

## THE SCARLET JACKET.

Yes, you are right; there is a story connected with that scarlet jacket. That is why I still keep it folded away in my wardrobe. Sometimes, when I feel melancholy, I take it out, and look at it, and think what might have been.

You would like to hear the story? Very well. Sit down by this bright little fire, and you shall hear it. There is half an hour yet before the dressing-bell rings.

Ah! Frances; we have been friends a good many years, and when we left school we promised to tell each other everything; but you have never heard this story before. I do not think you have ever even heard the name of Hugh Brereton. And yet among the train of admirers who crowded round me when I "came out," and took my place in Graybridge society, he was the prince and the chief.

He was different from all the rest. He never flattered me as they did, but often talked to me in a sensible, serious manner, that made me feel quite good.

Sometimes he reproved and laughed at me, but even then I liked him; he was so true and loyal, and I knew he loved me dearly.

I should tell you that Hugh was the son of our Rector, Mr. Brereton. He held an appointment in India, and had come home for six months on sick leave. The Rectory grounds adjoined ours, and we had many private opportunities of meeting; but Hugh hated anything clandestine, and besought me again and again to give him permission to speak to my father. But I would not. I was fond of my lover; but I did not wish to be engaged to him yet. I wanted to be free a little longer—free to talk and laugh and dance with whom I pleased. Once formally engaged, all this would be over, for Hugh was very particular in some things, and I liked my liberty too well to be in any hurry to resign it. So I turned a deaf ear to all his entreaties; and when he grew hot and angry, as he sometimes did, I soothed him with gentle words and vague promises.

Like most true lovers, Hugh was jealous, and the special object of his jealousy was Captain Maclure, an officer in the regiment then quartered at Graybridge.

Captain Maclure was a handsome man—which Hugh was not—and his manners were agreeable and fascinating. Both my father and my mother liked him, and he was a frequent visitor at our house.

It was my father's birthday, and we celebrated the event by giving a small dinner-party. Among the guests were Hugh Brereton and Captain Maclure. I was looking my best that evening, I remember, and I wore a black silk dress and this very scarlet jacket, which I put on new for the occasion.

When the gentlemen came up from the dining-room, I was seated in the small inner drawing-room, which was partly screened from the observation of those in the larger apartment by the crimson curtains looped back on each side of the connecting arch.

Hugh at once made his way to my side. "Will you sing my favourite song?" he whispered.

But I did not feel inclined to sing just then, and refused rather curtly, whereupon he moved away in a huff, and Captain Maclure, coming in at that moment, took possession of the empty seat beside me.

After a few preliminary remarks, he began to pay me compliments in a low, confidential tone, which, however, as the room was quiet, were perfectly audible a few yards distant, where Hugh stood, gloomily turning over some books.

"How charming you are looking to-night, Pauline! And what a bewitching little jacket that is you have on!"

"Yes, it is pretty," I assented. "I had it direct from London."

"Ah! I thought as much. Graybridge could not produce such a stylish little affair."

"Mamma does not like me to wear it. She says it is too smart. What do you think, Captain Maclure?"

"Oh! if my opinion is worth anything," returned the officer, laughing, "I should say, wear it by all means, for it is most becoming."

Hugh left the books, and turned towards us.

"And if my opinion is worth anything, I should say, never put it on again," he remarked, quietly.

Captain Maclure looked up.

"Miss Hardy did not ask for your opinion."

"Perhaps not. But that is no reason why she should not hear it," returned Hugh, dryly.

"And why should your opinion be of any consequence?" asked the officer, superciliously.

"That is my affair," was the proud reply.

The two men faced each other; the one haughty, the other insolent.

I was infinitely relieved to see mamma enter the room, and hastily acceded to her request for a little music.

Hugh held aloof from me for the rest of the evening; and I noticed that immediately Captain Maclure took his leave, Mr. Brereton also prepared to withdraw.

Fearing lest there should be a quarrel between the two, I slipped quietly down into the hall, and stood waiting in a shadowy corner until Hugh should have made his adieu.

In a minute or two he came downstairs, looking decidedly cross, and was hastily leaving the house, when I stepped forward and stopped him.

"Don't follow him, Hugh," I cried, half frightened.

"Follow whom?" he demanded, in surprise.

"Captain Maclure."

He smiled contemptuously.

"You need not alarm yourself on his account. My quarrel is with you, not with him."

"Then come this way," said I, relieved on that point, but not quite comfortable on my own account.

And I led him into the library, and turned up the gas.

"Now, Hugh, what is the matter?"

"You know well enough," he retorted, with an angry frown on his face.

"I do not," I replied, coldly. "I am quite at a loss to understand your strange conduct."

"My strange conduct!" he repeated, ironically. "It is your conduct that is strange, Pauline."

"How so?"

"In many ways. You say that you love me, and have promised to be my wife; and yet you will not permit me to ask your father for your hand; you refuse to accord me the position of an accepted lover; and you flirt continually before my face."

"You are jealous," I replied.

"I admit it. I am jealous, and not without cause."

"And do you mean to say that I have been 'flirting,' as you call it, to-night, Mr. Brereton?" I asked, beginning to feel angry myself.

