

# HONOUR FIRST

BY HERBERT STRANG



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A Tale of the 'Forty-five

BY

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## CHAPTER THE FIRST

### MR. CAPPLETHWAITE IS EXPECTED

Maurice Nugent awoke to sunshine on his sixteenth birthday,—and sunshine on the fells in March was rare enough to make the morning notable. But as he turned over on his bed, stretched himself, and put his feet to the floor, his gloomy face did not reflect the brightness of the day, nor had his movements the alacrity proper to a celebration. He dragged himself to the window, facing south, threw open the casement, and resting his elbows on the sill, gazed into the distance, where the sunbeams gleamed upon water. For some minutes he leant thus, moody, motionless; then abruptly he drew himself up, sighed, cracked his fingers, and turning back into the room, began the slow process of dressing.

One of his shoelaces snapped.

'Hang old Capplethwaite!' he said explosively, throwing the broken end across the floor.

He sought a new lace, and threaded the eyes with a roughness that threatened another break. Every now and then his lips murmured. Had he uttered his thoughts aloud they would have composed a long tirade against 'old Capplethwaite'. 'Why did my father make him my guardian? What has he ever done for me? Paid my school fees—with my father's money. Paid John Seddon for my keep—with my father's money. What else? Nothing: the old skinflint. Keeps my father's money snug, he says, till my coming of age. I wish I were twenty-one to-day instead of sixteen. He wouldn't keep me here another hour.'

A woman's voice called him from below.

'Coming, coming,' he replied.

Hurrying his toilet, he presently descended the stairs to the large, low

living-room. Three persons were already seated at the table beneath the oak-beamed ceiling. They turned smiling faces towards him as he entered.

'Good morrow, lad, and many happy returns o' th' day,' said the broad-faced, broad-shouldered man who held the head of the table, knife and fork in hand. 'It's a grand morning. Mother wouldn't wake you, seeing as it was your birthday.'

The others added their greetings.

'Thank you, John; thank you, Nanette; thank you, Caleb,' said Maurice as he passed to his place. His face was still gloomy. The handsome dark woman at the lower end of the table pressed his hand when he sat beside her.

'Courage, mon chéri,' she murmured.

He threw her a grateful glance. The farmer pushed towards him a platter heaped with steaming meat and vegetables.

'Not so much,' said Maurice. 'I've no appetite.'

'Bless the lad, what ails you?' said the farmer. 'Schooldays cannot last for ever. Every boy must begin to be a man. Come, take a good pull at your pot of ale, and then fall to. It'll brace you up for Mr. Capplethwaite's coming.'

'I wish he weren't coming,' said Maurice gloomily. 'How would you like to spend years of your life in a stuffy office?'

John Seddon laughed.

'Me in an office, with no schooling to my name! Can you see a pen in this 'ere fist? It fair makes me laugh. I'd fashion to drive a plough, but not a pen. But yon Mr. Gilpin's a sound man, they say, and you with your school learning will soon master the law, and I reckon I'll live to see you rich, and happen mayor of Kendal.'

'I don't want to be rich, or mayor of Kendal,' said Maurice, with a grimace. 'Why can't Mr. Capplethwaite let me go to sea?'

'Eh, now! That's what comes of gluing your nose to those books of yours,' said the farmer, shaking his head, and speaking with great deliberateness.

'Books give you notions. Thank God I never had notions. I like the dry land, solid under my feet. A sheep, not a ship, for me. I'd fain have made a farmer of you, but I reckon Mr. Capplethwaite knows best. He's your guardian, and with the money your poor father left I doubt not he'll set you up gradely an' all when you've learnt what Mr. Gilpin can teach you. How't be, lad, eat away, and when you've had your fill we'll go down th' dale, and you can try a fall with Caleb; he's itching to get a grip of you.'

His son grinned. Caleb's chief delight was wrestling. Many a time, in the holidays, when Maurice came home from the grammar-school at Heversham across the bay, the two lads contended in friendly bouts, so evenly matched that neither could claim an absolute superiority. Caleb indeed, would have felt rather sorry if victory had always inclined to him; it would have seemed treason to the relationship that subsisted between him and his playfellow. For generations the Seddons had been dependents and devoted adherents of the Nugent family, and Caleb cherished what may be called a hereditary admiration for the present owner of that name.

After breakfast they waited awhile, until John Seddon had finished his morning pipe; then they went out of the grey old farmhouse to a little level plot of green sward below. Each wore only a shirt, pants, and stockings. The farmer accompanied them as umpire.

