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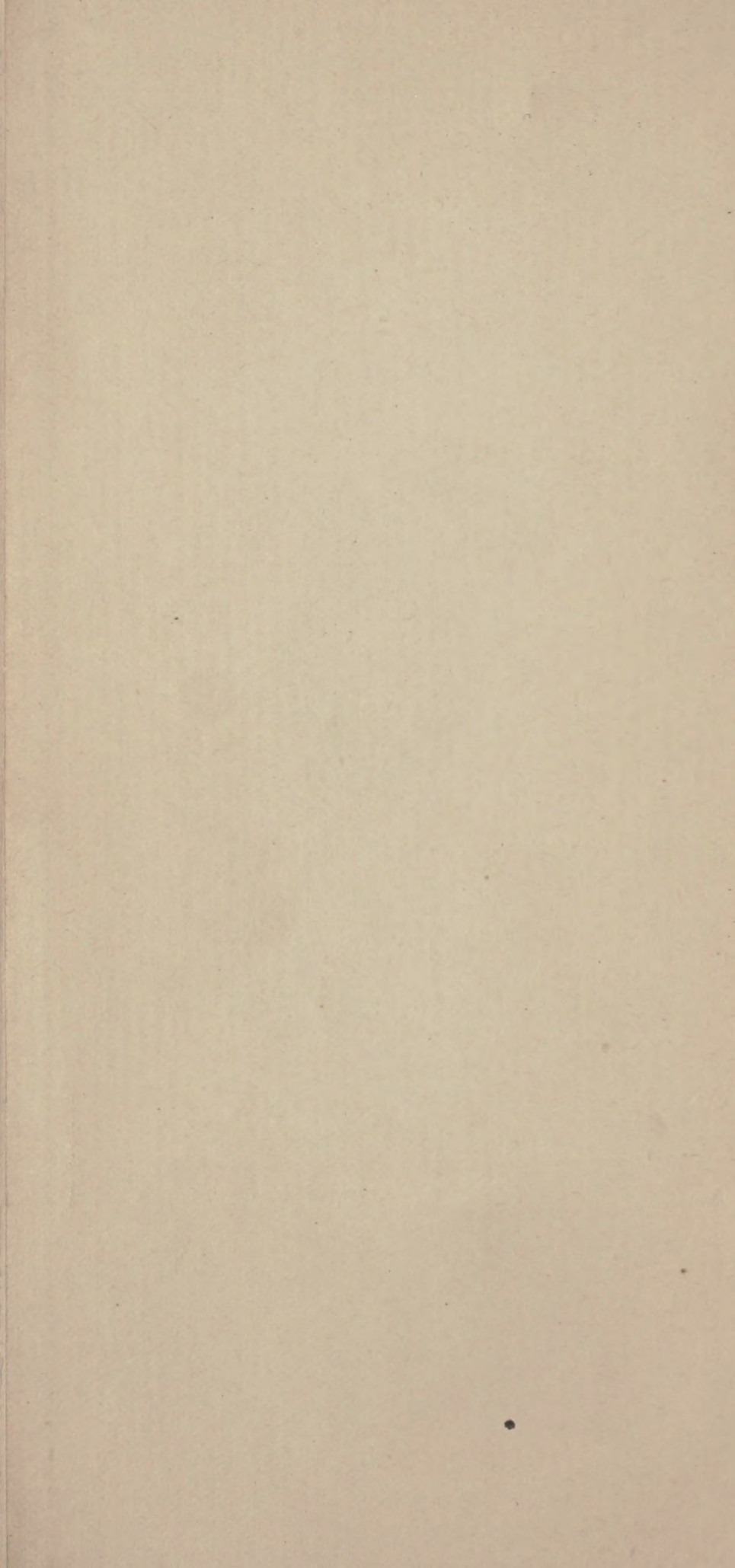


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THE LONE INN

A MYSTERY

BY

FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB,"
"THE FEVER OF LIFE," "MADAME MIDAS," "THE
"RED STAR," "ALADDIN IN LONDON," "THE
QUEER STORY OF ADAM LIND,"
ETC., ETC.



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THE LONE INN.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENTURE AT THE INN.

IF there be aught in presentiments I was well warned by that first glimpse of the inn. The monstrous bulk of gables, sloping roofs, and lean chimneys, hunched blackly against the sky, would have scared a bolder spirit than mine. All day I had walked under blue sky, between green hedgerows, with light heart and whistling lip. Confronted in the twilight by so sinister a scene I felt qualmish. Ragged clouds dropped their fringes over sullen western red, around spread the salt marshes, evil in their desolation, and I with chilled blood stared at the lonely mansion dominating the outlook. Here, thought I, an ad-

venture awaits me. The hour, the house, the scene, hint at romance, and that of the strangest.

So much were my spirits dashed by these ominous environments, that it was in my mind to walk the further ten miles and shelter for the night at Marshminster. Yet some fate compelled my unwilling feet toward that inhospitable door, and almost before I knew my own mind I was knocking loudly. It opened while my hand was still raised for the final rap, and a handsome woman presented herself to my astonished eyes. What beauty did among the tombs I know not, yet there she smiled. Though handsome, she was not a lady, and lacked the undefinable stamp of birth. At the same time she was above the commonality. Not a lady, not a servant; but something between the two. Her appearance confirmed the promise of romance.

“I have walked from Eastbury,” said I, cap in hand, “and wish to put up here for the night.”

“Marshminster is only ten miles away,” answered she, in nowise disposed to admit me.

“And for that reason I want a bed here. Twenty or more miles walking under a hot sun has wearied me considerably.”

"I am sorry we cannot accommodate you, sir."

"This is an inn," I said, glancing at the sign.

"The Fen Inn, sir," she replied, still smiling, "and full of guests for the time being."

"Full of guests, in this locality! You must then entertain waterfowl, for I have seen no human being for the last twelve miles."

She made no direct answer, but shook her head and prepared to close the door. Piqued by the discourtesy, and still more by the mystery of this reception, I was about to insist upon admission, when my attention was attracted to a face at the near window. I recognized it as that of a college friend, and waved my stick in greeting.

"Halloa, Briarfield!" I shouted lustily. "Come and help me to a night's lodgings."

The girl was surprised by my remark, and, as I thought, changed color. She stepped aside to let Briarfield pass, and exhibited further astonishment at the urbanity of our greeting.

"What wind blows you here, Denham?" asked Briarfield, shaking my hand.

"I am on a walking tour," I answered, "and hoped to have

reached Marshminster to-night. But as it is ten miles away and I feel weary I wish to sleep here. This young lady, however, says the inn is full of guests and——”

“Full of guests!” interrupted Briarfield, looking at the girl. “Nonsense, Rose, I am the only guest here!”

“We expect others, sir,” said Rose obstinately.

“You can’t expect a sufficient number to fill the house,” he retorted; “surely Mr. Denham can have a bed?”

“I shall ask my father, sir!”

When she disappeared Briarfield turned to me with a smile, and asked a strange question.

“Now, I’ll be bound,” said he, “that you don’t know my first name?”

“Felix.”

“No! You are wrong, I am not the rich Felix, but the poor Francis.”

“You see the result of being one of twins,” said I impatiently; “if at college I could not distinguish between you how can you expect me to do so now? I haven’t seen either you or your brother for at least two years. Where is Felix?”

“At Marshminster.”

“And what are you doing here?”

“Ah, that’s a long story. If you——”

“Please to walk in, sir,” interrupted Rose at this moment, “my father desires to speak with you.”

“I have then to submit myself to the approval of the landlord,” said I, and forthwith entered the house, followed by Francis Briarfield.

The landlord, a lean, saturnine man, above the common height, saluted me with a sour smile. In appearance and demeanor he was quite in keeping with that dreary inn. About him lurked a Puritanic flavor, not ill suited to his somber attire and unctuous speech. He was less like an innkeeper than a smug valet. I mistrusted the man at first sight.

“I can give you supper and a bed, sir,” said he, bending his body and rubbing his hands, “neither, I regret to say, of the first quality.”

“Never mind,” I answered, unstrapping my knapsack. “I am too tired and hungry to be particular.”

“We have only lately taken up this house, sir,” he continued, still bowing, “and things are a trifle disordered.”

I glanced round. Despite the cheerful blaze of a fire, the room had a mildewed look, as though long uninhabited. Traces of hasty cleans-

ing were visible in all corners, and in the dim light filtered through dusty panes, the apartment had a singularly uninviting aspect. Again that premonition of misfortune came over me.

“I wonder you took up the house at all,” said I. “You won’t make your fortune in this locality.”

The landlord made no reply, but muttering something about supper left the room. His daughter had already departed, presumably in the direction of the kitchen, and I found myself alone with Francis Briarfield. He was absently looking out at the window, and started when I addressed him directly. I augured mystery therefrom.

“What’s the meaning of these mysteries?” I asked abruptly. The horror of the place was already influencing my spirits.

“What mysteries?” demanded Briarfield, in a listless manner.

“This inn has been uninhabited for some considerable period. A suspicious looking rascal and his pretty daughter have taken up their abode here with no possible chance of getting customers. I stumble on this Castle Grim in the twilight and find you here—you of all men, whom I believed to be in South America. Don’t you call these mysteries?”

“If you put it that way I admit the mysteries,” replied Francis, coming toward the fire. “I know little about the inn—still less about the landlord and his daughter. As to myself—I am here by appointment to meet my brother Felix. Came from London to Starby, and rode from thence to this inn.”

“Why meet him in this murderous looking house?”

“He named the place of meeting himself.”

“And you?”

“I only arrived this month in England from South America. I wrote him from London asking to see him. He appointed this inn as neutral ground for us to meet, so here I am.”

“Why neutral ground? Have you quarreled!”

“Bitterly.”

“You did so at college,” said I looking steadily at him. “Strange that such ill blood should exist between twin brothers.”

“The inevitable woman,” said Francis, in a harsh tone, quite at variance with his usual soft speech.

“Oh! And her name?”

“Olivia Bellin!”

“I know her. Do you mean to say, Briarfield, that——”

“Hush!” he said, rapidly indica-

ting the door, and there stood the girl Rose listening to our conversation. Her face was pale and it was evident that the mention of the name had powerfully affected her. Seeing our eyes were on her, she apologized in a low, nervous voice.

"Your pardon, gentlemen," she said, placing a tray on the table. "I did not intend to interrupt your conversation. Allow me to lay the table for supper!"

"First show me my room," said I, picking up my knapsack. "I am dusty, and wish to give myself a brush up."

Rose nodded, and preceded me out of the apartment. I glanced back, and saw that Francis had returned to his old post by the window. Evidently he was watching for the arrival of his brother.

"When does Mr. Felix Briarfield arrive?" I asked Rose, as we ascended the stairs.

"I don't know the name, sir," she said with an obvious effort.

"You don't know the name," I repeated, seeing she was lying, "yet Mr. Francis Briarfield is here to meet his brother."

"It may be so, sir! But I know nothing about it. Mr. Briarfield is a stranger to me, like yourself."

"It is to be hoped you received

him more willingly than you did me."

My words fell on the empty air, for after her last remark she hastily departed. I mechanically attended to my wants, and wondered what could be the meaning of the girl's attitude.

"She knows Miss Bellin and Felix Briarfield," I thought, "perhaps not personally, but at least their names. She is also aware of the intended visit of Felix to this place. I must find out from Francis the reason of that visit, and it may throw some light on the demeanor of Rose. I am glad I came here to-night, for that landlord is scarcely a person to be trusted. Certainly my presentiment of romance is coming true."

When I descended to the dining room I found supper laid, and Francis impatiently awaiting my arrival. A lamp was lighted, and for the first time I saw his face plainly. The alteration in his looks and demeanor since our college days was astonishing. Felix had always been the graver of the twins, and it was the distinguishing mark between them. Now the livelier spirits of Francis had calmed down to a subdued gravity which made the resemblance between them still greater. We seated ourselves at the table in si-

lence, and he colored as he caught my earnest look.

"You find me altered?" he asked, with manifest discomposure.

"Very much altered, and more like Felix than ever!"

"I haven't seen him for over a year," said Briarfield abruptly, "so I don't know if the resemblance is still strong."

"It is stronger," I answered emphatically. "I saw Felix two months ago, and now I look at you to-night I can scarcely believe it is Francis, and not Felix seated before me."

"We are alike to outward view, Denham, but I hope our natures are different."

"What do you mean?"

"Felix," said he, with marked deliberation, "is a thief, a liar, and a dishonorable man!"

"You speak strongly!"

"I have reason to."

"The before-mentioned reason, Briarfield," said I, alluding to the feminine element.

"Yes! By the way," he added feverishly, "you said Miss Bellin was known to you."

"In a casual way only. She is a society beauty, and I have met her once or twice; also her very silly mother. The latter is as remarkable for folly as the former is for beauty.

Well, Briarfield, and what about Miss Bellin?"

"I was engaged to her."

"You are engaged to her?"

"I said 'was,'" he replied, with emphasis; "now she is engaged to my brother."

"Of her own free will?"

"I don't know," said Briarfield, "I really don't know. When I went to Chili I was her affianced lover. Now I return and learn that she is to marry my brother."

"What explanation does he make?"

"None as yet. To-night or to-morrow morning he comes here to explain."

"But why here, of all places?"

"Miss Bellin is in Marshminster. Felix is staying there also, and in his letter asked me to see him at the Fen Inn, as he wished to explain his conduct fully before I met Olivia again."

"And you agreed?"

"As you see."

"In your place," said I meditatively, "I should have gone at once to Marshminster and confronted both. There is some trickery about this."

"You think so?"

"I am by nature suspicious," I answered, "perhaps too much so. Yes! I think there is some trickery."

Francis frowned and glanced at his watch.

"It is now eight o'clock," he said, replacing it in his pocket, "too late to go to Marshminster."

"Besides which," I added, "our worthy landlord has doubtless neither trap nor horse."

By this time we had finished supper and Rose came in to clear away. Thoughtfully filling my pipe I watched her closely. Undeniably she was a very beautiful woman, and ill suited to her present occupation. Why a girl so handsome should bury herself in this lonely inn was a mystery to me. I felt sure that there was a purpose connected with her presence here, and that inimical to Briarfield. The landlord did not make his appearance, which was to me a matter of some relief. I disliked the fellow greatly.

Francis, smoking hard, sat staring at the fire, and took no heed of Rose. Once or twice she glanced in his direction, and looked as though about to address him. Catching my eye, she bit her lip and desisted. Finally she disappeared from the room with manifest anger at not having accomplished her design.

"Strange," said I, lighting my pipe.

"What is strange?" asked Briarfield, looking up.

“That girl knows your brother.”

“It’s not impossible,” he answered carelessly; “Felix always had an eye for pretty faces, and as he appointed this inn as a meeting place, he has probably been here before. Rose Strent no doubt draws him hither by her beauty.”

“That is not a compliment to Miss Bellin.”

“I know it. Felix is a profligate scamp, and will make her a bad husband. He shall not marry her!” added Briarfield angrily. “I say he shall not marry her and make her life miserable! I’ll kill him first!”

“Man! man! think of what you are saying—your own brother.”

“My own brother—my twin brother,” scoffed Francis; “is that any reason why he should take away from me the woman I love?”

“She is not worth regretting if she forgets you so soon.”

“She has not forgotten me,” he said earnestly; “I assure you, Denham, she loves me still. The last letter I received from her gave no hint that she wearied of me. As you say, there is some trickery about it. I’ll have an explanation from Felix,” continued he, striking the table with his fist, “or, by Heaven, I’ll kill him!”

“Where did you meet her?” I

asked, ignoring his last remark, which was but idle.

“In town, over a year ago,” he replied, calming down. “She is, as you know, very beautiful, and her mother wished her to make a great match. I am comfortably off, but have not a title, therefore Mrs. Bellin would not sanction the engagement. Then I had to go out to South America on business connected with my property. Before I left she promised to become my wife, and swore that nothing should part us or render her false to me. See, here is the ring she gave me,” he added, stretching out his hand, “this pearl ring. I was to be back in six months, and our engagement was to be made public. I am back in six months, and the first news I hear is that she is to marry Felix.”

“Did she write and tell you so?”

“No, but Felix did, and asked me to meet him here before seeing her.”

“Now, I wonder if this apparent treachery of Miss Bellin has anything to do with your twinship.”

“What do you mean?” asked Briarfield, starting up.

“You are so like in appearance,” said I, “that no one could tell you apart. You have lived constantly together save for the last six months, and know every action of each

other's lives. It may be that Felix has passed himself off to Miss Bellin as you."

"Impossible! She would detect the deception."

"I doubt it, save by intuition. I assure you, Briarfield, that the resemblance between you is most perplexing. There is not the slightest difference. You dress the same, you have the same features, you almost think the same. It is scarce possible to tell which is which when apart. I thought to-night that you were Felix."

"It cannot be, it cannot be," he muttered feverishly; "her own heart would tell her the truth."

"Did you tell Felix of your engagement?" I asked abruptly.

"Yes; I told him all."

"And when did you hear last from Miss Bellin?"

"Some three months ago. It was because she did not reply to my letters that I came back so soon."

"To whom were your letters sent?"

"To her, of course!"

"Care of Felix?" said I, with instinctive suspicion.

"Why, yes," he said, with a sudden frown. "I did not want Mrs. Bellin to know of our engagement, so did not dare to write openly."

Felix undertook to deliver the letters."

"He may have undertaken to do so, but," I added forcibly, "he did not."

"Denham!"

"The whole case is as clear as day," said I. "Felix was in love with Miss Bellin, and wished to marry her. Knowing she was in love with you, he was well aware he had no chance, so resorted to trickery. When you left for Chili, he gave her your letters for three months, then saying he was going abroad, ostensibly left England, but really stayed, and presented himself as—you."

"As me!"

"Yes. He has traded on the marvelous resemblance between you. He knows all your life, all your love affairs, and I have no doubt that Miss Bellin believes that he is Francis Briarfield, her lover, returned from South America in three months instead of six."

"If I thought so," muttered Francis, biting his fingers, "if I thought so——"

"I am sure it is so. Now you see why it is imperative that he should interview you before you meet Miss Bellin. He wishes to reveal the deception and throw himself on your mercy."

“He’ll get no mercy from me if this is so,” said Briarfield, in a somber tone. “Oh, fool that I was not to write direct to Olivia when I came back to England! But it is not too late. When he comes here I’ll learn the truth, and denounce him to Olivia. Then our troubles will be over.”

“A man capable of such a trick is capable of worse,” said I sententially. “I advise you to be on your guard against Felix.”

“Do you think he’ll kill me?”

“I don’t go as far as that,” I replied cautiously; “but your meeting will be—productive of trouble. Just now you expressed a wish to kill him.”

“And I shall, if he has tricked me as you say.”

“Nonsense, Briarfield; you talk wildly. This matter can surely be settled in a less melodramatic fashion. I am glad I am here, as perhaps you will permit me to be present at the interview.”

“Willingly. I know how clever you are, Denham. You may assist me to unmask Felix.”

“Do you think he’ll come to-night?” said I, going to the window.

“His letter said to-night or to-morrow!”

“Then it will be to-morrow! Felix

wouldn't risk meeting you at night if he has thus betrayed you. Let us go to bed and to-morrow settle the matter."

At first Francis was unwilling to retire, but when the landlord came to lock up for the night, and laughed at the idea of anyone coming there from Marshminster, he fell in with my desire. Together we went upstairs and parted on the threshold of his room. It was five or six doors away from mine.

"Lock your door," said I as we parted.

"What! do you think I'll be murdered in my sleep?"

"No! but I don't like the inn, and I dislike the face of Strent, the landlord. Besides," I continued, tapping Briarfield's breast, "that girl Rose!"

"What about her?"

"She knows Miss Bellin. Good-night!"

With that I departed, notwithstanding his desire for an explanation of my last words. So wearied was I that despite my suspicions of the inn I speedily fell asleep.



CHAPTER II.

THE SEQUEL TO THE ADVENTURE AT THE INN.

IT was close on ten o'clock when I awoke next morning. My long tramp of the previous day had tired me more than I thought. Nevertheless, I was annoyed at oversleeping myself, and astonished that Francis had not called me earlier. I knew how anxious he was about the proposed meeting with his brother, and fancied that his impatience would have drawn him to my room at dawn. Apparently he was less curious concerning the interview than I thought. Yet, leaving him out of the question, I ought certainly to have been roused by Strent or his daughter, and determined to reprove them for such neglect. After all, an inn is an inn, and one has a right to attentions for which one pays. Judging from the

landlord's looks, I did not think my bill would err on the side of cheapness.

These thoughts passed through my mind as I hastily dressed myself. Opening the window, I looked out on the marshes, golden in the sunshine. A keen wind was blowing from the sea, and the smell of brine struck into the heavy atmosphere of my bedroom. An absolute stillness prevailed both inside and out. I felt as though I had awakened in the spellbound palace of the sleeping beauty. An inn, of all places, should be full of bustle and noise, but there was something uncanny in the silence which reigned in this marsh-locked hostel. It hinted trouble, and I felt uneasy.

In no very good temper I descended to the dining room, with the intention of apologizing to Francis for my tardy appearance and of rating the landlord for his negligence. To my astonishment, neither Francis nor anyone else was seen, and the room was in precisely the same condition as on the previous night. The fire was unlighted, the table not set out for breakfast, even the window blinds were down. For the moment I was sick with apprehension, as it was impossible to conjecture the reason of this neglect and absence of

human life. The stillness was as absolute as had prevailed upstairs, and when I rang the bell it echoed throughout the house as though mocking my efforts to summon landlord, maid, or friend.

Twice, thrice, I pulled the bell-rope without result ; then, somewhat unnerved by the silence in which I found myself, went to the back part of the premises. Here the condition of things was the same as in the dining room. The kitchen was empty, nor were there any signs of fire or of food. I explored the whole of the ground floor and found nobody. The conclusion forced itself upon me that Strent and his daughter had left the inn during the night.

