

Captain Hamilton Of The Guards
by John Byers

My first estimation of Captain Hamilton voted him a gallant gentleman. But I was only a young, enthusiastic chap from a quiet Massachusetts town, seeing the sights in London, and my opinion was but the hastily formed judgment of a boy—hastily formed and hastily changed, as the reader will see.

I was going it alone, as the saying has it. My dear old uncle, whose protégé I was, had said to me:

“Go and visit England and the Continent, my boy. You have a zest for traveling. Push through alone; the experience will do you good; nothing like it for a young fellow fresh from college. You will come back all the better for the contact.”

So he put money in my purse, forwarded to a London banker a handsome reserve fund for me, and bade me go and enjoy myself.

I made Captain Hamilton’s acquaintance during the second week of my stay in London. I knew nobody there. During the evenings, after my return from sight-seeing, I used to saunter about through the reading-room and billiard-room of the hotel trying to kill the time until bed hour. Naturally enough I had many odd bits of conversation with different people. I was proud of telling everyone who talked with me that I was an American from the North—our civil war was about closing then—and so I had a part in not a few hot arguments; for the tide of sympathy was still setting strongly in favor of the South. Any one who espoused my cause won my friendship immediately. Among the number who indorsed me, and, to my mind the best of them all, was Captain Hamilton.

He stood by me right cleverly one evening, in what was almost a quarrel with a stout little Liverpool shipping merchant; and he handled my case so well that my heart overflowed with gratitude for him.

“I am a military man myself, sir,” he said to me when the affair was over; “Captain Hamilton of the Guards, at your service; and be gad sir, if I had been able to quit the scene of my duties here you would have found me enlisted in your noble cause. You would, sir, trust me.”

I trusted him with all my heart, and we exchanged cards on the moment.

“Harrington, eh?” returned he, glancing at my card; “why, that’s my mother’s family name. Who knows but we may be relations, far removed? Why we must know each other better—indeed we must. Won’t you have a cigar? Oh, I’ve forgotten my cigar case. Hem! No matter; let us sit down here and have a chat.”

I insisted on him accompanying me to my room. He refused at first, but, on being pressed, consented, remarking that he had an engagement at his club, but would sacrifice that for my sake—condescending fellow!”

We had four flights of stairs to mount on the way to my room. We made slow progress on the road as we talked a great deal. Each flight of stairs added more to our intimacy, and when the fourth was passed the Captain had his arm through mine, and was addressing me as “Harrington, my boy,” while I had got as far as “my dear Captain.” Once in the room I desired my new friend to make himself at home, which he said he most certainly would do; and he began by saying if he were going to indulge in cigars he would have to change his new frock coat, as it would not be nice to call upon ladies in it fumigated with smoke. SO with the air of an old friend the Captain doffed his coat and substituted my dressing-gown. The cigars were handed out immediately.

“This is a glorious weed, Harrington,” said he, when he had lighted one and passed it under his nose a few times; “the waft is worthy of an ‘Upman,’ as fragrant s a bouquet of flowers.”

“Of tobacco flowers, you mean,” said I, laughing; ‘but you are right, it is an ‘Upman.’”

“Ah, yes, I should know them; but I say, Harrington, don’t be ordering anything in the liquor line simply because you have me for a guest, you know. You will be doing me too much honor, indeed you will, be gad; but if you should take it into your precious head to have something sent up, then I say let us pledge your glorious flag in a drop of the ‘Widow Clicquot!’”

It had been my intention to ask my friend to join me in a bottle of wine; but if I was surprised at the hint for cigars, I was much more surprised at the last reminder. I resolved to censure his boldness by a look showing that I had taken offence; but turning to give the crushing glance, I found him lolling in my easy-chair, gazing as far heavenward as my ceiling would permit. I began to have serious doubts of the disinterestedness of my friend the captain.

“Ah, well,” said I to myself as I rang for the servant, “such coolness is worthy of being indulged. Besides, I’m only a boy, with a limited knowledge of the world and its men. He’s a good fellow, any how, and I like him. I must not think him bold—perhaps his manner is a way they have in the army.” Charitable I!”

“Ah, there’s music for you!” exclaimed the captain, as the cork flew from our first bottle; “and the bursting of those sparkling bubbles has a tone about it both soothing to the ear and tickling to the palate. Harrington, I pledge you honored flag.”