'Now, lads, off with your shirts,' he said. 'Happen it's the last time ye'll wrestle for many a long day.'

They faced each other. A stranger would have been puzzled to forecast the outcome of the contest. Maurice was tall and slim and sinewy; his shoulders were well formed and light, but training had hardened and developed the muscles of his upper arms. Caleb, though a year older, stood three or four inches shorter. His shoulders and arms were thick and a little clumsy, his legs short and massive and slightly bowed. In sheer muscular strength he appeared the better of the two.

The farmer gave the word. The two lads approached each other, chest to chest, each laid his chin on his opponent's shoulder, and throwing his left arm above the other's right, grasped him round the body, the hands clasped behind. Then the play began. Caleb at once tried to make use of his superior

weight and strength. He turned his left side to Maurice, clicked his leg in the inside below the calf, and by means of the leverage thus obtained, sought to force him backward. But Maurice knew the 'hank' as well as Caleb. He leant forward and tightened his hold, with the result that after a few seconds' straining the two fell to the ground together.

'A dog fall,' cried the farmer. 'You're side by side. You must to it again.'

They rose smiling, and stood apart to recover their breath. Then they closed again. The next bout was a long one. Each tried all the 'chips' known to him,—the back-heel, the clicks, the outside stroke; but long practice had accustomed them to each other's tricks, and neither could give the fall that would end the match. The farmer encouraged them both impartially; watching them keenly, he had made up his mind that Caleb's greater strength would win in the end unless Maurice could counter it with superior quickness.

Maurice had come to the same conclusion, and at last ventured upon a chip that was attended with considerable risk if it failed. Suddenly slackening his hold, he turned quickly round, drove his back into Caleb's stomach, lifted him off the ground, and tried to throw him over his head. Caleb was taken by surprise. Instead of tightening his grip, and making use of his commanding position on Maurice's back, he for a second allowed his hold to relax. It was enough. Next moment he turned a somersault over Maurice's shoulder, and found himself sprawling on the grass.

'Well done, lad,' cried the farmer, heartily. 'Caleb, my son, your muscles are all right, but your mind works a bit slow. It were a good match, and worth a pot of ale. Run into th' house and rub yourselves dry; bring the mugs here, and we'll drink Maurice's health.'

He watched them fondly as they ran off side by side. They had grown up like brothers under his roof, and though he had known that some day the parting must come, he had not realized until this moment what a gap it would leave in his family life. His thoughts ran back to the day, fourteen years before, when he had brought his French wife, their boy Caleb, and Maurice Nugent from Paris to the little grey farm on the fells: to the day, still more remote, when, himself a mere youth, he had fled with his master, Paul

Nugent, to the city on the Seine. The Nugents had always been staunch supporters of the house of Stuart; they had shed their blood and spent their treasure in the service of their kings; and as the Nugents had served the Stuarts, so the Seddons had served the Nugents. When, in the first year of the first George, the son of James II made a bid for his father's throne, Paul Nugent, the young Westmorland squire, flung himself heart and soul into the royal cause, and his groom, John Seddon, rode out with him as a matter of course. At the failure of the ill-starred rising, Nugent, like many a wealthier man, was proscribed; his estate was sequestered; and he fled overseas, taking with him such family treasures as he was able to save, and his faithful servant.

In Paris the two men married mistress and maid; in Paris they remained when the Stuart king was driven to Avignon and to Rome. Nugent obtained a lucrative appointment in the household of King Louis; Seddon continued in his service. A year after Caleb was born, Nugent's young wife died in giving birth to a son, named Maurice after King Charles's nephew. Two years later Nugent himself died, and with his last breath he commended his infant son to the care of John Seddon and his wife, bidding them take the boy back to England and confide him to the guardianship of Reuben Capplethwaite, a distant relative. Seddon carried out his master's injunctions. The boy's guardian was an old man, a widower, and an invalid, living with an only son, also named Reuben, on a small estate near the Nugent property a few miles west of Kendal. It was arranged that Seddon, who had saved a little money, should rent a small farm and bring Maurice up with his own son until he attained his sixteenth year. Old Capplethwaite dying shortly afterwards, the younger man assumed the guardianship, and it never occurred to Seddon to question his right to do so. The arrangement had subsisted for fourteen years. Capplethwaite had paid Seddon, not too generously, for the boy's keep, sent Maurice to the old grammar-school at Heversham, and let it be understood that he had invested the money left by Paul Nugent in trust for the boy until he came to man's estate. Two days before Maurice's sixteenth birthday he had sent word that he would call at the farm on his return from a sheep auction at Cartmel, and take the lad to Kendal, there to apprentice him to an attorney.

