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CARRISTON'S GIFT.

By HUGH CONWAY.

Author of "Called Back," "Dark Days," "A Family Affair," etc.

[TOLD BY PHILIP BRAND, M. D., LONDON.]

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER V.

"The end has come sooner than I expected." These were the last words I muttered to myself as, waving my frightened servant away, I closed the door and stood alone with the supposed maniac. He rose and, wrung my hand, then without a word sank back in his chair and buried his face in his hands. A sort of nervous trembling seemed to run through his frame. Deeply distressed, I drew his hands from his face.

"Now, Carriston," I said, as firmly as I could, "look up and tell me what all this means. Look up, I say, man, and speak to me."

He raised his eyes to mine and kept them there, while a ghastly smile—a phantom of humor—flicked across his white face. No doubt his native quickness told him what I suspected, so he looked me full and steadily in the face."

"No," he said, "not as you think. But let there be no mistake. Question me. Talk to me. Put me to any test. Satisfy yourself, once for all, that I am as sane as you are."

He spoke so rationally, his eyes met mine so unflinchingly, that I was rejoiced to know that my fears were as yet ungrounded. There was grief, excitement, want of rest in his appearance, but his general manner told me he was, as he said, as sane as I was.

"Thank heaven you can speak to me and look at me like this!" I exclaimed.

"You are satisfied, then?" he said.

"On this point, yes. Now tell me what is wrong!"

Now, that he had set my doubts at rest, his agitation and excitement seemed to return. He grasped my hand convulsively.

"Madeline!" he whispered. "Madeline—my love—she is gone."

"Gone!" I repeated. "Gone where?"

"She is gone, I say—stolen from me by so e black-hearted traitor—perhaps forever. Who can tell?"

"But, Carriston, surely in so short a time her love cannot have been won by another. If so, all I can say is——"

"What?" he shouted. "You who have seen her! You in your wildest dreams to imagine that Madeline Rowan would leave me of her own free will! No, sir, she has been stolen from me—entrapped—carried away—hidden. But I will find her, or I will kill the black-hearted villain who has done this."

He rose and paced the room. His face was distorted with rage. He clinched and unclinched his long slender hands.

He clenched and unclenched his long, slender hands.

"My dear fellow," I said, "you are talking riddles. Sit down and tell me calmly what has happened. But, first of all, as you look utterly worn out, I will ring for my man to get you some food."

"No," he said, "I want nothing. Weary as I am, for I have been to Scotland and back in a day, I cannot rest. I reached London by the last train, and after seeing one friend, for help—it may be for protection. But I have eaten and I have drunk, knowing I must keep my health and strength."

However, I insisted upon some wine being brought. He drank a glass, and then, with a strange, enforced calm, told me what had taken place. His tale was this:

After we had parted company on our return from Scotland, Carriston went down to the family seat in Oxfordshire and informed his uncle of the impending change in his life. The baronet, an extremely old man, infirm and all but childish, troubled little about the matter. Every acre of his large property was strictly entailed, so his pleasure or displeasure could make but little alteration in his nephew's prospects. Still, he was the head of the family, and Carriston was in duty bound to make the important news known to him. The young man made no secret of his approaching marriage, so in a very short time every member of the family was aware that the heir and future head was about to ally himself to a nobody. Knowing nothing of Madeline Rowan's rare beauty and sweet nature, Carriston's kinsmen and kinswomen were sparing with their congratulations. Indeed, Mr. Ralph Carriston, the cousin whose name was coupled with such absurd suspicions, went so far as to write a bitter, sarcastic letter, full of ironical felicitation. This and Charles Carriston's haughty reply, did not make the affection between the cousins any stronger. Moreover, shortly afterward the younger man heard that inquiries were being made in the neighborhood of Madeline's home as to her position and parentage. Feeling sure that only his cousin Ralph could have had the curiosity to institute such inquiries, he wrote and thanked him for the keen interest he was manifesting in his future welfare, but begged that hereafter Mr. Carriston would apply to him direct for any information he wanted. The two men were now no longer on speaking terms.