What was the meaning of this sudden flight? What reason could be sufficiently powerful to force them to vacate the premises? Asking myself these questions I entered room after room, but in none of them did I find any answer. The front door was bolted and barred, the back entrance was in the same condition, and there was no key in either lock. I considered the features of the case, and saw that the air was full of mystery, perhaps of—but no, in that lonely house I could not bring myself to utter that terrible word.

I knew not what had happened

during my sleep, but felt certain that some event had taken place. Otherwise there could be no reason for this state of things. Almost against my will I searched the house again, but could discover neither Strent nor his daughter Rose. I was alone in the house ! But Francis——

“Francis !” said I, repeating my thoughts aloud, “aye, Francis. I wonder if he has left the inn also, or whether he has overslept himself, and is still in his room.”

To make sure, I went upstairs to his bedroom. Pray observe that all this time I had not connected these things with crime. It is true I had a faint suspicion that there might possibly be some foul play, but as there was nothing to confirm such a belief I abandoned the idea. I declare that when I knocked at the door of Briarfield’s room I had no more idea of the horrid truth than a babe unborn. My premonitions pointed to mystery, but not to murder. Yet from the conversation of the previous night I might have guessed what had happened. The house was as accursed as the palace of the Artidæ and Ate bided on the threshold stone.

Not until I had thrice knocked without receiving any answer did my suspicions begin to form. Then

they took shape in an instant. I tried the door. It was locked. The ominous silence still hinted at unspeakable horrors. My knocking echoed jarringly through the stillness. At that moment there flashed before my eyes the picture of two figures flying across a red horizon against which blackened the beams of a gallows. It was the shadow of the future. I knocked, I called his name, and finally in desperation at the continued silence set my shoulder against the crazy door. It yielded with a tearing sound, and I entered the room amid a cloud of fine dust.

He was lying on the bed stiff and cold. I had no need to call, to touch his shoulder, to place my hand on his heart. He was dead! With the clothes drawn up smoothly to his chin lay the man with whom I had conversed the previous night. The right arm lay outside the counterpane. On the hand glistened a pearl ring. I looked at that bauble, I glanced at the waxen face. The matter was beyond all doubt. Francis Briarfield was dead.

Before I could further examine the body or the room I was forced to run for my brandy flask. For the moment I was deadly sick, and it needed a long draft of the fiery spirit to speed the stagnating blood

through my veins. The strange circumstance was a sufficient apology for such qualmishness. This lonely inn set on a hand breadth of living ground amid quaking bogs, this dead body of what had once been a friend, this solitude by which I found myself environed, these were sufficient to shake the strongest nerve. It looks in a manner prosaic on black and white, but think of the horror of the actual experience!

For the moment I could formulate no ideas on the subject. That my friend should be dead was sufficient to stun me. When reason came back I asked myself how he died and who was responsible for the crime. The landlord, the maid, the brother—one of these three had murdered Francis Briarfield. But in what way?

I examined the body. It was clothed in a nightgown and the clothes lay folded up on the chair by the bedside. The face was calm, there were no marks of violence on the throat or on the frame. Only on the violet lips lingered a slight curl of foam. The smooth bed-clothes drawn up to the chin forbade the idea of a struggle. I looked at the right arm lying on the counterpane, at the hand, and there in the palm was a ragged wound from

thumb to little finger. It was discolored at the edges, and looked green and unwholesome. This livid appearance made me think of poison, but I was not sufficiently a doctor to diagnose the case correctly. Yet I was certain of one thing. That Francis Briarfield had come by his death in some foul fashion, and that at the hands of—whom?

Aye! there was the rub. So far as I knew the landlord had no motive to commit such a crime. Suspicions pointed toward the maid who had wished to speak with the dead man after supper. Yet why should she desire his death? From the lips of Francis himself I had heard that he knew neither Strent nor Rose, nor indeed aught of the Fen Inn. Hither he had been brought by his brother's letter to keep an appointment, and was as ignorant of the inn, of its inmates, of its surroundings as I.

Could Felix have committed the crime? True, if my theory were correct, and he had passed himself off to Olivia Bellin as Francis, there were some grounds for believing he wished his brother out of the way. Francis would undoubtedly refuse to permit the deception to be carried on, so it was just possible that Felix, in a frenzy of wrath and terror at

the idea of his treachery being exposed, might have slain his brother. Yet all this fine theory was upset by the fact that Felix had not arrived on the previous night to keep the appointment. He therefore must be guiltless.

If so, what of the landlord and his daughter? Certainly they had no reason to slay a stranger who had sheltered under their roof for the night. Yet their flight looked suspicious. If they were innocent why did they leave the inn?

Another question pregnant with meaning was the reason of their being alone in the inn. I had seen no servants either indoors or out. Father and daughter appeared to do all the work, yet it was beyond all reason that they should have no assistance. Where was the cook, the waiter, the hostler, the chambermaid? The house was a large one. Two people with all the will in the world could not thoroughly attend to the domestic economy of so great a mansion. Moreover, the girl had looked unused to work. That in itself was suspicious.

"Can it be?" I thought. "Can it be that these two hired this inn to compass the death of Francis Briarfield, and that he was drawn here as into a snare by his brother's letter?"

On the face of it, it looks absurd, and yet in what other way can I explain the absence of servants, the mildewed aspect of the rooms? Now Francis is dead, and they without a word to me have departed."

I could not solve the mystery. Far from doing so, the more I thought, the more I examined the surroundings, the deeper grew the mystery. The door had been locked and I could find no key. The window also was locked, and even had it not been, no one could have entered thereby, so considerable was the height from the ground. How, then, had the assassin gained admittance? Yet sure was I that Briarfield had been murdered, but by whom it was hard to say—nay, impossible.

I did indeed think that he had committed suicide, but this was too wild an idea to entertain even for a moment. When I parted from him on the previous night he was in the best of health, looking forward to meeting Miss Bellin, and was passably content with his life. There was no hint of self-destruction either in speech or action. The thought that his brother had deceived him would not have engendered such an idea. Rather was he determined to unmask the traitor, and regain his

promised wife by force. Murder it might be, suicide was out of the question.

Thus far I threshed out the matter, yet arrived at no logical conclusion. As there seemed no signs of landlord and maid, it behooved me to consider what I should do. According to Francis, his brother was due at the meeting place that morning, so I deemed it advisable to wait until he arrived, and then explain the circumstances to him. If he was in league with Strent to murder his brother he would hardly be able to disguise his joy at hearing the success of his plot. I therefore determined to watch his face during the interview, and if I saw therein any signs of guilt, to there and then in that lonely inn accuse him as a second Cain. By thus terrorizing his soul with such accusation and with the sight of his victim I might force him into confession.

If he were guilty, I guessed the plea behind which he would shelter himself: That he had not been near the place on the previous night. This I would counter by the accusation that his emissaries had carried out his orders and then sought safety in flight. It might be that I suspected Felix wrongly, yet, after the story told me by Francis, I could not

but think he was connected in some unseen way with the death of the latter. But, after all, these suspicions were yet vague and aimless. All I knew for certain was that Francis Briarfield was dead. I swore on the instant to devote myself to finding out and punishing his detestable assassin.

Having come to this resolution, I propped up the open door, so as to close the entrance to the chamber of death, and descended to the lower regions. Finding victuals and fuel in the kitchen, I cooked myself a meal, and made a sufficiently good breakfast. Then I lighted my pipe and took my seat at the front door, to watch for the coming of Felix Briarfield. Whether my suspicions would be dispelled or confirmed by his demeanor I was, of course, unable to say until the interview took place. But I was most anxious to know.

All that morning I looked down the winding road to Marshminster, but saw no one coming therefrom. Not a soul was in sight, and if I did for a moment think that Strent and his daughter might return and declare themselves innocent, the thought was banished by a few hours' outlook. The inn, as I said before, was on a slight rise, and I could see far and wide. No human being was to be

seen, and as the hours passed I grew almost horrified at the grewsome solitude. To be alone with a dead body in a lonely house in a lonely moor is hardly healthy for the mind.

Toward noon I took a resolution.

“If,” said I, “the mountain won’t come to Mahomet—why, then, Mahomet must go to the mountain.”

The interpretation of this was that I intended to see Felix Briarfield at Bellin Hall, Marshminster. Face to face with him, I would force him to explain why he had not kept the appointment. It seemed to me a suspicious circumstance. Perhaps Strent had told him Francis was dead, and therefore it would be useless for him to ride to the Fen Inn. If this were so, it would go a long way toward implicating him in the crime.

I re-entered the house, locked up everything, and, strapping on my knapsack, took my departure toward Marshminster. Some way down the road I looked back at the ruin, and saw it loom more grim and ghastly than ever. Even in the bright sunshine it could not appear otherwise than eerie, and it was with great pleasure that I left it behind. Yet under those sloping roofs Francis Briarfield lay dead, and it was to discover his assassin and to avenge his death that I set my face toward Marshminster.



CHAPTER III.

FELIX OR FRANCIS ?

LATE in the afternoon I tramped into Marshminster. It was by no means my first visit to that sleepy provincial town. Under the shadow of the cathedral tower dwelt relatives with whom I had aforetime spent school and college holidays. Their house was the goal of my pilgrimage, and a week's rest was to recoup me for the toils of the walking tour. The tragic occurrence at the Fen Inn altered all my plans. With an assassin to be tracked, there was no time for comfortable idleness. Francis Briarfield had been my friend, and I owed it to his memory to avenge his death. It was no easy task I had set myself ; I recognized that from the first.

In place, therefore, of seeking the center of the town and my maiden

aunt's, I turned off at the outskirts and made for Bellin Hall. According to the story of Francis, his brother was staying with the Bellins, and it was necessary that I should see him at once about the matter. My acquaintance with Mrs. Bellin and her daughter was confined to casual conversation at crowded "at homes" during the season. I had hardly the right to thrust myself on them uninvited, but my business brooked of no delay. The sooner Felix knew the truth the better it would be for him. If he were guilty, I could punish him for his crime by denouncing him at once to the authorities; if innocent, he need lose no time in hunting down those who had slain his brother. Besides, I wished to put Olivia on her guard against the man masquerading as Francis Briarfield. That I intended to do in any case, whether he was innocent or guilty.

Bellin Hall was a grotesque specimen of architecture, built by Jeremiah Bellin, who had made his money out of blacking. It was uncommonly like a factory, but perhaps the deceased Jeremiah liked something to remind him of the origin of his fortune and keep him from thinking his ancestors came over with William the Conqueror. He married the daughter

of a baronet, and then took his departure to the next world, leaving his widow well provided for and his daughter an heiress in her own right. Mrs. Bellin was a pretty woman, with no brains and a giggling laugh. Her daughter had the beauty of her mother and the brains of her father, so she was altogether a charming girl. How she could tolerate her silly dolly of a mother I could never understand. Perhaps twenty-three years of constant forbearance had inured her to the trial.

On arriving at the front door I learned that Mr. Briarfield was within, and sent up my card, requesting a private interview. For the present I did not wish to see Olivia, as it was my intention to warn Felix that I was cognizant of his trickery. My theory was proved correct by the following dialogue :

Myself : "Is Mr. Briarfield within?"

Footman : "Yes, sir. Mr. Francis Briarfield has just returned from town."

After which question and answer I was shown into a room. Observe that I said "Mr. Briarfield," and the footman answered "Mr. Francis Briarfield." Now, as I well knew that the man bearing that name was lying dead at the Fen Inn, it was

conclusive proof that Felix, to gain the hand of Olivia, was masquerading as his brother. I had just argued this out to my complete satisfaction when Felix made his appearance.

The resemblance between the brothers was extraordinary. I had some difficulty in persuading myself that the man before me was not he whom I had seen dead that morning. The same pale face, dark hair, and jaunty mustache, the same gestures, the same gravity of demeanor, and actually the same tones in the voice. There was not the slightest difference between Felix and Francis; the one duplicated the other. I no longer wondered that Olivia was deceived. Despite my acquaintance with the brothers, I should have been tricked myself. As it was I stared open-mouthed at the young man.

“This is a pleasant surprise, Denham,” he said, looking anxiously at me. “I did not know you were in this part of the world.”

“Nor was I until yesterday. I am on a walking tour, and last night slept at the Fen Inn.”

“The Fen Inn,” he repeated, with a slight start; “what took you to that out of the way place?”

“I came by the marshes, and, as I was belated, had to take the shelter that offered.”

“But, man alive!” said Felix, raising his eyebrows, “the inn is empty.”

This time it was my turn to be astonished. If Felix thought the inn was empty, why did he appoint it as a meeting place for his brother? He either knew too much or too little, so it behooved me to conduct the conversation with the utmost dexterity.

“It was not empty last night, at all events,” I retorted, keeping my eyes fixed on his face.

“Indeed! Are gypsies encamped there?” he said coolly.

“Well, not exactly,” I answered, emulating his calm; “it was in charge of a man called Strent, and his daughter.”

“This is news to me. I was always under the impression that the Fen Inn was quite deserted.”

“You have not been near it lately?”

“No! Nobody goes near it. They say it is haunted.”

“Pshaw,” I answered angrily, “an old wife’s tale. And yet,” I added, after a moment’s thought, “it may well be haunted after what took place there last night.”

“This begins to grow interesting,” said Felix. “Had you an adventure?”

“Yes! I met with your brother.”

“Impossible! My brother Felix is in Paris.”

“I am talking of Francis.”

“Francis!” he repeated, with a disagreeable smile. “Francis! Well, Denham! I am Francis.”

“I think you are making a mistake, Briarfield,” said I coldly; “your brother Francis slept at the Fen Inn last night.”

“I slept in this house.”

“I quite believe that. But you are Felix!”

“Oh!” said Briarfield, bursting into a harsh laugh. “I see you are making the inevitable mistake of mixing me up with my brother. It is pardonable under the circumstances, otherwise I might resent your plain speaking.”

The assurance of the man was so complete that I wondered if he knew that his secret was safe by the death of his brother. Such knowledge would account for his complacency. Yet it was quite impossible that he could know of the death, as he certainly had not been to the inn. I knew that from my own knowledge.

“If you are Francis,” said I slowly, “you are engaged to Miss Bellin.”

“I am,” he answered haughtily, “but by what right you——”

“One moment, Mr. Briarfield.

Miss Bellin gave her lover Francis a pearl ring. I do not see it on your finger."

He glanced down at his hand and grew confused.

"I lost it," he muttered, "I lost it some time ago."

"That is not true!"

"Do you dare to——"

"I dare anything in connection with what I know to be a fraud. You are passing yourself off as your brother Francis."

"By what right do you make this mad assertion?"

"From what Francis told me last night."

"But I tell you I am Francis," he said savagely. "Don't I know my own name?"

"If you are the man you assert yourself to be, where is the pearl ring?"

"I lost it."

"You did not! You never had it! I saw it on the finger of Francis no later than last night."

"I think you are mad, Denham!" said Felix, white with passion; "or else you must be talking of Felix, who is in Paris."

"That untruth will not serve," I said coldly. "Felix is before me, and Francis is lying dead at the Fen Inn."

“What, Francis dead?” he cried unguardedly.

“Ah! you admit it is Francis!”

“No, I don’t,” he retorted quickly. “I only re-echoed your words. What do you mean by saying such a thing?”

For answer I rose from my seat and made for the door. The farce wearied me.

“Where are you going, Denham?” he asked, following me up.

“For the police!” I answered, facing him. “Yes, I am determined to find out the mystery of Francis Briarfield’s death. You, his brother, decline to help me, so I shall place the matter in the hands of the authorities!”

“Upon my soul, Denham,” said Felix, detaining me, “you are either mad or drunk. I declare most solemnly that I am Francis Briarfield. From this story of yours I should think it was my brother Felix who is dead, did I not know he is in Paris.”

“A fine story, but it does not impose on me,” I answered scoffingly. “Listen to me, Briarfield. Your brother Francis went out to South America some six months ago. Before he went he was engaged to Miss Bellin. The mother would not hear of the marriage, so the engagement was kept quiet. You alone knew of it

and took advantage of such knowledge to suppress the letters sent to Miss Bellin through you by Francis, and represent yourself to Olivia as her lover returned three months before his time. You, I quite believe, are supposed to be in Paris, so that you may the more easily carry out the game."

"This is mere raving !"

"It is the truth, and you know it. As Miss Bellin did not answer his letters, Francis thought something was wrong and returned home. Afraid lest he should find out your plot, you asked him to meet you at the Fen Inn, and there either intended to throw yourself on his mercy or—to murder him !"

"Murder him !" he repeated fiercely ; "it is false !"

"That will be for the police to determine !"

"But surely, Denham, you don't intend to inform the police ?"

"I am going to do so now."

Felix seized me by the arm and dragged me back to my seat. He was now much agitated, but made every effort to restrain his emotion.

"Sit down," he said in a hoarse tone. "You do me wrong, Denham—on my soul you do me wrong. I was engaged ! I am engaged to Olivia Bellin ; her mother consented

to our engagement after I returned to England three months ago. Felix, I believe, is in Paris! I don't know whom you met at the inn last night. It was not I—it could not have been Felix. There was no appointment between us. I am not masquerading as Francis, because I am Francis."

"I don't believe you!"

"You must! I can bring forward witnesses to prove my identity!"

"They may be misled by the resemblance. Remember you and Francis are twins."

"I said before, and I say it again, you are mad!" he cried, roughly casting me off. "Who ever heard of an appointment being made at a ruined inn? No one has lived there for months. Anyone in Marshminster will tell you so."

"Strent and his daughter Rose——" I began, when he cut me short.

"Who are they? I never heard of them. They are figments of some dream. You went into that ruined inn last night and dreamed all this."

"You don't believe my story?"

"Not one word," said Felix, coolly looking me straight in the face.

"Then I don't believe one word of yours!" I cried, jumping up; "let us place the matter in the hands of the authorities and see who will be believed."

“What are you going to say, Denham?”

“Say! that Francis Briarfield has died in the Fen Inn.”

“You won’t believe that I am Francis?” he said, evidently making some resolve.

“No, you are Felix!”

“One moment,” he said, going to the door; “I shall prove my identity, and in a manner that will admit of no denial.”

With that he vanished, and I waited to see what further evidence he would bring forward to back up his imposture.





CHAPTER IV.

OLIVIA'S EVIDENCE.

THERE was no doubt that Felix intended to continue passing himself off as Francis. For how long I was uncertain ; perhaps for the rest of his natural life, or until he made Olivia his wife. In this latter event he could reveal the fraud with impunity and revert to his own identity. I could not help thinking that he had been informed beforehand of the death of his brother, else he would not have dared to keep up his imposture with a possible revelation so near at hand. Even assuming such ignorance, I had now told him of the death myself, and so strengthened his position. I regretted that I had not been more cautious.

I was curious to see whom he would bring forward as a witness to his identity. Scarcely Olivia, as if

she once had a suspicion of the truth she would never rest until all was cleared up to her satisfaction. I hardly thought Felix would run such a risk, the more so as his story of losing the pearl ring could not stand against my assertion that it was on the finger of the dead man. If he still persisted in declaring himself to be Francis, I determined that he should ride with me to the Fen Inn and there see the corpse of the man whose name he had so shamelessly assumed. That would surely settle the matter.

Felix was bolder than I gave him credit for, as his witness proved to be none other than Olivia Bellin. She entered the room with assumed lightness, but her face was anxious and she glanced every now and then at Felix, as though to seek his aid and countenance. He, as was natural, wore a haggard expression. His nerves were tensioned up to the highest pitch, a matter of small wonderment, seeing that his life's happiness depended upon this interview.

"What is this strange story you bring, Mr. Denham?" asked Olivia, greeting me coldly. In our best days we were never overfriendly.

"Has not Mr. Briarfield told you?"

"I have not had the time," interposed Felix quickly; "beyond a few

hints of the truth she knows nothing."

"Not even that you are Felix Briarfield?"

"Felix!" repeated Miss Bellin in surprise. "But you are making a mistake, Mr. Denham; this is Francis."

"So he says!"

"You see, Olivia," said Briarfield, addressing Miss Bellin, "Denham insists upon taking me for my brother Felix."

"How absurd! I assure you, Mr. Denham, that Felix is in Paris. I only received a letter from him this morning."

"Impossible!" said I, taken aback by the authority of her tone.

"It is quite true," she continued hurriedly. "Excuse me for a moment, and I shall fetch the letter. You must believe the evidence of your own eyes."

When she left the room, Felix turned toward me with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Are you convinced?" he asked mockingly.

"No; I am puzzled."

"In what way?"

"To think how you managed to get that letter sent on from Paris without being there yourself."

"Against stupidity the gods them-

selves fight in vain," quoth Felix, shrugging his shoulders. "I assure you that my brother Felix is in Paris. Miss Bellin is about to produce a letter received from him only this morning, and yet you insist that I am not myself, and that he whom I pretend to be is dead. You are mad."

"Here is the letter," said Miss Bellin, entering at this moment. "You see it bears the date of yesterday. He is at present staying at the Hôtel des Étrangers, Rue de St. Honoré, but talks of going to Italy."

I examined the letter closely. It was genuine enough; of that there was no doubt, as it bore the French and English postmarks. I quite believed that it was written by Felix, but also that it had been forwarded from Paris by an emissary of the young man in order to keep up the needful deception. Certainly Felix had a marked talent for intrigue.

"If Felix Briarfield is in Paris," said I, handing back the letter to Olivia, "who was it I met at the Fen Inn last night?"

"The Fen Inn!" replied Olivia, with a puzzled look; "why, no one lives there now, Mr. Denham. It is in ruins, and has been empty for over two years."

"Nevertheless, it was tenanted

last night, and I slept there. Also I met Francis Briarfield at the same place."

"Francis was not out of the house last night," declared Olivia decisively.

"Quite true," he replied. "I went to bed early with a bad headache."

"It was not you I met at the inn last night, but your brother Francis."

"How can you persist in so foolish a story?" said Olivia angrily. "This is Francis, and Felix is in Paris. You could not have met either of them at the Fen Inn last night, and, indeed, I can't believe that you slept there at all!"

