

The Lady of the Shroud

By

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Book I. The Will Of Roger Melton

The Reading Of The Will Of Roger Melton And All That Followed

Record made by Ernest Roger Halbard Melton, law-student of the Inner Temple, eldest son of Ernest Halbard Melton, eldest son of Ernest Melton, elder brother of the said Roger Melton and his next of kin.

I consider it at least useful--perhaps necessary--to have a complete and accurate record of all pertaining to the Will of my late grand-uncle Roger Melton.

To which end let me put down the various members of his family, and explain some of their occupations and idiosyncrasies. My father, Ernest Halbard Melton, was the only son of Ernest Melton, eldest son of Sir Geoffrey Halbard Melton of Humcroft, in the shire of Salop, a Justice of the Peace, and at one time Sheriff. My great-grandfather, Sir Geoffrey, had inherited a small estate from his father, Roger Melton. In his time, by the way, the name was spelled Milton; but my great-great-grandfather changed the spelling to the later form, as he was a practical man not given to sentiment, and feared lest he should in the public eye be confused with others belonging to the family of a Radical person called Milton, who wrote poetry and was some sort of official in the time of Cromwell, whilst we are Conservatives. The same practical spirit which originated the change in the spelling of the family name inclined him to go into business. So he became, whilst still young, a tanner and leather-dresser. He utilized for the purpose the ponds and streams, and also the oak-woods on his estate--Torraby in Suffolk. He made a fine business, and accumulated a considerable fortune, with a part of which he purchased the Shropshire estate, which he entailed, and to which I am therefore heir-apparent.

Sir Geoffrey had, in addition to my grandfather, three sons and a daughter, the latter being born twenty years after her youngest brother. These sons were: Geoffrey, who died without issue, having been killed in the Indian Mutiny at Meerut in 1857, at which he took up a sword, though a civilian, to fight for his life; Roger (to whom I shall refer presently); and John--the latter, like Geoffrey, dying unmarried. Out of Sir Geoffrey's family of five, therefore, only three have to be considered: My grandfather, who had three children, two of whom, a son and a daughter, died young, leaving only my father, Roger and Patience. Patience, who was born in 1858, married an Irishman of the name of Sellenger--which was the usual way of pronouncing the name of St. Leger, or, as they spelled it, Sent Leger--restored by later generations to the still older form. He was a reckless, dare-devil sort of fellow, then a Captain in the Lancers, a man not without the quality of bravery--he won the Victoria Cross at the Battle of Amoaful in the Ashantee Campaign. But I fear he lacked the seriousness and steadfast strenuous purpose which my father always says marks the character of our own family. He ran through nearly all of his patrimony--never a very large one; and had it not been for my grand-aunt's little fortune, his days, had he lived, must have ended in comparative poverty. Comparative, not actual;

for the Meltons, who are persons of considerable pride, would not have tolerated a poverty-stricken branch of the family. We don't think much of that lot--any of us.

Fortunately, my great-aunt Patience had only one child, and the premature decease of Captain St. Leger (as I prefer to call the name) did not allow of the possibility of her having more. She did not marry again, though my grandmother tried several times to arrange an alliance for her. She was, I am told, always a stiff, uppish person, who would not yield herself to the wisdom of her superiors. Her own child was a son, who seemed to take his character rather from his father's family than from my own. He was a wastrel and a rolling stone, always in scrapes at school, and always wanting to do ridiculous things. My father, as Head of the House and his own senior by eighteen years, tried often to admonish him; but his perversity of spirit and his truculence were such that he had to desist. Indeed, I have heard my father say that he sometimes threatened his life. A desperate character he was, and almost devoid of reverence. No one, not even my father, had any influence--good influence, of course, I mean--over him, except his mother, who was of my family; and also a woman who lived with her--a sort of governess-- aunt, he called her. The way of it was this: Captain St. Leger had a younger brother, who made an improvident marriage with a Scotch girl when they were both very young. They had nothing to live on except what the reckless Lancer gave them, for he had next to nothing himself, and she was "bare"--which is, I understand, the indelicate Scottish way of expressing lack of fortune. She was, however, I understand, of an old and somewhat good family, though broken in fortune--to use an expression which, however, could hardly be used precisely in regard to a family or a person who never had fortune to be broken in! It was so far well that the MacKelpies--that was the maiden name of Mrs. St. Leger--were reputable--so far as fighting was concerned. It would have been too humiliating to have allied to our family, even on the distaff side, a family both poor and of no account. Fighting alone does not make a family, I think. Soldiers are not everything, though they think they are. We have had in our family men who fought; but I never heard of any of them who fought because they WANTED to. Mrs. St. Leger had a sister; fortunately there were only those two children in the family, or else they would all have had to be supported by the money of my family.