Charles Carriston, in his present frame of mind, cared little whether his relatives wished to bless or forbid the banns. He was passionately in love, and at once set about making arrangements for a speedy marriage. Although Madeline was still ignorant of the exalted position held by her lover—although she came to him absolutely penniless, he was resolved in the matter of money to treat her as generously as he would have treated the most eligible damsel in the country. There were several legal questions to be set at rest concerning certain property he wished to settle upon her. There of course caused delay. As soon as they were adjusted to his own, or, rather, to his lawyer's satisfaction, he purposed going to Scotland and carrying away his beautiful bride. In the meantime he cast about for a residence.

Somewhat Bohemian in his nature, Carriston had no intention of settling down just yet to live the life of an ordinary moneyed Englishman. His intention was to take Madeline abroad for some months. He had fixed upon Cannes as a desirable place at which to winter, but having grown somewhat tired of hotel life, wished to rent a furnished house. He had received from an agent to whom he had been advised to apply the refusal of a house, which, from the glowing description given, seemed the one above all others he wanted. As an early decision was insisted upon, my impulsive young friend thought nothing of crossing the channel and running down to the south of France to see with his own eyes that the much-landed place was worthy of the fair being who was to be its temporary mistress.

He wrote to Madeline and told her he was going from home for a few days. He said he should be travelling the greatest part of the time, so it would be no use her writing to him until his return. He did not reveal the object of his journey. Were Madeline to know it was to choose a winter residence at Cannes, she would be filled with amazement, and the innocent deception he was still keeping up would not be carried through to the romantic end which he pictured to himself.

The day before he started for France, Madeline wrote (that her aunt was very unwell, but said nothing as to her malady causing any alarm. Perhaps Carriston thought less about the old Scotch widow than her relationship and kindness to Miss Rowan merited. He started on his travels without any forebodings of evil.

His journey to Cannes and back was hurried—he wasted no time on the road, but was delayed for two days at the place itself before he could make final arrangements with the owner and the present occupier of the house. Thinking he was going to start every moment, he did not write to Madeline. At the rate at which he meant to return, a letter posted in England would reach her almost as quickly as if posted at Cannes.

He reached his home, which for the last few weeks had been Oxford, and found two letters waiting for him. The first, dated on the day he left England, was from Madeline. It told him that her aunt's illness had suddenly taken a fatal turn—that she had died that day, almost without warning. The second letter was anonymous.

It was written apparently by a woman, and advised Mr. Carr to look sharply after his lady love, or he would find himself left in the lurch. The writer would not be surprised to hear some fine day that she had eloped with a certain gentleman who should be nameless. This precious epistle, probably an emanation of feminine spite, Carriston treated it as it deserved—he tore it up and threw the pieces to the wind.

But the thought of Madeline being alone at that lonely house troubled him greatly. The dead woman had no sons or daughters—all the anxiety and responsibility connected with her affairs would fall on the poor girl. The next day he threw himself into the Scotch express and started for her far-away home.

On arriving there he found it occupied only by the rough farm servants. They seemed in a state of wonderment, and lvolubly questioned Carriston as to the whereabouts of Madeline. The question sent a chill of fear to his heart. He answered their questions by others, and soon learned all they had to communicate.

Little enough it was. On the morning after the old woman's funeral Madeline had gone to Callendar to ask the advice of an old friend of her aunt, as to what steps should now be taken. She had neither been to this friend, nor had she returned home. She had, however, sent a message that she must go to London at once, and would write from there. That was the last heard of her—all that was known about her.

Upon hearing this news Carriston became a prey to the acutest terror—an emotion which was quite inexplicable to the honest people, his informants. The girl had gone, but she had sent word whither she had gone. True, they did not know the reason for her departure, so sudden and without luggage of any description—true, she had not written as promised, but no doubt they would hear from her to-morrow. Carriston knew better. Without revealing the extent of his fears he flew back to Callendar. Inquiries at the railway station informed him that she had gone, or had purposed going, to London, but whether she ever reached it, or whether any trace of her could be found there, was at least a matter of doubt. No good could be gained by remaining in Scotland, so he traveled back at once to town, half distracted, sleepless and racking his brains to know where to look for her.

"She has been decoyed away," he said in conclusion. "She is hidden, imprisoned somewhere. And I know, as well as if he told me, who has done this thing. I can trace Ralph Carriston's cursed hand through it all."

