and, passing the door without a thought of anything wrong, saw you opening the desk, which lay only on a table near the centre of the room. He thought nothing of it at the time; but when he heard of the loss of the money, imagine his feelings. He says, Captain Melton, he was so taken aback by your effrontery in saying out boldly at me that you had been in the room, that at first he thought you must have been innocent; but after that affair with Tufton he became uneasy, charged you with the theft to your face, forced you to acknowledge it, and then, he says, his first wrong step was taken. Instead of going on to the spot to James or the colonel, and telling what he had discovered, he allowed himself to be persuaded into keeping the matter secret. Your penitence, he said, seemed so great and your grief so abject, that he really had not the heart to ruin your prospects in life without giving you one more chance. Now,' continued Brabazon, who, though a nice young fellow if he had not fallen into bad hands, had evidently been so well primed and schooled by Cameron, that he could hardly look at the matter from any point of view not sanctioned by that worthy, 'I should never have fancied Cameron to be good-natured enough to do that kind of thing; and I must say in this matter I think he was altogether too lenient.'

'Well, all I can say,' answered Solace, 'is that his good nature does not seem to be very great when he can not hold his tongue, but allows insinuations and rumors of all kinds to be bruited about in a way that would destroy any man's character, no matter how innocent he might be of the charges against him, and that as the case stands will very likely drive Melton out of the regiment quite as surely as if he had told the colonel at first. I don't call that good nature if you do.'

'I thought as you do at first,' replied Brabazon; 'but he explained that nothing would have induced him to betray the secret once he had allowed you, Melton, to remain in the regiment; but when he saw me drifting into a friendship with you, taken by your charming manner and frank face, he then considered it his duty to warn me of the character of the man I was disposed to admire. Even then he did not speak out explicitly, only hinted darkly all was not right, till, seeing at last that his innuendoes produced rather a contrary effect from what he wished he was obliged to be more distinct. Besides, he said that though fear had kept you from falling into a flagrant offense since then, still he saw by your manner that, far from being repentant, you felt nothing but hatred for the man who had spared you. He says he now sees it would have been better such a character should have left the regiment at once rather than remain in it to have the opportunity of influencing young fellows recently joined in a manner which can do them nothing but harm. Remember, Captain, Melton, Brabazon went on, apologetically, 'I am only repeating Cameron's exact words and am very sorry to pain you by doing so; only you would insist on hearing them, and he never gave me to understand I was not to repeat them.'

'Judging by physiognomy,' interrupted Solace, 'Cameron looks much more likely to commit a theft than Melton. Yet I can not fancy such a knowing fellow would have committed himself by spreading scandals unless he knew that you, Melton, were bound in some way or by some promise that would prevent your vindicating your character in the eyes of the world. However, I am glad now you have heard it all, and I for one will believe your simple denial in preference to Cameron's sneaking lies.'

'Thanks, Solace,' said Hugh, looking up dejectedly, but still proudly, into the young fellow's face. 'I think you know me well enough to judge the measure of faith you can attach to such slanders. Circumstances prevent my disproving them as I might do; my denial is all I can give you. To you I am sure it will be all that is necessary; to others I feel it will not be as worthy of belief

imagine. Still he did care; he was cut to the heart, and even one who liked him less than I might have seen that his tone and words seemed to say, 'You hear of what I am accused, and see that I make no defence; why have you not left me?'

It was time something should be done to show him that some at least remained faithful, and would not believe the slanders of the enemy; so laying my hand on his arm I said, gently:

'Hugh, I shall be really angry if you can think me so false a friend, so unworthy a mind, as to turn from the one most dear to me on the strength of a scandal spread by a man whom, of all others, I distrust and despise. You have told me you have some secret connected with him in your keeping. What it may be I know not; but I feel confident that it is to revenge himself for your having become acquainted with a secret he has invented this report, in the hope that though few would venture to disbelieve your denial, yet such a taint of suspicion would linger round you as might compel you to sell out in order to escape its atmosphere. I see his plan, and a cunningly devised one it is; but if you consider yourself sufficiently absolved from your promise by his conduct, tell me the mystery, and we will together devise some plan to make his villainy recoil on his own head.'

'Dear friend,' answered Hugh, grasping my hand, 'I can never thank you enough for standing by me in this cruel trial. Let me think one minute before I tell you all.'

He rose and paced hurriedly up and down our narrow strip of deck. The flush had died away now from his brow, and his face looked white and worn; his lips were set in a rigid line of fierce determination; his dark eyes were painfully sad, and had a wild, hunted look in them as he glanced once or twice over the blue waters, heaving as he did so a short sigh. At length he stopped, and said, in a low voice, 'I can't help it, Charlie; those who think badly of me must do so. What that young fellow said just now about Cameron reminds me of what I ought to do. A promise must be kept at all risks. He knows he is safe, or he would never have dared say such things of me. Do you remember the words of the old poem I showed you once?'

'Let me be false in others' eyes,
So faithful in my own.'

That is just my case; until he commits some more flagrant offence than inventing slanders about me, my lips are sealed. I see now I made a great mistake, and one that I fear will affect other lives dearer to me than mine; but the die is cast—I must stand by and bide my time in patience.'

His voice shook as he turned away and again paced up and down, a deeper gloom than I had ever before seen there settling down on his once gay and careless face. Then he wheeled round suddenly, a light of determination breaking out over his countenance seemed to transform it into the likeness of one of those warlike angels of whom Raphael and Michael Angelo dreamed, as, facing me, he said: 'I tell you, whatever he thinks to do—and you say he intends to drive me out of the regiment—I will not go. He may prosecute me by slanderous reports and malicious acts, he may blacken my character and darken my life, he may take friends and acquaintance from me, but he shall not get rid of me till the time during which I must watch him shall expire. Yes, Charlie, even though you were to turn against me—which God forbid!—should still remain—a poor despised outcast among all my former comrades.'

'But surely,' I answered, 'his behavior toward you is quite such as to release you from any promise you may have made him. For my part, though I can't conceive what the secret can be between you two, yet I am sure were I in your place, I should throw honor to the winds, have my revenge on him, and clear myself, as I felt convinced you could do if you chose.'

He signed me to be silent with an impatient gesture. 'Hush, for mercy's sake! You don't know how strong the temptation is. Don't add your voice to that of my natural selfish nature, which is urging me to forsake all the principles I have tried to live by, and drives me, with a force I find almost to resist, to clear myself from this charge, even at the cost of my honor. How long it seems since I have had any rest—