"I do not know what your idea of flirting may be, but you permitted Maclure to pay you compliments, to call you Pauline, and to make cool remarks upon your dress. I have borne a good deal in silence; but when I perceived that instead of resenting you actually encouraged his impertinence, my patience came suddenly to an end, and—"

"And you were very rude!" I interrupted.

"Was I? I did not mean to be rude, and am sorry if that was the case. But when a man is wounded, he is apt to forget politeness."

"You did, certainly."

He sighed.

"I won't argue that point; I have something of more importance to say. This state of things must cease. You must either openly accept me as your affianced husband, or—we must part."

"There was a look of resolve on his dark face, a tone of decision in his voice that showed me he was in earnest.

My heart sank; the tears sprang into my eyes. I loved him, and could not let him go.

"Oh! Hugh, don't leave me!" I faltered.

His arm was round me in a moment.

"If you but love me, I will never leave you," he answered, tenderly.

"I do love you—indeed I do!" I whispered, in his ear.

"Do you?" he answered, rather sadly. "Will you give me a proof of your love?"

"Oh, yes, twenty!" I exclaimed.

"I do not ask for twenty; only for one," he answered, with a grave smile. "Will you promise never to wear this gaudy thing again?" touching my scarlet jacket.

I was silent. I little thought the proof he required would be of that nature. Had he asked me to walk barefoot, or do anything difficult or outrageous, I would have done it gladly. But never to wear my pretty new jacket again! That seemed an absurd and unreasonable request, and was, moreover, a reflection on my good taste. Zouave jackets had then just come into fashion, and I was the first lady in Graybridge to possess one. It would be hard not to wear it, especially as I knew it was very becoming, and fitted me to perfection.

"Do you really wish me not to wear it, Hugh?" I asked, dolefully.

"Yes," he replied, gravely. "If you do wear it again after what I said to-night in the presence of Captain Maclure, it will be a plain proof

that you have no regard for my wishes or love for me."

"But why don't you like it?" I persisted, turning and looking at myself in the glass. "Doesn't it suit me?"

Hugh was provoked.

"No; it does not," he answered, sharply. "I never saw you wear anything I liked less. It is far too conspicuous for good taste."

I was much offended.

"Captain Maclure is not of your opinion," I replied, stiffly.

"Oh! if his opinion is of more consequence than mine, there is, of course, nothing more to be said."

"He has better taste than you have."

"Indeed! Still, you might have some regard for my taste, such as it is. Come, Pauline, will you not make this little sacrifice for my sake?"

His voice softened, and he took my hand in his.

But I drew it away.

"You are too dictatorial," I said, coldly.

"Am I never to wear any garments but such as you approve?"

"Then you will not promise?"

I felt the pleading touch of his hand; I saw the wistful look in his eyes; but I was angry, and would not relent.

"Your request is too unreasonable."

As the words fell from my lips, his face hardened.

"I will detain you no longer, Miss Hardy. Good-night," he said, with cold politeness; and he took up his hat, and left the room, and the next moment I heard the hall-door shut.

The next day passed, and the next, and a whole week drew slowly to a close, and I saw nothing of Hugh. Accidentally I heard that he was talking of going down to Scotland to visit some friends. What if he were to leave Graybridge, and never return? The thought was too painful to be endured; and after some consideration, I wrote and sent the following note:—

"DEAR HUGH,—

"Are you never coming to see me any more? I am very sorry I was so ungracious the other night. Do come in this evening, if it is only to show that you forgive

"Your penitent

"PAULINE."

In an hour or two I received an answer. It was only one line; but he promised to come, and I knew I was forgiven.

No sooner, however, were my fears relieved, than a spirit of mischief and self-will seemed to take possession of me, and I resolved to wear the obnoxious jacket.

As I sat in the drawing-room waiting for Hugh that bright May evening, as ill-luck would have it, who should drop in but Captain Maclure.

I was by no means glad to see him, and my greeting was but cold; but it made no difference to him; and, taking a chair beside me, he rattled away with his usual freedom.

"You have your pretty jacket on, I see. I'm glad you were not frightened at what Mr. Brereton said the other night."

I drew back as Captain Maclure bent his handsome head towards me.

"It was but a joke," I replied. "Mr. Brereton did not mean what he said."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Hardy; I did mean what I said."

I looked up in alarm, and met Hugh Brereton's eyes fixed on me in bitter scorn. His face was very pale; his stern glance filled me with dismay.

I don't remember what I said or did: I only know that in a few minutes Hugh left the house never to return. The next day I received the following note:—

"I see now that you never loved me: it was all a delusion. You have played fast and loose with a man's true love, and—lost

"HUGH BRERETON."

He left Graybridge the same day, and afterwards sailed for India without returning to his native town. After that, I did not care much what become of me, though I showed a brave front to the world, and resolved to accept the first offer I received. You know the rest. My husband is a great deal my senior; but he is very good to me, and surrounds me with every comfort and luxury I can wish for. Some people call me vain and frivolous, and perhaps they are right. Sometimes I think I might have been a better woman, a happier wife, if I had married Hugh.

E. H.