Maurice, ever since he could remember, had longed to go to sea. The

waters of Morecambe Bay, dimly visible from the farm windows, fascinated his childhood; seen at closer quarters from his school, they drew him with an irresistible attraction; and he lost no opportunity of slipping away to the little port of Milnthorpe, and watching the white-sailed coasting vessels come and go. Lighting upon the volumes of Hakluyt's Voyages in his master's library, he spent many a leisure hour in conning the records of Drake and Frobisher, Raleigh and John Smith, and other heroes of their adventurous age, and he burned with a feverish desire to sail over unknown seas, into far parts of the earth, and behold marvels like those of which he had read. His guardian's intention of making a lawyer of him turned him cold. He had dreaded the dawn of his sixteenth birthday, and felt a bitter resentment at the thought of spending long years shut up in a lawyer's office. John Seddon and his wife sympathized with him, because they loved him; but the farmer never disguised his landsman's dislike of the sea-faring life, and the dark-eyed Frenchwoman never thought of its perils without a shudder.

Nanette joined her husband while he was still awaiting the return of the boys.

'Maurice is sick in the heart, my John,' she said in her pretty accent. 'Must it be?'

'Why, my dear, you would not have him go to sea after all?' said the farmer.

'Oh, no, no: I hate the sea,' she replied vehemently. 'But I do not like him so sad, and I do not like Mr. Capplethwaite; no, I do not like him. He is—how you say?—*avare*, mean. He is big—ah, big!' She spread out her arms. 'But he has a little heart—ah! so little.'

'He is careful, that's true; so much the better for the lad when he grows to be a man. Money makes money, my lass; and there'll be a plump nest-egg for the lad in five years' time. And look: there's Mr. Capplethwaite himself riding athwart the dale. He'll be here in ten minutes. See that the lad puts on his best coat. He's going into Kendal, you know.'

His wife hastened into the house.

'Queer fancies a woman has,' thought Seddon, rubbing his chin. 'A big



man and a little heart! Happen she's right.'

## CHAPTER THE SECOND

### ELIJAH FOLKARD IS SURPRISED

Mr. Reuben Capplethwaite rode at walking pace up the winding track that led from the dale road to the farmhouse. John Seddon and his wife stood at the door.

'Ah, John, a grand morning for the time of year,' said the horseman. He took off his square hat with an elaborate flourish—a salutation he would not have given to every farmer's wife. 'Bonjour, Madame,' he said. He liked to air his little French. 'Where is my lad?'

'Getting into his best coat, sir,' replied the farmer.

'Very right and proper. He will not keep me waiting, I trust. My appointment is for twelve o'clock, and punctuality is a virtue.'

'I will bring him,' said Mrs. Seddon, withdrawing into the house.

'And I'll fetch a pot of ale, sir,' added John. 'It'll refresh you after your ride.'

'I'll not say no; you have a famous brew.'

Left alone, he sat complacently back in the saddle, humming a merry tune. He had the air of a man well satisfied with himself. His round, rubicund, shaven face, with its high-arched nose and prominent blue eyes, had won him in Kendal market the sobriquet of 'handsome Reub'. The dome of his head was quite bald, but he cherished with particular care the curly brown locks below. His stout frame seemed too heavy for the pony he bestrode, but she was a sturdy mare, and had carried him for many a year about the countryside.

Reuben Capplethwaite was something of an enigma to the dalesmen and the townsfolk of Kendal. He had owned a small estate, but had long since

parted with it. He bought land and sold it again; he owned several houses in Kendal, and a 'yard' there was called by his name; he was a well-known figure at the sheep markets for miles around; it was rumoured that he held shares in mines somewhere in the north. In common talk he was a 'warm' man; but he kept no style, living solitary with an ancient housekeeper in a small house in the town. His manner was genial; he would stop in the street and crack a joke with any man; but though his fellow-townsmen paid him outward deference, they did not seek his company. He kept his purse-strings tightly drawn, and no one would have thought of approaching him for a contribution to any charitable object.

He had emptied his pot of ale when Maurice, looking rather pale, came to the door.