I glanced at him askance. This morbid suspicion of his cousin amounted almost to monomania. He had told the tale of Madeline's disappearance clearly and tersely; but when he began to account for it, his theory was a wild and untenable one. However much he suspected Ralph Carriston of longing to stand in his shoes, I could see no object for the crime of which he accused him—that of decoying away Madeline Rowan.

"But why should he have done this?" I asked. "To prevent your marriage? You are young; he must have foreseen that you would marry some day."

Carriston leaned toward me, and dropped his voice to a whisper.

"This is his reason," he said—"this is why I come to you. You are not the only one who has entirely misread my nature, and seen a strong tendency to insanity in it. Of course I know that you are all wrong, but I know that Ralph Carriston has stolen my love—stolen her because he thinks and hopes that her loss will drive me mad—perhaps drive me to kill myself. I went straight to him—I have just come from him. Brand, I tell you, that when I taxed him with the crime—when I raved at him—when I threatened to tear the life out of him—his cold wicked eyes leapt with joy. I heard him mutter between his teeth, 'Men have been put in strait-waistcoats for less than this.' Then I knew why he had done this. I curbed myself and left him. Most likely he will try to shut me up as a lunatic; but I count on your protection—count on your help to find my love."

That any man could be guilty of such a subtle refinement of crime as that of which he accused his cousin, seemed to me, if not impossible, at least improbable. But as at present there was no doubt about my friend's sanity, I promised my aid readily.

"And now," I said, "my dear boy, I won't hear another word to-night. Nothing can be done until to-morrow; then we will consult as to what steps should be taken. Drink this and go to bed—yes, you are as sane as I am, but remember, insomnia soon drives the strongest man out of his senses."

I poured out an opiate. He drank it obediently. Before I left him for the night I saw him in bed and sleeping a heavy sleep.

CHAPTER VI.

The advantage to one, who writes, not a tale of imagination, but a simple record of events, is this: He need not be bound by the recognized canons of the story-telling art—need not exercise his ingenuity to mislead his reader—need not suppress some things and lay undue stress on others to create mysteries to be cleared up at the end of the tale. Therefore, using the privilege of a plain narrator, I shall here give some account of what became of Miss Rowan, as, so far as I can remember, I heard it some time afterward from her own lips.

The old Scotch woman's funeral over, and those friends who had been present departed, Madeline was left in the little farm-house alone, save for the presence of the two servants. Several kind bodies had offered to come and stay with her, but she had declined this offers. She was in no mood for company, and perhaps, being of such a different race and breed, would not have found much comfort in the rough, homely sympathy which was offered to her. She preferred being alone with her grief—grief which, after all, was bound to be much lightened by the thought of her own approaching happiness, for the day was drawing near when her lover would cross the border and bear his bonnie bride away. She felt sure that she would not be long alone—that the moment Carriston heard of her aunt's death he would come to her assistance. In such a peaceful, God-fearing neighborhood she had no fear of being left without protection. Moreover, her position in the house was well defined. The old woman, who was childless, had left her nieces all of which she died possessed. So Madeline decided to wait quietly until she heard from her lover.

Still, there were business matters to be attended to, and at the funeral Mr. Douglas, of Callendar, the executor under the will, had suggested that an early interview would be desirable. He offered to drive out to the little farm the next day, but Miss Rowan, who had to see to some feminine necessaries which could only be supplied by shops, decided that she would come to the town instead of troubling Mr. Douglas to drive so far out.

Madeline, in spite of the superstitious element in her character, was a brave girl, and in spite of her refined style of beauty, strong and healthy. Early hours were the rule in that humble home, so before 7 o'clock in the morning she was ready to start on her drive to the little town. At first she thought of taking with her the boy who did the rough, out-door work; but he was busy about something or other, and besides, was a garrulous lad, who would be certain to chatter the whole way, and this morning Miss Rowan wanted no companions save her own mingled thoughts of sadness and joy. She know every inch of the road—she feared no evil—she would be home again before nightfall—the pony was quiet and sure-footed—so away went Madeline in the strong, primitive vehicle on her lonely twelve-mile drive through the fair scenery.

She passed few people on the road. Indeed, she remembered, meeting no one except one or two pedestrian tourists, who, like sensible men, were doing a portion of their day's task in the early morning. I have no doubt but Miss Rowan seemed to them a passing vision of loveliness.