Well, there’s truth in wine. With our first bottle all doubts of the genuineness of Captain Hamilton’s friendship vanished from me; with the second, I took his hand fondly in mine and vowed that such a friend as he I had never met in my lifetime; and with the third—the captain said there was luck in odd numbers—my dear friend proved, to my complete

satisfaction, that he was my second cousin. “Nothing less, old fellow; and I’m proud of the relationship, be gad!” And when, with a dramatic air, he raised his glass and drank to the health of his new-found kinsman, I felt I should raise to my feet and reply. My limbs performed their office, but my poor voice failed me in the matter of articulation; I could only say, “Guess I mus’ be ‘toxicated.’”

The captain assured me I was only mellow; as for himself, he said he was as fresh as a daisy about the head, but a little shaky in the legs, and would have to go home in a cab. Ah, and that reminded him that he had forgotten to put his purse in his pocket when he changed his trousers that evening. Could I lend him five pounds?

Five pounds! I assured him he could have fifty, if he wanted it; and slapping my pocket-book on the table, desired him to help himself. Self-denying fellow! He would only increase the amount to ten pounds; indeed he had no need for one quarter of the amount, but then my kindness was so overpowering!

I have but an indistinct remembrance of our parting that night, but can recall his pushing me back gently when I insisted upon seeing him to the door, and his injunction: “Mind your eye, old chap; turn in and court the drowsy god.”

The next morning I found myself lying across my bed, accounted as I was when the captain left me. Oh, what a feeling of shame was mine! And how my regard for my convivial companion lowered, as I thought of our spree! No breakfast for me that day, nor dinner either; nor did my stomach recover its tone until evening. My supper I relished; and as my prostrated energies revived, my heart warmed again to the captain. I met him shortly after supper in the billiard hall. He repaid me the ten pounds he had borrowed, with many apologies for having been compelled to incur the debt. The fact of his paying the money so soon made me say to myself, “Captain Hamilton is no schemer. I’m positive.” It was strange though that, on figuring up my cash when I reached my room, I found myself still ten pounds short.

Upon the captain’s invitation, I went with him to the theatre. He let me pay the way in, although I was the invited party; but he knew I wanted to be clever. On our way home I announced my intention of leaving London for Paris at an early day of the following week. My friend was surprised to learn the fact.

“Oh, you must stay to the end of the week, at any rate. Indeed you must, be gad; for I should like you to go down with me to my father’s house in Devonshire for a day or two, that you may see a little of English country life before your departure. And besides, my dear boy, you must not go off without seeing the ‘Derby;’ it takes during the end of next week.”

I stand to see the Derby.

I had often wondered any Captain Hamilton never referred to his regiment in the Guards, nor mentioned the names of any of his brother officers. At the race course, on the “Derby

day,” I met the first of his soldier friends I had ever seen. The numbers were being put up for the Derby itself, when a very well-dressed gentleman sauntered to where Hamilton and I were standing; and the captain, after expressing surprise at the meeting, introduced us, naming the stranger, “Major Barclay, of ‘Ours.’”

The major was evidently a betting man, and a blustering fellow into the bargain. He showed that he meant business. He would wager with any man in the kingdom that the favorite, Galdiateur, would win the Derby. The captain said that, for his part, he was not in a betting humor; but that if he were, he should most assuredly back the field, and not the favorite. The major said he would give him odds of a hundred pounds to twenty, that Galdiateur would carry off the honors.

“Oh, you cannot badger me into making a wager to day, Barclay,” said Hamilton; “but if our young friend here had any sport in him, I think he should not refuse such odds.”

Resolved not to make Major Barclay think that an American gentleman had no sport om him, I accepted his terrible odds, and he took care to make a note of the fact in his memorandum-book. The last bell had rung, the preliminary canters were over, and the starter was getting the horses in place. The flag fell, and then I saw that mass of beautiful thoroughbreds break away for a short but momentous struggle. I watched them with eager eyes as they swept around that turf-covered circle, my young blood warming up as every second added to the excitement. I saw those in front give place to those behind; I saw the positions change again and again; and I heard the wild cheer that greeted every new color that showed in the front. Tattenham corner was passed, and down they came in a magnificent rush for the finish. One gallant horse has the lead now, and two or three are challenging him for the place. He knows the value of the moment as well as that confident man whose steady hand and eye are guiding him; and he responds to his rider’s call with a stride quicker, if it were possible, than he has shown yet. The other jockeys are plying whip and spur, but it is only for second place. I have lost twenty pounds, and Galdiateur has won the Derby!

