A FAMILY AFFAIR,

BY HUGH CONWAY

Author of "Called Back" and "Dark Days."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HELPING HAND.

To make up one's mind; to vow to find a young woman who has disappeared without leaving a trace is one thing—to find her is another. The world is a place of considerable size, and chance meetings are not so common as the confiding novel reader is asked to believe. Such was at least the experience of two men, who, from different motives, were equally anxious to find the fugitive. The first Maurice Hervey, the second Frank Carruthers.

Hervey, who, having paid a second visit to Oakbury, had in some way managed to learn that Beatrice, the boy and the nurse had gone to London, made a hasty sally to Blacktown and returned to the capital. The more he studied the situation, the more apparent it became that, to use his own words, he was in a cleft stick. So long as Beatrice could conceal her whereabouts from him, so long was he utterly helpless. He could, of course, compass a certain amount of revenge but the cost would be too terrific. However sweet a thing may be, it may be bought too dearly. He could walk boldly up to Sir Maingay Clauson and proclaim himself his son-in-law. He could go to those Talberts and show them that he married their niece when she was little more than a school-girl. But what good would this do? His bolt would be shot, and his quiver held no other. It might bring down Beatrice but not her money. He would have to deal with men of the world instead of a woman over whom he held the terror of exposure. He had one article to sell, silence. There was one customer for it, his wife. With her he could trade to advantage, but the moment he broke luck for another market his commodity became all but valueless.

Again, there was that cursed clause in old Talbert's will. Hervey could easily prove that Beatrice was his wife, but in doing so he also proved that she had married, when under age, without her trustees' consent, and the said trustees could do almost exactly as they liked with her fortune! Probably they would throw him two hundred a year so long as he kept out of the way. What was two hundred a year when we know that had he not insisted on bringing some one's head down to the dust, he might have had ten times the amount? Why had he not taken the money and foregone his revenge?

In fact, Beatrice's flight, although not effected for strategical reasons, was a masterpiece; a move which bound her enemy hand and foot. Savagely he looked forward to the time when circumstances would force him to take the best offer made him. Well he knew that the moment Beatrice nerved herself to reveal the truth to her friends, the moment she elected to confess her girlish folly, and face what shame and blame might be due to her, every shred of power he held would be gone. It was, therefore, imperative he should find Beatrice and reopen negotiations upon a basis more favorable to her. Reflection and the risk he now ran of losing everything made him inclined to lower his demands. He would take fifteen hundred, even a half of his wife's income, and if she wished it would enter into a regular deed of judicial separation. He would be silent so long as the money was paid or so long as it paid him better to be silent.

What if he gave out that he was dead and waited until she had married again? Then his sway would be supreme. But to gain this advantage he must be silent, it might be for years, and in the meantime must somehow make a living. Perhaps, after her former experience, she would not marry again. Any way the state of his exchequer put a veto on the waiting scheme.

He expected no unextorted help from her. He looked for no mercy. He had showed none. He had blasted her life; robbed her years of early womanhood of their sweetness; he had traded on the romance which lies in the heart of every young girl, then, for mercenary purposes, had turned and crushed it out. He had shown her, nay, had, in brutal words, told her that he had married her to raise money in order to save himself from the penalty due to his crime. He well knew what he had done, and knowing this he had not even ventured at attempting to cajole her when they measured strength at Blacktown. Had he been needed the stern set of her features—the scorn of her manner would have told him that he had no mercy to expect, that it was a duel between the two.

He must find her! As the months went on the necessity of finding her became more and more obvious. He had, after the manner of a gambler, who feels that any hour may bring the great stroke of luck, lived luxuriously. His money had by now so diminished that he saw he must shortly do one of three things, find Beatrice, earn money or starve.

The first, the most desirable course in every way, seemed impossible. He had made, both in person and vicariously, such inquiries at Sir Maingay's house as could be made without exciting comment and suspicion. He had even been down once more to Oakbury, seen the Talberts, but had learned nothing to his advantage. So course number one could not be counted upon to meet the emergency.

Course number three, if the simplest, was the most unpleasant, so he was constrained to adopt number two; at least, provisionally.

Before his disgrace Hervey had occasionally done some work for illustrated periodicals. As this branch of his late profession seemed to offer him the best chance of supplying his needs, he called upon two or three people whom he had known in former days, and who, moreover, knew what had caused his protracted absence. He simply said he was anxious to redeem the past, and begged for a helping hand. Selfish as the world is supposed to be, there are many willing to help a fallen man on to his legs. Hervey received one or two promises, which might or might not lead to remunerative work.