But when she was a mile or two from Callendar she [illegible] boy on a pony. The boy who mu[illegible] from her by sight, stopped and handed [illegible] telegram. She had to pay several shillings for the delivery, or intended delivery, of the message, so far from the station. The boy galloped away, congratulating himself on having been spared a long ride, and Miss Rowan tore open the envelope left in her hands.

"The messages was brief: "Mr. Carr is seriously ill. Come at once. You will be met in London."

Madeline did not scream or faint. She gave one, low moan of pain, set her teeth, and with the face of one in a dream drove as quickly as she could to Callendar, straight to the railway station.

Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, she had money with her, so she did not waste time in going to Mr. Douglas. In spite of the crushing blow she had received, the girl had all her wits about her. A train would start in ten minutes' time. She took her ticket, then found an idler outside the station, and paid him to take the pony and carriage back to the farm, with the message as repeated to Carriston.

The journey passed like a long dream. The girl could think of nothing but her lover, dying, dying—perhaps dead before she could reach him. The miles flew by unnoticed; twilight crept on; the carriage grew dark; at last—London at last! Miss Rowan stepped out on the broad platform, not knowing what to do or where to turn. Presently a tall, well-dressed man came up to her, and removing his hat, addressed her by name. The promise as to her being met had been kept.

She clasped her hands. "Tell me—oh, tell me, he is not dead!" she cried.

"Mr. Carr is not dead. He is ill, very ill—delirious, and calling for you."

"Where is he? Oh, take me to him!"

"He is miles and miles from here—at a friend's house. I have been deputed to meet you and to accompany you, if you feel strong enough to continue the journey at once."

"Come," said Madeline. "Take me to him."

"Your luggage?" asked the gentleman.

"I have none. Come!"

"You must take some refreshment."

"I need nothing. Come!"

The gentleman glanced at his watch. "There is just time," he said. He called a cab, told the driver to go at top speed. They reached Paddington just in time to catch the mail.

During the drive across London Madeline asked many questions, and learned from her companion that Mr. Carr had been staying for a day or two at a friend's house in the west of England. That yesterday he had fallen from his horse and sustained such injuries that his life was despaired of. He had been continually calling for Madeline. They had found her address on a letter, and had telegraphed as soon as possible—for which act Miss Rowan thanked her companion with tears in her eyes.

Her conductor did not say much of his own accord, but in replying to her questions he was politely sympathetic. She thought of little outside the fearful picture which filled every corner of her brain, but from her conductor's manner received the impression that he was a medical adviser, who had seen the sufferer and assisted in the treatment of the case. She did not ask his name, nor did he reveal it.

At Paddington he placed her in a ladies' carriage and left her. He was a smoker, he said. She wondered somewhat at this desertion. Then the train sped down west. At the large stations the gentleman came to her and offered her refreshments. Hunger seemed to have left her, but she accepted a cup of tea. Then I know why he had done this. I curbed myself and left him. Most likely he will try to shut me up as a lunatic; but I count on your protection—count on your help to find my love."

That any man could be guilty of such a subtle refinement of crime as that of which he accused his cousin, seemed to me, if not impossible, at least improbable. But as at present there was no doubt about my friend's sanity, I promised my aid readily.

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Still, there were business matters to be attended to, and at the funeral Mr. Douglas, of Callendar, the executor under the will,

He threw himself into a chair.

recognize in the intruder my clever but brilliant friend Charles Carriston!

manly person whom I had met on my journey to Bournemouth last spring—the man who had seemed so much impressed by my views on insanity, and had manifested such interest in the description I had given—without mentioning any name—of Carriston's peculiar mind.

I should have at once claimed acquaintanceship with my visitor, but before I could speak he advanced and apologized gracefully for his intrusion.

"You will forgive it," he added, "when I tell you my name is Ralph Carriston."

Remembering our chance conversation, the thought that, after all, Charles Carriston's wild suspicion was well founded flashed through me like lightning. My great hope was that my visitor might not remember my face as I remembered his. I bowed coldly, but said nothing.

"I believe, Dr. Brand," he continued, "you have a young relative of mine at present staying with you?"

"Yes, Mr. Carriston is my guest," I answered. "We are old friends."

"Ah, I did not know that. I do not remember having heard him mention your name as a friend. But, as it is so, no one knows better than you do the unfortunate state of his health. How do you find him to-day—violent?"