'Here you are, my lad,' he called in his big voice. 'How does it feel to be sixteen? My faith, what would I not give to be sixteen again! "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth." All the world's before you. Your future is in your own hands, to make or mar, and with the start I'll give you I don't doubt you'll be a credit to us all. Come now, we'll set off, and I'll give you a few useful hints on the way. Good morning, John; that's prime ale of yours; adieu, Madame, or shall I say au revoir? You look younger than ever.'

Mrs. Seddon's eyes flashed; she made no answer, but turned and murmured a word in Maurice's ear. He gave her a wan smile, gripped her hand, then her husband's, and waving towards Caleb, who had held himself in the background, he set off down the hill beside Mr. Capplethwaite's pony.

No word was exchanged between him and his guardian until they reached the road below. Then Mr. Capplethwaite spoke.

'Put your best foot foremost. We have six miles to go, and I should be sorry to keep Mr. Gilpin waiting. You are lucky, my lad, in coming under such excellent hands. Gilpin is a sound lawyer, and being under some obligation to me, he will in due time give you your articles, if you are diligent. Most people have to pay a good round sum for those same articles, let me tell you.'

'Why shouldn't I pay for mine, sir?' asked Maurice.

'Eh? Pay for yours? Bless my life, where's the money to come from? The little your father left has been drained away by your schooling, my lad, and John Seddon's charges. Not quite, I admit; I know my duty. I must keep something for the years to come. But bear in mind that you must depend mainly on your own exertions. You have a chance that many a young fellow might envy, and I look to you to justify my recommendation to Mr. Gilpin, and make yourself an ornament in the profession I have chosen for you.'

'I'd rather choose for myself, sir,' said Maurice. 'It's very good of you, but I don't think I'm cut out for——'

'Dear me, how time flies?' Mr. Capplethwaite interrupted, drawing a huge watch from his fob. 'We must not dawdle like this. Keep up with me.'

He dug his heels into his pony's flanks; the animal broke into a trot. Maurice could but run alongside, sometimes dropping behind when the road narrowed. Further conversation was impossible. By the time that a rise in the road compelled the horseman to draw rein, Maurice was too much out of breath to continue his plea. Even when, after a long spell of walking, he had mustered both breath and courage, and was about to tell of his desire to go to sea, Mr. Capplethwaite again kicked the pony into a trot, and kept it up, though he was red and sweating from his exertion.

The road wound between the green hills and crossed one or two brawling becks. Presently, as the travellers came within sight of Scar Foot, some two miles out of Kendal, they saw an odd figure emerge from a bridle track a little ahead of them. It was a short, stocky man, wearing a glazed flat hat, a loose guernsey, and long sea-boots; perched insecurely upon a shaggy pony, he was bumping up and down in the saddle with every movement of his mount, his elbows and toes stuck out in the manner of a seaman ashore. As he came into the road he caught sight of Mr. Capplethwaite, tugged the pony to a standstill, and roared in a deep rough voice:

'Blast my binnacle! 'Tis the very man!'

He had drawn his pony across the road. Mr. Capplethwaite approached him at a walk, wreathing his face into what seemed to Maurice a rather artificial smile.

'Ah, captain, how d'ye do?' he said genially. 'A grand morning for a ride. But I reckon you'd feel more at home with sea-horses than hill ponies, eh? Ha! ha!'

There was no answering smile on the seaman's swarthy, bearded face. His looks were black. He spat upon the ground, glancing darkly at Maurice, whose amusement at the man's quaint horsemanship was now merged in curiosity.

'Look 'ee here, master, I want a word or two with you—ay, and maybe three or four, and what's more, I'm going to have 'em.'

'Certainly, certainly, but don't bellow, my good captain,' said Mr. Capplethwaite. 'Maurice, my lad, walk on; I'll catch you up very shortly.'

Maurice walked slowly up the rising road, not sorry for the opportunity of getting his breath and cooling himself. The voices of the two men in altercation followed him, but he could make nothing of the confused clamour, and he withstood the temptation to turn until he had gained the top of the ascent. Then, the sounds having ceased, he halted and looked back to see whether Mr. Capplethwaite was riding on. What he saw was no less interesting than surprising. The seaman pitched himself from his saddle, sprang at Mr. Capplethwaite, gripped him round the middle, and hauled him by main force from his pony's back. Next moment the two burly frames were rolling together on the road.

