THE LONE INN.

By FERGUS HUME, Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," etc.

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CHAPTER X.

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'll 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 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 been put off with a lie."

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

"There you are wrong," said Merrick, with grim jocularity. "Every one 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's 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, doctor, 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 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 8 o'clock. She will be there tomorrow evening at the same time. I learned that fact today."

"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, clinching her fist, "if it is true, I shall bitterly punish him for the deception."

"Come with me tomorrow evening at 8 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."

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 tomorrow 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?" asked I 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 8 tomorrow, 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

"I will be with you at a quarter to 8 tomorrow."

come to my rooms in Duke street. I will await 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 tomorrow."

"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 tomorrow 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.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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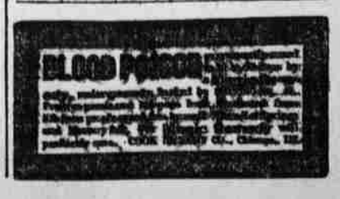
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