A HIDDEN FOE

—BY—

G. A. HENTY,

Author of "The Curse of Carne's Hold," "Gabriel Allen, M.P.," "The Plague Ship," etc., etc.

(Continued.)

"That is ten days from now, and will give me plenty of time," Constance said. "You don't think there is any chance of their sending by Brindisi to catch the last steamer at Alexandria."

"I should say not the slightest, Miss Corbyn. It was only the day before yesterday that I was at Woodstock, and it is most unlikely that the butcher would write that day to the man who had called upon him; the latter would have to communicate to his employers, whoever they are; they would have to think the matter over, find a suitable agent, and so on. I should consider it quite out of the question that they could complete their preparations and send a man off in time to overtake the last steamer at Alexandria. Why, they would not get the letter until to-morrow morning, and would have but three days at most to decide upon their plans and make their arrangements. No, I do not think you need feel the slightest anxiety on that score. The more I think of it, indeed, the more certain does it seem to that our idea that the man with the shiny hat is employed by some old friend of Morson's, who wants to let him know that your father is dead, that you have not appeared, and that there is money to be made out of restoring you to your rights, is the correct one. For with the exception of Philip Clitheroe, no one else can have any interest whatever in keeping you out of your inheritance."

"It would certainly seem so," Constance agreed, "if so, all the better; but in any case it seems to me that my plan is the best."

"Before you start, Miss Corbyn, you had better give me a power of attorney to act for you, for I should not be in the least surprised if on your arrival in Australia you find that Morson has left for England."

"I should be glad to do that, Mr. Harbut, but I don't see how he is to know that you are the person he has to come to, unless, indeed, they have watched me ever since I came to England, and do you know, madame and I did think we were watched when we were in Pimlico."

"Did you?" Robert asked, eagerly. "What made you think that?"

"Perhaps it was all fancy," Constance replied, "but there was a man who used to hang about our street, and I used to think that he looked specially at our door whenever he passed it, and once or twice the same man kept behind us all the way to the Temple. Of course, we could not say he was watching us, and it may have been a mere accident, but both madame and I fancied that we were watched. Very likely it was only a silly idea from our being strange in London."

"Of course, it is impossible," Robert Harbut replied. "But if you were watched it upsets our last idea that the man in the shiny hat can be employed by a chum of Morson's, and would almost prove that those who are at work against you are people with long purses, and that when Mr. Corbyn died they at once set to work on the one hand to find out this Morson, and on the other to ascertain whether you suspected that you were entitled to his estates, and what steps you were taking in the matter."

"Well," Miss Peyton said, "it is no use worrying any more over that matter. You may guess as much as much as you like, but as it is purely guess work, that is a mere loss of time. Let us be practical. Now, I understand that you have made up your mind, Constance, to go by this next steamer, and that you want to get over to St. Malo to see this Frenchwoman of yours as soon as you can. In that case, every hour you stop here is so much lost. How do you go to St. Malo, direct by sea?"

"Yes, Miss Peyton."

"See when the next steamer starts, Robert."

"One sails this evening," Robert replied after consulting the Times.

"Then you had better go by that," Miss Peyton said decidedly. "If you have to go, the sooner you go the better, and I would much rather lose you at once if I am to lose you, than be dillydallying over it for two or three days. Don't look tearful, my dear. I knew your story when you came to me, and know that you might be leaving before long; besides, as I myself brought you here on purpose that you might, if possible, obtain some clue in the matter, I should indeed be silly to grumble because you have succeeded. I brought Robert Harbut down to help us in the search, and more has come of it than I expected. I am heartily glad, my dear, though I own I shall miss you sorely just at first. However, when you come to your own, we shall be great friends I hope, and as you will still be an unprotected female, I shall, if you let me, take you under my wing, and see that no fortune-hunter runs away with you. But now to business, again. Robert, I suppose you mean to go up with Miss Corbyn, and to take her down to Southampton and see her on to the boat."

"Certainly, Miss Peyton."

"There is not the least occasion, indeed there is not," Constance protested.

"I think it much better, my dear. Going up to London is nothing, and I don't mean to say that you would be likely to come to any harm in crossing town or on going on board at Southampton. Still it is not pleasant for a young lady all alone, and I am sure Robert would be glad to go with you, and that my niece can spare him very well till to-morrow at lunch time."

