

THE STOWMARKET MYSTERY; OR, A LEGACY OF HATE

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CHAPTER V.

FROM BEHIND THE HEDGE.

The man's swarthy face added force to the faint, David Hume leaped up, but Brett anticipated him, gripping his arm firmly, and without ostentation.

Margaret, too, had risen. She appeared to be battling with some powerful emotion, choking back a fierce impulse. For an instant the situation was electrical. Then the woman's clear tones rang through the room.

"I am mistress here," she cried. "Giovanni, remain silent or leave us. How dare you, of all men, speak thus of my cousin?"

Certainly the effect of the barrister's straightforward statement was unlooked for. But Brett felt that a family quarrel would not further his object at that moment. It was necessary to stop the imminent outburst, for David Hume and Giovanni Capella were silently challenging each other to mortal combat. What a place of ill-omen to the descendants of the Georgian baronet was this sunlit library with its spacious French windows!

"Of course," said the barrister, speaking as quietly as if he were discussing the weather, "such a topic is an unpleasant one. It is, however, unavoidable. My young friend here is determined, at all costs, to discover the secret of Sir Alan's murder. It is imperative that he should do so. The happiness of his whole life depends upon his success. Until that mystery is solved he cannot marry the woman he loves."

"Do you mean Helen Layton?" Margaret's syllables might have been so many mortal daggers.

"Yes."

"Is David still in love with her?"

"Yes."

"And she with him?"

David Hume broke in:

"Yes, Rita. She has been faithful to the end."

A very forcible Italian oath came from Capella as he passed through the window and strode rapidly out of sight, passing to the left of the house, where one of the lines of yew trees ended in a group of conservatories.

Margaret was now deadly white. She pressed her hand to her bosom. "Forgive me," she sobbed. "I do not feel well. You will both be always welcome here. Let no one interfere with you. But I must leave you. This afternoon—"

She staggered to the door. Her cousin caught her.

"Thank you, David," she whispered. "Leave me now. I will be all right soon. My heart troubles me. No. Do not ring. Let us keep our miseries from the servants."

She passed out, leaving Hume and the barrister uncertain how best to act. The situation had developed with a vengeance. Brett was more bewildered than ever before in his life.

"That scoundrel killed Alan, and now he wants to kill his own wife!" growled Hume, when they were alone.

Brett looked through him rather than at him. He was thinking intently. For a long time—minutes it seemed to his fuming companion—he remained motionless, with glazed immovable eyes. Then he awoke to action.

"Quick!" he cried. "Tell me if this room has changed much since you were last here. Is the furniture the same? Is that the writing table? What chair did you sit in? Where was it placed? Quick, man! You have wasted eighteen months. Give me no opinions, but facts."

Thus admonished, scared somewhat by the barrister's volcanic energy, Hume obeyed him.

"There is no material change in the room," he said. "The secretaire is the same. You see, here is the drawer which was broken open. It bears the marks of the implement used to force the lock. I think I sat in this chair, or one like it. It was placed here. My face was turned towards the fire, yet in my dream I was looking through the center window. The Japanese sword rested here. I showed you where Alan's body was found."

The young man darted about the room to illustrate each sentence. Brett followed his words and actions without comment. He grabbed his hat and stick.

"We will return later in the day," he said. "Let us go at once and call on Mrs. Eastham."

"Mrs. Eastham? Why?"

"Because I want to see Miss Helen Layton. The old lady can send for her."

Hume needed no urging. He could not wait long enough. They had gone a hundred yards from the house when Brett suddenly stopped and checked his companion.

Behind the yew trees on the left, and rendered invisible by a stout hedge, a man was running—running at top speed, with the laboring breath of one unaccustomed to the exercise. The barrister sprang over the strip of turf, passed among the trees, and plunged into the hedge regardless of thorns. He came back instantly.

"There is a footpath across the park, leading towards the lodge gates. Where does it come out?" he asked, speaking rapidly in a low tone.

"It enters the road near the avenue, close to the gates. It leads from a farmhouse."

"A lady is walking through the path towards the lodge. Capella is running to intercept her. Come! We may hear something!"

Brett set off at a rapid pace along the turf. Hume followed, and soon they were near the lodge. Mrs. Crowe saw them, and came out.

"Stop her!" gasped Brett. Hume signalled the woman not to open the gate. She watched them with open mouthed curiosity. The barrister slowed down and quietly made his way to the leafy angle where the avenue hedge joined that which shut off the park from the road.

