



CHAPTER VIII.

The drama of "The Prodigal Son" was enacted over again when I returned to Marshminster. My aunts had greatly resented my sudden departure for 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 staid here so long when the season was in London," said Aunt Sophie, "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, Sophie. 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, securing 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, Sophie?" said Aunt Jane, in a tone of subdued triumph.

must also have condemned the deception at the Hotel des Etrangers. 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 that 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 Lehigh with Mrs. and Miss Bellin. The coast now being clear, I returned 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? Every one seems to be going there."

"What do you mean, Fundy?" said I.

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

"Did Mr. Briarfield ride 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 it 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 his horse was done up. Look here," added Fundy, opening his daybook. "See, on the 10th of June he had a horse 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 he had actually murdered his brother. Hitherto I believed that 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 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 discover how the murder was committed.

The Fen inn was quite deserted and of all 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 conspicuously with horse's 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

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 stony and sullen in appearance. On the verge of this trail ceased, and then I knew that I saw before me the tomb of Francis Briarfield. Into these 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 assistance 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, 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 onto the hearth.

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 for myself, I rode back to Marshminster, wondering how Felix had hid 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 Bellin's house a perfect armory of savage weapons was arrayed against the wall. There were clubs, arrows, bows, mallets and grinning wooden heads. Doubtless Felix, knowing the arrows to be poisoned, had taken on 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 little difficulty in gaining admission from the woman in charge. Requesting permission to examine the warriorlike implements patterned against the 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 no sufficient evidence to prove that Felix had killed Francis and sufficient to warrant 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.

Dr. Merrick was delighted to see me again so speedily and assured me that he had thought of nothing else but the long 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?"

"Not 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

flint arrowhead. 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 Chile till this month, and, third, that Felix himself hid the corpse. By myself I should never have discovered a 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 Felix himself."

Merrick uttered an exclamation 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."

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 nungled the job considerably."

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

"The duce!" 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 commission 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 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 commission of the crime. Failing them, Felix may slip through your fingers."

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

"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 Swanscombe square and Felix at his chambers in Jernyn street."

"I wonder if Rose is still in communication with Felix?"

"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 Rose assisted Felix in his scoundrelly schemes out of pure love."

"Hardly," responded Merrick. "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. Your 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 any one 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.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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 to warn 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 Jernyn street, and as mine were just around 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 him of 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 at 8 o'clock when I reached the door of the chambers. At the foot of the stairs I found the caretaker engaged 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," 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 9 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 wearing 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 down one of the side streets, turned off there into a dirty 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 Eriovility 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 entered 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.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Flour Awards. CHICAGO, Oct. 31.—The first official announcement of World's Fair diplomas on flour has been made. A medal has been awarded by the World's Fair judges to the flour manufactured by the Washburn, Crosby Co., in the great Washburn Flour Mills, Minneapolis. The committee reports the flour strong and pure, and entitles it to rank as first-class patent flour for family and bakers' use. MEGARGEL & CONNELL WHOLESALE AGENTS. SUPERLATIVE AND GOLD MEDAL. The above brands of flour can be had at any of the following merchants, who will accept THE TRIUMPH FLOUR COVONS of 25 on each one hundred pounds of flour or 50 on each barrel of flour.

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