I pretended to ignore the man's meaning, and answered smilingly: "Violence is the last thing I should look for. He is tired out and exhausted by travel, and is in great distress. That, I believe, is the whole of his complaint."

"Yes, yes, to be sure, poor boy. His sweetheart has left him, or something. But as a doctor you must know that his mental condition is not quite what it should be. His friends are very anxious about him. They fear that a little restraint—temporary, I hope—must be put upon his actions. I called to ask your advice and aid."

"In what, Mr. Carriston?"

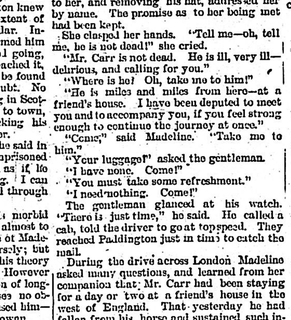
"In this. A young man can't be left free to go about threatening his friends' lives. I have brought Dr. Daley with me—you know him, of course. He is below in my carriage. I will call him up, with your permission. He could then see poor Charles, and the needful certificate could be signed by you two doctors."

"Mr. Carriston," I said, decidedly, "let me tell you in the plainest words that your cousin is at present as fully in possession of his wits as you are. Dr. Daley—whoever he may be—could sign no certificate, and in our day no asylum would dare to keep Mr. Carriston within its walls."

An unpleasant, sinister look crossed my listener's face, but his voice still remained bland and suave. "I am sorry to differ from you, Dr. Brand," he said, "but I know him better than you do. I have seen him as you have never yet seen him. Only last night he came to me in a frantic state. I expected every moment he would make a murderous attack on me."

"Perhaps he fancied he had some reasons for anger," I said.

Ralph Carriston looked at me with those cold eyes of which his cousin had spoken.



Ralph Carriston looked at me with those cold eyes of his.

"If the boy has succeeded in converting you to any of his delusions, I can only say that doctors are more credulous than I fancied. But the question is not worth arguing. You decline to assist me, so I must do without you. Good morning, Dr. Brand."

He left the room as gracefully as he had entered it. I remained in a state of doubt. It was curious that Ralph Carriston turned out to be the man whom I had met in the train; but the evidence offered by the coincidence was not enough to convict him of the crime of endeavoring to drive his cousin mad by such a far-fetched stratagem as the inveigling away of Madeline Rowan. Besides, even in wishing to prove Charles Carriston mad he had much to say on his side. Supposing him to be innocent of having abducted Madeline, Carriston's violent behavior on the preceding evening must have driven any man into insanity. In spite of the aversion with which Ralph Carriston inspired me, I scarcely knew which side to believe.

Carriston still slept; so when I went out my afternoon rounds I left a note begging him to remain in the house until my return. Then I found him up, dressed and looking much more like himself. When I entered dinner was on the table, so not until that was over could we talk unrestrainedly upon the subject which was uppermost in both our minds.

CHAPTER VIII.

Although Carriston stated that he came to me for aid, and, it may be, protection, he manifested the greatest reluctance in following any advice I offered him. The obstinacy of his refusal to obtain the assistance of the police placed me in a predicament. That Madeline Rowan had really disappeared was, of course, compelled to believe. It might even be possible that she was kept against her will in some place of concealment. In such a case it behooved us to take proper steps to trace her. Her welfare should not depend upon the hallucinations and eccentric ideas of a man half out of his senses with love and grief. I all but resolved, even at the risk of forfeiting Carriston's friendship, to put the whole matter in the hands of the police, unless, in the course of a day or two, we heard from the girl herself or Carriston suggested some better plan.

Curiously enough, although refusing to be guided by me, he made no suggestion on his own account. He was racked by fear and suspense, yet his only idea of solving his difficulties seemed to be that of waiting. He did nothing. He simply waited, as if he expected that chance would bring what he should have been searching for high and low.

Some days passed before I could get a tarely consent that aid should be sought. Even then he would not go to the proper quarter; but he allowed me to summon to our counsels a man who advertised himself as being a private detective. This man, or one of his men, came at our call, and heard what was wanted of him. Carriston reluctantly gave him one of Madeline's photographs. He also told him that only by watching and spying on Ralph Carriston's every action could he hope to obtain the clew. I did not much like the course adopted, nor did I like the look of the man to whom the inquiry was intrusted; but, at any rate, something was being done.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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