"I did, Miss Bellin, and there I met Francis."

"If you did, where is he now? Why not clear up the mystery by bringing him here with you?"

"Because he is dead!"

"Dead!" she echoed, catching the arm of Felix. "Dead! Who is dead?"

"Francis Briarfield."

"He is mad," she said to Felix in a low tone, her face white with fear.

"Upon my word, I am beginning to think so myself," I said, losing my temper; "but I declare on my oath that I speak the truth. There is only one way of solving the

riddle. Come out with me to the Fen Inn, and look on the face of the dead man I say is Francis Briarfield. A single glance will give the lie to the assertion of this man who pretends to be your lover ! ”

Felix looked at Olivia, she at him. It seemed to me that they grew a shade paler. I wondered whether any guilty bond existed between them, as certainly they seemed to understand one another very well. Olivia appeared anxious to protect Felix from harm. Either she really believed him to be Francis, or had taken her heart from one brother and given it to the other. It was she who spoke first in and throughout the interview ; the woman played a more daring game than did the man. Her attitude puzzled me, and for the moment I was quite in the dark as to what were her real thoughts regarding my story and that of the pseudo Francis.

“ We cannot go to-night,” she said, with some hesitation, “ but to-morrow morning, if you like, we will ride out to the inn.”

I glanced at my watch.

“ It is now five o'clock,” said I ; “ and will be light up to nine or thereabouts. There is plenty of time for us to ride to the Fen Inn, and I think it advisable to do so at once.”

“Why not to-morrow morning?” objected Felix.

“Great Heavens, Briarfield! have you no natural affection? Don’t I tell you that your brother is lying dead there? Can’t you understand the necessity of attending to so serious a matter without delay? If you have no affection, you might at least have decency.”

“I decline to believe that my brother is dead,” said Briarfield coolly; “that letter shown to you by Olivia proves that he was in Paris yesterday. He could not have come over so quickly, and, besides, would have no reason to go to the Fen Inn.”

“Of course, if you insist upon assuming your brother’s name, I can say nothing, but I know the truth, and had it from the lips of Francis.”

“What do you mean?” asked Olivia.

“I mean that Francis returned from Chili a few days ago and went to the Fen Inn by appointment in order to hear the explanation of Felix.”

“What explanation?”

“The reason of Felix passing himself off as Francis.”

“You are utterly mistaken, Mr. Denham. I swear that this is Francis, the man to whom I am engaged!”

“Can you wish for stronger proof?” asked Felix, with the marked intention of insulting me.

I paid no attention to his sneer, but turned round to Miss Bellin, and asked a pertinent question.

“Where is the pearl ring you gave Francis, Miss Bellin?”

“The pearl ring!” she said, much agitated. “Yes, I did give Francis a pearl ring, but he lost it. Did you not lose it, Francis?” she added, turning toward her lover.

“Two months ago.”

“Well, Miss Bellin,” said I deliberately, “if you come out with me to the Fen Inn, I will show you the pearl ring on the finger of the dead man.”

“It cannot be—it is impossible,” she murmured, clasping her hands together in great distress. “I am utterly bewildered by your talk. Francis returned from Chili three months ago, and my mother consented to our engagement.”

“It was not Francis who returned,” I asserted doggedly, “but Felix—Felix, who pretends to be in Paris.”

“But this letter!”

“Bah! That was written here by Briarfield, and forwarded to a friend in Paris to be posted back to you.”

“Liar!” cried Felix, dashing for-

ward with clenched fists; "if you don't retract that statement, I'll——"

"For pity's sake be quiet," entreated Olivia, throwing herself between us. "Do not bring my mother here. Francis, you do not know the harm you are doing. Mr. Denham," she added, turning to me as he suddenly stepped back, "do you say this gentleman is Felix?"

"I do! Most decidedly.

"I tell you, sir, it is not so. This is my affianced lover, Francis. Great Heavens! could a woman make a mistake in so serious a matter?"

"I believe the resemblance between the brothers would deceive anyone."

"Let us settle the question by going to the Fen Inn," said Felix sharply. "I'll wager that there we find neither landlord nor anyone."

"You don't believe me," said I quickly.

"I do not, sir. I believe you have dreamed all this rubbish. I am here—I, Francis Briarfield; Felix, my brother, is in Paris; and as to your cock and bull story of a murder at the Fen Inn, I don't believe a word of it."

"Very well, Briarfield," I said, picking up my hat. "You have chosen your course, I will now choose mine. Hitherto I have kept the affair quiet for your sake and for

that of Miss Bellin. Now I will place the matter in the hands of the authorities, and wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Do what you think fit," retorted Briarfield fiercely, and turned his back on me. Stung by his contemptuous manner, I walked smartly toward the door, but was stopped on the threshold by Miss Bellin.

"It is no use your going to see the police, Mr. Denham," she said anxiously. "I assure you it will only get you into trouble. Your story is too wild to believe. They will say you are mad."

"I'll take the risk of that. I am not yet so mad as not to believe the evidence of my own eyes. Let me pass, Miss Bellin."

"Stay!" she said in a peremptory tone. "Let me speak a moment with Francis."

I bowed my head in token of acquiescence, and she glided back to where Felix was looking out of the window. For a few minutes they spoke together in low, hurried voices. She seemed to be entreating and he refusing. At length he evidently yielded to her prayers, for he sank into a chair with a gesture of despair, and she returned to my side.

"I don't wish you to get into trouble, Mr. Denham," she said

coldly, "nor do I wish you to use my name, as you assuredly will do in making your report to the police. I believe this story of yours to be an hallucination, and, in order to convince you of it, am willing to ride out to the Fen Inn to-morrow with you and Francis. When we arrive there, I assure you we shall see nothing."

"I am certain you'll see more than you bargain for," said I dryly. "I would rather you went there to-night."

"I cannot. My mother would not allow me to go. Be a little considerate, Mr. Denham."

I saw the justice of this reasoning, and forebore to press the point. After all, so long as they went the time did not much matter.

"Then let it be to-morrow morning," I said coldly, "at ten o'clock. I will be at your park gates. If you and Briarfield are not there, I go at once to the police office and give information concerning the murder of Francis."





CHAPTER V.

AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY.

AFTER that momentous interview I presented myself to my astonished relatives. These were two lovable old maids, sisters of my mother, who had passed the best part of their existence in the Cathedral Square of Marshminster. They knew everybody and all about everybody, and pottered through life with the assistance of a comfortable income which they shared in common, a trifle of gossip, and a series of afternoon teas. At the daily services of the cathedral they were always to be seen, and were intimately acquainted with the dean and chapter. Even the bishop condescended to take tea with them on occasions, and they held their heads high in consequence. Moreover, they loved me greatly, though I was but a graceless nephew to the good souls.

When I made my appearance, the Misses Durrant received me with open arms. They had not expected me till much later in the month, but had already prepared for my reception. My portmanteau, which I had ordered to be sent down from London, had arrived, the bedding of my room was thoroughly well aired, and Rachel, their handmaiden, spread for me a sumptuous meal. When I washed and clothed myself anew, I made an excellent meal, for the long tramp from the Fen Inn made me hungry, I then sat down for a chat and a smoke.

“I think he may, Jane,” hinted Sophia gently.

“If he sits near the open window, Sophia,” was the firm reply, whereupon, this little comedy having been gone through as usual, I produced my pipe and took my appointed station. Thus settled I made inquiries about Bellin Hall and its inmates.

“I see you have the London beauty down here, aunt.”

“Olivia Bellin,” said they both in a breath, and then sighed.

“Is there anything to mourn about, Aunt Jane?” I asked, pricking up my ears for useful information which I knew these gossips could supply.

“ Ah,” sighed Aunt Jane, folding her withered hands, “ who knows the wickedness of the heart ? ”

“ Olivia’s heart ? ”

“ Dear me, no, Lionel,” said Aunt Sophia, scandalized ; “ she is a good girl,—as good as she is lovely,—and not so silly as her mother,” concluded the old lady, with feminine spite.

“ Then to whose heart do you allude ? ”

This question started a duet between the two old ladies.

“ Francis Briarfield ! You remember, Jane.”

“ Yes, Sophia ! That hussy with the feather boa——”

“ Was seen speaking to him in the cathedral by Bishop Jevon’s tomb.”

“ And he seemed very intimate with her.”

“ Still, Jane, he was glad when she left Marshminster.”

“ Rather relieved, I think, Sophia.”

“ And poor Olivia Bellin knew nothing about his wickedness,” they concluded together.

My heart beat rapidly. In this idle talk I saw a link which would bind Felix Briarfield to the girl at the Fen Inn.

“ Was she a pretty girl ? ” I asked with well-simulated carelessness.”

“ Handsome is that handsome

does," snorted Aunt Jane, who was remarkably plain herself.

"Sure, sister, she was not ill-looking," said the gentler Sophia, who had been a toast in her youth; "she had a good figure and dark hair and eyes. I admired her complexion, Jane! it was like cream, and a dimple here," finished Sophia, touching her chin, "a pretty-pretty dimple."

"Sophia!"

"Well, it was a pretty dimple, Jane. No one can deny that."

In this description I espied Rose Strent, especially as regards the dimple. I had noticed it myself. Evidently there was an understanding between this woman and Felix which had led to her taking up her quarters in the Fen Inn with her father—if indeed the landlord was her father, a fact I was beginning to doubt. I set the garrulous ladies off on another tack.

"Do you know anything about the Fen Inn, Aunt Jane?"

"The Lone Inn, child! Never name it! In my youth it was the scene of a terrible murder, and since that time no one has lived in it, save one man."

"It is now in ruins," said Sophia, with bated breath, "and is said to be haunted."

“Does anyone go near it?”

“No one : I don't think there is a man in the country who would venture near the Lone Inn after dark. Two years ago a stranger refurnished and repaired it. But he did not stay longer than a week.”

“What became of him?”

“He disappeared,” said Aunt Sophia, nodding her head solemnly, “vanished altogether. It was supposed that he was drowned in the marshes. The house is still furnished, I believe, but no one goes near it.”

“What about the landlord?”

“It's in Chancery,” said Aunt Jane wisely ; “it has no landlord.”

After this discussion I went to bed with plenty to think about. I saw well enough that Strent and his daughter had taken up their abode in the ruined house for a certain purpose. That purpose was, I verily believe, to encompass the death of Francis Briarfield, and now that it was accomplished they disappeared. As Aunt Sophia said, the furniture of the former proprietor was still there, so a touch or two had rendered the house habitable. This accounted for their unwillingness to receive me as a guest, and for the mildewed aspect of the rooms which had struck me so forcibly. A second

tragedy had accentuated the evil reputation of the house. But while the first tragedy was known to all, the second was known only to myself and to—Felix Briarfield.

I felt certain that he was connected in some way with the unexpected death of his brother. Francis had been lured to that lonely inn for the purpose of being murdered, and the crime had been accomplished by Strent and his daughter. So far as I knew, Felix had not been near the house on the night in question, yet he was without doubt morally guilty of the crime. Olivia, believing him to be her lover Francis, did not place much faith in my story, but surely, when she was convinced by the sight of the dead body, and I had torn the mask from the face of Felix, she would let me deal with him as he deserved.

Next morning I was up betimes, and, telling my aunts I would not be back till late, went round to the sole livery stables possessed by Marshminster. These were kept by Bob Fundy, a bow-legged little man, who had been a jockey in his youthful days, and who was a great friend of mine. He expressed great joy at my reappearance in Marshminster, and mounted me on the best of his steeds. I was in too great a hurry to ex-

change more than a few words with the genial old fellow, and set out at once for Bellin Hall. Later on I regretted my haste, as a few words of explanation from Fundy would have saved me much money and a long journey.

At ten o'clock I was at the park gates, but Felix and Olivia had not yet put in an appearance. I intended to denounce Felix as a murderer, in the presence of his brother's dead body, and to tell Miss Bellin of his friendship with Rose Strent. Jealousy, if nothing else, might make her guess the truth, and prevent Felix carrying on the shameless imposture in which he now indulged so insolently. Once I proved the identity of the dead man by means of the pearl ring, which Olivia would recognize, I hoped to make short work of the pretensions of Felix. It was a difficult task, but I was now seized with what is known as detective fever, and determined to run the assassin to earth. His name, I firmly believed, was Edward Strent; and that Felix was an accomplice. It was questionable whether Rose Strent had taken any active part in the commission of the crime.

In a few minutes I saw them riding down the avenue. They looked a handsome couple, and I sighed to

think how the outward appearance of Felix belied his foul spirit. Olivia looked remarkably beautiful and managed her horse to perfection. As they drew near I noted their haggard looks, as though they had passed the night without sleep, and again the thought flashed through my mind that there might be an understanding between them.

But however much Olivia knew, I felt sure she was ignorant that Francis had been done to death by his brother, else even she would have recoiled from so base a scoundrel.

"Here we are, you see," said Felix defiantly, as I raised my hat to Miss Bellin, "quite ready to set out on this wildgoose chase."

"I am afraid you will find it more serious than you think, Briarfield."

"At all events we won't find that body you speak of."

"I am certain you will, Mr. Felix Briarfield."

"You still insist that Francis is Felix," said Olivia, as we rode on together.

"I am absolutely certain of it."

"What about this?" interposed Felix, reining up his horse and handing me a telegram; "Olivia received it this morning."

I glanced at the telegram. It was from Felix in Paris to Olivia at

Marshminster, and stated that he was going to Italy in a few days, but hoped to return for the wedding. I handed it back without remark, but it struck me as strange that such matter should have been sent by wire instead of by post. The telegram to my mind was only another move in the game Felix was playing so boldly.

“Well, Denham,” he said, restoring it to his pocket, “you see by that telegram that Felix is in Paris, and if so I must be Francis.”

“In that case,” said I, looking at him keenly, “who is the dead man at the Fen Inn.”

“There is none there!” he answered jestingly, yet with a lurking anxiety which I was quick to note; “I have no third brother. We are twins, not triplets.”

I vouchsafed no reply to this witicism, which I judged to be in bad taste, but rode on rapidly. By this time we had left the town far behind, and were some way on the winding road which crossed the marshes. Miss Bellin evidently did not desire to talk, for she pushed forward well in front, and as Felix also relapsed into silence, we rode on smartly without uttering a word. A more dismal riding party I never saw. The keen wind brought a touch of color into the pale cheeks of Olivia, but she

had dark circles under her eyes and looked considerably worried. Felix rode by her side and addressed her every now and then, but I was too far in the rear to know what they said. I felt anything but comfortable while in their company, as they regarded me with great disfavor.

“Never mind,” I thought, touching my horse with the whip, “once I bring Felix face to face with his dead brother he will be forced to abandon these airs. At whatever cost I must tear the mask off him, if only for the sake of that poor girl who believes so firmly in such a villain.”

There was no change in the appearance of the Fen Inn as we rode up to it, save that it looked more ruinous than ever. The solitary building had a sinister aspect, and even in the bright sunshine hinted at secret murder. I noticed how thick grew the grass round the house, thereby marking more strongly its desertion and desolation. Sure enough, it had not been inhabited for a considerable period, and this fact alone roused my suspicions as to the motives of Strent and his daughter. They could have no good design in staying in so haggard a dwelling.

“You see the inn is a ruin,” said

Olivia, pointing toward it with her riding whip; "no one could find shelter there even for one night."

"I did, Miss Bellin."

"It was a dream," she answered, "an idle dream. You may have slept there, but you never met Francis within its walls."

"We are on a fool's errand," said Felix derisively; "I thought so all along."

"Come and see," I said, dismounting at the door of the inn; "he laughs best who laughs last."

It seemed to me that Olivia made as though to turn her horse's head away from the house, but by this time the hand of Felix was already on the bridle rein, and she suppressed the momentary inclination to flee. The action revived my suspicions. With a half sigh she dismounted with the aid of Felix and we entered the house.

All was as I had left it. The blinds were down, the rooms mildewed and desolate, the fireplaces filled with heaps of gray ashes. Olivia drew her riding skirts closely round her and shuddered. I led upstairs to the room of Francis. Here the door had fallen down and we walked on it into the room. To my surprise the bed was empty.

"Well, Denham," said Felix, after

a pause, "where is the dead body to whom you have given my name?"

"Someone has been here and taken it away!"

"I don't think so. The absence of the body only proves the truth of what I said from the first. You dreamed your adventure!"

Before I could reply Olivia burst into hysterical tears. The strain on her nerves was very great, and now that the climax was reached she broke down utterly. Felix took her in his arms and soothed her as he best could, while I, utterly bewildered by the turn events had taken, carefully searched the room. All was in vain. I could find neither body, nor clothes, nor aught pertaining to Francis Briarfield. I began to think to myself that I must be dreaming. But that was out of the question. The only conclusion I could come to was that Strent had watched me leave the house and then returned to make away with the body. Without doubt it was Strent who had slain my unfortunate friend, and now had hidden the corpse in some quaking bog.

When Olivia broke down Felix led her from the room, and I went to the front door—there to find them mounted on their horses.

"We are going back to Marsh-

minster," said Felix, gathering up his reins; "thanks to this wildgoose chase Miss Bellin is quite ill. I trust now, sir, that you are convinced."

"I am not convinced that you are Francis!" I answered doggedly.

"You still think I am Felix," he asked, with a sneer.

"I do! notwithstanding the disappearance of the body, which has been made away with by Strent. I firmly believe that Francis is dead, and that you are Felix Briarfield."

"As we have seen nothing, Mr. Denham," said Miss Bellin coldly, "I must decline to believe your statement. This gentleman is Francis, and Felix is in Paris."

"Very good," said I quietly; "then I leave for Paris to-morrow."

"For what reason?"

"I go to seek Felix. You say he is in Paris, I say he is now before me on that horse. You came to the Fen Inn and found no body, Miss Bellin; I go to Paris—to the Hôtel des Étrangers, and I'll wager that I shall find no Felix."

They looked at one another in silence for a few moments. My remark evidently scared them.

"Are you going to put this matter in the hands of the police?" asked Felix.

"It is useless to do so now, as the

body of your brother has disappeared. I shall go to Paris, and if I do not find Felix there——”

“Well?” she said, seeing I hesitated.

“I will tell the police all and have this neighborhood searched,” I said, concluding my sentence.

Olivia laughed scornfully and rode away, while Felix, preparing to follow, uttered a last word.

“Consult a doctor, Denham, at once. You are mad, or subject to hallucinations.”

And with that he set off at a smart trot, and I was left alone at the door of the inn.

After the extraordinary experiences I had undergone I began to think there might be something in what he said. Nevertheless, I determined for my own satisfaction to go to Paris and see if Felix Briarfield was at the Hôtel des Étrangers. If he were not, then my suspicions might prove to be correct; but if he were, then I might believe that my adventure at the inn was a dream.



CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN IN PARIS.

HAVING made up my mind what course to pursue, I returned to Marshminster, took leave of my relatives, and left that evening for London. There I remained two days reviewing the strange events in which I had lately been an actor. At one moment it was in my mind to abandon what certainly seemed to be a hopeless search, for I could not but see it was a matter of great difficulty to lay my hand on the assassin of Francis. It would be better, I thought, to place the matter in the hands of the police, and let them thrash it out for themselves. Two reasons prevented my taking this ignoble course.

One was that Francis Briarfield had been a college friend, and I was unwilling that his death should

go unavenged. The story of his love for Olivia which he had told me at the inn contained the elements of a strange romance, fitly capped by his tragic end. I felt certain that Felix through his hired bravo—for I could call Strent by no other name—had encompassed the death of his brother. Felix was passionately in love with Olivia, and the unexpected return of Francis not only threatened to take her away from him, but also to reveal the scoundrelly fashion in which he had behaved. At one blow Felix would lose her love and respect, therefore his motive for averting such a catastrophe was a strong one. That he should determine on fratricide was a terrible thought, but there was no other course left to him by which to secure the woman he loved, and the respect he valued. It was the mad action of a weak, passionate man such as I knew Felix to be. Too cowardly himself to strike the fatal blow, he had hired Strent to carry out his plans, and the death had been duly accomplished, though in what way I was quite unable to say. It was sufficient for me to know that Francis was dead, and I felt myself called upon to avenge his death.

The other motive was perhaps the

stronger one of detective fever. I was a bachelor, I had a good income and nothing to do, therefore this quest was one of great interest to me. I had often hunted beasts, but this man hunt was a much more powerful incentive to excitement. I could hardly sleep for thinking of the case, and was constantly engaged in piecing together the puzzle. As yet I had no clear clew to follow, but the first thing to be settled was the identity of Felix at Marshminster with Felix at Paris. Once I established that point, and proved conclusively that Felix had never left England, I would be in a position to prosecute the search in the neighborhood of Marshminster.

I own that there was an additional reason in the pique I felt at the scornful disbelief of Olivia. She evidently considered my story pure fiction, and the strange disappearance of the corpse from the inn confirmed her in this belief. Irritated by such contempt, I was resolved to bring home the crime to Felix, and to prove conclusively to her that he was masquerading as her lover, the dead Francis. It would be a cruel blow when assured of the truth, but it was better that she should suffer temporary pain to dragging out a lifelong agony chained to a man

whom I knew to be a profligate, a liar, and a murderer.

At the end of two days I confirmed myself in the resolution to hunt down the criminal, and decided as the first step to go to Paris. Leaving Victoria by the night mail, I arrived in the French capital next morning. Anxious to lose no further time, I hastened at once to the Hôtel des Étrangers, in Rue de St. Honoré, and there took up my quarters. Recovered from the fatigues of the journey, I partook of luncheon, and then made inquiries about Felix Briarfield. To my surprise I not only discovered that he was in Paris, but that he was in the hotel at that moment.

“Has he been staying here for any length of time?” I asked the manager.

“For six weeks, monsieur, and now talks of going to Italy,” was the astonishing reply.

To say that I was surprised would give but a faint idea of what I felt. That the assertion of Olivia should thus prove true was almost impossible of belief. If Felix were here, and had been here for the past six weeks, it could not possibly be he whom I had met at Marshminster. Assuming this to be the case, who was the man of the Fen Inn who

called himself Francis? My head was whirling with the endeavor to grapple with these thoughts. Suddenly an idea flashed into my brain which might possibly account for the mystery.