On the way home I offered to settle wager, but Hamilton stopped me with:

“Oh, never mind the funds, Harrington, my tulip; we shall go back with you to your hotel, and you can give Barclay an order on your banker. If he had the ready money in his hands it would all be gone before morning, for he is a terrible spendthrift, indeed he is, be gad!”

Barclay assented to this, and, on reaching the hotel, I wrote an order on my banker for the amount. Barclay said he would present the order for payment the next day.

“That makes your balance a little smaller, eh, Harrington?” said the captain; “but you would bet, you see,”

I was piqued enough at having lost the money, but put on what appearance I could, and replied to the captain’s banter that I had still a good five hundred pounds to my credit.

“Oh,” said he, “then you are not so near broke as you might be, eh? But you are a decent fellow, anyhow, and, funds or no funds, I shall always stand by you.”

A most comforting assurance, considering the source.

“Ah, Hamilton, did I understand you to say that Mr. Harrington was an American?” asked the major in a peculiar, dry voice, as we were about to part.

“I am an American,” said I, choosing to answer for myself.

“Ah, indeed; from the North I should presume?”

“Yes, sir,” answered I, not a little nettled at his half-insolent manner. “And why, might I ask, do you put the question?”

“Oh, for no particular reason. I was only going to remark that I considered that pack of Northerners a bloodthirsty lot; a lot of contemptible vagabonds; and the whole party should be—”

“Why, Major, you astound me!” interrupted Hamilton at this juncture; “our friend here is a Northerner by birth and sentiment. Are you not treading on delicate ground?”

“I shall tread on whatever ground I choose, sir, and ask no guidance from you either!” replied Barclay, flushing up.

“You shall use no insulting remarks nor innuendoes touching the feelings of my friend while I stand here and bid you to hold your peace, I’ll warrant you,” retorted the captain, in most angry tones.

“Oh! And so you think you can dictate my line of duty to me, eh?” was the sneering rejoinder.

“So long as you persist in outraging the common laws of gentlemanly intercourse, most assuredly I shall.”

“Then you may consider yourself a fool, sir.”

This last thrust completed the business. Both sprang to their feet, and before I could rush between them, Hamilton struck Barclay a severe blow on the mouth, drawing blood. I expected to see pistols drawn on the moment, but Barclay simply drew back a few steps, saying:

“Very good, sir; very good; you shall hear from me;” and then walked off, wiping the blood from his mouth as he went.

On the evening of the same day, Captain Hamilton called with a challenge from Major Barclay. Everything had been arranged, and there was no chance for pacification. He asked me to furnish him with some writing materials, that he might note down a few requests, which I should witness and see carried out, in case anything should happen to him.

“There, my boy,” said he, when he had finished, “are some instructions for you, if anything should occur of a serious nature. You will excuse me for covering over what I have written with this sheet of blotting paper, while you sign your name as witness. I need not remind you that what I have written is of a delicate nature. You will please sign your name to the right, without putting the word ‘witness,’ as I have announced the fact above.”

I had been walking up and down the room while the captain was writing, in a very sad state of mind, and I did not know how much he had written, nor, of course, *what* he had written. I signed my name where he desired it.

“Now, Harrington, if you will ring that bell again, and order a taste of brandy, I shall arrange this in an envelope; and get a little sealing-wax, please.”

The envelope was closed when I produced the sealing wax. The sealing was soon accomplished, and the envelope was addressed to me, with the command that it was not to be opened, except in the case of Captain Hamilton’s death. I placed the precious document in my pocket, as the captain took a large bumper of brandy.

“We are but friends a short time,” he said, “but I have chosen you for this trust because I have such confidence in you, and because you know all the circumstances of the case. The meeting will take place early in the morning, at some distance from town. I beg you will not stir out of doors until the afternoon, or, at least until you have seen me or heard of my fate; my second will know where to find you, if I go down. And now, Harrington, my friend and relative, let us part, trusting our parting will not be forever. If I survive, we shall be lasting friends; if I fail, I know one heart that will not forget me. Give me both your hands—good-bye, good-bye!” And, entirely overcome, the captain grasped his hat, and hurriedly left my room.