Mr. St. Leger, who was only a subaltern, was killed at Maiwand; and his wife was left a beggar. Fortunately, however, she died--her sister spread a story that it was from the shock and grief--before the child which she expected was born. This all happened when my cousin--or, rather, my father's cousin, my first-cousin-once-removed, to be accurate--was still a very small child. His mother then sent for Miss MacKelpie, her brother-in-law's sister-in-law, to come and live with her, which she did--beggars can't be choosers; and she helped to bring up young St. Leger.

I remember once my father giving me a sovereign for making a witty remark about her. I was quite a boy then, not more than thirteen; but our family were always clever from the very beginning of life, and father was telling me about the St. Leger family. My family hadn't, of course, seen anything of them since Captain St. Leger died--the circle to which we belong don't care for poor relations-- and was explaining where Miss MacKelpie

came in. She must have been a sort of nursery governess, for Mrs. St. Leger once told him that she helped her to educate the child.

"Then, father," I said, "if she helped to educate the child she ought to have been called Miss MacSkelpie!"

When my first-cousin-once-removed, Rupert, was twelve years old, his mother died, and he was in the dolefuls about it for more than a year. Miss MacKelpie kept on living with him all the same. Catch her quitting! That sort don't go into the poor-house when they can keep out! My father, being Head of the Family, was, of course, one of the trustees, and his uncle Roger, brother of the testator, another. The third was General MacKelpie, a poverty-stricken Scotch laird who had a lot of valueless land at Croom, in Ross-shire. I remember father gave me a new ten-pound note when I interrupted him whilst he was telling me of the incident of young St. Leger's improvidence by remarking that he was in error as to the land. From what I had heard of MacKelpie's estate, it was productive of one thing; when he asked me "What?" I answered "Mortgages!" Father, I knew, had bought, not long before, a lot of them at what a college friend of mine from Chicago used to call "cut-throat" price. When I remonstrated with my father for buying them at all, and so injuring the family estate which I was to inherit, he gave me an answer, the astuteness of which I have never forgotten.

"I did it so that I might keep my hand on the bold General, in case he should ever prove troublesome. And if the worst should ever come to the worst, Croom is a good country for grouse and stags!" My father can see as far as most men!

When my cousin--I shall call him cousin henceforth in this record, lest it might seem to any unkind person who might hereafter read it that I wished to taunt Rupert St. Leger with his somewhat obscure position, in reiterating his real distance in kinship with my family--when my cousin, Rupert St. Leger, wished to commit a certain idiotic act of financial folly, he approached my father on the subject, arriving at our estate, Humcroft, at an inconvenient time, without permission, not having had even the decent courtesy to say he was coming. I was then a little chap of six years old, but I could not help noticing his mean appearance. He was all dusty and dishevelled. When my father saw him--I came into the study with him--he said in a horrified voice:

"Good God!" He was further shocked when the boy brusquely acknowledged, in reply to my father's greeting, that he had travelled third class. Of course, none of my family ever go anything but first class; even the servants go second. My father was really angry when he said he had walked up from the station.