He held up a warning hand. Hume stepped warily behind him, and both men looked through a portion of the hedge where briars were supplanted by hazel bushes.

Capella was standing panting near a stile. A girl, dressed in muslin, and wearing a large straw hat, was approaching.

"Great heavens! It is Helen!" exclaimed Hume.

Brett grasped his shoulder. "Watch yourself," he whispered earnestly.

"Luckily, Capella has not heard you. I regret the necessity which makes us eavesdroppers, but it is a fortunate accident, all the same. Not a word! Remember what is at stake."

They could not see the Italian's face. His back was heaving from the violence of his exertion. Miss Layton was walking rapidly towards the stile. Obviously she had perceived the waiting man, and she was not pleased.

Her pretty face, flushed and sunburnt, wore the strained aspect of a woman annoyed, but trying to be civil.

It was she who took the initiative. "Good day, Mr. Capella," she said pleasantly. "Why on earth did you run so fast?"

"Because I wished to be here before you, Miss Layton," replied the man, his voice tremulous with excitement.

"Yes, sir."

"I wish I had known, because I could have bidden you easily if you meant to race me."

"That was not my object."

"Well, now you have attained it whatever it may have been, please allow me to get over the stile. I will be late for luncheon. My father wished me to ascertain how Farmer Burton is progressing after his spill. He was thrown from his dogcart whilst coming from the Bury St. Edmund's fair."

It was easy for the listeners behind the hedge to gather that the girl's affable manner was affected. She was really somewhat alarmed. Her eyes wandered to the high road to see if anyone was approaching, and she kept at some distance from the Italian.

"Do not play with me, Nellie," said Capella, in agonized accents. "I am consumed with love of you. Can you not, at least, give me your pity?"

"Mr. Capella," she cried, and none but one blind to all save his own passionate desires could fail to note her lofty disdain, "how can you be so base as to use such language to me?"

"Base! To love you?"

"Again I say it—base and unmanly. What have I done that you should venture to so insult your charming wife, not to speak of the insult to myself? When you so far forget yourself a fortnight ago as to hint at your outrageous ideas regarding me, I forced myself to remember that you were not an Englishman, that perhaps in your country there may be a social code which permits a man to dishonor his home and to annoy a defenceless woman. I cannot forgive you a second time. Let me pass! Let me pass, I tell you or I will strike you!"

Brett, in his admiration for the spirited girl who, notwithstanding her protestations, seemed to be anything but "defenceless," momentarily forgot his companion.

A convulsive tightening of Hume's muscles, preparatory to a leap through the hedge, warned him in time.

"Idiot!" he whispered, as he clutched him again.

Were not the others so taken up with the throbbing influences of the moment they must have heard the rustling of the leaves. But they paid little heed to external affairs. The Italian was speaking.

"Nellie," he said, "you will drive me mad. But listen, carissima. If I may not love you, I can at least defend you. David Hume-Frazer, the man who murdered my wife's brother, has returned, and openly boasts that you are waiting to marry him."

"Do not say that," she cried.

"To me, I heard him say this not fifteen minutes since."

"Where? You do not know him. He could not be here without my knowledge."

"Then it is true. You do intend to marry this unconvicted felon?"

"Mr. Capella, I really think you are what English people call 'cracked.'"

"But you believe me—that this man has come to Beechcroft?"

"It may be so. He has good reasons, doubtless, for keeping his presence here a secret. Whatever they may be, I shall soon know them."

"Helen, he is not worthy of you. He cannot give you a love fierce as mine. Nay, I will not be repelled. Hear me. My wife is dying. I will be free in a few months. Bid me to hope. I will not trouble you. I will go away, but I swear, if you marry Frazer, neither he nor you will long enjoy your happiness!"

The girl made no reply, but sprang towards the stile in sheer desperation. Capella strove to take her in his arms, not indeed with intent to offer her any violence, but she met his lover's ardent with such a vigorous buffet that he lost his temper.

He caught her. She had almost surmounted the stile, but her dress hampered her movements. The Italian, vowing his passion in an ardent flow of words, endeavored to kiss her.

Then, with a sigh, for he would have preferred to avoid an open rupture, Brett let go his hold on Hume. Indeed, if he had not done so, there must have been a fight on both sides of the hedge.

He turned away at once to light a cigarette. What followed immediately had no professional interest for him.

But he could not help hearing Helen's shriek of delighted surprise, and certain other sounds which denoted that Giovanni was being used as a

football by his near relative by marriage.

