

THE FEN INN

THE MYSTERY OF A HANSON CAB, ETC.

BY FERDINAND H. HARRIS

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CHAPTER I

If there be aught in presentiments, I was well warned by that first glimpse of the inn. The monstrous bulk of gables, sloping roofs and lean chimneys loomed blackly against the sky would have scared a bolder spirit than mine. All day I had walked under blue sky, between green hedgerows, with light heart and whistling lip. Confronted in the twilight by so sinister a scene, I felt qualms. Ragged clouds dropped their fringes over sullen western red, around spread the salt marshes, evil in their desolation, and I, with chilled blood, stared at the lonely mansion dominating the outlook. Here, thought I, an adventure awaits me. The hour, the house, the scene, hint at romance, and that of the strangest.

So much were my spirits dashed by these ominous environments that it was in my mind to walk the farther 10 miles and shelter for the night at Marshminster. Yet some fate compelled my unwilling feet toward that inhospitable door, and almost before I knew my own mind I was knocking loudly. It opened while my hand was still raised for the final rap, and a handsome woman presented herself to my astonished eyes. What beauty did among the tombs I know not, yet there she smiled. Though handsome, she was not a lady and lacked the undefinable stamp of birth. At the same time she was above the commonality. Not a lady, not a servant, but something between the two. Her appearance confirmed the promise of romance.

"I have walked from Eastbury," said I, cap in hand, "and wish to put up here for the night."

"Marshminster is only 10 miles away," answered she, in no wise disposed to admit me.

"And for that reason I want a bed here. Twenty and more miles walking under a hot sun has wearied me considerably."

"I am sorry we cannot accommodate you, sir."

"This is an inn," I said, glancing at the sign.

"The Fen inn, sir," she replied, still smiling, "and full of guests for the time being."

"Full of guests in this locality! You must then entertain waterfowl, for I have seen no human being for the last 12 miles."

She made no direct answer, but shook her head and prepared to close the door. Piqued by the discourtesy and still more by the mystery of this reception, I was about to insist upon admission when my attention was attracted to a face at the near window. I recognized it as that of a college friend and waved my stick in greeting.

"Hello, Briarfield!" I shouted lustily. "Come and help me to a night's lodgings."

The girl was surprised by my remark, and, as I thought, changed color. She stepped aside to let Briarfield pass and exhibited further astonishment at the uranity of our greeting.

"What wind blows you here, Denham?" asked Briarfield, shaking my hand.

"I am on a walking tour," I answered, "and hoped to have reached Marshminster tonight, but as it is 10 miles away and I feel weary I wish to sleep here. This young lady, however, says the inn is full of guests and—"

"Full of guests!" interrupted Briarfield, looking at the girl. "Nonsense, Rose. I am the only guest here!"

"We expect others, sir," said Rose obstinately.

"You can't expect a sufficient number to fill the house," he retorted. "Surely Mr. Denham can have a bed?"

"I shall ask my father, sir!"

When she disappeared, Briarfield turned to me with a smile and asked a strange question.

"Now, I'll be bound," said he, "that you don't know my first name!"

"Felix."

"No! You are wrong. I am not the rich Felix, but the poor Francis."

"You see the result of being one of twins," said I impatiently. "If at college I could not distinguish between you, how can you expect me to do so now? I haven't seen either you or your brother for at least two years. Where is Felix?"

"At Marshminster."

"And what are you doing here?"

"Ah, that's a long story! If you—"

"Please to walk in, sir," interrupted Rose at this moment. "My father desires to speak with you."

"I have, then, to submit myself to the approval of the landlord," said I and forthwith entered the house, followed by Francis Briarfield.

The landlord, a lean, saturnine man above the common height, saluted me with a sour smile. In appearance and demeanor he was quite in keeping with that dreary inn. About him lurked a Puritanic flavor not ill suited to his somber attire and unctuous speech. He was less like an innkeeper than a smug valet. I mistrusted the man at first sight.

"I can give you supper and a bed, sir," said he, bending his body and rubbing his hands, "neither, I regret to say, of the first quality."

"Never mind," I answered, unstrapping my knapsack. "I am too tired and angry to be particular."

"We have only lately taken up this house, sir," he continued, still bowing, "and things are a trifle disordered."

He glanced around. Despite the cheerful blaze of a fire, the room had a mildewed look, as though long uninhabited. Traces of hasty cleansing were visible in all corners, and in the dim light filtered through dusty panes the apartment had a singularly uninviting aspect. Again that premonition of misfortune came over me.

"I wonder you took up the house at all," said I. "You won't make your fortune in this locality."

