



CHAPTER III.

Late in the afternoon I tramped into Marshminster. It was by no means my first visit to that sleepy provincial town.

In place, therefore, of seeking the center of the town and my maid's aunt's I turned off at the outskirts and made for Bellin Hall.

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

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.

On arriving at the front door I learned that Mr. Briarfield was within and sent up my card, requesting a private interview.

Footman—Yes, sir. Mr. Francis Briarfield has just returned from town. After which question and answer I was shown into a room.

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.

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.

"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."

"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."

"Sit down," he said in a hoarse tone. "You 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."

Briarfield, said I coldly. "Your brother Francis slept at the Fen inn last night."

"I slept in this house."

"Quite believe that. But you are Felix."

"Oh," said Briarfield, bursting into a harsh laugh, "I see you are making the inevitable mistake of mistaking 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."

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

"That is not true!"

"Do you doubt?"

"I dare anybody 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 truth will not serve," I said coldly. "Felix is before me, and he 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 face wearing 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 scornfully. "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 know 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. Afoolish 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—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

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

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 suspicion of the truth she would never trust 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 received a letter from him only 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 themselves fight in vain," quoth Felix, slugging 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 Hotel des Etrangers, Rue de St. Honore, 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 needed 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 Francis. "Dead! Who's 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 you 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, and throughout the interview the woman played a more cunning 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 tonight," she said, with some hesitation, "but tomorrow morning, if you like, we will ride out to the inn."

"It is now 5 o'clock," said I, "and will be light up to 9 or thereabout. 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 tomorrow 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 Chile a few days ago and went to the Fen inn by appointment in order to hear the explanation of the 'ax.'"

"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," 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 Chile 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 forward with clinched 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 any one."

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

"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 a hallucination, and in order to convince you of it am willing to ride out to the Fen inn tomorrow 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 tonight."

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

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

"Then let it be tomorrow morning," I said coldly, "at 10 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."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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