The months passed very dismally and drearily for the second seeker, Frank Carruthers. He knew not where to turn, where to look for Beatrice. However, he was better off than Hervey, for he had direct intelligence from her. Once a month she had written to her uncles, but her letters gave no clew that could be followed. They bore no address; they were posted in London; they mentioned no places, not even a country. She said she was living an exceedingly quiet, calm life. She longed to see dear old Oakbury again, and wondered if it would ever be her lot to do so. In each letter she regretted the necessity for the step she had taken and hoped that if ever her uncles knew her true reason for it they would forgive her. She trusted, nevertheless, that they would never learn it. The only hints at locality in any one of her letters were that she mentioned that the weather was bitterly cold, and also that she spent much time studying art; was, indeed, learning to paint in oils.

These letters Herbert, who felt sympathy for his cousin, sent on to Frank, and Frank perused them again and again, endeavoring by the light he had gained to read between the lines. And the more he read the more mystified he became. If Mrs. Rawlings' tale was true, there was something which Herbert and Horace never could, never would forgive; yet Beatrice wrote as if forgiveness was not an impossibility. Moreover, it struck Frank that her words expressed a doubt as to whether her uncles had learned the reason for her flight. When should he find her? When should he learn the whole truth?

He searched her letters in vain for his own name, for any message to him. The omission troubled him, not because he thought himself forgotten, but because it showed him that Beatrice felt there was a fate, which nothing could overcome, keeping them apart. So her letters gave him no hope.

Had he been an idle man Frank Carruthers could never have borne those months of suspense. But he was hard, very hard at work on a second book. Believe me, a man does not write his worst when his heart is sad. A deficiency of the gastric juice or a superabundance of lithic acid may ruin a man's work, but not necessarily grief. Toothache may prove fatal to inspiration, but heartache need not. So pending the appearance of his first book, which had for some reason been delayed, Frank was busy with a successor.

About that first book, a satirical, semi-political novel, which, by the by, made a great hit, Mr. Carruthers, like all new writers, was as nervous and fidgety as a young husband whose beloved wife is for the first time about to increase the population. One day it struck him that the great work would be more taking if adorned with illustrations. He mentioned his idea to the publishers, who quite agreed with him, only adding that six full-page illustrations would cost so many pounds, an expense they did not feel justified in incurring. But if Mr. Carruthers liked to bear the cost, well and good. Frank, who had money to spare, said he would see for how much he could get them done.

He called upon a friend, a Mr. Field, who knew all about such matters, and inquired where he could find [illegible] not too costly. And this friend [illegible] be one of those from whom Maurice Hervey had begged a helping hand. So it [illegible] seen that the hereinbefore-mentioned [illegible] between Carruthers and Hervey wa[illegible] all so-called chance [illegible] back to its course, [illegible] Indeed it is hard to say how [illegible] have happened otherwise.

"There's a fellow called on me a [illegible] two ago," said Mr. Field, "[illegible] down on his luck now. [illegible]"

"Can you recommend him? [illegible] name?"

"I don't know that I can recommend [illegible] but you may give him a trial. [illegible] himself Henry Morris. He's down on his luck as I said."

"Write him a line and ask him to call on me," said Carruthers, who liked to help men down on their luck. "Is he clever?"

"He's been idle so long I can't say. Look here, Carruthers, make him do the drawing on approval; and if I were you I wouldn't give any money on account."

"Send him to me and I'll talk to him." Carruthers was just leaving the room when his friend called him back.

"I say, Carruthers, I'd better tell you, then you can't say I didn't. This chap has been in quod five years for forgery. His name's Maurice Hervey. I suppose he's out now on ticket of leave. He tells me he means to run straight for the future. Now you know all about it and can please yourself."

The consequence was that Carruthers, who held the same belief as him with "the harp of divers tones," resolved to see this man, and, moreover, to treat him as if he had no knowledge of his antecedents. He was glad to help any one back to the straight path.

Carruthers, who hated the bother of catering for himself, still lived at his hotel. He had taken an office in a quiet street some little way off. Here he spent the greater part of the day, writing his new book, correcting those delightful objects, the proofs of a first book, or thinking sadly of Beatrice's and his own lot. This office was on the first floor and approached by a steepish, straight flight of uncarpeted stairs.

One morning he heard feet on the stairs; heard them stop on the little landing in front of the door which bore his name. Some one knocked, and Frank shouted "Come in." To his supreme astonishment in walked the man who had demanded Beatrice's address and so outraged old Whittaker's sense of dignity.

"What do you want?" asked Frank brusquely.

Hervey explained that Mr. Field had written to him and instructed him to call, so Carruthers knew that the man who was so anxious to find out Beatrice was a forger, felon and ticket-of-leave man. He raised his head and coldly scrutinized his visitor.