"A nice spectacle for my tenants and my tradesmen! To see my--my--a kinsman of my house, howsoever remote, trudging like a tramp on the road to my estate! Why, my avenue is two miles and a perch! No wonder you are filthy and insolent!" Rupert--really, I cannot call him cousin here--was exceedingly impertinent to my father.

"I walked, sir, because I had no money; but I assure you I did not mean to be insolent. I simply came here because I wished to ask your advice and assistance, not because you are an important person, and have a long avenue--as I know to my cost--but simply because you are one of my trustees."

"YOUR trustees, sirrah!" said my father, interrupting him. "Your trustees?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, quite quietly. "I meant the trustees of my dear mother's will."

"And what, may I ask you," said father, "do you want in the way of advice from one of the trustees of your dear mother's will?" Rupert got very red, and was going to say something rude--I knew it from his look--but he stopped, and said in the same gentle way:

"I want your advice, sir, as to the best way of doing something which I wish to do, and, as I am under age, cannot do myself. It must be done through the trustees of my mother's will."

"And the assistance for which you wish?" said father, putting his hand in his pocket. I know what that action means when I am talking to him.

"The assistance I want," said Rupert, getting redder than ever, "is from my--the trustee also. To carry out what I want to do."

"And what may that be?" asked my father. "I would like, sir, to make over to my Aunt Janet--" My father interrupted him by asking--he had evidently remembered my jest:

"Miss MacSkelpie?" Rupert got still redder, and I turned away; I didn't quite wish that he should see me laughing. He went on quietly:

"MACKELPIE, sir! Miss Janet MacKelpie, my aunt, who has always been so kind to me, and whom my mother loved--I want to have made over to her the money which my dear mother left to me." Father doubtless wished to have the matter take a less serious turn, for Rupert's eyes were all shiny with tears which had not fallen; so after a little pause he said, with indignation, which I knew was simulated:

"Have you forgotten your mother so soon, Rupert, that you wish to give away the very last gift which she bestowed on you?" Rupert was sitting, but he jumped up and stood opposite my father with his fist clenched. He was quite pale now, and his eyes looked so fierce that I thought he would do my father an injury. He spoke in a voice which did not seem like his own, it was so strong and deep.

"Sir!" he roared out. I suppose, if I was a writer, which, thank God, I am not--I have no need to follow a menial occupation--I would call it "thundered." "Thundered" is a longer word than "roared," and would, of course, help to gain the penny which a writer gets for a

line. Father got pale too, and stood quite still. Rupert looked at him steadily for quite half a minute--it seemed longer at the time-- and suddenly smiled and said, as he sat down again:

"Sorry. But, of course, you don't understand such things." Then he went on talking before father had time to say a word.

"Let us get back to business. As you do not seem to follow me, let me explain that it is BECAUSE I do not forget that I wish to do this. I remember my dear mother's wish to make Aunt Janet happy, and would like to do as she did."

"AUNT Janet?" said father, very properly sneering at his ignorance. "She is not your aunt. Why, even her sister, who was married to your uncle, was only your aunt by courtesy." I could not help feeling that Rupert meant to be rude to my father, though his words were quite polite. If I had been as much bigger than him as he was than me, I should have flown at him; but he was a very big boy for his age. I am myself rather thin. Mother says thinness is an "appanage of birth."

"My Aunt Janet, sir, is an aunt by love. Courtesy is a small word to use in connection with such devotion as she has given to us. But I needn't trouble you with such things, sir. I take it that my relations on the side of my own house do not affect you. I am a Sent Leger!" Father looked quite taken aback. He sat quite still before he spoke.

"Well, Mr. St. Leger, I shall think over the matter for a while, and shall presently let you know my decision. In the meantime, would you like something to eat? I take it that as you must have started very early, you have not had any breakfast?" Rupert smiled quite genially:

"That is true, sir. I haven't broken bread since dinner last night, and I am ravenously hungry." Father rang the bell, and told the footman who answered it to send the housekeeper. When she came, father said to her:

"Mrs. Martindale, take this boy to your room and give him some breakfast." Rupert stood very still for some seconds. His face had got red again after his paleness. Then he bowed to my father, and followed Mrs. Martindale, who had moved to the door.