“Can it be,” thought I, “that it was Felix whom I met at the inn? Felix who tried to pass himself off as Francis, and then invented that lying story? Perhaps he was not dead, as I thought, but merely plunged into a trance. When he revived, seeing the uselessness of fighting with Francis, he fled back to Paris.”

All this time I stared hard at the manager. In reality I was puzzling out the mystery, and not paying any attention to the man before me. He, however, grew weary under my regard, and moved uneasily.

“Mr. Briarfield is now in his room, monsieur. Shall I take to him your card?”

“If you please,” I answered mechanically, and handed it to him. In a few moments a waiter came with a message, stating that Mr. Briarfield would be glad to see me. I followed the man, in a state of the utmost bewilderment, and found myself in the presence of Felix before I knew what to say or do. He was so like Francis, whom I thought was lying

dead at the Fen Inn, so like the man who passed as Olivia's lover, that for the moment I could do nothing but stare at him. Yet he could be neither of the two, for one was dead and the other I had left behind at Marshminster.

"How are you, Denham?" he said, somewhat surprised at my strange conduct. "And why do you stare so steadily at me?"

"Are you Felix Briarfield?" I gasped out.

"As you see," he answered, raising his eyebrows; "surely you know me well enough to dispense with so foolish a question."

"And your brother?"

"He is at Marshminster, I believe, with Miss Bellin, to whom he is engaged. Why do you ask so strange a question?"

I sat down on the sofa, and buried my face in my hands. Either I was out of my mind or the victim of some horrible hallucination. I certainly had met Francis at the inn, and beheld him dead under its roof. As surely had I seen the man I believed to be Felix at Marshminster. Yet here in Paris I beheld an individual who was neither the dead friend nor the living lover, and he called himself Felix Briarfield.

"I must be mad! I must be

mad!" was all I could say for the moment.

"What is the matter, Denham?" asked Briarfield, touching my shoulder. "Are you ill?"

For answer I seized first one hand and then the other. On neither appeared the least scratch. Yet the man whom I believed to be Francis had a ragged wound on the right hand. My theory of a trance vanished into thin air at this proof that the men were distinct. Astounded by my action, Felix drew back in some alarm.

"How strangely you act, Denham," he said uneasily. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Do you think I am mad?" I asked irritably.

"Your action just now was scarcely the act of a sane person. Why did you examine my hands?"

"To see if they were cut in any way."

He turned the palms of his hands toward me, and shook his head with a slight laugh.

"You see," he said, smiling, "they are absolutely free from cut or wound. Why do you expect them to be marred?"

I made no reply, but passed my hand across my brow. The situation in which I found myself was so

strange and embarrassing that I did not know how to proceed. In the presence of facts I could not but admit that my story would sound but a wild invention.

"Come, Denham," said Briarfield soothingly, "you are doubtless in some trouble, and have come to me for help and advice. I'll give both to the best of my ability."

"I want neither," I muttered in a low voice; "but if you will answer some questions I wish to ask, you will oblige me greatly."

Briarfield drew back with a queer look in his eyes, as if he thought my madness was increasing. However, he overcame the dread my actions apparently caused him, and answered civilly enough.

"Certainly! If it will do you any good. What is it you wish to know?"

"Were you in England within the last seven days?"

"No! I have not been in England for at least six weeks."

"Do you know the Fen Inn?"

"Never heard of it in all my life."

"Are you acquainted with a girl named Rose Strent?"

"I don't even know her name."

"When did your brother Francis return to England from South America?"

“Three months ago.”

“Have you seen him since his return?”

“Frequently in London, but he is now, I believe, at Marshminster.”

“Do you know he is engaged to Miss Bellin?”

“Of course I do,” said Briarfield; “the marriage takes place shortly, and I am to be the best man—that is, if I return in time.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m going to Italy tomorrow,” said the young man, shrugging his shoulders, “and it is just—possible that I may prolong my tour to the East. In that case I may be absent from England for at least six months or more. During that time Francis will doubtless marry Olivia, and I shall not be able to be at the wedding.”

“You have not been to England within the last six weeks, you don’t know the Fen Inn, nor of the existence of Rose Strent,” I summed up; “then I am the victim of some extraordinary hallucination.”

“You are very extraordinary altogether,” retorted Briarfield. “Now I have answered your questions, pray answer mine. Why do you ask all these things?”

“It is a strange story, and one which you will scarcely believe.”

“Let me hear it.”

Thus adjured, I told him the story of my adventure at the inn, but suppressed all mention of the belief I then entertained that the brothers had changed names. He listened attentively and eyed me with some concern. At the conclusion of the narrative he considered for a few moments before making any reply.

“I hardly know what to say,” he said at length. “Your story is very circumstantial, yet you must have been deceived by the chance resemblance.”

“I swear that the man I met at the Fen Inn was your brother Francis.”

“How can that be when Francis was at Bellin Hall, and Olivia said he had not been out of the house? Besides, you say the man whom you believed to be Francis was murdered, yet you left Francis alive and well at Marshminster.”

“I thought Francis was you.”

“Ah! Deceived by our resemblance, no doubt.”

“Yes! I think so,” I replied, not wishing to tell him of my suspicions.

“Well, you see, you made a mistake! Francis is at Marshminster, and I am here, I suppose,” he added jokingly. “You are quite convinced that I am Felix?”

“I was quite convinced the other man was Francis.”

“Great Heavens, man, you surely don't doubt that I am Felix Briarfield?” he cried irritably, rising to his feet.

“I don't! I can't!”

“Perhaps you thought it was I whom you met at the inn?”

“No! because the man I met at the inn is dead. Besides, he had a wound on his right hand, and you have not.”

“It's a queer business altogether,” said Briarfield, walking to and fro. “I cannot but agree with your idea of hallucination.”

“I tell you it is too real for hallucination.”

“Then how can you explain it?” he demanded sharply, pausing before me.

“I can't explain it.” I replied helplessly.

“If you had discovered the corpse when you returned to the inn, there might be some chance of solving the mystery. But you admit there was no corpse there!”

“Not the vestige of one.”

“Then that proves the thing to be hallucination,” he said triumphantly. “If the man was murdered, who would take the trouble to remove the corpse?”

“Strent might have done so to conceal the evidence of his crime.”

“He fled the previous night by your own acknowledgment. The whole thing is ridiculous. If I were you, Denham, I would see a doctor. That brain of yours is in a dangerous state.”

“In spite of all you say, I am certain it was Francis I met at the inn.”

“How can that be when he whom you met is dead and Francis is alive? It could not be Francis, and, as I have not been out of Paris, it could not have been me.”

“Then who was it?”

“Some stranger, no doubt, in whom you saw a facial resemblance to us.”

“Impossible!”

“So I think,” said Briarfield significantly; “for my part I think you are subject to delusions. Do not pursue this case, my friend, or you may find yourself in a lunatic asylum!”

“Will you come over to Marshminster and help me to solve the mystery?”

“Certainly not, Denham. My plans are all made for Italy, and I go there to-morrow. I certainly don't intend to put them off for such a wildgoose chase as you wish me to indulge in.”

I took up my hat and prepared to go. The matter was beyond my comprehension.

“There is nothing for me but to return to England.”

“Do!” said Briarfield in a pitying tone; “and give up following this Will-o’-the-wisp.”

“It seems hopeless enough.”

“Well, so far as I can see, it seems madness. Nothing more nor less. My brother Francis is at Marshminster, you see me here, so it is absolutely impossible you could have met either of us at that inn. The more so as the man you met is dead, and we are both alive.”

“Yes! Facts are too strong for me,” I said, holding out my hand. “Good-by, Briarfield. Many thanks for your kindness; but, oh, man!” I added, with a burst of bitterness, “what does it all mean?”

“It’s hallucination,” said Briarfield; “place yourself at once in the hands of a doctor.”





CHAPTER VII.

LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF EVIDENCE.

AFTER that interview with Felix I returned forthwith to London. I had accomplished the object of my journey, and did not care about staying longer in Paris. My mind was much perturbed, as I was quite unable to come to any conclusion respecting the episode at the Fen Inn. Beyond all doubt I had proved that Francis was at Marshminster, Felix in Paris. Who, then, was the man whom I had met at the inn? It was impossible that I could be mistaken in the identity of my college friend, yet in the face of such evidence as I had gathered it was ridiculous to cling to my first impressions. There could not be three brothers exactly alike in personal appearance, and yet I had beheld three men, at the Fen Inn, at

Marshminster, and in Paris, who resembled each other in every respect. The more I pondered over the mystery the deeper did it become, and the more confused grew my brain.

I began to think that I was the victim of some hallucination, as I could explain the matter in no other way. With this idea, which was the only feasible one left to me, I took the advice of Felix and on my return to town went to see Dr. Merrick. He, a specialist on diseases of the brain, listened to my story with great attention, and questioned me closely on all points.

"There is some trickery about this, Mr. Denham," he said, after consideration.

"You do not, then, think my meeting with Francis Briarfield was an hallucination?" I asked eagerly.

"There is no hallucination about you, sir," was the comforting response; "you seem to me as sane and matter of fact a person as I have ever met."

"Then, if it is not hallucination, how do you account for my having met three men all exactly alike, when I know there are only two with that special appearance in existence?"

"I think it is trickery," repeated Merrick, nursing his chin. "This is more a case for a detective than for

a doctor. Were I you, Mr. Denham, I would employ a good detective, and probe the mystery thoroughly. The matter seems miraculous to you now, but I feel sure when you learn the solution you will be astonished at its simplicity."

"If I am sane, as you say, and as I believe myself to be, I will thrash out the matter myself."

"Better get a trained man, Mr. Denham. From what you have told me I see you have to deal with a criminal of no ordinary intelligence. It is an extraordinary case," mused the doctor, "and I do not wonder at the fascination it seems to exercise over you. Were I in your place——"

"Were you in my place?" seeing he hesitated.

"Here am I setting up for a lawyer," said Merrick quaintly. "To tell you the honest truth, Mr. Denham, you have inoculated me with detective fever. I should like to solve this problem myself. Criminal investigation has always been rather a hobby of mine. In my business I meet with some queer experiences. There are more insane people in the world than you think."

"Tell me your ideas, doctor, and I'll carry them out, and report progress."

"Good! I'll be the sleeping part-

ner," he said in an amused tone ; "but I warn you, Mr. Denham, that from what I see of this case it will be one of great difficulty, and may take months to work out."

"I don't mind that ; it is nothing to an idle man like myself ; but I am afraid, Dr. Merrick, I take up your valuable time."

"Oh, I can spare a few minutes," said the doctor quickly. "I work hard enough, so it is permitted to even a professional man to indulge occasionally in some amusement. This case is so to me."

"Well, and your idea ?"

"In the first place, I am inclined to agree with your ideas of Felix passing himself off as Francis."

"I have abandoned that idea," said I dolefully ; "I saw Felix in Paris."

"Wait a moment," replied Merrick, "we'll come to that later on. Furthermore, I believe it was Felix you met at Marshminster—Felix, who called himself Francis, and posed as the lover of Miss Bellin."

"But I saw him in Paris," said I, again clinging to that undeniable fact.

"I know you did, but the pretended Francis of Marshminster, and the real Felix of Paris, are one and the same person."

“You mean that he followed me over?” I cried, suddenly enlightened.

“Precisely, and suborned the manager of the Hôtel des Étrangers.”

“But why should he do that?”

“Can’t you see?” said Merrick impatiently. “Felix wants to put a stop to your following up this case. From your story it is quite probable that he killed his brother through Strent. The whole circumstances of that Lone Inn are very suspicious. Your unforeseen arrival that night complicated matters. You saw how unwilling they were to admit you. Had you not arrived, Francis would have vanished from the world, and none would have been a bit the wiser. But when you came to Bellin Hall, Felix saw a new source of danger, not only to his character, but to his life. He asked for a night’s grace. During that night he went himself to the Fen Inn, and hid the corpse in some boghole.”

“Impossible!”

“I’ll stake my life that it is so,” said Merrick calmly. “Make inquiries as to the movements of Felix Briarfield on that night, and I’ll lay anything you’ll find he went to the Fen Inn.”

“That, then,” said I, “was the reason he was so ready to go there next morning with me.”

“Exactly! He knew well, thanks to his forethought, that there was no evidence there to convict him of a crime, and he could still keep up his imposture. So far all was in his favor, but your obstinacy raised a new danger. You said you would go to Paris and satisfy yourself of the existence of Felix. Now, then, you remained two days in London.

“Yes; I was not quite sure whether it was worth while carrying on the matter.”

“It was a pity you wasted so much time,” said Merrick, “for Felix took advantage of your negligence to slip over to Paris, and lay a trap for you. In plain words, he disappeared from Marshminster as Francis, and reappeared in Paris as Felix.”

“He might have done so! But don’t you think I would have guessed the identity of the one with the other?”

“How could you,” said the doctor, “when the twins are alike in every respect? And, moreover, you firmly believed Olivia Bellin’s lover was in Marshminster.”

“But if I go down at once to Marshminster, I’ll detect the absence of Felix, and so guess what has taken place.”

“If you go down to Marshminster,

you'll find Felix back again in his old place."

"Then Paris?" I queried uneasily. I was beginning to see I had been duped.

"You forget Mr. Felix of Paris has gone to Italy and left no address. It's all safe there, and, as he said he was going to the East for six months or so, there will be plenty of time for the pretended Francis to marry Olivia."

"You don't believe that Felix of Paris has gone to Italy or the East?"

"Of course not! I believe he arranged all these matters to baffle your prying, and then calmly returned to Marshminster."

"But the manager of the hotel?"

"He is in the pay of Felix. You'll get nothing out of him. Now, I am certain that is the explanation. Are you not surprised at its simplicity?"

"Yes, I am! It is astonishing I never thought of it before."

"Columbus and his egg once again," said Merrick grimly. "Well, what are you going to do next?"

"To drive to Marshminster, and find out the movements of Felix on the night after the murder."

"Quite so; but first satisfy yourself on the subject of Francis."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What day of the month were you at the Fen Inn?” continued Merrick.

“On the 10th of June.”

“Good! Francis there told you that he had just arrived from Chili. Now, find out what boat he came by, look up his name in the passenger list, and ascertain the date on which the true Francis arrived in England. That point established, you can prove the false Francis to be an impostor.”

“An excellent idea,” said I, starting to my feet. “I’ll see about it at once.”

“And mind,” said Merrick, raising his forefinger, “I expect to be kept fully advised of the case.”

“Never fear, doctor. You are excellent at solving puzzles. When I find another nut, I’ll bring it to you to crack.”

“Do! I take a great interest in this sort of cases. I ought to have been a lawyer instead of a doctor.”

“I’m thankful for my own sake you are the latter,” said I, shaking his hand. “Good-by, doctor; I am greatly obliged for the kind interest you have taken in this case.”

“Pure selfishness, I assure you,” replied Merrick; and so I took my leave.

Before searching the shipping lists I sent two telegrams—one to the manager of the Hôtel des Étrangers, asking if Mr. Felix Briarfield was still there; the other to my aunt Jane, inquiring whether Mr. Francis Briarfield was in Marshminster. This business having been dispatched, I took a hansom to the City, and saw a merchant of my acquaintance. He was an old friend, and willing to oblige me in every way.

“Chambers,” said I, when in his office, “I want to find out a ship that arrived in London from Chili during the present month.”

“During¹ June,” said Chambers. “Well, there’s no difficulty about that. What is her name?”

“That is one of the things I wish to find out; also the names of the passengers.”

“Come with me to the Jerusalem,” said Chambers, picking up his hat; “you’ll find there her name and agents. Go to the agents and they will supply you with a list of the passengers. What’s up now?”

“Nothing particular,” I answered carelessly. “I have reason to believe a friend of mine returned from South America this month, and I want to make certain.”

“Well, if he came under his own name, you’ll have no diffi-

culty in doing so. Here's the Jerusalem!"

This, it is well known, is a shipping club for the convenience of merchants. It tells them all about incoming and outgoing vessels, gives information regarding cargoes, and, in fact, supplies all kinds of knowledge useful to those who have argosies afloat. Chambers was well acquainted with the mode of procedure, so I let him do all the work. It was now the 16th of June, and, as Francis had informed me he had arrived during the month, there was not much difficulty in finding what I wanted.

"Here you are," said Chambers, beckoning to me; "only one ship this month from Chili—a steamer, the *Copiapo*. Arrived on the 6th of June. Dane & Paxton, 45 Devereux Lane."

I copied this down in my notebook, refused Chambers' hospitable invitation to luncheon, and went off at once to Devereux Lane. Here I had no difficulty in seeing the passenger list of the *Copiapo*, and one of the first names I set my eyes on was "Francis Briarfield."

"This puts the matter beyond all doubt," said I, making a note of this; "if Francis Briarfield did not arrive in London till the 6th of

this month, he cannot be the man now bearing his name at Bellin Hall."

I was now perfectly satisfied that Merrick's idea was correct. In order to confuse and throw me off the scent Felix had followed me to Paris, and appeared *in propria persona*. But for the doctor's suggestion of the shipping list I should not have been able to prove this, but now I held incontrovertible evidence in my hands to prove that Felix was trading on the marvelous resemblance between his brother and himself. Francis had arrived in England on the 6th of June, he had met me at the Fen Inn on the 10th, and had there been foully done to death by his brother through a third party. But I was now on the trail and hoped to run to earth both the unnatural brother and his vile tool. I felt like the hero of some wild romance.

On returning to my rooms in Duke Street I wrote off at once to Merrick, telling him of my success in proving the identity of Francis with the man who had been slain at the lone inn. It now remained for me to go down to Marshminster and there make inquiries as to the movements of Felix on the night in question. I felt confident that I could pursue such a search without hin-

drance, as he would be quite satisfied that I would now rest after the Paris episode. No man in his senses would search for a dead man when that man had been conclusively proved to be alive. So Felix doubtless thought, and rejoiced in his cleverness in thus putting an end to my inquiries. But mark how ironical is Fate. Felix advised me to consult a doctor about my hallucination, as he chose to call it. I took that advice and saw Merrick. Merrick had nullified all his plans by solving the riddle with which Felix was trying to baffle me.

It was hard on Felix to thus be the means of pointing the way to his own destruction. But, then, Fate is so ironical.

That afternoon I received answers to my telegrams. The first, from Paris, stated that Mr. Felix Briarfield had started for Italy; the second, from Marshminster, informed me that Francis Briarfield was staying at Bellin Hall.

"No," said I, on reading these telegrams, "Felix Briarfield did not leave Paris for Italy, but for Marshminster, and Francis Briarfield, poor soul, is not at Bellin Hall, but lying in the Essex marshes."

That night at five o'clock I left for Marshminster.



CHAPTER VIII.

A CLEW TO THE MYSTERY.

THE drama of "The Prodigal Son" was enacted over again when I returned to Marshminster. My aunts had greatly resented my sudden departure to Paris, and announced that they this time intended to keep me with them for some weeks. I had no objection to this arrangement, as I anticipated a long and laborious task in ferreting out evidence against Felix. The first thing to be done was to learn all that had taken place in my absence, and the information was ably supplied by Aunt Jane, seconded by her sister. I inquired about Briarfield and his fiancée.

"Bellin Hall is to be shut up next week," said Aunt Jane; "the Bellins are going to town, and with them Mr. Briarfield.

"I wonder they stayed here so

long when the season was on in London," said Aunt Sophia, "but it was all that foolish Mrs. Bellin. She chose to consider herself ill, and so insisted upon remaining here. Now she can't resist the attractions of town life any longer, and goes next week."

"She has to arrange about the wedding, Sophia. You know it takes place in July. I wonder if Mr. Felix Briarfield will be back in time to be best man."

"That I can safely say is impossible," said I dryly.

"But why?" exclaimed both the old ladies, scenting news.

"Well, he has gone to Italy, and from there goes to the East," I answered, unwilling to tell the truth. "I don't see how he can return in time for the wedding if it takes place in July."

My female relatives looked significantly at one another.

"What did I tell you, Sophia?" said Aunt Jane in a tone of subdued triumph.

"Yes, sister, you were right," sighed Sophia, shaking her head. "Poor young man. I thought myself he loved Olivia."

"Who loved Olivia?" I asked sharply.

"Felix Briarfield," said Aunt Jane;

“when his brother went to America, he was always with her, and no doubt loved her dearly. I can scarcely wonder at that, as she is so beautiful a girl. But he behaved very well, and when Francis came back, went to the Continent.”

“He was unable to bear the sight of his brother’s happiness,” said Aunt Sophia sentimentally; “poor, poor young man! I have no doubt his heart is broken. He actually left Marshminster before his brother arrived from America, so as to spare himself the painful sight of their happiness.”

I saw by this conversation that my surmise was correct. Felix had fallen in love with Olivia while his brother was in America, and, selfishly determined not to give her up, had devised the idea of passing himself off as Francis. With this in his mind he had gone to Paris, and pretended to stay there; then reappeared at Marshminster as Francis, alleging an earlier return from Chili as an excuse. When Francis really returned, Felix asked him to be at the Fen Inn, so as to rid himself of his brother before he could see Olivia. Whether he intended to kill Francis or to merely explain matters I could not tell, but at all events Francis had been murdered, and I firmly believed

that Felix was morally guilty of the crime. The suppression of the letters, the substitution of himself as Francis, and the dexterous manner in which he had rid himself of the corpse (according to Merrick's theory), all showed me that I had a dangerous and reckless man to deal with. But after the clever way in which he had baffled me in Paris by resuming his name I was prepared for any villainy at his hands. He had committed himself so far that he could not draw back, and was compelled to follow crime by crime in order to bolster up his position.