The landlord made no reply, but muttering something about supper left the room. His daughter had already departed, presumably in the direction of the kitchen, and I found myself alone with Francis Briarfield. He was absently looking out at the window and started when I addressed him directly. I assured mystery therefrom.

"What's the meaning of these mysteries?" I asked abruptly. The horror of the place was already influencing my spirits.

"What mysteries?" demanded Briarfield in a listless manner.

"This inn has been uninhabited for some considerable period. A suspicious looking rascal and his pretty daughter have taken up their abode here with no possible chance of getting customers. I stumble on this castle grim in the twilight and find you here—you of all men—whom I believed to be in South America. Don't you call these mysteries?"

"If you put it that way, I admit the mysteries, replied Francis, coming toward the fire. "I know little about the inn, still less about the landlord and his daughter. As to myself, I am here by appointment to meet my brother Felix. Came from London to Starby and rode from thence to this inn."

"Why meet him in this murderous looking house?"

"He named the place of meeting himself."

"And you?"

"I only arrived this month in England from South America. I wrote him from London, asking to see him. He appointed this inn as neutral ground for us to meet, so here I am."

"Why neutral ground? Have you quarreled?"

"Bitterly."

"You did so at college," said I, looking steadily at him. "Strange that such ill blood should exist between twin brothers."

"The inevitable woman," said Francis in a harsh tone, quite at variance with his usual soft speech.

"Oh! And her name?"

"Olivia Bellin!"

"I know her. Do you mean to say, Briarfield, that—"

"Hush!" he said, rapidly indicating the door, and there stood the girl Rose listening to our conversation. Her face was pale, and it was evident that the mention of the name had powerfully affected her. Seeing our eyes were on her, she apologized in a low, nervous voice.

"Your pardon, gentlemen," she said, placing a tray on the table. "I did not intend to interrupt your conversation. Allow me to lay the table for supper."

"First show me my room," said I, picking up my knapsack. "I am dusty and wish to give myself a brush up."

Rose nodded and preceded me out of the apartment. I glanced back and saw that Francis had returned to his old post by the window. Evidently he was watching for the arrival of his brother.

"When does Mr. Felix Briarfield arrive?" I asked Rose as we ascended the stairs.

"I don't know the name, sir," she said, with an obvious effort.

"You don't know the name?" I repeated, seeing she was lying. "Yet Mr. Francis Briarfield is here to meet his brother."

"It may be so, sir. But I know nothing about it. Mr. Briarfield is a stranger to me, like yourself."

"It is to be hoped you received him more willingly than you did me."

My words fell on the empty air, for after her last remark she hastily departed. I mechanically attended to my wants and wondered what could be the meaning of the girl's attitude.

"She knows Miss Bellin and Felix Briarfield," I thought, "perhaps not personally, but at least their names. She is also aware of the intended visit of Felix to this place. I must find out from Francis the reason of that visit, and it may throw some light on the demeanor of Rose. I am glad I came here tonight, for that landlord is scarcely a person to be trusted. Certainly my presentiment of romance is coming true."

When I descended to the dining room, I found supper laid and Francis impatiently awaiting my arrival. A lamp was lighted, and for the first time I saw his face plainly. The alteration in his looks and demeanor since our college days was astonishing. Felix had always been the graver of the twins, and it was the distinguishing mark between them. Now the livelier spirits of Francis had calmed down to a subdued gravity which made the resemblance between them still greater. We seated ourselves at the table in silence, and he colored as he caught my earnest look.

"You find me altered?" he asked, with manifest discomposure.

"Very much altered and more like Felix than ever."

"I haven't seen him for over a year," said Briarfield abruptly, "so I don't know if the resemblance is still strong."

"It is stronger," I answered emphat-

ically. "I saw Felix two months ago, and now I look at you tonight I can scarcely believe it is Francis and not Felix seated before me."

"We are alike to outward view, Denham, but I hope our natures are different."

"What do you mean?"

"Felix," said he, with marked deliberation, "is a thief, a liar and a dishonorable man."

"You speak strongly."

"I have reason to."

"The before mentioned reason, Briarfield," said I, alluding to the feminine element.

"Yes. By the way," he added feverishly, "you said Miss Bellin was known to you."

"In a casual way only. She is a society beauty, and I have met her once or twice; also her very silly mother. The latter is as remarkable for folly as the former is for beauty. Well, Briarfield, and what about Miss Bellin?"

"I was engaged to her."

"You are engaged to her?"

"I said 'was,'" he replied, with emphasis. "Now she is engaged to my brother."

"Of her own free will?"