"Certainly I can, aunt, though it is not every young lady that I should approve of his running about with; but I should not like Constance to go alone."

"That is settled then, and when he gets back we will go down together for a few days to Torquay or Teignmouth, just as you like. How long can you stay away, Robert?"

"I was just going to say, Miss Peyton, that you must please reckon without me. I told Hilda when we came down that four days was as much as I could manage, and it is already five. In any case I should have gone back to-morrow morrow at the very latest, so that you see, Miss Corbyn, I am only curtailing my stay here by a few hours."

"I am sorry, Mr. Harbut, for you have done nothing but attend to my affairs since you came down here; still I know that it is not of the least use protesting or talking. It seems to me that you are all very obstinate."

"You are the last person who ought to say so, Constance," Hilda laughed, "for if we are so, we are only following at a long distance the example you set us. I think, aunt, we may as well stay here for the next few days; it is handy for getting back to town, and I am quite sure you will want to run up to see our travelers off."

Miss Peyton smiled.

"Well, my dear, I think that we shall both want to do that; besides, Constance will have a good many things to get for her voyage, and to see about, and it will be much better in every respect that she and her friend could come to me in Audley Street, instead of going into lodgings for the few days they will be over. So you and I will, as you say, stay here until the end of the week, and then go up to town together, and it is understood, Constance, that you and Madame Duport are to come straight to me when you arrive. What train will you want to go by to-day, Robert? It is no use going earlier than necessary. You will only want time to drive from Paddington across to Waterloo."

"The train leaves Waterloo at seven, Miss Peyton, so the four o'clock from here will take us up in time."

"Very well, then, we will have early dinner at half-past two, and in the meantime we will go for a drive. We will go by your place, Constance. I should like to see this Corbyn Covrt of yours."

CHAPTER XII.

After seeing Constance down to the ladies' cabin on board the boat at Southampton, Robert Harbut returned by the nine o'clock train to town. As he went up to town he thought over the incidents that had happened since Constance Corbyn came to England. Everything had gone well until it was found that the leaf had been abstracted from the register. This at the time he had unhesitatingly put down as the work of Algernon Corbyn; but he no longer felt sure of this. Now that he learned that someone else had been at work from the first, that inquiries had been made about Morson within a fortnight of Mr. Corbyn's death, and that as Constance supposed she had been watched while in London, the aspect of the affair had changed, and it was quite probable that the first act of these mysterious opponents had been to obtain possession of the one absolute proof of the marriage. That James Ferris could know anything of the affair he regarded as altogether out of the question.

"I have a great mind to consult him on the subject," he said to himself. "I suppose it would be a most unprofessional proceeding, but then the whole affair is unprofessional as far as I am concerned, and I don't see anything else to do. Of course I should not take such a step with any one else but Jim; but he is the soul of honor, and would never have put me into this thing unless everything had been perfectly straightforward. I can make neither head nor tail of it, and can see nothing to be done but to ask him if he can throw any light on the matter. I will drop him a line in the morning and ask him to come in and smoke a pipe with me at nine o'clock to-morrow evening, if he has no other engagement; and if he has, to make an appointment to give me an hour at the earliest time he can fix."

The clock was just striking nine on the following evening when there was a knock at the outer door of Robert's chambers, for he had closed this lest any of his Temple friends might drop in.

"Well, Bob, how are you?" James Ferris asked cheerfully, "and what is the matter with you? and what means this mysterious summons to a midnight conference?"

"I am well enough, Jim, but I am worried, and I will tell you all about it when we have got fairly settled. There's the 'bacco; there is a clean churchwarden if you lke it. There is a box of cigars, and good ones, help yourself; also here are port and whiskey."

"Port good?"

"Yes, very fair."

"Then we will begin with that, anyhow, Bob. Now then, our pipes are drawing, our glasses are filled, unbosom yourself. Go ahead."

"I am rather in a queer position, Jim. You see you put me into this affair."

"You forget, my dear friend," Jim said, mildly, "that at present I have not the most remote idea of what affair you mean."

"This Corbyn affair."

"Oh, it is about that," Jim Ferris said, in some surprise. "Has the girl come over? Have you persuaded her to go back again? Have you fallen in love with her?"