Nearly an hour afterwards my father sent a servant to tell him to come to the study. My mother was there, too, and I had gone back with her. The man came back and said:

"Mrs. Martindale, sir, wishes to know, with her respectful service, if she may have a word with you." Before father could reply mother told him to bring her. The housekeeper could not have been far off-- that kind are generally near a keyhole--for she came at once. When she came in, she stood at the door curtseying and looking pale. Father said:

"Well?"

"I thought, sir and ma'am, that I had better come and tell you about Master Sent Leger. I would have come at once, but I feared to disturb you."

"Well?" Father had a stern way with servants. When I'm head of the family I'll tread them under my feet. That's the way to get real devotion from servants!

"If you please, sir, I took the young gentleman into my room and ordered a nice breakfast for him, for I could see he was half famished--a growing boy like him, and so tall! Presently it came along. It was a good breakfast, too! The very smell of it made even me hungry. There were eggs and frizzled ham, and grilled kidneys, and coffee, and buttered toast, and bloater-paste--"

"That will do as to the menu," said mother. "Go on!"

"When it was all ready, and the maid had gone, I put a chair to the table and said, 'Now, sir, your breakfast is ready!' He stood up and said, 'Thank you, madam; you are very kind!' and he bowed to me quite nicely, just as if I was a lady, ma'am!"

"Go on," said mother.

"Then, sir, he held out his hand and said, 'Good-bye, and thank you,' and he took up his cap.

"But aren't you going to have any breakfast, sir?" I says.

"No, thank you, madam,' he said; 'I couldn't eat here . . . in this house, I mean!' Well, ma'am, he looked so lonely that I felt my heart melting, and I ventured to ask him if there was any mortal thing I could do for him. 'Do tell me, dear,' I ventured to say. 'I am an old woman, and you, sir, are only a boy, though it's a fine man you will be--like your dear, splendid father, which I remember so well, and gentle like your poor dear mother.'

"You're a dear!' he says; and with that I took up his hand and kissed it, for I remember his poor dear mother so well, that was dead only a year. Well, with that he turned his head away, and when I took him by the shoulders and turned him round--he is only a young boy, ma'am, for all he is so big--I saw that the tears were rolling down his cheeks. With that I laid his head on my breast--I've had children of my own, ma'am, as you know, though they're all gone. He came willing enough, and sobbed for a little bit. Then he straightened himself up, and I stood respectfully beside him.

"Tell Mr. Melton,' he said, 'that I shall not trouble him about the trustee business.'

"But won't you tell him yourself, sir, when you see him?" I says.

"I shall not see him again,' he says; 'I am going back now!'

"Well, ma'am, I knew he'd had no breakfast, though he was hungry, and that he would walk as he come, so I ventured to say: 'If you won't take it a liberty, sir, may I do anything to make your going easier? Have you sufficient money, sir? If not, may I give, or lend, you some? I shall be very proud if you will allow me to.'

"'Yes,' he says quite hearty. 'If you will, you might lend me a shilling, as I have no money. I shall not forget it.' He said, as he took the coin: 'I shall return the amount, though I never can the kindness. I shall keep the coin.' He took the shilling, sir--he wouldn't take any more--and then he said good-bye. At the door he turned and walked back to me, and put his arms round me like a real boy does, and gave me a hug, and says he:

"'Thank you a thousand times, Mrs. Martindale, for your goodness to me, for your sympathy, and for the way you have spoken of my father and mother. You have seen me cry, Mrs. Martindale,' he said; 'I don't often cry: the last time was when I came back to the lonely house after my poor dear was laid to rest. But you nor any other shall ever see a tear of mine again.' And with that he straightened out his big back and held up his fine proud head, and walked out. I saw him from the window striding down the avenue. My! but he is a proud boy, sir--an honour to your family, sir, say I respectfully. And there, the proud child has gone away hungry, and he won't, I know, ever use that shilling to buy food!"