Hervey until that moment had not recognized him. He did so then, and knew that the recognition was mutual. All question of the original purpose which had brought about this meeting faded from the mind of each man. With each Beatrice was the one thought.

"Will you give the address I wanted when last we met?" asked Hervey eagerly.

"I will not," answered Carruthers shortly. He did not this time assert his inability to oblige his questioner, because he was unwilling to confess that Beatrice's present abode was a secret kept even from her own friends. He had also made up his mind that nothing should tempt him to ask this ex-convict a single question. An attempt to get at the truth through such a medium as this would be a degradation, an insult to the woman he loved.

His visitor took the blunt refusal very badly. The truth is that Mr. Hervey's temper was not improving, or rather his command of it was, from a sustained course of [illegible] and whisky and water, growing fitful and intermittent. Besides, Carruthers had a way with him which was particularly irritating to those who had the misfortune to quarrel with him. On a previous occasion Hervey had found it almost more than he could put up with. However with the exception of slapping his hand on Frank's table he controlled himself for the present.

"I must insist upon your telling me," he said; "I have to make an important business communication to Miss Clauson."

Carruthers smiled contemptuously. "Her trustees, the Messrs. Talbert, of Oakbury, manage Miss Clauson's business, I believe. Or you might go to the family solicitor, whose name I will give you."

"My business is of a private nature. I demand this address. I have a right to ask it."

Carruthers shrugged his shoulders, elevated his eyebrows in true Talbert fashion, and again smiled that irritating smile.

"My good sir," he said, "cannot you understand that I absolutely refuse to gratify you? That a gentleman is not justified in giving every one who asks it a lady's address? Go to Sir Maingay Clauson, he is the proper person to apply to. As to rights, I am certainly within my own if I ask you to leave my room. No doubt you see that the business which gave me the pleasure of this visit cannot be carried through."

Hervey scowled, hesitated and then walked out of the room. He was wise in so doing, as he might have said more than he intended; and a premature disclosure, indeed, a disclosure at all, of the truth would entirely ruin his clouded prospects. As, from lack of politeness, or flurry of discomfiture, he left the door ajar, Carruthers rose and walked across the room to close it. Just then the door opened and the two men confronted each other on the threshold.

"If you write to Miss Clauson will you give her a message from me?" asked Hervey with forced civility.

"That depends exactly upon what the message may be."

"Will you tell her that I called on you and said the matter could now be easily arranged? There's no harm in that."

"There seems none. When I write I'll give it."

"You'd better mention my real name. It's not Henry Morris—It's—"

"I am acquainted with your real name," said Frank, with perfect nonchalance. Hervey grew very angry.

"Now, I wonder who you may be," he said, "you who write to her. Perhaps you're sweet on each other, and look forward to a happy marriage." An incautious remark of the rogue's, yet one he could not refrain from making; nor could he refrain from eyeing Carruthers to see how the shot told. Hard as the effort was, Carruthers preserved his equanimity.

"Perhaps so," he said carelessly. "I can't, however, imagine it can be of the slightest interest to you." The scornful emphasis laid on the last word flicked Hervey like a whip.

"Perhaps so!" he echoed with his mocking laugh. "Ha, ha! do you think I'm a fool? Do you think you take me in with your studied ease? Don't I know you're dying to know who I am and all about me!"

"I know a good deal already," said Frank, in scathing tones. "If I felt any wish to know more I should apply at Scotland Yard or wherever the proper office may be."

This taunt was more than even the most amiable ticket-of-leave man could be expected to let pass. It finished Hervey entirely. He boiled over. With the violent expletive which invariably accompanies such an act he struck out full at the speaker.

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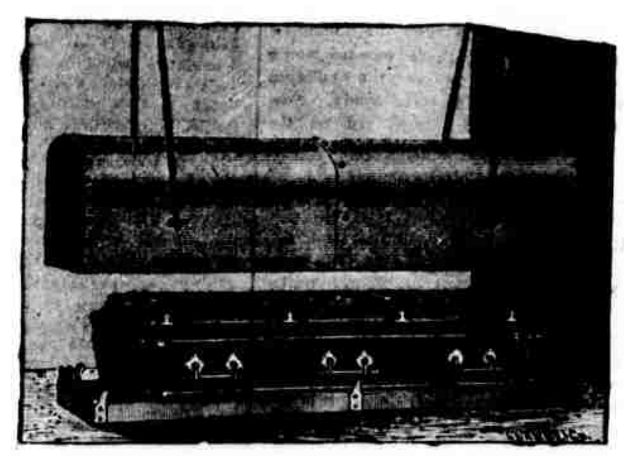

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