He was going to town with the evident intention of evading me. Doubtless he thought that, deceived by the episode at the Hôtel des Étrangers, I had quite abandoned all idea of meddling in the affair. But for Merrick I should certainly have done so. Now that Merrick saw the matter in the same light as I did, I was determined to go on, but resolved to give no hint of this to Felix. When he left Marshminster, I could pursue my inquiries at leisure. Already I had been too rash in revealing my intentions, for had I not mentioned my journey to Paris, Felix would not have been put on his guard and baffled me so adroitly.

I had at least gained one important piece of information, which in itself was sufficient to break off the match. The passenger list of the *Copiapó* proved conclusively that Francis had not reached England before the 6th of June, and this shown to Olivia would show that Felix was passing himself off as her lover. With such proof I could stop the marriage immediately, but preferred to wait until I gained further evidence implicating him in the murder of his brother. I believed Merrick's theory to be true, and quite expected to find that Felix had ridden out to the Fen Inn for the purpose of hiding his brother's body in one of the bogholes.

"By the way," I asked Aunt Jane, as we parted for the night, "how does Miss Bellin look? Like a happy bride! eh?"

"By no means," replied my aunt solemnly; "she looks ill and miserable. But that I know this marriage with Francis is a love match, I should say she disliked the idea of becoming his wife."

"No doubt," thought I, "no doubt. Olivia mistrusts Felix already."

I said good-night to my elderly relative, and went off to bed. Instead of turning in I lighted my pipe and leaned out of the window,

thinking deeply. Could it be possible that Olivia had discovered the imposture? If so, why did she tamely submit to marry a man whom she must know was guilty of his brother's and her lover's death? Moreover, if she were assured of this, she must also have condoned the deception at the Hôtel des Étrangers. Her conduct seemed strange, yet I could not bring myself to believe that she knew the truth. If she did, she was as bad as Felix.

"She must think he is really Francis, and that Felix is in Paris," I thought. "Surely she would not willingly go to the altar with a man whom she knows to be a villain. No! He has thrown dust in her eyes, and made her believe what he pleases. I must save the poor girl from such a fate. Perhaps, in spite of outward semblance, she instinctively feels that Felix is not Francis. Women have their instincts. I know of no other reason why she should look pale and ill."

My cogitations were cut short by Aunt Jane knocking at the door and telling me not to waste the candles. I was used to these little idiosyncrasies of my aunts, so I answered that I was going to bed, and put out the light at once, but the rest of the night was passed in a wakeful state.

Truly, I had a bad attack of detective fever!

For the next few days I kept very quiet, as I was unwilling to rouse the suspicions of Felix. At length, my aunts, who entertained no suspicion of my designs, informed me that he had gone to London with Mrs. and Miss Bellin. The coast now being clear, I ventured out and began to work out my carefully-laid plans.

In the first place I went to Bob Fundy to hire a horse. It was my intention to ride out to the Fen Inn and thoroughly examine the rooms, as I fancied Felix might have hidden the corpse in the house. From Fundy I gained a piece of unexpected information.

"Want to ride to the Fen Inn, sir," said he, scratching his head. "Why, whatever's come over that old ruin? Everyone seems to be going there."

"What do you mean, Fundy?"

"First Mr. Briarfield, and now you," said Fundy. "Blessed if I can understand it. Though, to be sure, he rode there at night, and you go in the daytime."

"Did Mr. Briarfield go to the Fen Inn at night?" I asked, seeing I was on the eve of learning something important. I had not forgotten Merrick's theory.

“That he did, sir. He rode there two nights over a week ago.”

“Curious,” said I, with assumed carelessness; “it is not an attractive place. I dare say he only rode a little way out of the town.”

“No, sir,” said Fundy decisively, “he went to the Fen Inn! He told me so himself, as I noticed the horse was so done up. Look here,” added Fundy, opening his day-book, “see, on the 10th of June he had a horse, and on the 11th. Both at night, and did not return till midnight.”

I mounted my horse and rode away, thinking deeply. If Felix had gone to the Fen Inn on the 10th, then I felt sure that he had actually murdered his brother. Hitherto I had believed Strent was the guilty party, but now, thanks to the evidence of Fundy, I saw that Felix had committed the crime. He had also ridden to the inn again on the 11th in order to conceal the body. Merrick's theory was thus proved to be correct. Link by link I was putting the chain together. I had proved that Francis had not arrived in England till the 6th of June, and so made certain of the identity of Felix. I had discovered that Felix was at the inn on the fatal night, and also that he had concealed the body. Now I wished to dis-

cover how the murder was committed.

The Fen Inn was quite deserted, and as evil-looking as ever. In spite of my searching I discovered no signs of the dead body of my friend. The clothes which I had seen folded on the chair beside the bed were also gone, and there was not the slightest thing left to excite suspicion.

“He must have hidden the body in the marshes,” I thought, after a vain search; “I’ll see if he has left a trail.”

Struck by the feasibility of this idea, I went out at the front door and examined the ground. It was moist and muddy, owing to the incessant percolation of marshy water. The path leading from Marshminster was marked confusedly with horses’ hoofs, so it was quite useless to look for a trail in that direction. Looking from the door of the inn, the path trended to the right; but on the left, where there was no path, I noticed hoof marks, also that the lush grass was trodden down.

“Here is the trail,” said I, mounting my horse; “he took the body to the left.”

Following the trail carefully,—and it was plainly discernible, owing to the dampness of the ground,—I rode straight out for some considerable

distance. The spongy marsh jetted black water under the feet of the horse, and it seemed as though I were in danger of being bogged. Nevertheless, as the trail still continued in front of me, I followed it. Where Felix could go I could follow. He had evidently placed the body of his brother across his saddle and ridden with it in this direction ; I wondered at the nerve of the scoundrel.

Unexpectedly the trail turned off at right angles, and led toward a broad pond of water, slimy and sullen in appearance. On the verge of this the track ceased, and then I knew that I saw before me the tomb of Francis Briarfield. Into those black waters the murderer had hurled his victim, and doubtless if the pool were dragged the body would be found. This I determined to do before taking further steps in the matter.

“Then, Mr. Felix Briarfield,” said I, riding back to the inn, “then we will see how much your astuteness will avail you.”

It was late in the afternoon when I got back to the inn, and the cold vapors of the marsh made me shiver. As I am subject to rheumatism, I was afraid of future sufferings, so, having some brandy in my flask, I determined to light a fire for the purpose of heating water,

and comforting myself with a hot drink. There was plenty of fuel about, and I had matches in my pocket. I began to rake the dead ashes out of the dining-room grate, when I disturbed an oblong piece of flint which rattled on to the earth. All ideas of lighting a fire were forgotten as I stood with that in my hand. It was an arrowhead. I handled it gingerly, for I knew well that it was steeped in poison, and that with this Francis had been murdered.

I saw at once what had taken place. Felix had arrived, and had gone up to his brother's room. Holding the flint with the razorlike edge outward, he had shaken hands with his brother, and so wounded him. A quarrel had ensued, but Francis, not thinking he was poisoned, never dreamed of his danger. Then he had fallen dead, and Felix, placing the body on the bed, had returned to the dining room, and flung the poisoned arrowhead into the fire. The most astounding thing was that I had not been awakened by the outcry of Francis, but I suppose I was quite worn out by my walk and in too deep a sleep. Nevertheless, it was strange that I had heard neither the arrival of Felix nor the struggle which must have

taken place. Possibly I had been drugged.

With this damning piece of evidence in my pocket, wrapped up in paper,—for I feared the poison myself,—I rode back to Marshminster, wondering how Felix had hit upon such a terribly ingenious fashion of removing his brother. So far as I knew he had not traveled much, and would not be likely to have any savage weapons in his possession; yet he could not have owned a flint arrowhead in the ordinary run of things. This puzzled me greatly.

I returned the horse to Fundy without making any remarks, and, thoroughly tired out, went early to rest, still puzzling over that arrowhead. Before dawn I solved the mystery. In the entrance hall of the Bellins' house a perfect armory of savage weapons were arrayed against the wall. There were clubs, arrows, bows, mats, and grinning heathen gods. Doubtless Felix, knowing the arrows to be poisoned, had taken the flint head of one in order to put his brother to death. As early as I could I went to Bellin Hall to satisfy myself on this point.

The Hall was a show place, as it possessed a fine picture gallery, so I had but little difficulty in gaining

admission from the woman in charge. Requesting permission to examine the warriorlike implements patterned against the hall wall, I narrowly observed the arrows. It was as I thought—one of the arrows was missing, and Felix had stolen it in order to kill his brother! I did not take much interest in the pictures after such a discovery, and the talk of the housekeeper fell unheeded on my ears. Finally I gave her a sovereign, and left the house, impatient to be alone and think over my discoveries.

I had now sufficient evidence to prove that Felix had killed Francis, and quite sufficient to warrant my having him arrested. If the pool were dragged, the body would be found, with the ragged wound of the flint arrowhead on the right hand. I could prove the finding of the arrowhead in the ashes, and how it had been taken from Bellin Hall. Fundy could give evidence to Felix having taken a horse to the Fen Inn on the 10th, and also on the 11th. And, altogether, the evidence against Felix was clearly sufficient to hang him. Still, I did nothing rashly, and before taking further proceedings returned to London to consult Merrick. His advice, I knew, would be judicious.



CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER SURPRISE.

R. MERRICK was delighted to see me again so speedily, and assured me that he had thought of nothing else but the Lone Inn crime. The peculiar circumstances of the case fascinated him greatly. "Decidedly I should be a detective," he said laughingly. "I have been inventing all kinds of theories in connection with this matter. By the way, my idea of searching the shipping list was a good one."

"Excellent. You received my letter?"

"I did, with much pleasure. So Francis did not arrive in England until the 6th of June?"

"No! Therefore it was Francis whom I met at the Fen Inn, who was killed by his brother, and it is Felix who now passes himself off to Olivia Bellin as Francis."

“Does she not guess the imposture?”

“No! So far as I can see she firmly believes Felix to be Francis. You were also right about the hiding of the corpse.”

“You don’t say so!” cried Merrick, highly delighted; “did Felix ride out to the Fen Inn and hide the body as I surmised?”

“He did! I have the evidence of the livery-stable keeper to prove that he hired a horse on the 11th and did not return till midnight.”

“During which time he disposed of his brother’s body.”

“Precisely! I tracked his horse’s hoof marks to the pool wherein I am convinced the body lies hidden.”

“Egad! You are a wonderful man, Denham! Did you have the pool dragged for the body?”

“Not yet. I wish to tell you all my discoveries before doing so.”

“Many thanks. I am so interested in this case that it is a great pleasure for me to follow it step by step.”

“I wish no thanks from you, Merrick,” said I heartily. “It is rather the other way, as your reasonings have led me to these important discoveries: First, that Felix was in Paris; second, that Francis did not arrive from Chili till this month; and

third, that Felix himself hid the corpse. By myself I should never have discovered so much. But I have made one most famous discovery."

"Yes! And that is?"

"I know how the crime was committed and by whom."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Merrick, in much excitement. "Have you seen Strent?"

"No; it was not Strent who killed Francis Briarfield."

"You don't mean to say it was Rose Strent?"

"No; it was Felix himself."

Merrick uttered an ejaculation of surprise, and remained silent for a few minutes.

"But you said yourself that Felix never came to the inn on that night," he objected.

"So I thought, but it appears that I was mistaken. Fundy, the livery-stable keeper, told me that. Felix hired a horse from him on the 10th and 11th of June. On both occasions he did not return till midnight. Now, Francis was murdered on the 10th, and his corpse disappeared on the 11th. Felix is therefore responsible for both the murder and the concealment of the body."

"That is purely circumstantial evidence."

I laid down the arrowhead on the table.

"This is proof positive," I said triumphantly. "With that piece of flint Francis was killed."

"Really?" said Merrick skeptically, picking up the arrowhead. "With such a clumsy instrument he must have bungled the job considerably."

"Not at all. That arrowhead is steeped in virulent poison."

"The deuce!" cried Merrick, dropping it hastily. "Why did you not warn me of its danger? I might have cut myself and gone the same way as poor Francis Briarfield. How do you know the murder was so executed?"

"I told you about the discolored wound in the palm of the right hand?"

Merrick nodded.

"Well," I continued, "that was the cause of death, as there was neither scratch nor violence on any other part of the body. I picked up that arrowhead in the fireplace of the dining room of the Fen Inn, where it had doubtless been thrown by Felix after the committal of the crime."

"Where did he get the arrowhead?"

"That is just what puzzled me for

a long time. Fortunately, I remembered that the entrance to Bellin Hall was decked with a perfect armory of savage weapons. I made an excuse of looking at the picture gallery, and so gained admission to the Hall."

"Did you find anything likely to confirm your suspicions?"

"Yes! I found that an arrow had been removed from the wall."

"How could you tell that?"

"Because the weapons were arranged in patterns, and one of the patterns was incomplete. Moreover, on comparing that arrowhead with those on the wall I found it was precisely similar in appearance."

"Humph," said Merrick thoughtfully, "there is only one deduction to be taken from all this. Felix stole the arrowhead, and, knowing it to be poisoned, rode off to the Fen Inn to kill his brother. He is a clever scoundrel."

"Very clever indeed," I answered dryly; "but for you, Merrick, he would have baffled me altogether."

"I think you have him this time," said Merrick, laughing. "Now, what do you intend to do next?"

"Have the pool dragged for the body and Felix Briarfield arrested."

"Before doing so it would be

advisable to find Rose Strent or her father."

"Why so?"

"Because they only can give positive evidence as to the committal of the crime. Failing them, Felix may slip through your fingers."

"They won't show up or give evidence for their own sake."

"In that case they must be found and forced into confession," said the doctor quickly. "And what about Felix and Miss Bellin?"

"They are now in town—Mrs. and Miss Bellin in Swansea Square, and Felix at his chambers in Jermyn Street."

"I wonder if Felix is still in communication with Rose Strent?" queried Merrick, half to himself.

"It's not impossible! Whatever Rose Strent was or is, she is not a waiting maid. I believe some guilty bond unites the pair, and that Rose assisted Felix in his scoundrelly schemes out of pure love."

"Hardly," responded Merrick thoughtfully. "If Rose loved Felix, she would not assist him to marry Olivia, and by removing Francis she certainly did so."

"How would it do to see Felix at his chambers and bully him into confession?"

"You won't manage that—the man is too clever."

“He can't do much against the proofs in my possession.”

“He'll deny anything !”

“At all events I'll try, Merrick. This evening I'll call on Felix and swear that I am going to have him arrested for the murder of his brother. That will bring him to his knees.”

“It might and it might not. Better look for Rose Strent.”

“If anyone knows where she is to be found, it is Felix. I can't do better than see him.”

“Try it, by all means,” said the doctor doubtfully, “but I'm afraid you won't get much satisfaction out of him. First find Rose Strent, have the pool dragged and the body found ; then, what with the evidence of Fundy and that arrowhead, you will have no difficulty in getting a warrant for his arrest. At present Felix will simply order you out of his rooms.”

“I'll run the risk of that,” I answered, and shortly afterward took my departure.

I could not now complain of lack of interest in my life. It took me all my time to keep the many details of this case in mind. There was no doubt that I had already solved the mystery and that Felix was guilty of his brother's death. Yet, as Merrick

said, it would be necessary to find the body and thus establish conclusive proof of the crime before the murderer could be convicted. When this was done, the evidence in hand would be sufficient to insure his condemnation. For my part I believed that he would be driven into a corner and forced to confess his complicity in the crime.

Firmly convinced of this man's guilt, I was determined he should not marry Olivia. The crime had been committed for her sake, and, seeing that he had behaved in so cowardly a fashion, it was a fit retribution that he should not achieve his purpose. It was no use my warning Olivia as to the true character of Felix, as she firmly believed him to be Francis, and would decline to believe my story. Under these circumstances I judged it advisable to see Felix at his chambers, and warn him that I knew all. Terrified by the predicament in which he found himself, he might leave England, and thus Olivia would be saved from lifelong misery. His punishment for the crime would occur later on; as, notwithstanding his flight, he could be arrested on the Continent while extradition treaties were in force.

After dinner I therefore went to call on Felix. His rooms were in

Jermyn Street, and, as mine were just round the corner in Duke Street, I had not far to go. My visit was paid on the chance of finding him in, as I did not wish to put him on his guard by notifying my wish for an interview. As the twins, in spite of constant disagreement, occupied the same rooms, I could not but wonder at the nerve of Felix in coming back to the apartments where every familiar object would remind him of his fratricidal act.

It was just eight o'clock when I reached the door of the chambers. At the foot of the stairs I found the caretaker ensconced in a glass box like an insect. To him I addressed myself. He was an old friend of mine, and rather an oddity in his way.

“Is Mr. Briarfield within?”

“Mr. Francis Briarfield is in his rooms,” said the caretaker; “but Mr. Felix is in Paris.”

Of course I guessed that this would be the answer, and secretly admired the dexterity with which Felix had carried out his plans. Doubtless in the end when his brother did not return, or rather when his pretended self did not reappear, he would account for it by an accident in the Eastern deserts. However, my business was with

Felix, alias Francis, so I made no comment on the caretaker's remark.

"Pray take up my card to Mr. Briarfield," I said. "I want to see him at once."

"I can't take it up now, sir," said the caretaker civilly. "Mr. Briarfield is engaged, and gave particular orders that he was not to be disturbed."

"Ah! but doubtless he is engaged with a friend of mine," I hinted ambiguously.

"Is the lady a friend of yours, sir?"

A lady! My thoughts at once reverted to Rose Strent; but, then, the chances were that it might be Olivia.

"Yes, Miss Bellin?"

"That's the young lady, sir, to whom Mr. Briarfield is engaged?" asked the caretaker, who was a confirmed gossip.

"Yes!"

"It is not her, sir. I know her well by sight, as she has been here with Mrs. Bellin. It's another lady."

My surmise was right, and I felt confident that while I stood there Felix was having an interview with his accomplice. I could not disturb them, yet wished to assure myself of the identity of Rose Strent. When I found out all about her, there might be a possibility of solving the mystery.

“Well, no matter,” I answered carelessly, stuffing the card back into my case. “I’ll see Mr. Briarfield another time.”

“Will you leave your name, sir?”

“No, it doesn’t matter. I’ll call about nine on the chance of finding him in.”

Having thus baffled the inquiries of the caretaker, I strolled into the street, and, taking up my station at the corner, kept my eyes on the door. If Rose Strent was with Felix, she must certainly come out in a short time. Then I intended to follow her up and speak to her if I got a chance. Failing Briarfield, I might possibly extort a confession from the weaker vessel.

In about a quarter of an hour the woman came out. She wore no veil, and, as it was still fairly light, I had no difficulty in seeing her face. She passed hurriedly by me in the direction of the Haymarket without observing me, and I recognized her at a glance. It was, as I thought, Rose Strent, and none other. In place of the waiting maid’s linen dress she was arrayed in a smart tailor-made costume, and looked very fashionable indeed. Her face wore a triumphant expression, as though she had been successful with Felix. I guessed the interview

had been for the purpose of extorting blackmail. With her knowledge of his secret Felix was certainly at her mercy.

Following her up at some little distance, she went down the Haymarket and turned into one of the side streets; turned off there into a dirty little alley, and finally disappeared into a swing door over which was a lamp inscribed with some letters. I looked up and saw written thereon "Stage Door."

"An actress!" said I, and went round to the front of the theater to inspect the play-bill. It was the Frivolity Theater, and they were playing the burlesque of "As You Don't Like It." Glancing down the list of characters, I saw that *Orlando* was played by Miss Rose Gernon.

"A leading lady," I thought, transfixed with astonishment. "A burlesque actress, doubtless, in the receipt of a good salary. What in Heaven's name took her to the Fen Inn?"

This question I was of course unable to answer, but I guessed it had something to do with love and Felix Briarfield. Leaving the matter alone for a few moments, I secured a stall, and entered the theater. When *Orlando* came on, I was thoroughly satisfied. Rose

Strent was Rose Gernon, and I had seen her play the part of waiting maid at the Fen Inn on the 10th of June, that fatal night of the murder.





CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN SCORNED.

WHEN I told Dr. Merrick of my good fortune in finding Rose Strent, or, to use her stage name, Rose Gernon, he was considerably astonished. The case had taken hold of him so completely that he could think of nothing else. He had a large practice, and attended fairly well to his patients, but informed me that he did so in a mechanical fashion, more or less, as his brain was busy with the Fen Inn mystery. We were now wonderfully familiar, considering the short period of our acquaintance, but this was doubtless due to the interest we both took in the case.

“Upon my word, Denham,” said Merrick, rubbing his head irritably, “I wish you had not come near me with your hallucinations. Instead of attending to my business I think of nothing but your mysteries. The

sooner we unravel this riddle the better will it be for me. You are an idle bachelor, so it does not matter much to you, but I am a busy medical man, and this infernal business worries me greatly. At this moment I ought to be attending to a patient, instead of which I am wasting my time with you."

"Shall I go away?"

"No, confound you! I wish to see the end of this affair, or I'll get no peace of mind. It is too late to remedy the matter, so I must have my curiosity allayed by learning all the ins and outs of this enigma. Come, let us begin. You have found Rose Strent?"

"Yes. She is a burlesque actress, and plays at the Frivolity Theater. Her name in the programme is set down as Rose Gernon, but this is doubtless her stage name. Rose Strent is her real one."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Merrick sharply. "If she went into that Fen Inn business with her eyes open, she doubtless took a false name, so as to baffle inquiry."

"Then what about the landlord, who called himself Edward Strent?"

"Oh, we must find out all about him also. No doubt his name is false also. Did he look like her father?"

“Well, I can’t say that there was much likeness between them. He looked to me like a valet.”

“A valet,” muttered Merrick reflectively. “Queer! I wonder if he really was a valet—valet to Felix.”

“In that case he would be with him now.”

“It is not impossible. He has Felix in his power, and can stay on just as he likes. It’s my opinion he’ll stay till he’s pensioned off. Case of blackmail, I fancy.”

“I think Rose Gernon is blackmailing Felix also.”

“Quite so. What else can he expect? Or else,” added Merrick, looking straight at me, “it’s a case of love and marriage.”