"I will tell you all that in due course, Jim, but first of all let us recall our conversation on the subject. I understood from you that Miss Corbyn was likely to come over here to make some inquiries as to a late client of yours. You said you had not the slightest belief that such a marriage had taken place, and that your object in asking me to interest myself on her behalf was that the girl was a nice girl, that she knew nothing of the world, and would almost for a certainty fall into bad hands, who would encourage her search and fleece her and her friends out of their last penny unless I would act as her mentor."

"All this is true, oh king," James Ferris agreed. "What next?"

"Next, you said that your client in the matter was a very honorable young fellow, who was ready to do the handsome thing in the way of providing for the girl, and who would be the last man in the world to offer any opposition to the exceedingly improbable event of the marriage being proved."

Jim Ferris nodded.

"Those are still your views?"

"Of course, they are," he replied; "we are solicitors for the property rather than for Philip Clitheroe. We should, of course, advise him to resist any claim that did not appear to us to be indisputable, and not to yield an inch to any claim unsupported by legal proofs."

"Well, what are you doing in the matter, Jim, if I may ask the question?"

"Doing," Jim repeated, in surprise, "what should we be doing but taking steps for the payment of succession duties, and that sort of thing."

"Then what on earth, Jim, are you employing detective people for? Why are you making inquiries about Tom Morson?"

Jim Ferris took his pipe out of his mouth and stared hard at his questioner. "I don't really know what you mean, Bob. We have employed no detectives; and as to Tom Morson, I never heard the name before in my life as far as I know."

"You didn't? Then who the deuce can it be, Jim?"

"My dear fellow, I shall be able to help you to guess perhaps when I have some conception of what you are talking about. At present I am utterly in the dark. I gather, however, that Miss Corbyn has come over, has consulted you, and has set about her search."

"That is so, Jim. She has been over here nearly five months. She came a few days after you spoke to me about her."

"Well, and what have you been doing?"

"Well, Jim, we have done a good deal, and we have discovered what, in my mind, amounts to a certainty that the girl's mother was married to Mr. Corbyn."

"By Jove! you don't say so," Jim Ferris exclaimed. "You astound me. Confound it, this is a serious business, a deuce of a business. Wait a moment, old fellow; do not say anything more; let me think it over."

James Ferris was altogether unprepared for the news. In recommending Constance Corbyn to go to this friend, he had been acting in the kindly wish to save her expense, and had never for a moment dreamt that this would be the result. For some minutes he sat without speaking, and then he said,

"Well, I see no harm in hearing the story, Bob."

"I see no harm in it, or I should not have proposed to tell it you; in any case, it will be my duty to lay it before you and your father, as solicitor to the estate, for the consideration of your client. Of course, if you were unscrupulous people, determined to defeat justice by any and every method, I should not show my hand to you, but as you and your client both desire that right should be done, I do not see why I should not do so. I should not have done this if the affair had not taken a most mysterious turn, and I had not discovered that someone is mysteriously and perhaps unscrupulously working against us. Now, I will tell you the facts."

Robert Harbut then related the journey down to Bath, the discovery of the locality where Constance Purcell's parents had resided, the interview with the clergyman, and the receipt of the packet of letters. He related how a postmark on the first letter, written an hour or two after the marriage, had given the only clue to the scene of marriage, how on searching the register at Folkestone it was found that the page on which the marriage had been inscribed had been cut out. How he had learnt from Madame Duport that Mr. Corbyn had been for some months after his marriage accompanied by a man who had been his scout at college, that the man's identity had been accidentally obtained, how that clue had been followed up, and the result.

"My dear Robert, you are a genius," James Ferris said, when he had finished, and it is clear that you were cut out for a detective. It is extraordinary how you should have worked all this out. Of course, the story as it at present stands is a pure assumption, and the postmark on the letter the only real fact. A woman in writing to her parents after running away would probably endeavor to ease their minds by telling them that she was married. Even if she was married, it may not have taken place at Folkestone. They may have been married in London, or Canterbury, or anywhere else, on this morning—this this day on which she writes. The fact that the page of the register at Folkestone happens to be missing is in itself no corroboration of the story. It is very unfortunate; that is all I can say about it. The case, as far as you have brought it, is a highly ingenious one; but you are still literally without a vestige of evidence that the marriage ever took place in Folkestone or elsewhere. What you have discovered may influence our own ideas on the subject, but it cannot in the smallest way affect the legal status of the owner of Corbyn Court."