Mrs. Crowe came out of her cottage.

"What's a-coin' on in the park, sir?" she inquired anxiously. "A great event," he said. "Faust is kicking Mephistopheles."

"Drat them colts!" she cried, adding, after taking thought: "but we haven't any horses of them names, sir."

"No. You surprise me. They are of the Italian pedigree."

Meanwhile he was achieving his object, which was to drive Mrs. Crowe back towards the wicket.

Helen's voice came to them shrilly: "That will do, David! Do you hear me?"

"Why, bless my heart, there's Miss Layton," said Mrs. Crowe.

"What a fine little boy this is!" exclaimed Brett, stooping over a curly haired urchin. "Is he the oldest?"

"Good gracious, sir, no. He's the youngest."

"Dear me, I would not have thought so. You must have been married very early. Here, my little man, see what you can buy for half-a-crown."

"What a nice gentleman he is, to be sure," thought the lodge keeper's wife, when Brett passed through the smaller gate, assured that the struggle in the park had ended.

"Just fancy 'im a-thinkin' Jimmy was the eldest, when I will be a grandmother come August if all goes well with Kate."

The barrister signed to the groom to wait, and joined the young couple, who now appeared in the roadway. A haggard, dishevelled, and furious man burst through the avenue hedge and ran across the drive.

"Mrs. Crowe," he almost screamed "do you see those two men there?"

"Yes, sir."

The good woman was startled by her master's sudden appearance and his excited state.

"They are never to be admitted to the grounds again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Capella turned to rush away up the avenue, but he was compelled to stop. Mrs. Crowe watched him wonderingly, and tried to piece together in her mind the queer sounds and occurrences of the last two minutes.

She had not long been in the cottage when the butler arrived.

"You let two gentlemen in a while ago?" he said.

"I did."

"One was Mr. David and the other a Mr. Brett?"

"Oh, was that the tall gentleman's name?"

"I expect so. Well, here's the missus's written order that whenever they want to come to the house or go anywhere in the park it's O. K."

Mrs. Crowe was wise enough to keep her own counsel, but when the butler retired, she said:

"Then I'll obey the missus, a master can settle it with her. I don't hold by Eyettians, anyhow."

CHAPTER VI.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Helen was very much upset by the painful scene which had just been enacted. Its vulgarly appalling her. In a little old-world hamlet like Stowmarket, a riotous cow or frightened horse supplied a sensation for a week.

What would happen when it became known that the rector's daughter had been attacked by the Spirit of Beechcroft in the park meadow, and saved from his embraces only after a vigorous struggle, in which her defender was David Hume-Frazer, concerning whom the villagers still spoke with bated breath?

Of course, the girl imagined that many people must have witnessed the occurrence. The appearance of Brett, of the waiting groom, and of a chance laborer who now strode up the village street, led her to think so.

She did not realize that the whole affair had barely lasted a minute, that Brett was Hume's friend, the man-servant a stranger who had seen nothing and heard little, whilst the villager only wondered, when he touched his cap, why Miss Layton was so flustered like.

Brett attributed her agitation to her right cause. He knew that this healthy, high-minded, and athletic young woman went under no fear of Capella and his ravings.

"What happened when you jumped the hedge?" he said to Hume.

"I handled that scoundrel somewhat roughly," was the answer. "It was Nellie here who begged for mercy on his account."

"Ah, well, the incident ended very pleasantly. No one saw what happened save the principals, a fortunate thing in itself. We want to prevent a nine days' wonder just now."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Miss Layton, overjoyed at this expression of opinion, and secretly surprised at the interest taken by the barrister in the affair, for Hume had not as yet found time to tell her his friend's name.

"Quite sure, Miss Layton," he said, with the smile which made him such a prompt favorite with women. "I had nothing to do but observe the mis-en-scene. The stage was quite clear for the chief actors. And now, may I make a suggestion? The longer we remain here the more likely are we to attract observation. Mr. Hume and I are going to call on Mrs. Eastham. May we expect you in an hour's time?"

"Can't you come in with us now?" exclaimed David eagerly.

She laughed excitedly, being yet hurried. The sudden appearance of her lover tried her nerves more than the Italian's passionate avowal.

"No, indeed," she cried. "I must go home. My father will forget all about his lunch otherwise, and I am afraid—I—want to cry!"

Without another word she hurried off towards the rectory.