“What! Do you think Felix promised to marry Rose if she helped him to get rid of his brother?”

“I think he might lead her to believe he would do so.”

“This is absurd, Merrick,” said I sharply. “Felix is in love with Olivia. The motive of the crime was to gain possession of Olivia’s hand. Rose would not help Felix if she knew that.”

“Precisely! If she knew it. But it’s my opinion that she does not know it. I believe Felix gulled

her into the belief that he would marry her if she gave her assistance, but he has not the slightest intention of keeping his promise."

"And what excuse could he make for wishing to murder his brother?"

"Ah, there you have me! I don't know that. Of course you and I are aware of the real motive of the crime, but Rose is ignorant of it. She thinks she knows, no doubt, but I'm certain she has been put off with a lie."

"But he can't keep the information from her forever. Even if he keeps quiet, someone is bound to tell her that Felix is engaged to Miss Bellin."

"There you are wrong," said Merrick with grim jocularity. "Everyone thinks Francis is engaged to Miss Bellin."

"Yes; but Rose Gernon knows well enough that Francis is dead, and that the engaged man must be Felix posing as Francis."

"There is some truth in that," admitted the doctor, looking puzzled. "I suppose he must have kept that fact from her so far, as I don't see what possible explanation he could give her."

"Always assuming she is in love with him," said I musingly.

"Oh, as to that, I am certain it is

so. A woman like Rose Gernon, drawing a good salary, would not mix herself up in such a dangerous business merely for money. There is a stronger motive, and that is love. I'll lay anything," continued Merrick, in sporting phrase—"I'll lay anything that she is madly in love with the fellow."

"Well, and Olivia, thinking Felix is Francis, loves him madly also. If these two women come together, there will be trouble for Felix."

"Eureka!" cried the doctor, jumping up excitedly, "the very thing. When thieves fall out—you know the adage. Let us bring the two women together, and see the upshot."

"There will simply be a row," said I; "what is the use of that?"

"This," retorted Merrick sharply: "that when Rose finds she has been betrayed she will reveal all the mystery out of revenge and assure Olivia that Felix is not Francis."

"That's not a bad idea, Merrick! Also it might occur that Olivia reveals something in her turn."

"Impossible! She can't possibly know the man's villainy, else she would not think of marrying him."

"I suppose not, and yet," I added reflectively, "I wouldn't be surprised if she were cognizant of Felix's movements on the 10th and

11th. She certainly stuck up for him in the most amazing manner at the first interview."

"Of course she did, because she believes he is Francis. Depend upon it, Denham, she knows nothing, and if we bring her and Rose together there will be a revolution and a revelation."

"It's worth trying at all events. But how can it be managed?"

"By working on the natural jealousy of the sex. Tell Olivia that Felix receives a woman in his rooms every evening."

"Oh, hang it, Merrick," said I, reddening, "it wouldn't be delicate even to a married woman, let alone a girl."

"Of course I don't mean you to put it to her in that barefaced manner," said Merrick hastily, "but handle the matter delicately. Wrap it up in sugar. I leave it to your own judgment. In any case you must rouse the jealousy of Miss Olivia Bellin, and induce her to come with you to the chambers of Felix when he is interviewing Rose."

"She wouldn't come without her mother."

"Then bring her mother along with you. This is a serious matter, and it doesn't do to be squeamish."

“Then do it yourself,” said I angrily.

“I!” said he, taken aback. “No! I don’t know Miss Bellin. You are the proper person. Besides, it’s better that she should know the truth, even at the cost of a shock to her delicacy, than be tied to a brute like Felix, as she certainly will be.”

“Not if Rose can help it.”

“She can’t help it if she doesn’t know. And the only way to spoil the game of Felix is to bring the two women face to face. Their mutual jealousy will do the rest, and instead of going to the altar Felix Briarfield will find himself bound for the scaffold.”

“True enough! Well, I’ll try, Merrick, but it’s a job I don’t like.”

He laughed at my scruples, and tried to show me that I was really doing Olivia a service in being so plain-spoken, but in spite of all his arguments I departed from his house in low spirits. I did not relish the idea of interviewing Olivia on so delicate a subject, yet I saw it was imperative, and therefore made up my mind to carry through the business at whatever cost of personal inconvenience to myself. That is the worst of being an amateur detective: one’s feelings are not under sufficient control.

The next day I called at Swansea Square, and sent up my card to Olivia. As it so happened, her mother had gone down to Hurlingham with Felix, and she remained at home on the plea of a headache. She sent down a message to the effect that she was unwell, and asked me to excuse her, but I scribbled a few lines on my card asking particularly to see her. This time the servant returned with the information that Miss Bellin would see me for a few minutes, and I was shown into the drawing room. I felt nervous, but, determined to go through with the matter, managed to screw up my courage. It was a most unpleasant task, but very necessary if I wanted to attain my object.

When Miss Bellin entered, I could not suppress a start, so changed was she in outward appearance. As I said before, she was a tall, well-developed, and very beautiful woman, but now she had grown thin, and her face wore an anxious expression. I could not help thinking that she knew something about the tragedy at the Lone Inn, as I could conjecture no other reason for her ill-health and manifest discomposure. She came forward with a nervous smile, and greeted me in a low voice.

“My mother and Mr. Briarfield

have gone to Hurlingham," she said, sitting down on a lounge near which my chair was placed.

"I am not sorry for that," I answered gravely, "as I wish to see you alone."

"What is the matter, Mr. Denham? Have you anything very terrible to tell me?"

"I think it is terrible."

"About Francis?" she demanded anxiously.

"Yes! About Francis!"

"Surely you are not going to begin again about that foolish matter you spoke of at Marshminster."

"No—it is not about that."

Olivia passed her handkerchief across her lips and gave a sigh of relief. The expression of her face was so strange that I was more than ever convinced she suspected the truth.

"I am glad you have given over that mad idea about Francis being Felix," she said at length. "I cannot conceive what made you take up so strange a belief. Felix is in Paris."

"I know that, Miss Bellin. I saw him there."

This I said in the hope of startling her, but she did not move a muscle of her face. Either she was keeping herself well in hand or was cognizant

of the fact that Felix had gone to Paris for the purpose of deceiving me. If so, she must have known he was not Francis, and also that my story of the Lone Inn tragedy was true. It was on my tongue to ask her if she was aware of the terrible truth, but on reflection I judged it best to let events evolve themselves. Fate could manage these things better than a mere mortal.

"I knew you would see him there," she said coldly, "but I cannot conceive why you should desire to convince yourself that I spoke truly."

"Because, Miss Bellin, I believe that the man who calls himself Francis is really Felix."

"The same old story," she said impatiently. "You are mad. If you saw Felix in Paris, you must be convinced that you are making a mistake."

"Well, Miss Bellin, we will waive that point for the present. I will call the man to whom you are engaged Francis."

"As he is," she interpolated imperiously.

I let the remark pass, and went on with my speech. "You will no doubt think me highly impertinent, but I wish to warn you against the so-called Francis Briarfield."

"What do you mean, sir?"

“Simply this. While at the Fen Inn I was waited on by a woman who called herself Rose Strent. That woman is now in town acting at the Frivolity Theater under the name of Rose Gernon.”

“And what have I to do with such a creature?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“Nothing, but your lover has everything to do with her.”

“Mr. Denham !”

We were both on our feet by this time, and she was looking at me with wrathful eyes. The crisis I so dreaded had come, but it was now too late to retreat, and there was no help for it but to go on.

“Be angry with me if you like, Miss Bellin,” I said, as soon as I was able, “but it is in your own interest I speak.”

“My own interest !”

“Yes ! This woman Rose Gernon is in love with Francis B——”

“No ! no !” she murmured, her face growing white ; “you are making a mistake.”

“It is true,” I said doggedly. “She was with him at his chambers yesterday evening at eight o’clock ; she will be there to-morrow evening at the same time. I learned that fact to-day.”

“Did you come here to insult me,

sir?" asked Olivia in a voice tremulous with rage.

"I came here to do you a service, but if you look upon it in the light of an insult, I may as well take my leave."

"Stop, sir!" she said, placing herself before me; "you shall not leave the room till I am convinced of the truth of your statement. Why should Francis meet Rose Gernon?"

"Why should Rose Gernon play the part of a waiting maid at the Fen Inn?" I retorted.

"How can I tell?"

"To further the schemes of the man who is to marry you, Miss Bellin. She loves him and he loves her."

"No! I tell you it is impossible. I trust him! I love him! He could not be such a mean villain."

"I can prove to you that what I say is true."

"Do so and I will believe it. If it is true," she muttered, clenching her fist—"if it is true, I shall bitterly punish him for the deception."

"Come with me to-morrow evening at eight o'clock to Briarfield's rooms in Jermyn Street, and I'll engage you shall see them together."

"If I thought so—but no," she said, breaking off impetuously. "I cannot come; how can I—how can I?"

“Ask Mrs. Bellin to come with you,” I suggested.

“I cannot do that.”

“Why not?”

She looked at me strangely for a moment, then walked to the other end of the room. When she returned, her face was flushed with anger.

“Why do you come here with these infamous tales, sir?” she cried excitedly. “I do not believe you!”

“Put me to the proof. Come to-morrow evening and you shall see for yourself.”

“You are the enemy of the man I love.”

“I am the bitter enemy of the man who pretends to love you, because I believe he killed his brother.”

“Mr. Denham, I could tell—but no, no! I must be silent.”

“What do you mean?” I asked eagerly, thinking she was about to reveal her suspicions.

Olivia thought for a few moments, then put her hand suddenly into mine.

“I will be with you at a quarter to eight to-morrow, and if it is true what you say—oh, if it is true——”

“Here is my card,” said I, forcing it into her hand. “Wear a veil and come to my rooms in Duke Street. I will wait you at the door, and we will go to the chambers of this villain.”

“He is no villain.”

“I say he is, Miss Bellin, and I’ll prove him to be so to-morrow.”

“Do it,” she said, fixing me with a glance, “and you shall see how bitterly I shall punish his treachery. Now go, Mr. Denham, and meet me to-morrow evening as you have arranged.”

I bowed and left the room in silence. As I passed through the door I looked back, and saw she had thrown herself on the couch, crying bitterly. The sight perplexed me.

“Does she know anything,” I thought, “or does she believe Felix is really Francis? Well, when she and Rose Gernon come face to face, the truth will be revealed.”

The truth was stranger than even I suspected.





CHAPTER XI.

TRANSFORMATION.

MY interview with Olivia passed off better than I had expected. If she had ordered me out of the house, I would only have looked on it as the just punishment for what must have appeared my impertinent interference in what did not concern me. The very fact that she listened so quietly proved that she suspected Felix was masquerading as her lover. She could only be assured of this by overhearing his interview with Rose Gernon, and therefore accepted my invitation to go to the Jermyn Street rooms. If their tenant was Francis, he would resent the intrusion of Rose, but if Felix, the two confederates would doubtless talk of their guilty secret.

Thanks to a sovereign judiciously bestowed on the caretaker, I had

discovered that Rose Gernon intended to visit Felix at eight o'clock. How the caretaker found out I do not know, but in some mysterious way servants seem to gain all information concerning the doings of their superiors. It sufficed for me that Rose would be in the rooms of Felix on this evening, and that Olivia would catch them in a trap. I had no pity for the guilty pair, but I was genuinely sorry for Olivia. She little knew the torture she was about to undergo. I did, and almost regretted that I had interfered in the matter. However, I consoled myself with the reflection that it was better for her to suffer a few hours' pain than lifelong misery.

That she agreed to go to Jermyn Street at that hour without a chaperon proved how desirous she was of learning the truth. Delicately nurtured, gently bred, she must have felt horrified at the risk she was running of losing her good name, but, seeing that her life's happiness depended upon knowing all, she flung etiquette to the winds and came. When I found her at the foot of the stairs at eight o'clock, I admired and respected her from the bottom of my heart.

"Am I late?" she asked, touching my hand with trembling fingers.

“Only five minutes,” said I, looking at my watch. “I have been waiting at the head of the stairs for that time. However, we can soon walk round to Jermyn Street.”

“Do you think anyone will know me, Mr. Denham?” said Olivia, taking my arm. “See, I have on a plain dress, and this veil is a thick one.”

“No one will recognize you,” I answered soothingly; “nor do I think you will meet any one of your acquaintances.”

“I should have brought my mother, but that I wished her to know nothing of this treachery. If I find I have been deceived, I shall break off my engagement with Francis. But you will keep silent about my visit, will you not, Mr. Denham?”

“No one shall hear a word from me,” I answered earnestly. “But keep up your spirits, Miss Bellin. Even if you find you have been deceived, there will be some consolation in knowing that it is Felix, and not Francis.”

“You are wrong there,” she replied positively; “it is Francis. I have told you so all along.”

I shrugged my shoulders without reply. Evidently nothing could shake her faith in the man. All I could hope for was that the two

confederates would betray themselves.

“What are you going to do, Mr. Denham?” asked Olivia anxiously.

“We will go up to the rooms of Briarfield,” I answered, “and there overhear their conversation.”

“Is that not dishonorable?” she said, shrinking back.

“In most cases it would be,” I replied hastily, “but it does not do to be too particular in this matter. If you break in on them, they may deny everything. Thinking they are alone, you will hear the truth. Remember, Miss Bellin, when one deals with a villain, one must beat him with his own weapons. Depend upon it, it is most necessary that we should learn all.”

“They can speak of nothing that I do not know.”

“Are you aware of the truth?” said I, somewhat startled by this remark.

“I am aware of the truth,” she repeated slowly, and before I could question her she flitted up the stairs. There was no time for me to ponder over her words, as it was now past eight o'clock, and Rose Gernon might descend at any time. I therefore spoke a few hasty words to the caretaker, telling him I wished to see Mr. Briarfield, and followed her

at once. In two minutes we were both standing before the door of Briarfield's room.

"It is locked," said Olivia faintly.

"Never mind," answered I, producing my latchkey; "this key of mine opens the door; I was, as you are aware, a great friend of Francis, and learned some time ago that my key fitted the lock of his rooms. I have not forgotten the circumstance, so it comes in useful now. See!"

I turned the key and the door opened noiselessly. Motioning to Miss Bellin to precede me, I followed her quietly and closed the door behind us. We heard the murmur of voices in the sitting room. She as well as I knew its whereabouts thoroughly. The door was slightly ajar, and in front of it stretched a tall screen with fretwork at the top. Stepping through the open door in a gingerly manner, we placed ourselves directly behind the screen so that we could both see and hear without danger of being observed. Thus far our enterprise had succeeded in the most fortunate manner, and nothing remained for us to do but to listen to the important conversation now taking place.

Felix, standing with his back against the mantelpiece, looked anxious and angry, while Rose Gernon,

her hands on the table, faced him fiercely. Evidently the conversation was not progressing in a satisfactory manner to either.

“No!” she was saying rapidly. “I will accept no money for what I have done. You know the only reward I claim—your love.”

“I cannot give it to you,” said Felix doggedly; “you know that as well as I do.”

“Do I?” she cried passionately. “Do you dare to say that to me after all your vows and protestations? Why did you tell me you loved me if it was but a lie?”

“I did not tell you so.”

“Yes, you did, Felix—you did! I remember the hour, the day, when you swore that you would make me your wife.”

“Keep quiet,” I muttered to Olivia, who made an involuntary movement.

“I tell you, Rose, there is some mistake,” said Felix angrily.

“You mean-spirited hound!”

“I am a mean-spirited hound,” he answered wearily; “no one knows that better than I do.”

“Some women,” continued Rose, not heeding his interruption—“some women would have you killed. I am not a woman of that kind. I’ll stay and marry you.”

“Impossible ! I am to marry Miss Bellin.”

“You promised to give up Miss Bellin if I helped you to see your brother at the Fen Inn.”

“My God !” muttered Olivia, trembling violently.

“Hush !” I whispered ; “now we shall hear the truth.”

“I have changed my mind,” retorted Felix, in answer to the last remark of Rose.

“That may be, but I have not, Mr. Felix Briarfield. I fulfilled my promise and went down with Strent to that lonely inn. Your brother came, and you know that he never left it again. I have fulfilled my promise. I now require you to fulfill yours and make me your wife.”

“I cannot ! I cannot !” he said in a faint voice, wiping his brow. “For Heaven’s sake take this money I offer you and leave me.”

“I have mixed myself up with crime for your sake, and you offer to put me off with money. It is useless ! Your promise I have, and that promise I require you to keep, or else——”

“Or else——”

“I’ll tell the truth to the police.”

“And thus involve yourself in ruin with me.”

“I don’t care,” she said sullenly ;

“anything would be better than the torture I am enduring at your hands.”

“And what will you tell the police?” asked Felix in an unnatural voice.

“You know well enough! I shall tell them how you killed your brother.”

“It is false!” he said passionately. “I neither saw nor laid a finger on my brother.”

“Indeed! Then if you are innocent who is guilty?”

“I don’t know!”

“Did you not come to the Fen Inn on that fatal night when Francis came?”

“Yes, but I never saw him.”

“You saw him, and killed him.”

“It is a lie!”

It was neither Felix nor Rose who spoke, but Olivia, who, in spite of all I could do, broke in on the astonished pair. The man advanced toward her, but she waved him back.

“I defend you, sir,” she said proudly, “because I know that this woman speaks falsely, but I have also to demand an explanation from you.”

Felix paid no attention to the remark, but simply stared at her in a stupefied manner.

“Olivia!” he said in a low voice, “how did you come here?”

"I brought her, Mr. Felix Briarfield," said I, stepping forward.

"You, Denham! And for what reason?"

I pointed to Rose Gernon, who stood quietly by with a malignant smile on her face.

"There is the reason," I retorted meaningly, "and Miss Bellin——"

"Miss Bellin will speak for herself," said Olivia in a peremptory tone.

"Miss Bellin speaks of what she does not understand," interposed Rose vehemently.

"Because I deny that Francis killed Felix?" questioned Olivia.

"No, because you deny Felix killed Francis."

"What do you mean, Miss Gernon?" I asked rapidly.

"I mean that this man whom Miss Bellin thinks is her lover Francis is Felix Briarfield, and Felix Briarfield," she continued, "is my lover."

"No!" said Felix hurriedly, "it is not true."

I expected to see Olivia grow angry, but in place of this a bright smile irradiated her face as she looked at Felix. I could not conjecture the meaning of her action, and began to grow uneasy. Rose also looked anything but comfortable; evidently she had met with her match in Olivia.

“I overheard part of your conversation,” said Olivia, addressing her pointedly.

“Very honorable, I am sure,” retorted Rose, with a sneer.

“Honor is thrown away on women like you,” answered Olivia scornfully. “I am glad I listened, for it enables me to protect the man I love against your arts.”

“That is not the man you love,” said Rose spitefully; “he lies in the marshes surrounding the Fen Inn, slain by the hand of his brother.”

“That is not true! I swear it is not true!” cried Felix, approaching nearer to Olivia.

“Be quiet, Francis,” she said quickly; “let us hear what she has to say.”

“I have to say that Felix Briarfield loved me,” cried Rose angrily; “he loved me long before he ever saw you, but when you crossed his path, he wanted to leave me. He impersonated his brother Francis, who was at that time in America, and you, poor fool, did not discover the deception.”

“You are quite right, I did not,” replied Olivia calmly; “go on.”

“When his brother Francis came back this month, he thought all would be discovered, and implored me to save him. He told me of a

plan whereby he intended to decoy his brother to the Fen Inn, on pretext of explanation. There he intended to kill him."

Olivia made no remark, but placed her hand within that of Felix. I wondered she could do so, seeing that he was accused by his accomplice of a hideous crime, and made no denial.

"I went down to the Fen Inn with a man called Strent——"

"That was not his real name," I interrupted.

"How do you know that?" she said sharply.

"Never mind; I know that it is so."

"I decline to tell his real name," said Rose, darting a furious look at me. "I call him Strent, and by that name you knew him, and knew me at the Fen Inn."

"I certainly did not expect Rose Strent, waiting maid, to change to Rose Gernon, actress."

"You are too meddlesome, Mr. Denham," she said coolly, "and would do better to mind your own business."

"Scarcely, when I have discovered so vile a crime."

"It was he who committed it," said Rose malignantly, pointing to Felix; "he came to the inn and killed his brother."

“It is a lie!” cried Felix, in despair. “I laid no hand on my brother. I did not even see him.”

“Wait one moment, Miss Gernon, before you make this accusation,” said Olivia. “You say that Felix is your lover?”

“I do.”

“And you promised to assist him in removing Francis if he married you?”

“I did.”

“For what reason, when the removal of Francis would enable Felix to marry me under his false name?”

“He promised not to do so, and I thought if I helped him to kill Francis I could force him to marry me.”

“You love him greatly?”

“I love him better than anyone else in the world.”

“I am sorry for that,” said Olivia, with a touch of pity, “because Felix is dead.”

“Felix dead!” said Rose incredulously. “Then who is this man?”

“This man is my lover, Francis Briarfield, who returned from Chili on the 6th of June.”



CHAPTER XII.

BACK FROM THE GRAVE.

FOR the moment I felt but little surprise, as I thought Olivia was but making the same mistake she had made formerly. Yet when I noted that she knew the true date of her lover's return, and remarked the strange expression on the face of Rose, I became instinctively convinced that she spoke the truth. It was Francis Briarfield who stood before me, and the dead man was Felix. How the change of personality had taken place I was unable to guess, but nevertheless felt that it was true.

Rose Gernon, with a look of disappointed rage, was the first to speak. She stamped her foot, and laughed scornfully.

"This is ridiculous," she said contemptuously; "it was Francis who died. He——"

"Francis did not die, as you well

know," interrupted the young man. "Felix fell into his own trap, and for safety I assumed his name. I believe you were aware of this all along."

"How can that be? And if I really did know you were Francis, why did you not say so?"

"Because I did not wish to betray myself. For aught I know you slew my brother, and were quite capable of accusing me of his murder."

