# THE LONE INN

A MYSTERY BY FERGUS HUME AUTHOR OF "THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB" ETC.

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CHAPTER XII.

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 any one 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 tomorrow. 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 tonight and go home. Tomorrow 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. Tomorrow I'll come here at 12 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 tomorrow 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 tomorrow 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 9, 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.

*"I told you I was Francis all along," he said reproachfully.*

"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 6 in the morning."

"And I was not up till 10 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 hided rather than blamed you."

"I see that now. It was kind of you to try to 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 6 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 down stairs. 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 that he had provided some reason 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 up stairs, 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 down stairs 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 up stairs 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 down stairs 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 Hotel des Etrangers 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 no body 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 Hotel des Etrangers 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 tomorrow," 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 tomorrow," I answered, "from Rose Strent, alias Rose Gernon."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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