THE LONE INN

By Fergus Hume, Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," etc.

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CHAPTER II.

It was close on 10 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 any one else was to be 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 up stairs, and when I rang the bell it echoed through the house as though mocking my efforts to summon landlord, maid or friend.

Twice, thrice, I pulled the bellrope 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 the 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 up stairs 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 horrible truth than the 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 Atridæ, 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 handbreadth 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 bedclothes 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. Suspicion 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 this 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?

He was lying on the bed stiff and cold.

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?" thought I. "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 thrashed 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 Mohammed, why, then, Mohammed 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, and 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 avenge his death that I set my face toward Marshminster.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Lonely Track Walker.

After nightfall, along the 3,000 miles of the Canadian Pacific railroad, no matter how bare the prairie nor how wild or desolate the mountain or lake shore, any one standing on the rear platform can see every few miles a lantern in the hands of a track walker, who, after the train passes, resumes his duty along the track. It is a rule on this road that after the passage of each train the roadway shall be carefully inspected, and particularly the bridges, for fear that some spark from the locomotive may have set fire to them.

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