Rose evaded this question, and, tossing her head with a sneer, moved toward the door. Before she could reach it I blocked her passage.

"Not yet, Miss Gernon," said I meaningly. "Though we have discovered Felix to be Francis, we do not know how the former met with his death."

"I cannot tell you."

"I think you can," said Olivia quickly, "seeing Felix by your own confession made all arrangements with you."

"And yet Felix is dead," scoffed Rose.

"He fell into his own trap."

"I don't know how he died," she said resolutely. "As regards that, I am as ignorant as you are, though I believe Francis killed him."

"Ah! You then acknowledge me to be Francis?"

“I acknowledge nothing. Let me pass, Mr. Denham. I have to attend to my business.”

“Not till you tell me where your so-called father, Strent, is to be found.”

“I don’t know,” she said sullenly.

“Yes, you do,” persisted Olivia, “and you shall not leave this room till you tell all.”

“If I do not go to the theater, I shall be ruined.”

“That does not matter to us,” said Francis mercilessly.

The woman looked at our three faces, and, seeing therein no hope of mercy, compromised the matter.

“Let me have a night to think over it,” she entreated anxiously.

“No,” said Francis and Olivia in one breath, “you must tell all now.”

“There is no time,” she urged; “I am late as it is: I must go.”

“Let me speak, Briarfield,” I interposed, seeing he was about to refuse again. “We do not want to make a public scandal of this—as yet.”

Francis consulted Olivia with a look and turned to me.

“You know more about this case than anyone else,” he said quietly. “Miss Bellin and myself are quite prepared to leave the matter in your hands.”

“Very good. Then Miss Gernon can go to her duties. I undertake that she shall be forthcoming to-morrow. Oh, yes, Miss Gernon,” I added ironically, “I have made all my plans. Knowing you were mixed up in this case, I engaged a detective to look after you.”

“A detective,” she said, with a terrified look.

“Yes! One of the smartest detectives of Scotland Yard. Permit me to escort you to the stage door of the theater and introduce you to this gentleman. Perform your part to-night, and go home. To-morrow come to these rooms at noon and tell us all you know. I am not afraid of your escaping, as my detective will watch you till we see you again.”

“Suppose I refuse!” said Rose viciously.

“In that case I’ll have you arrested at once as an accessory to the murder of Felix Briarfield.”

“You are too strong for me,” she said savagely. “I accept your conditions. To-morrow I’ll come here at twelve o’clock. Can I go now?”

“Certainly! Provided you accept me as your escort.”

“As you please,” she replied disdainfully. “As for you, Miss Bellin,” she added, turning toward Olivia, “I wish you joy of your bargain.”

That man is Francis Briarfield, sure enough. I knew it all along, and played on his fears for my own ends. He is a coward, and Felix was worth a dozen of him. For you, Mr. Briarfield, I have nothing but contempt."

With this parting shaft she sailed out of the door, closely followed by me. The detective was waiting on the other side of the street, and followed us closely. Rose glanced uneasily from side to side, but not one word would she speak. Nor did I wish her to talk, having quite enough on my mind for the present. When we arrived at the stage door of the Frivolity Theater, she halted on the step. In the light shed from the lamp above I could see her scornful face.

"What I have promised I shall do, Mr. Denham," she said spitefully; "but to-morrow I can tell you nothing. With all your cleverness as a spy, you have discovered nothing but a mare's nest."

When she entered the theater, I turned round to the detective, whom I found at my elbow.

"You know what you have to do?" I said imperatively.

"Yes, sir. I saw her face in the light. You can depend upon me; I shan't lose sight of her."

"She is to come to Mr. Briarfield's rooms to-morrow at noon."

“That’s all right, sir. I’ll see she is there.”

“Good. Be very careful. She is a clever woman, and would baffle the devil himself.”

“She won’t baffle me,” said the detective confidently, and so departed on his mission.

Having thus provided for the safe keeping of Rose Gernon, I returned to Briarfield’s rooms, and found him alone. Miss Bellin had taken her departure during my absence.

“Where is she?” I asked, glancing round.

“Olivia has gone home,” explained Francis. “If she is back before nine, her mother will never hear of this escapade, so I put her in a cab and sent her off.”

“All the better,” said I, taking a seat. “Now that we are alone I wish to hear the story of your transformation from Francis to Felix.”

“I told you I was Francis all along,” he said reproachfully.

“Yes ; in such a way that I thought you were Felix,” I answered ironically. “You might have trusted me, Briarfield. It would have been better for us all.”

“I have no doubt it would,” answered Francis gloomily, “but I was afraid lest you should think I had killed Felix.”

"I knew you were incapable of such a thing."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "Had I known you were so true a friend, I should have made you my confidant. As it was, when I remembered my wild threats of killing Felix, I dreaded lest, finding him dead, you might accuse me of his murder."

"Who killed him?"

"I don't know. When I saw him, he was dead."

"And Strent and Rose?"

"They had left the house."

"What time was this?"

"About six in the morning."

"And I was not up till ten o'clock. You had plenty of time to fly. But what put it into your head to place the dead body of Felix in your bed?"

"It's a long story, and I hardly know if you will understand my motives."

"Yes, I do. You were afraid of being accused of the crime. It was foolish of you to mistrust me. I would have aided rather than blamed you."

"I see that now. It was kind of you to try and avenge my death. Unfortunately, all your industry was dangerous to me, and I had to baffle it."

"You certainly did so very adroitly. But tell me the story. I

am anxious to know what took place."

Francis was quite unnerved by the late interview, and, before continuing, poured himself out a glass of brandy. Then, pushing the bottle toward me, he began his strange narrative without further preamble.

"When I went to bed that night," he said slowly, "I could not sleep for ever so long. I kept wondering if your theory could possibly be true about the treachery of Felix. If it were, I considered how I should punish my brother. While thus thinking, I fell asleep, and didn't wake up till close on six o'clock in the morning. All my troubles came on me with full force, and you know how much worse things look at that hour than in broad daylight. There was no chance of further sleep, so I put on my clothes and went downstairs. The first thing I saw was my brother Felix lying dead on the floor."

"Had you any idea who killed him?"

"Not the slightest. I thought it was either Strent or the girl, so I went in search of them. They had fled, for I found my horse gone, so this flight confirmed me in my suspicion. At first I determined to wake you up and explain all, but,

remembering my foolish talk of the previous night, I thought you might think me guilty of my brother's death."

"That was a foolish idea."

"Well, put yourself in my place, and you would have thought as I."

"Not a bit of it. I should have had more moral courage."

"I hadn't at that moment. I thought you would denounce me and I would be hanged, so took steps to secure my own safety. I went outside and found my brother's horse at the side of the house. Strent and his daughter had taken mine, and overlooked my brother's in the hurry of their guilty flight. I saw a means of escape and took it."

"But what about the substitution of yourself for Felix?"

"I did that to throw off the scent. I guessed that your idea was right, and that Felix was masquerading as I, so thought I might go back with safety as myself. Felix was far cleverer than I, and it was certain he had provided some reasons for the absence of his real self while he passed himself off as me. The whole plot unrolled itself in a moment before me, and I saw in carrying it through lay my only chance of safety."

"It would have been far easier to have trusted to my friendship."

"I see that now," said Francis penitently, "but I did not then. I wanted to leave the house without your waking, so took the body of Felix softly upstairs, undressed it, and laid it in my bed. Then I folded up my clothes on the chair beside the bed and dressed myself in his suit."

"And the pearl ring?"

"I had to part with that so as to carry out the deception, therefore I slipped it on the finger of the dead man. Then I locked the door of my bedroom and came downstairs again. In a few minutes I was on my way to Marshminster."

"How did you get the horse back to Fundy's stables, and what made you think of going to Bellin Hall?"

"As to the first, I found Fundy's name on the saddle, so knew Felix had hired the horse. I took it back to the stables, and, owing to my resemblance to Felix, easily managed to deceive the hostler. Then as Felix in his letter had told me he was staying at Bellin Hall I went there."

"Was there any suspicion?"

"None at all! I told a footman I had been out for a morning ride, and asked him to bring me a brandy and soda to my room; I needed the drink after all I had gone through, but my principal reason for asking him was to find out my room."

“How so?”

“Well, I made him carry the tray upstairs in front of me. Of course he took it to the room of Felix, and thus I gained my point without exciting suspicion. All the baggage, clothes, etc., of Felix were in the room. I knew all about them, as I had seen them plenty of times. Then I dressed in a morning suit and went downstairs to find Olivia.”

“Did she guess the truth?”

“Not at first, but she saw there was something wrong, as she kept referring to events of the previous week about which I knew nothing. Luckily Mrs. Bellin did not come down to breakfast, so I was able to tell her all when the servants left the room.”

“Had she recognized that Felix was masquerading as you?”

“She had, more or less, but was not quite certain. When I told her all that had occurred, she believed me at once. In some instinctive way she knew that I was really her lover. Then we set to work to concert measures for my safety. Olivia told me Felix was supposed to be in Paris at the Hôtel des Étrangers and showed me his letters, so it was decided as wisest to keep up that fiction. She told me all that had taken place during my absence, and

by the time you came I was thoroughly fitted into the skin of Felix."

"Then I came and insisted you were Felix."

"Yes! You see, I told the truth, and so did Olivia, when I said I was Francis. But, of course, as I had changed clothes with the dead man, we saw where you were making your mistake. I never thought you'd take my death so much to heart."

"Seeing that, Briarfield, you ought to have told me all."

"Olivia suggested as much, but I was afraid. When you asked me to ride out and see the inn, I asked for a night's grace in order to get rid of the body. I rode out during the night and threw it into a pool near the inn."

"I know that pool," said I grimly, "and traced your trail thereto."

"I am afraid I did it badly," said Francis, with a shudder; "it was a horrible task, yet necessary, as I thought when you saw nobody the next day you would think it was a dream or a hallucination."

"I did very nearly," I answered gravely. "And what about Paris?"

"Oh, that was very easy. When you said you were going there to look up Felix, I followed you to London by the same train and crossed over to Paris at once. At

the Hôtel des Étrangers I found Felix had bribed the manager to send on those letters to Olivia. He, of course, thought I was Felix and talked quite openly before me. Felix had invented a very ingenious plot to enlist the manager in his service. What it was I need not tell you, but I told the manager what I wanted and he did it well. Of course I paid him lavishly."

"You mean he deceived me by saying you had been six weeks in Paris."

"Yes, and about my going to Italy. Of course when you saw me you thought I was really Felix, and that you were out of your mind."

"How could I do otherwise when your statements were backed up by the manager? I did not know what to make of it."

"Well, that's all I have to tell," said Francis, "and a lot of trouble it has been. I wish I had told you all at first."

"What about Rose Gernon?"

"Oh, she found me out and made believe I was Felix. She wanted to marry me, as you saw. I had great trouble with her."

"We'll settle her to-morrow," said I grimly. "But now, Francis, who do you think killed your brother?"

“I can't say! I don't even know how he died.”

“He died,” said I, “from a wound in the hand inflicted by a poisoned arrowhead which was taken from Bellin Hall.”

“And who wounded him?” demanded Francis, turning pale.

“We'll find that out to-morrow,” I answered, “from Rose Strent, alias Rose Gernon.”





CHAPTER XIII.

PERPLEXITY.

AFTER all, it is true that the unexpected always happens. In my unraveling of the Fen Inn mystery I never for a moment expected to find that Francis was alive. I was even ignorant that Felix had been to the inn on that night. He had ridden round the back way of the house, and, as my room was over the front door, I had not heard his arrival. Under these circumstances it was easy for me to make the mistake, and think the dead man was Francis, particularly as I was misled by the marvelous resemblance between the brothers, and, moreover, saw the pearl ring on the finger of the corpse. My mistake was a perfectly excusable one, and I had been confirmed in such erroneous belief by the adroit fashion in which Francis, for his own safety, kept up the deception.

Now I knew the truth, that Francis was alive and Felix dead, yet as regards the name of the man who had committed the crime I was still quite in the dark. Rose Gernon knew, but it was questionable whether she would confess, even to save her own skin. Either she or Strent was the guilty person, as none other was in the inn at that time. Strent had vanished, but no doubt she knew his whereabouts. The question was whether she would tell.

“Oh, she’ll tell where he is, right enough,” said Merrick, to whom I put this view of the matter, “especially if she is guilty herself.”

“You don’t think she is the criminal, Merrick?”

“There is no reason why she should not be,” he replied argumentatively. “She had every reason to hate Felix Briarfield. He had promised to marry her, and was engaged to Olivia. Quite enough reason there for a jealous woman such as she seems to be.”

“But she wanted Felix to kill his brother, so that she might force him to marry her.”

“Yes ; but that little arrangement did not come off. My idea is that she saw Felix when he arrived at the inn, and asked him straight out if he had arranged to marry Olivia.

She would hear of the engagement while passing through Marshminster on her way to the lone inn. No doubt Felix lied about the matter, and she lost her temper. It may be that she did not intend to kill him, but, having the poisoned arrowhead in her hand, forgot how dangerous it was, and threw herself on him. He put out his hand to keep her off, and so was wounded. Then he died, and, terrified at what the consequences might be, she and Strent left the inn."

"But what about her blackmailing Francis?"

"She guessed what Francis had done, and saw a chance of securing her aims by putting the murder on to him. He had so compromised himself by his foolish actions that, of course, he was afraid to denounce her."

"Still, why did she want to marry him? She loved Felix, not Francis."

"It's my opinion she loved neither of them," said Merrick dryly, "and simply wanted to marry for respectability."

"Do you think she will denounce Strent?"

"She'll denounce anyone to save herself."

"Won't you come and hear her confession, Merrick?"

“Not I. A respectable practitioner like myself has no business to be mixed up in such criminality. Hitherto I have been the sleeping partner in this affair, and you have carried through my ideas excellently well. Continue to do so, and then come and tell me all about it.”

“Very pleasant for you,” I grumbled; “but I have all the hard work.”

Merrick laughed and pushed me out of the door. He had a dozen patients waiting, and could spare no more time. He said one last word before I left.

“Oh, by the way, Denham,” said he, lifting a warning forefinger, “don’t you trust that Rose Gernon in the least. I’ve been making inquiries about her, and she has a black record—about the worst in London, I should say.”

On my way to Jermyn Street I wondered how he had gained this information. A specialist of Merrick’s standing does not go round making inquiries about loose characters. Yet I knew he spoke the truth. His faculty for learning things was marvelous. Decidedly, Merrick should have been a detective. His opinion about Rose Gernon coincided with mine. One had only to look in her face to see what she was.

At Jermyn Street I found Francis, eagerly waiting for my arrival.

"I've sent down to the Marshminster police," said he quickly, "and instructed them to drag the pool near the Fen Inn."

"I am afraid you'll get into trouble over that, Briarfield."

"I don't care," said Francis doggedly. "I have been a coward too long. Had I trusted you, and told all, there would not have been this trouble. If the police arrest me, they can just do so, and I'll leave it to you to see me through."

"I hope we'll learn the truth from Rose to-day."

"It's possible, but not probable. She'll lie like the devil, whose daughter she is."

"I'm not too sure of that. If she is guiltless, she'll be only too anxious to save her own neck. Why should she risk her liberty for the sake of this man Strent? Who is he?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Then we'll make Rose tell to-day—or have her arrested."

"There is not sufficient evidence against her," objected Francis.

"Yes, there is. I'll take the risk of all that. Before Rose Gernon leaves this room she has to confess the truth. It's your only chance of safety."

"But you don't believe I killed Felix?"

"I don't, but the police may. You forget how highly suspicious all your actions have been. Rose knows you have been passing as your brother, and will be sure to make capital out of it."

"You'll see me through, Denham?" he said, taking my hand.

"You can be sure of that," I answered, shaking it heartily. "I won't rest till you are safe, and the murderer of your brother is in jail."

"Who killed him, do you think?"

"I don't know, but Rose does, and we'll make her tell!"

We discussed the matter extensively, but neither of us could come to any conclusion. When the clock struck noon, Rose Gernon, true to her appointment, walked into the room. Without waiting for an invitation she sat down in a chair and scowled at me.

"That man of yours is outside," she said savagely; "he's been following me about everywhere, and watching my house all night. Perhaps you'll ask him to go away."

"That depends on the result of this conversation. You're not out of danger yet, Miss Gernon."

"I am not aware that I was ever

in danger, Mr. Denham! Are you going to accuse me of killing Felix?"

"I might even do that unless you tell the truth!"

"Oh!" said she, with a sneer; "is that your game, sir? Then suppose I do tell the truth, and say you killed Felix?"

"You're quite capable of doing so, but no one would believe so wild a tale. I had no reason to kill Felix Briarfield."

"Then what motive had I for so doing?"

"That's best known to yourself," I answered tartly, weary of all this fencing.

"It is waste of time talking like this," interrupted Francis. "You must be aware, Miss Gernon, that you stand in a very dangerous position."

"Not more so than you do yourself," she replied, with superb insolence.

"Pardon me, I think otherwise. By your own confession you went down to the Fen Inn to assist my brother in getting me out of the way. You said that last night before two witnesses---Miss Bellin and Mr. Denham."

"I talked at random," she muttered. "I did not intend that any crime should be committed."

“Perhaps not. Nevertheless, my brother is dead, and you know how he died.”

“I know the cause of his death, but I do not know who killed him!”

“If you know one thing, you must know the other.”

“I do not! When Felix arrived, he showed Strent and I an arrowhead which he said was poisoned.”

“Is this the arrowhead?” I asked, producing it out of a thick piece of paper.

“Yes; where did you get it?”

“I found it in the ashes of the fireplace where you threw it!”

“That is not true,” said Miss Gernon angrily. “I did not throw it into the fireplace. I never even had it my hand—the idea that it was poisoned frightened me.”

“Pray go on with your story, Miss Gernon.”

“I see you don’t believe me,” she flashed out defiantly, “but I am telling exactly what took place. Felix said he was going to kill his brother with the poisoned arrowhead. I told him I would have none of that sort of thing; that I only consented to play the part of a waiting maid in order to deceive his brother into a meeting. I said Francis could marry Miss Bellin, and he was to marry me.”

“ And after that ? ”

“ He jeered and said he intended to marry Miss Bellin. Then I grew angry and struck him ! ”

She was in real earnest, for her mouth was set, and her hands were clenched. Not a pretty sight by any means. I remembered Merrick's idea, and conceived that it might be possible the woman before me had killed the man who flouted her, not intentionally, but in a fit of blind rage.

“ You struck him with the arrow-head ? ” I hinted.

“ No, I didn't ! He had laid that down on the table. I struck him with my open palm, and said if he killed his brother I would denounce him to the authorities as a murderer ; then he would go to the scaffold instead of the altar with Miss Bellin.”

“ What did he say ? ”

“ Nothing at first. Then I saw a look pass between him and Strent, and they seemed to understand one another. Felix said he would return to Marshminster, and let his brother marry Miss Bellin. I did not then know he had been passing himself off as you,” she added, turning to Francis ; “ if I had, I would have guessed he was lying. As it was I thought he spoke the truth, and kissed him. Then I went to bed.”

“And afterward?” said Francis, seeing she paused.

“Well, I never saw Felix again till he was dead.”

“In the morning?”

“No. An hour after I left him. Strent knocked at my bedroom door, and asked me to come down. I guessed by his voice he was afraid, so dressed hurriedly and came down-stairs. Felix was lying dead by the table. I could not see Strent, and went to look for him. He was out at the back door mounting Francis’ horse. I asked him where he was going, and he said Felix was dead, and he did not want to stay in order to be accused of the crime.”

“Did he say he had killed him?”

“No; nor had I time to ask him. He went off at a gallop, and left me alone with the body. I was horribly afraid, as I thought you or Francis would wake up and accuse me of the crime. Besides, I could not account for my presence in that house without suspicion. So I put on my hat and cloak and fled to Marshminster.”

“How did you fly?”

“There was a trap and horse in which Strent and I had brought provisions to the inn. I harnessed the horse and drove back to Marshminster. There I returned it to the

owners, and went back to London by the early train."

"What became of Strent?"

"I don't know. I have never set eyes on him since."

"Do you think he killed Felix?"

"Yes. I believe they had a row, and he killed him. But he did not admit it."

Francis and I looked at one another. The whole business was so queer as to be hardly believable. Nevertheless, we saw Rose Gernon had told the truth.

"What made you come to me?" asked Francis.

"I thought you had escaped from the inn, and wished to ask you what had become of your brother's body. Then I saw you wore the clothes of Felix, and guessed the whole game."

"Particularly as you listened to my theory at the Fen Inn," said I.

"Yes," she answered quickly; "it was your conversation which put the idea into my head. I saw that Felix had passed himself off as Francis, and afterward Francis acted the part of Felix."

"You wished to marry me," said Francis, whereat Rose laughed.

"No. I tried that game on to get the whole truth out of you. I wished you to admit you were Felix, for he had promised to marry me. How-

ever, you did not fall into the trap. And now," she added, standing up, "I have told you all, may I go?"

I consulted Francis with a look. He consented mutely.

"Yes," I said, also rising, "you may go, but my detective will still watch you."

"For how long?"

"Till Strent is found."

"You think I know," she said, tossing her head. "You are wrong. Till I met Strent at Marshminster I never saw him before, nor do I know where he now is. Take off your bloodhound."

"When Strent is found," I persisted; "not till then."

She looked wrathfully at me, and rushed out of the room.





CHAPTER XIV.

THE HUNTING OF MAN.

WE were no nearer the truth than before. Rose Gernon had told us nothing new comparatively speaking. Certainly she declared herself to be innocent of the crime, and accused Strent, but if we found Strent, he might declare himself innocent and accuse her. One or the other of them must necessarily be guilty, as they alone had seen Felix on that fatal night. Rose was being closely watched by a detective, so that we could obtain her evidence at any moment. It now remained for us to find Strent, and hear his story. Francis believed Strent had killed his brother. I had my doubts, as I could see no motive for him committing the crime, whereas Rose, in a fit of blind anger, might have done so. Merrick's theory as to her guilt was more in accordance with my belief.