Father was not going to have that, you know, so he said to her:

"He does not belong to my family, I would have you to know. True, he is allied to us through the female side; but we do not count him or his in my family." He turned away and began to read a book. It was a decided snub to her.

But mother had a word to say before Mrs. Martindale was done with. Mother has a pride of her own, and doesn't brook insolence from inferiors; and the housekeeper's conduct seemed to be rather presuming. Mother, of course, isn't quite our class, though her folk are quite worthy and enormously rich. She is one of the Dalmallingtons, the salt people, one of whom got a peerage when the Conservatives went out. She said to the housekeeper:

"I think, Mrs. Martindale, that I shall not require your services after this day month! And as I don't keep servants in my employment when I dismiss them, here is your month's wages due on the 25th of this month, and another month in lieu of notice. Sign this receipt." She was writing a receipt as she spoke. The other signed it without a word, and handed it to her. She seemed quite flabbergasted. Mother got up and sailed--that is the way that mother moves when she is in a wax--out of the room.

Lest I should forget it, let me say here that the dismissed housekeeper was engaged the very next day by the Countess of Salop. I may say in explanation that the Earl of Salop, K.G., who is Lord- Lieutenant of the County, is jealous of father's position and his

growing influence. Father is going to contest the next election on the Conservative side, and is sure to be made a Baronet before long.

Letter from Major-General Sir Colin Alexander MacKelpie, V.C., K.C.B., of Croom, Ross, N.B., to Rupert Sent Leger, Esq., 14, Newland Park, Dulwich, London, S.E. July 4, 1892.

MY DEAR GODSON,

I am truly sorry I am unable to agree with your request that I should acquiesce in your desire to transfer to Miss Janet MacKelpie the property bequeathed to you by your mother, of which property I am a trustee. Let me say at once that, had it been possible to me to do so, I should have held it a privilege to further such a wish--not because the beneficiare whom you would create is a near kinswoman of my own. That, in truth, is my real difficulty. I have undertaken a trust made by an honourable lady on behalf of her only son--son of a man of stainless honour, and a dear friend of my own, and whose son has a rich heritage of honour from both parents, and who will, I am sure, like to look back on his whole life as worthy of his parents, and of those whom his parents trusted. You will see, I am sure, that whatsoever I might grant regarding anyone else, my hands are tied in this matter.

And now let me say, my dear boy, that your letter has given me the most intense pleasure. It is an unspeakable delight to me to find in the son of your father--a man whom I loved, and a boy whom I love-- the same generosity of spirit which endeared your father to all his comrades, old as well as young. Come what may, I shall always be proud of you; and if the sword of an old soldier--it is all I have-- can ever serve you in any way, it and its master's life are, and shall be, whilst life remains to him, yours.

It grieves me to think that Janet cannot, through my act, be given that ease and tranquillity of spirit which come from competence. But, my dear Rupert, you will be of full age in seven years more. Then, if you are in the same mind--and I am sure you will not change--you, being your own master, can do freely as you will. In the meantime, to secure, so far as I can, my dear Janet against any malign stroke of fortune, I have given orders to my factor to remit semi-annually to Janet one full half of such income as may be derived in any form from my estate of Croom. It is, I am sorry to say, heavily mortgaged; but of such as is--or may be, free from such charge as the mortgage entails--something at least will, I trust, remain to her. And, my dear boy, I can frankly say that it is to me a real pleasure that you and I can be linked in one more bond in this association of purpose. I have always held you in my heart as though you were my own son. Let me tell you now that you have acted as I should have liked a son of my own, had I been blessed with one, to have acted. God bless you, my dear.

Yours ever,
COLIN ALEX. MACKELPIE.

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