"Of course, I see that," Robert Harbut said. "I myself am as convinced that this marriage took place as if I had witnessed it. And I am convinced—although I quite grant I may be wrong—that it was to destroy the evidence of that marriage that the leaf was extracted from the register. At first, my opinion was very strong that Algernon Corbyn, after having lost his wife, determined to ignore the marriage altogether, and that to prevent the possibility of its discovery managed somehow to cut out the missing leaf. At the time I thought so, it did not appear to me that anyone else could have known of the marriage, still less have any interest in suppressing the proof of it, but now there is evidence that a third party is at work, endeavoring to trace the whereabouts of this man Morson. I do not know what to think about it. The leaf may have been cut out twelve days ago or twelve years. We now come to the question I asked you first. Who is the party who is looking for Morson?"

"I have not the most remote idea. Certainly it is not Clitheroe."

"It is clear that, whoever it is, he must have been aware previously of the whole circumstances of the case; of the church at which the marriage took place, and the names of the witnesses to it, and was therefore able to go straight to the church and destroy the proof there, and to send straight to Oxford to find out the whereabouts of Morson."

"It is a strange business, however, and a most singular one. What do they want Morson for?"

"To see whether he was likely to be troublesome, I should say. Now that they have found out that, if still alive, he is in Australia, they, whoever they may be, will probably do nothing more in the matter. It would not be politic to let him know that Algernon Corbyn is dead, and that, the register of the marriage being lost, his evidence has become of great importance."

"Yes," Ferris said, "but you see you are assuming that whoever has set these detectives at work is hostile to Miss Corbyn, and that is by no means proved. Of course, if these are the people who have stolen the leaf, they are endeavoring to prevent her from proving her rights; but who would have any interest that way except Philip Clitheroe?"

"Now, assuming that my first conjecture was not the right one, and that Corbyn himself did not cut out the leaf, the person now inquiring for Morson may be some one who has for years been cognizant of the business, some one to whom Corbyn may have confided it, or some pal of Morson's, who, hearing of Corbyn's death, sees his way to making a handsome thing out of proving that his daughter is the legal heiress to Corbyn Court. That certainly seems to me by far the most likely solution."

"Yes, I suppose it is," James Ferris said more thoughtfully; "this is a most complicated business, look at it which way you will. Have you any objection to my telling the story to Clitheroe? I think that as you have told me he ought to know how the thing stands. Of course, till the result of the search which I suppose you are going to make for Morson is over, nothing can be done. If you get legal proof of the marriage, there is an end of the matter, but if you do not find him and can get nothing out of him, I am sure that Clitheroe will be glad to recognize that the young lady has a higher moral claim, although no legal one, than she would have as the undoubtedly illegitimate daughter of his uncle, and I can certainly promise you beforehand, in his name, that he will be ready to agree to any proposition that may seem to you fair, just and honorable for her future provision. Anyhow, I think he ought to be told the facts."

"Yes, I agree with you that he had better be told, James. We have nothing to conceal, and we are working openly, and he is not the man to take improper steps to thwart us. It would not be fair that he should be kept in ignorance of the probability of a storm suddenly bursting upon him. You told him, did you not, that you had recommended Miss Corbyn to place herself in my hands."

"Oh, yes, I told him, and he repeated what he said before, that he only wanted right to be done; and was, indeed, genuinely distressed at the thought that he might be possibly usurping the rights of a friendless girl."

(To be continued.)

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LOCAL COURTS CALENDAR, 1892.

Place & Sittings & P. O. Address of Clerks.	Clerks.	Jan.	Mar.	May.	July.	Sept.	Nov.
Milton	Wm. Panton.	15	11	13	15	16	18
Oakville	R. Balmer	6	2	4	6	7	9
Georgetown	L. Grant	12	8	10	12	13	15
Acton	J. Matthews	14	10	12	14	15	17
Campbellville	S. R. Lister	11	14	9	11	12	14
Burlington	Jas. Robinson	5	1	3	5	6	8

General Sessions of the Peace and County Court Sittings, with or without Jury Tuesday, 12th December, at 10 a.m.

County Court Sittings, without Jury, Tuesday, 5th April and 4th October, at 10 a. m.

County Court Sittings, Formerly Terms—Monday, 11th January, 4th April, 4th July and 4th October, at 10 a. m.

Audit of Criminal Justice Accounts—8th January, 4th April, 4th July and 3rd October.

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