No boy could have refrained from smiling at so grotesque an exhibition. But after a momentary amusement Maurice awoke to the remembrance that the man who was being assaulted was his guardian. That he did not like him was no excuse for withholding help, and he sprinted down the hill. By the time he reached the combatants both had risen to their feet, and the seaman was squaring up to Mr. Capplethwaite, calling on him to fight, and pouring out a torrent of abusive epithets.

Mr. Capplethwaite's ruddy cheeks had turned a sickly hue. The polish of his bald head was dulled with grime and scratches. He backed, protesting, holding up his arms defensively.

'Put up your fists, you onion-eyed lubber!' cried the seaman, pursuing

him. 'Put 'em up, I say, before I smash in your figure-head. What, you han't got so much spunk as a scuppered rat! Then here's for ye, you white-livered skunk.'

He drove his great fist full at the bony arch of Mr. Capplethwaite's nose, and sent him staggering back, following him up with the evident intention of repeating the blow. But at this moment Maurice threw himself between the two, and stood with clenched fists in the seaman's path.

'Ho! What's this!' said the man, surprised. He looked Maurice up and down. 'Out of the fairway, blast ye!' he roared. Maurice stood his ground. 'You won't, won't ye? You'll set yourself agen Elijah Folkard? Avast there!'

He hurled himself forward, lowering his big head like a butting goat.

Now Maurice had borne his part in many a merry mill at Heversham Grammar School. In that little commonwealth no one could hold his footing without some skill in sparring. He had acquitted himself with credit in these petty duels; indeed, there were some who would willingly have backed him against Miles Winthrop, the cock of the school. But Winthrop and he were such good friends that all attempts to embroil them in the cause of sport had come to nothing, and they had never met in the ring. His little battles and his friendly bouts with Caleb had hardened his muscles and quickened his eye, and he met the irate seaman's onslaught with only a passing tremor.

He took the opening blow on his left arm, and countered with his right.

'So ho, my cockerel!' cried the seaman, grinning. 'Are ye moulting your feathers?' And he shot out his right fist with force enough to fell an ox. But Maurice skipped adroitly back, and got home a blow on the man's thick neck. For a while they dodged and circled, and Maurice discovered that his opponent, though possessed of any amount of strength and pluck, had little or no science. If his reach had been a trifle greater he would probably have prevailed in the first exchanges by the sheer weight and drive of his onslaught. But his powerful arms were short; Maurice, quicker on his feet and nimbler in dodging, managed to parry the hurricane of blows showered on him, content for some few seconds to remain on the defensive.

It was not long before the seaman realized that most of his energy was

wasted on thin air, and a good deal of his breath in clamant oaths. Surprise at this discovery caused him to pause for a moment, opening his guard. Maurice was quick to mark his opportunity. While the seaman still hesitated, he gathered all his strength for a smashing upper-cut. He landed his knuckles full on his opponent's jaw. The seaman spun round, toppled, and next moment was sitting on the road, looking up with a comical expression of innocent amazement.

He was not long upon the ground. Scrambling to his feet, he rubbed his jaw, and gazed at Maurice, who stood awaiting a renewal of the attack. But it did not come. The seaman stood silent, hands on hips; the look of surprise gradually faded from his face; his lips twitched, his eyes blinked; presently he opened his mouth and let out a great roar of laughter.

'Blast my binnacle!' he cried. 'To think that Elijah Folkard ha' been downed by a bit of a boy!'

He laughed again.

'Give us your flipper, lad,' he said heartily. 'You be a rare young pug for your years. Dang me if I bain't right well punished for going at ye like a blind dumbledore. And I dunno how ye did it! There's no bad blood atwixt us, eh?'

'Not a drop,' said Maurice, accepting the offered hand, and wincing as his bruised knuckles were squeezed in the mighty fist. 'You gave me an opening, you know.'

'That's a fact,' said the seaman, with conviction. Suddenly he appeared to remember Mr. Capplethwaite, who had stood inactive during the fight, and was now in the saddle again, gingerly rubbing his swollen nose.

'Ah, you white-livered son of a scab,' cried Folkard. 'That'll keep ye out of market for a week. This young sprig ha' saved ye from worse, but only for a time, I warn ye. If I run across your course when there's no consort standing by, I'll give ye what ye deserve, you fat-chapped, whey-blooded, blowed-out bladder of a miser, you!'

Turning his back, he caught his pony, which had been placidly browsing on the grassy roadside, scrambled on to the saddle, and set off at a bumping