Hitherto we had kept the case from being meddled with by the police, but now they began to handle the matter. Informed by Francis as to the whereabouts of the body, they dragged the pool near the Fen Inn, and recovered the corpse of the unhappy young man. Then the inspector wrote a peremptory letter to Francis, requesting him to come down and attend the inquest. There was a note of suspicion in the letter, and Francis could not very well help obeying the summons. He requested me to come with him, which I had every intention of doing. We settled the time of our departure, and before going saw Olivia and Dr. Merrick. Mrs. Bellin had not been informed of the death of Felix, nor did she suspect that anything wrong was going on under her very nose. Thanks to the wonderful resemblance between the twins, she accepted Felix as Francis and Francis as himself without the slightest suspicion. At first she had objected to the engagement, but afterward, learning that Briarfield possessed a good income, consented. To be sure, she would have been better pleased had Olivia married a title, but, as her daughter declared she would marry no one but Francis, Mrs. Bellin gave way with a good grace.

As to Olivia, she was terribly dismayed when she heard Francis was going to Marshminster, and she dreaded lest he should be accused of his brother's murder. The actions of Francis had been so very peculiar that I was afraid to tell them to the inspector, lest he should think the young man guilty. At the same time it was impossible to keep them secret, as Francis had thrown the body of his brother into the pool, and would have to explain to the inspector how it got there. Our only chance of proving him to be innocent lay in finding Strent, and where he was to be discovered none of us knew. Merrick's clever brain discovered a clew to the destination of the fugitive.

"Did you ride to the Fen Inn from Marshminster?" he asked Francis.

"No. Had I come by train to Marshminster, I would have gone to Bellin Hall, where my brother was staying, and seen him before Olivia."

"It's a pity you did not go there," said Merrick thoughtfully. "All this trouble might have then been avoided. Well, how did you get to the Fen Inn?"

"I took the train from London to Starby, hired a horse there, and rode to the Fen Inn."

“How far is it from Starby to the Fen Inn?”

“About twelve miles.”

“And from the Fen Inn to Marshminster?”

“Ten miles.”

“Much about a muchness,” said Merrick. “Did you tell Strent you had ridden from Starby?”

“Yes, I had no reason to conceal my movements.”

“Quite so. Well, according to Rose Gernon, it was your horse Strent took to escape.”

“It was. I wonder he did not take the horse of Felix.”

“For a very simple reason! He knew when the alarm was given that you and Denham would go to Marshminster; therefore to hide his trail the better he went back with your horse to Starby.”

“Do you think so?”

“I am sure of it. Go to the livery stable at Starby where you hired your horse, and I am certain you’ll find it there, restored by Strent.”

“Well,” said I, in no wise satisfied, “suppose we trace him to Starby. That will be no use. No doubt he took the train there to London.”

“Very probably,” said Merrick coolly, “and waited there for Rose Gernon.”

“But she has not seen him since he fled from the inn.”

“So she says, but it is not true, for all that. When he killed Felix,—and the evidence seems to point to him as the murderer,—he told Rose to take the gig and go to Marshminster. Then he rode off to Starby and re-joined her in London.”

“But why should she conceal his movements?”

“Because he knows too much about the crime,” said Merrick decisively. “Either she did it herself and is afraid of his speaking, or he did it and she wishes to screen him.”

“Why should she wish to screen a man who killed her lover?”

“I can’t answer all questions,” said Merrick irritably, finding himself at a loss; “all this is pure theory, but I think it is so. I am certain there is an understanding between Rose and Strent. If that detective watching Rose only knew Strent, I am certain he would catch him paying her a visit.”

“Why not give the detective a picture of the man?” suggested Francis.

“Why not, indeed!” I retorted derisively; “because we haven’t got a picture.”

“I have one at my rooms,” said Francis.

“Where did you get it?”

“I drew it while waiting for Felix at the Fen Inn. You know, Denham, I have some skill in catching expressions and watching faces. The fellow struck me as such a smug scoundrel that I penciled a caricature of him while he moved about the dining room. It is not a photograph, certainly—still, I think it is sufficiently like him.”

“Capital!” said the doctor, rubbing his hands. “It’s a good thing you employed your leisure in that way, Mr. Briarfield. It may do you a great service.”

“You think I am in danger?”

“I think you stand in a perilous position,” replied the doctor gravely. “Your very efforts to preserve your secret and baffle Denham will score against you with the police. And you must tell them all, seeing you knew where the body was to be found.”

“I’ll tell them all, and do the best I can,” said Francis, turning pale, “but Rose can prove I was never out of my room.”

“No, she can’t! Rose went to bed, and for aught she knows you might have come down and quarreled with your brother afterward. Your only chance, Mr. Briarfield, of proving your innocence

it to find Strent. If you give that portrait to the detective watching Rose Gernon, I believe you'll lay hands on him, but it's a mere chance."

"There is another means of identification," said I. "Strent is lame, so if a lame man calls on Miss Gernon, my detective, aided by the picture, will know it is Strent."

"Well, go and try my plan," said Merrick, shaking Francis by the hand. "I hope for your sake, Mr. Briarfield, it will be successful."

When we left the doctor, Francis looked pale and upset. He was just beginning to realize the predicament in which he stood. I was afraid myself that when all was known he would be arrested. His own actions looked black, though I knew they were done out of pure foolishness. Had he only trusted me at the time, all the trouble would have been averted. As it was I determined to stand by him to the end.

"Cheer up, Briarfield!" said I, clapping him on his back. "If Merrick and I solved so much of the mystery, you may be sure we'll find out the rest."

"It's the newspapers I'm thinking of," he said ruefully; "if all this foolishness gets into the press, Mrs. Bellin will never let me marry Olivia."

"I don't think Mrs. Bellin will

have much say in the matter," I answered dryly. "Olivia is not the kind of woman to give up her lover so easily, particularly when she knows the truth. She'll stick to you, as I intend to do. As to the press, you forget that the inquest is at Marshminster, which only possesses a weekly paper. I know the editor, and can keep all details out of it. Cheer up!"

"Thank you, Denham," said the poor fellow gratefully. "You are the best friend I have."

"Faith, you didn't think so at Paris, Briarfield. I've no doubt that there you cursed me by all your gods for a meddlesome fool."

At this he laughed, and began to pick up his spirits. We saw the detective who was watching Rose Gernon, and gave him the picture drawn by Francis, with a full description of the man he wanted. Especially did we lay stress on the lameness, and in the end our detective promised that he would nail any man answering to our description. I gave him my address at Marshminster, and told him to wire when he found out the whereabouts of Strent. I also told him to wire to Merrick, as the doctor was anxious to know if his theory would prove correct.

Next day we went down to Marshminster. By permission Francis stayed with me at Aunt Jane's house, and, learning that he was in trouble, the two old ladies made much of him. We saw the inspector of police, who was a friend of mine, and learned that the body of Felix Briarfield was at the morgue of Marshminster. The inquest was to be held next morning, and all arrangements had been made. When the inspector had supplied us with this information, we sat down and told him the whole story as has been here set forth. He listened with much astonishment, and expressed himself to that end.

"I never read a novel to touch this," he said, staring at Francis. "Truth is stranger than fiction, after all. You greatly resemble your unhappy brother, Mr. Briarfield."

"Is the body much decomposed?" asked I, seeing that Francis remained silent.

"It's recognizable only," replied the inspector. "You acted very foolishly in this matter, both of you. Why did you not come and tell me about it all at once?"

"I was afraid of being accused of killing my brother," said Francis faintly.

"You've made it ten times worse

now," said the inspector dryly. "Had you wished to damn yourself, you could not have gone to work in a more pig-headed fashion."

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"No. There is not sufficient evidence against you. Besides, I quite believe your story. Still," added he, with some hesitation, "you have to face the coroner to-morrow. He may not believe you so easily as I."

"What do you think is best to be done?" I asked dismally.

"Well, judging from what you have told me, I should think the best thing would be to find Strent," said the inspector; "he is the only man to solve the mystery. Failing him, you'd better get Rose Gernon down. Her evidence may go to prove that Mr. Briarfield was in bed at the time Felix was in the house."

"I'll wire for her to come down at once," I said, jumping up.

"It will be as well. I'll send a man over to Starby, and find out if Strent delivered the horse to the livery-stable keeper. I wish to Heaven, Denham," said the inspector, raging at me, "that you had told me all about this at first."

"I acted for the best."

"I've no doubt you did," he replied ill-temperedly, "but I hate your amateur detectives; they simply

muddle things. I'd have straightened out this coil long ago had I taken it in hand."

"I have my doubts of that," said I dryly, and went off to the telegraph office. There I sent a telegram to Rose Gernon, asking her to come down by the early train next morning, and also informed the detective that I wished her to come. I knew quite well she would not dare to refuse, and, moreover, that my detective would send a man to watch her, while he waited round her house for the possible appearance of Strent.

When I got back to the inspector's room, I found that his ill temper had vanished, and he was doing his best to console Francis.

"I've seen a man in a worse plight than is yours, Mr. Briarfield," he was saying, when I entered, "and yet he came out all right in the end. The cause of his predicament was similar."

"What's that?" said Francis, looking up.

"Lack of moral courage. Had you told Denham at the time, and then both of you had told me, we might have laid our hands on Rose Gernon and Strent. As it was, you gave them time to make up their plans and get away."

"Rose hasn't got away," said I

grimly. "She's safe enough, and will be here to-morrow."

"I wish we could say the same about Strent," said the inspector.

"Do you think he is guilty?" asked Francis.

"Upon my word, sir, after all my experience of the law, I am afraid to say who is guilty and who isn't. That theory of Dr. Merrick's regarding Rose Gernon is feasible enough. She certainly seems to have had more motive for killing your brother than had Strent."

"It's my opinion," said I, "that there is a relationship between Strent and Rose. In such relationship lies the secret of the crime and her silence."

"Humph! There's something in that," said the inspector. "They might be man and wife."

"Or brother and sister," suggested Francis.

"Or even lovers," I said, nodding my head. "Jealousy on the part of Strent might have spurred him on to killing Felix."

These, however, were all theories, and we parted for the night without coming to any decision as to who was the guilty party. In the morning I received a telegram from Merrick, and went off with it at once to the inspector. It ran thus:

“Have secured Strent. Am bringing him down with Rose. Arrive at noon. Hold over inquest if possible.”

“By Jove, sir !” said the inspector, “that man is lost as a doctor. He ought to be a detective !”





CHAPTER XV.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT THE FEN INN.

YOU see, I was right," said Merrick, when I met him at the station.

"You have been right in every instance," I answered; "the inspector, here, quite agrees with me that you should be a detective. Where are your prisoners?"

"No, no! Not prisoners!" replied Merrick, shocked at the word. "They are my guests, traveling companions, what you will, but not prisoners."

"Still, I see my detective attends on them both," said I, as Strent and Rose Gernon came along the platform.

"It is as well to take all precautions. How is Francis Briarfield?"

"Rather downcast. He is afraid of being arrested for the murder."

“No fear of that,” answered Merrick, casting a glance at Strent; “this gentleman’s evidence will exonerate him fully.”

Strent, smooth and unctuous as ever, rubbed his hands and bowed, but Rose Gernon turned her back on him with a gesture of disgust. Evidently she had not forgiven his hurried departure from the inn.

“What are we waiting for?” she said sharply. “Let us go on to the inquest. I wish to get it over as soon as possible and return to town.”

We took the hint, and walked along to a room adjoining the morgue, where the inquest was being held. I introduced Merrick to the inspector, and after a short conversation they went into the morgue to examine the body. Not caring to see so ghastly a sight, I remained outside with Francis. In a quarter of an hour the doctor and the inspector returned, the former rubbing his hands with a well-pleased expression, the latter looking somewhat astonished. What had passed in the morgue I know not, as Merrick refused to gratify my curiosity.

“Wait till you hear the evidence of Strent,” he said significantly.

The jury was made up of well-to-do Marshminster tradesmen, who

took a profound interest in the proceedings, as the dead man was the brother of Miss Bellin's future husband. The Bellins were the great people of the neighborhood, and the tradesmen hoped to serve the Hall when Mr. and Mrs. Briarfield settled there. They were, therefore, excessively polite to Francis, but their frequent marks of attention only drew from him a bitter smile.

"Would they treat me in this way if they knew all?" he whispered to me.

"They will never know all," I answered in the same tone.

I had spoken to the inspector, and he in his turn had talked seriously with the coroner. The latter had been told the whole story, and, though astonished at the folly of Francis, yet found it in his heart to be sorry for the young man. He said he would not question Francis more than was necessary, and we hoped to carry through the inquest without exposing the underlying romance.

The first witness called was a local doctor, who deposed to having examined the body of Felix. He gave it as his opinion that the young man had died of poison, and explained the state of the blood with a lot of medical technicalities which none of the jury understood. It was, said

the doctor, a case of blood poisoning, and the deceased had been wounded in the hand by some sharp instrument which had been steeped in poison.

I came next, and narrated how I had stayed at the Fen Inn on that night, and had met there Francis Briarfield, who was waiting there for his brother. Then I told of the discovery of the corpse, and the finding of the arrowhead in the fireplace. I said nothing about my tracking the trail to the pool, and if possible we wished that portion of the evidence to be passed over in silence. Fortunately the jury were a dull-headed lot, and submitted quietly to the guidance of the coroner. He only asked questions pertinent to the death without going too deeply into the subject. At this point I produced the arrowhead.

Francis explained that he had arrived from Chili on the 6th of June and had gone at once to the Fen Inn at the request of his brother Felix. His brother had not arrived on that night, and he had gone to bed. He was unable to say how his brother had come by his tragic end. Then came the critical point which we wished passed over in silence.

“Did you see your brother at the Fen Inn, Mr. Briarfield?” asked the coroner.

“ I did not see my brother alive,” was the evasive answer.

“ Perhaps the body had been put in the pool by the murderer,” said one of the jurymen, “ in which case Mr. Briarfield would not see him.”

“ I did not go to the pool on that night,” replied Francis, adroitly evading the remark ; “ it was later on that I learned my brother’s body was there, and at once gave instructions that the pool was to be dragged.”

At this point Mr. Briarfield was asked to stand down, and the inspector’s evidence was taken. He deposed to the fact that Mr. Briarfield had instructed him to drag the pool for the body, and that it was found there.

This piece of evidence quite put the jury off the scent, as if Francis had placed the body in the pool, he would not have told the inspector where to find it. The critical point was thus glided gently over, and the coroner called Rose Gernon. Once the jury knew how the crime had been committed, they would forget all about the hiding of the body in the pool, so that the folly of Francis would not be made public.

I must say that Rose Gernon gave her evidence very clearly. She said she was an intimate friend of Felix

Briarfield's, a statement which rather shocked the moral tradesmen of Marshminster. Felix asked her to go down to the inn, as he had prepared it for his brother, and wished to see him there about a family matter.

"But the inn was a ruin," interrupted a juryman.

Miss Gernon said that was very true. Still it was habitable, and Mr. Felix Briarfield had sent on fuel and provisions. As the former proprietor had left all the furniture, the rooms were fairly comfortable. She could not say why Felix did all this, unless it was that he wanted to see his brother privately.

Such talk was very weak, and the jurymen looked significantly at one another. They knew the Fen Inn, and could not conceive that anyone could be so mad as to dwell in it even for a night. It was said to be haunted, and though such a superstition might be scoffed at, yet not one of those present would have passed twelve hours of darkness in that ill-omened place.

"Were you not afraid when you saw the Lone Inn?" asked a juryman.

Rose shrugged her shoulders and laughed contemptuously.

"I am afraid of nothing," she said coolly; "there are no such things as

ghosts. Besides, I had my brother with me."

"Your brother!"

"Yes, Edward Strent."

The inspector gave a low whistle, and, catching my eye, nodded significantly. He remembered what I had said on the previous night, and now agreed with my theory that the secret of the committal of the crime lay in the relationship existing between Rose and Strent. They were, it appeared, brother and sister. I saw all kinds of possibilities now that such a tie was made clear. Meanwhile Rose proceeded with her evidence.

"Mr. Felix Briarfield came to the inn," she said, "after his brother had gone to rest. I saw and spoke with him, and afterward went to bed myself. I understood that he was going to stay all night and see his brother in the morning."

"Was he alone in the room when you left him?"

"No; he was with Strent. An hour or so after I retired Strent came to my door and asked me to go downstairs. I did so, and found Felix lying dead on the floor. My brother had left the room, and on going out at the back of the house I found him mounting the horse of Mr. Francis Briarfield. I asked him

what had happened, and he just said Felix was dead, and advised me to fly lest I should be accused of the murder."

"That, I suppose, was also the reason of his flight?"

"So he told me when I saw him in London, but he then declared himself innocent of the crime. I was afraid I would be accused of the crime, so took the horse and gig in which we had come to the Fen Inn, and drove to Marshminster. From there I returned to London.

"Why did you not give the alarm?"

"I was afraid of being accused of the murder."

Here the inspector whispered something in the ear of the coroner. He nodded, and again spoke to Rose Gernon.

"Why did you not tell Mr. Denham where to find Strent when he was apparently guilty?"

"Strent is my brother," said Rose quietly, "and as he told me he was innocent, I did not wish him to be arrested for the crime. But that he visited me yesterday, and was seen by the men set to watch me, he would never have been caught."

Her examination lasted some considerable time, but the coroner did not succeed in eliciting anything new

from her. She persistently held to the same story, so in despair the examiner desisted, and she was told to stand down. In her place Edward Strent was called, and then for me began the most interesting part of the case. I knew all that had been said hitherto, but I did not know how the crime had been committed, and waited to hear what Strent had to say. I quite believed him to be guilty, yet hardly thought he would accuse himself of the crime.

He first corroborated the story of Rose as to going to the inn, and narrated all that had occurred up to the time when he was left alone in the room with Felix.

“When I found myself alone with Briarfield,” he proceeded, “I had a quarrel with him.”

“About what?”

“About my sister. He had promised to marry her, yet, as I well knew, was paying attentions to Miss Bellin.”

“But Miss Bellin was engaged to his brother,” remarked a jurymen.

“I know that. It was about Miss Bellin he wished to see his brother. I insisted that he should marry my sister, and he refused. We had hot words. He was on one side of the table, I on the other. Between us lay the arrowhead, which he had brought in his pocket.”

“Why had he brought the arrowhead there?”

“I don't know,” replied Strent, lying with the utmost promptitude. “He took the arrowhead out of his pocket, said it was poisoned, and laid it down on the table.”

“Do you think he intended to kill his brother because he stood in his way with Miss Bellin?” asked an inquisitive juryman of a romantic turn of mind.

“I really don't know, sir,” replied Strent, looking the juryman straight in the face. “He said nothing to me. We were quarreling over the shabby way in which he had treated my sister, and the arrowhead was on the table between us.”

“What was the position of the arrowhead?” asked the coroner, prompted by Merrick.

“It was leaning against a book which was on the table, and the point was uppermost. I said to Mr. Briarfield: ‘Will you marry my sister?’ and he said: ‘No; I'm —— if I will.’ While saying this, he brought down the open palm of his hand on the arrowhead, and gave a cry of pain. When he lifted his hand, it had a ragged wound across it from the thumb to the little finger. I wished to bind it up, but he pushed me away, crying out he was a dead

man. In three minutes he was lying dead on the floor. I threw the arrowhead into the fireplace, and tried to revive him, but it was no use. He was dead !”

“And you ?”

“I was afraid I would be accused of the death, as Mr. Denham or Mr. Francis might have heard us quarreling together. I lost my head altogether, and only thought of flight. I ran up to my sister’s room, and told her Felix was dead. Then I saddled the horse. When she came to the door, I was mounting. I told her to take the gig and fly to Marshminster, and that I would explain all in London.”

“You fled like a coward !”

“I suppose I did,” said the man sullenly, “but I was beside myself with terror. I rode to Starby, and gave the horse back to the livery-stable keeper. Then I went to London and saw my sister. She agreed with me that it was best to keep quiet, so I did not come forward to give evidence. Had it not been for that detective who watched my sister, I should not be here now.”

This evidence practically ended the inquest. Merrick was called to prove that the wound in the hand was such a one as might have been made by the downward stroke of the

hand on a sharp point. This evidence was substantiated by the local practitioner, who had examined the body with Dr. Merrick. There was no doubt that the affair had happened as Strent said. Felix Briarfield had slapped his open hand on the table to emphasize his refusal to marry Rose Gernon. Unfortunately, it came in contact with the poisoned arrowhead. The flint had an edge like a razor, and, being steeped in virulent poison, acted like a snake-bite on the unfortunate young man. Felix had not been murdered, but died by misadventure.

This was the verdict brought in by the jury, and so the whole of this strange affair came to an end. Thanks to the astuteness of the inspector, and the delicacy of the coroner, the jury were quite unaware of what had happened between the death of Felix and the inquest. The reporters of the *Marshminster Gazette* merely put in a short statement of the affair, and in a few days people ceased to take any interest in the Fen Inn crime. It was a lucky escape for Francis, but I don't think the lesson was thrown away on him.

Rose Gernon and her brother went back to town the same evening. I never saw Strent again, but frequently had the pleasure of seeing

his sister performing on the stage. She is now engaged to be married, but with the knowledge of her actions at the Fen Inn I cannot say I envy the bridegroom.

After the burial of Felix I went abroad with Francis, whose health was quite broken down by the strain put on it during the last few weeks. He returned in six months, and married Olivia. She was told all that had taken place in the Lone Inn, but kept the information to herself. Mrs. Bellin never knew that Felix had substituted himself for Francis. I was best man at the wedding by particular request, and saw the happy pair start for their honeymoon. I hope they will be happy, and am sure they deserve to be, seeing through what tribulations they have passed.

“What has become of the Fen Inn?” asked Dr. Merrick, one day, when we were talking over the case.

“Oh, the Fen Inn is pulled down, I believe,” was my reply. “There will be no more tragedies there.”

“A fit end for such a shambles,” said Merrick; and I think he was about right.

THE END.

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