I shall not attempt to describe the state of mind in which I passed that night, nor need I say what feelings were mine during the following morning. My first waking thoughts of Captain Hamilton were, that he had renewed my regard for him three times over. I looked upon him in the light of a champion in my behalf, and I could not help recall with gratefulness his different word-battles on my behalf during our acquaintance. I felt so strongly the importance of the trust he had committed to me, that I mentally resolved to consider that trust a sacred charge, and carry out every to the very letter every detail.

Well, I need hardly assert here that I looked anxiously for some intelligence from my friend. My state of alternate doubt and hope was not relieved even by noontime; then I began to think the police had interfered and arrested the whole party. When one o’clock

came and brought no news, I could endure my impatience no longer; so, after a bit of lunch, I went out for a walk, leaving word at the hotel office that I would return in half an hour.

I had proceeded but a short distance, when I met the cashier of the banking house where I kept my account. We knew each other very well, and we stopped a moment to chat. Almost the first expression he used was:

“That was a large amount you drew on us this morning.”

“Oh, yes,” said, laughing, and thinking of the twenty pounds; “but twenty more like it would not wipe me off your books.”

“Why, you are dreaming, young man! Another order for *four hundred pounds* would leave you largely in our debt.”

“Another order for four hundred pounds!” exclaimed I. “Why, what a jester you are!”

“Indeed, no; there was a single order of yours for that amount cashed this morning. What a jester *you* are!”

“Then, if there was,” said I, in a thoroughly alarmed voice, “that order was a forgery!”

“A forgery! Why—why—we must look into this. Here is a cab; let us go to the office as fast as we can.”

It was a nervous moment for me, while sitting in the private office of my banker, awaiting a view of the order that four hundred pounds had been paid on.

“There it is, Mr. Harrington,” said the cashier, “and that is your own signature, if ever you signed your name in your life.”

I had an idea that Barclay had made over the order I had given him, for collection, to some one, who had altered it to the forged amount; but that seemed impossible, and the thought was entirely dissipated when the order for the four hundred pounds was shown me. There, sure enough, was my own honest signature, and the body of the order filled in by a hand that imitated my own to perfection.

“That is my signature, surely; but was there no order for twenty pounds presented today?” I asked.

“There was none, sir; and now the question arises, if you did not write the order, how did you happen to sign it? You acknowledge your signature.”

“I acknowledge that to be my name, and written by me; but as sure as I stand here, I never signed that paper!”

In reply to the banker's questions, I then told him the story of my acquaintance with Captain Hamilton and Major Barclay. I also looked at the "trust" paper left with me by the captain. It was a sheet of blank foolscap. The whole matter then became clear to the banker, though everything seemed blank and vague to me.

Fortunately my banker took the matter in hand; and before I had time to think much, a detective was in the room getting the facts.

From my description he recognized Barclay; but the "captain" baffled him. Barclay was an old hand at the confidence game; and the opinion he held of Hamilton was, that he was an American adventurer.

"I have an idea, gentlemen," he said, "and perhaps there's luck in it. The steamer for New York sails from Liverpool tomorrow. The two rogues may be on their way now to take passage in her. The twelve o'clock train was the only one that left for Liverpool since early morning. The Liverpool chief of police shall be telegraphed to have detectives at the station to watch its passengers, and arrest any two that may answer the description.

I need extend my story no further. The detective was right. Barclay was caught in Liverpool, with all the money, except a few pounds, on his person. And Barclay told all; Hamilton, after filling out the order for my signature—using the one I gave Barclay as a guide—made it over to Barclay to present for payment, and took the early train for Liverpool, after arranging to meet "the major" there. Most probably he was in the crowd, and saw Barclay arrested. I never heard of him afterward.

Of course the duel was a sham, to occasion a purpose for obtaining my sign-manual, and Hamilton's design from the first had been to swindle me. My uncle said, on hearing the story:

"You always thought yourself a smart chap, my boy; but never think so again until more years are on your shoulders. 'Captain Hamilton of the Guards' was a much smarter man than you."

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