"I don't know," said Briarfield. "I really don't know. When I went to Chile, I was her affianced lover. Now I return and learn that she is to marry my brother."

"What explanation does he make?"

"None as yet. Tonight or tomorrow morning he comes here to explain."

"But why here, of all places?"

"Miss Bellin is in Marshminster. Felix is staying there also, and in his letter asked me to see him at the Fen inn, as he wished to explain his conduct fully before I met Olive again."

"And you agreed?"

"As you see."

"In your place," said I meditatively, "I should have gone at once to Marshminster and confronted both. There is some trickery about this."

"You think so?"

"I am by nature suspicious," I answered. "Perhaps too much so. Yes, I think there is some trickery."

Francis frowned and glanced at his watch.

"It is now 8 o'clock," he said, replacing it in his pocket, "too late to go to Marshminster."

"Besides which," I added, "our worthy landlord has doubtless neither trap nor horse."

By this time we had finished supper, and Rose came in to clear away. Thoughtfully filling my pipe, I watched her closely. Undeniably she was a very beautiful woman and ill suited to her present occupation. Why a girl so handsome should bury herself in this lonely inn was a mystery to me. I felt sure that there was a purpose connected with her presence here, and that inimical to Briarfield. The landlord did not make his appearance, which was to me a matter of some relief. I disliked the fellow greatly.

Francis, smoking hard, sat staring at the fire and took no heed of Rose. Once or twice she glanced in his direction and looked as though about to address him. Catching my eye, she bit her lip and desisted. Finally she disappeared from the room, with manifest anger at not having accomplished her design.

"Strange," said I, lighting my pipe. "What is strange?" asked Briarfield, looking up.

"That girl knows your brother."

"It's not impossible," he answered carelessly. "Felix always had an eye for pretty faces, and as he appointed this inn as a meeting place he has probably been here before. Rose Strent no doubt draws him hither by her beauty."

"That is not a compliment to Miss Bellin."

"I know it. Felix is a profligate scamp and will make her a bad husband. He shall not marry her," added Briarfield angrily. "I say he shall not marry her and make her life miserable. I'll kill him first."

"Man, man, think of what you are saying—your own brother!"

"My own brother—my twin brother," scoffed Francis, "is that any reason why he should take away from me the woman I love?"

"She is not worth regretting if she forgets you so soon."

"She has not forgotten me," he said earnestly. "I assure you, Denham, she loves me still. The last letter I received from her gave no hint that she wearied of me. As you say, there is some trickery about it. I'll have an explanation from Felix," continued he, striking the table with his fist, "or, by heaven, I'll kill him!"

"Where did you meet her?" I asked, ignoring this last remark, which was but idle.

"In town over a year ago," he replied, calming down. "She is, as you know, very beautiful, and her mother wished her to make a great match. I am comfortably off, but have not a title; therefore Mrs. Bellin would not sanction the engagement. Then I had to go to South America on business connected with my property. Before I left she promised to become my wife and swore that nothing should part us or render her false to me. See, here is the ring she gave me," he added, stretching out his hand, "this pearl ring. I was to be back in six months, and our engagement was to be made public. I am back in

six months, and the first thing I hear is that she is to marry Felix."

"Did she write and tell you so?"

"No. But Felix did and asked me to meet him here before seeing her."

"Now, I wonder if this apparent treachery of Miss Bellin has anything to do with your twinship?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are so like in appearance," said I, "that no one could tell you apart. You have lived constantly together save for the last six months and know every action of each other's lives. It may be that Felix has passed himself off to Miss Bellin as you."

"Impossible! She would detect the deception."

"I doubt it, save by intuition. I assure you, Briarfield, that the resemblance between you is most perplexing. There is not the slightest difference. You dress the same; you have the same gestures; you almost think the same. It is scarce possible to tell which is which when apart. I thought tonight that you were Felix."

"It cannot be; it cannot be," he muttered feverishly. "Her own heart would tell her the truth."

"Did you tell Felix of your engagement?" I asked abruptly.

"Yes. I told him all."

"And when did you hear last from Miss Bellin?"

"Some three months ago. It was because she did not reply to my letters that I came back so soon."

"To whom were your letters sent?"

"To her, of course."

"Care of Felix?" said I, with instinctive suspicion.

"Why, yes," he said, with a sudden frown. "I did not want Mrs. Bellin to know of our engagement, so did not dare to write openly. Felix undertook to deliver the letters."

"He may have undertaken to do so, but," I added forcibly, "he did not."

"Denham!"