"My dear fellow," murmured Brett to the disconsolate Hume, "don't you understand? She cannot bear the constraint imposed by my presence at this moment, nor could she meet Mrs. Eastham with any degree of composure. Now, this afternoon she will return a mere iceberg. Mrs. Eastham, I am sure, has tact. I am going to the Hall. You two will be

left alone for hours."

He turned aside to arrange with the groom concerning the care of the horse, as they had been detained some time in the village. Then the two men approached Mrs. Eastham's residence.

That good person, a motherly old lady of over sixty, was not only surprised but delighted by the advent of David Hume.

"My dear boy," she cried, advancing to meet him with outstretched hands when he entered the morning-room. "What fortunate wind has blown you here?"

"I can hardly tell you, auntie," he said—both Helen and he adopted the pleasing fiction of a relationship that did not exist—"you must ask Mr. Brett."

Thus appealed to, the barrister set forth, in a few explicit words, the object of their visit.

"I hope and believe you will succeed," said Mrs. Eastham impulsively. "Providence has guided your steps here at this hour. You cannot imagine how miserable that man Capella makes me."

"Why?" cried Hume, darting a look of surprise at Brett.

"Because he is simply pestering Nellie with his attentions. There! I must speak plainly. He has gone to extremes that can no longer be misinterpreted. In our small community, Mr. Brett," she explained, "though we dearly love a little gossip, we are slow to believe that a man married to such a charming if somewhat unconventional woman as Margaret Hume-Frazer—I cannot train my tongue to call her Mrs. Capella—would deliberately neglect his wife and dare to demonstrate his unlawful affection for another woman, especially such a girl as Helen Layton."

"How long has this been going on?" inquired Brett, for Hume was too furious to speak.

"For some months, but it is only a fortnight ago since Helen first complained of it to me. I promptly told Mr. Capella that I could not receive him again at my house. He discovered that Nellie came here a good deal, and managed to call about the same time as she did. Then he found that she was interested in Japanese art, and he is really clever in that respect."

"Clever," interrupted the barrister. "Do you mean that he understands lacquer work, Satsuma ware, painting or inlaying? Is he a connoisseur or a stunner?"

"It is all Greek to me!" exclaimed the old lady, "but unquestionably the bits of china and queer carvings he often brought here were very beautiful. Nellie did not like him personally, but she could not deny his knowledge and enthusiasm. Margaret, too, used to invite her to the Hall, for Miss Layton has great taste as an amateur gardener. Mr. Brett. But this friendship suddenly ceased. Mr. Capella became very strange and gloomy in his manner. At last Nellie told me that the wretched man had dared to utter words of love to her, hinting that his wife could not live long, and that she would come in for her fortune. Now, as my poor girl has been the most faithful soul that ever lived, never for an instant doubting that some day the clouds would lift from David, you may imagine what a shock this was to her."

"Mrs. Eastham," said Brett, suddenly switching the conversation away from the Italian's fantasy, "you are well acquainted with all the circumstances connected with Sir Alan's murder. Have you formed any theory about the crime, its motive, or its possible author?"

"God forgive me if I do any man an injury, but in these last few days I have had my suspicions," she exclaimed.

"Tell me your reasons."

"It arose out of a chance remark by Nellie. She was discussing with me her inexplicable antipathy to Mr. Capella, even during the time when they were outwardly good friends. She said that once he showed her a Japanese sword, a most wonderful piece of workmanship, with veins of silver and gold let into the handle and part of the blade. To the upper part of the scabbard was attached a knife—a small dagger—similar."

"Yes, I understand. An implement like that used to kill Sir Alan Hume-Frazer?"

"Exactly. Nellie at first hardly realized its significance. Then she hastily told Capella to take it away, but not before she noticed that he seemed to understand the dreadful thing. It is fastened in its sheath by a hidden spring, and he knew exactly how to open it. Any person not accustomed to such weapons would endeavor to pull it out by main force."

Brett did not press Mrs. Eastham to pursue her theory. It was plain that she regarded the Italian as a man who might conceivably be the murderer of his wife's brother. This was enough for feminine logic.

Hume, too, shared the same belief, and had not scrupled to express it openly.

There were, it was true, reasons in plenty, why Capella should have committed this terrible deed. He was, presumably, affianced to Margaret at the time. Apparently her father's will had contemplated the cutting down of her annual allowance. The young heir had, on the other hand, made up the deficit. But why did these artificial restrictions exist? Why were precautions taken by her father to diminish his daughter's income? She had been extravagant. Both father and brother quarrelled with her on this point. Indeed, there was a slight family disturbance with reference to it during Sir Alan's last visit to London. Was Capella mixed up with it?