"The whole case is as clear as day," said I. "Felix was in love with Miss Bellin and wished to marry her. Knowing she was in love with you, he was well aware he had no chance, so resorted to trickery. When you left for Chile, he gave her your letters for three months, then, saying he was going abroad, ostensibly left England, but really staid and presented himself as you."

"As me?"

"Yes. He has traded on the marvelous resemblance between you. He knows all your life, all your love affairs, and I have no doubt that Miss Bellin believes that he is Francis Briarfield, her lover, returned from South America in three months instead of six."

"If I thought so," muttered Francis, biting his fingers, "if I thought so—"

"I am sure it is so. Now you see why it is imperative that he should interview you before you meet Miss Bellin. He wishes to reveal the deception and throw himself on your mercy."

"He'll get no mercy from me if this is so," said Briarfield in a somber tone. "Oh, fool that I was not to write direct to Olivia when I came back to England! But it is not too late. When he comes here, I'll learn the truth and denounce him to Olivia. Then our troubles will be over."

"A man capable of such a trick is capable of worse," said I sentimentally. "I advise you to be on your guard against Felix."

"Do you think he'll kill me?"

"I don't go as far as that," I replied cautiously, "but your meeting will be productive of trouble. Just now you expressed a wish to kill him."

"And I shall if he has tricked me as you say."

"Nonsense, Briarfield, you talk wildly. This matter can surely be settled in a less melodramatic fashion. I am glad I am here, as perhaps you will permit me to be present at the interview."

"Willingly. I know how clever you are, Denham. You may assist me to unmask Felix."

"Do you think he'll come tonight?" said I, going to the window.

"His letter said tonight or tomorrow."

"Then it will be tomorrow. Felix wouldn't risk meeting you at night if he had thus betrayed you. Let us go to bed and tomorrow settle the matter."

At first Francis was unwilling to retire, but when the landlord came to lock up for the night and laughed at the idea of any one coming there from Marshminster he fell in with my desire. Together we went up stairs and parted on the threshold of his room. It was five or six doors away from mine.

"Lock your door," said I as we parted.

"What, do you think I'll be murdered in my sleep?"

"No, but I don't like the inn, and I dislike the face of Strent, the landlord. Besides," I continued, tapping Briarfield's breast, "that girl Rose."

"What about her?"

"She knows Miss Bellin. Good night."

With that I departed, notwithstanding his desire for an explanation of my last words. So wearied was I that despite my suspicions of the inn I speedily fell asleep.

(To be continued.)

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GOVERNMENT ROADS

IS PUBLIC OWNERSHIP PRACTICAL AND DESIRABLE

How the Plan Succeeds in New Zealand

No. 1.

Under the above head we propose to give to our readers a series of articles on the public ownership of railroads. Many honest and otherwise well informed persons believe that public ownership of railroads is not only impractical but a new and untried theory. In the outset we want to disabuse their minds of this error. Public ownership of railroads is as old as the invention of railroads. If anyone will take the pains to look it up they will find in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. III., pages 1303-6, that the following governments own railroads, most of which are operated by the state:

Austria owns and operates nearly 2,000 miles of railway.

Baden owns 829 miles of railway.

Bavaria has 2,896 miles of railway owned by the government.

Belgium owns about 2,000 miles of railway.

Some 181 miles of railway is owned by Ceylon.

Chili owns 670 miles of railway.

China owns and operates all her railways.

The United States of Columbia owned 218 miles of railway in 1890.

Denmark has about 1,000 miles of railway owned by the government.

France owns about 2,000 miles of railway, but most or quite all is leased to companies.

The German empire owns about 21,840 miles of railway.

England and Wales own 14,034 miles.

Scotland has 3,118 miles of railways belonging to the state.

Ireland owns 2,791 miles of railroad.

Heese owns 226 miles of her railway system.

A large per cent of the railways of Italy belong to the government, but are leased to companies.

Japan owns 603 miles of railway.

The colony of Natal owns 305 miles of railway.

The Netherlands has nearly 1,000 miles owned by the government.

New South Wales owns 2,182 miles of railway.

New Zealand in 1890 owned 672 miles of railroad.

Norway has 929 miles of railroad—all her own.

Portugal owns about one-half of the railways in that country.

Oldenburg owns 222 miles of her railroads.

Peru has 1,625 miles of railroads owned by the state.

Roumania in 1890 owned 1,590 miles of railway.

Poland and Caucasus own 5,065 miles of railways.

Sweden owns 1,645 miles of railroads.

Victoria owns all of her railroads—2,341 miles.

Some 1,137 miles of road in Finland belongs to Russia. About one-tenth of the roads in that empire are owned by the