At last there was a glimmering perception of motive for an otherwise fiendishly irrational act. Did it tend to incriminate the Italian?

A summons to luncheon dispelled the momentary gloom of their thoughts. Before the meal ended Miss Layton joined them.

Brett looked at his watch. "Fifty minutes!" he said.

Then they all laughed, except Mrs. Eastham, who marvelled at the coolness of the meeting between the girl and David. But the old lady was quick-witted.

"Have you met before?" she cried.

"Dearest," said the girl, kissing her, "do you mean to say they have not told you what happened in the park?"

"That will require a special sitting," said Brett gaily. "Meanwhile, I am going to the Hall. I suppose you do not care to accompany me, Hume?"

"I do not."

The reply was so emphatic that it created further merriment.

"Well, tell me quickly what this secret is," exclaimed Mrs. Eastham, "because in five minutes I must have a long talk with my cook. She has to prepare pies and pastry sufficient to feed nearly a hundred school children next Monday, and it is a matter of much calculation."

Brett took his leave.

"I knew that good old soul would be tactful," he said to himself. "Now I wonder how Winter made such a colossal mistake as to imagine that Hume murdered his cousin. He was sure of the affections of a delightful girl; he could not succeed to the property; he has declined to take up the title. What reason could he have for committing such a crime?"

Then a man walked up the road—a man dressed like a farmer or gardener, rotund, strongly-built, cheerful-looking. He halted opposite Mrs. Eastham's house, where the barrister still stood drawing on his gloves.

"Yes," said Brett aloud, "you are an egregious ass, Winter."

"Why, Mr. Brett?" asked the unabashed detective. "Isn't the make-up good?"

"It is the make-up that always leads you astray. You never theorize above the level of the Police Gazette."

Mr. Winter yielded to not unattractive annoyance. With habitual caution, he glanced around to assure himself that no other person was within earshot; then he said vehemently:

"I tell you, Mr. Brett, that swine killed Sir Alan Hume-Frazer."

"You use strong language."

"Not stronger than he deserves."

"What are you doing here?"

"I heard he was in London, and watched him. I saw him go to your chambers and guessed what was up, so I came down here to see you and tell you what I know."

"Out of pure good nature?"

"You can believe it or not, Mr. Brett. It is the truth."

"He has been tried and acquitted. He cannot be tried again. Does Scotland Yard—"

"I'm on my holidays."

Brett laughed heartily.

"I see," he cried. "A bus-driver's holiday. For how long?"

"Fourteen days."

"You are nothing if not professional. I suppose it was not your first offence, or they might have let you off with a fine."

The detective enjoyed this departmental joke. He grinned broadly.

"Anyhow, Mr. Brett," he said, "you and I have been engaged on too many smart bits of work for me to stand quietly and let you be made a fool of."

The barrister came nearer, and said, in a low tone:

"Winter, you have never been mistaken in your life. Now, attend to my words. If you help me you will, in the first place, be well paid for your services. Secondly, you will be able to place your hand on the true murderer of Sir Alan Hume-Frazer, or I will score my first failure. Thirdly, Scotland Yard will give you another holiday, and I can secure you some shooting in Scotland. What say you?"

The detective looked thoughtful. Long experience had taught him not to argue with Brett when the latter was in earnest.

"I will do anything in my power," he said, "but there is more in this business than perhaps you are aware of, more than ever transpired at the Assizes."

"Quite so, and a good deal that has transpired since. Now, Winter, don't argue, there's a good fellow. Go and engage the landlord of the local inn in a discussion on crops. I am off to Beechcroft Hall. Mr. Hume and I will call for you on our way back to Stowmarket. In our private sitting-room at the hotel there I will explain everything."

They parted. Brett was promptly admitted by Mrs. Crowe, and walked rapidly up the avenue.

Winter watched his retreating figure.

"He's smart. I know he's smart," mused the detective. "But he doesn't know everything about this affair. He doesn't know, I'll be bound, that David Hume-Frazer waited for his cousin that night outside the library. I didn't know it—worse luck! until after he was acquitted. And he doesn't know that Miss Nellie Layton didn't reach home until 1.30 a.m., though she left the hall at 12.15, and her house is, so to speak, a minute's walk distant. And she was in a carriage. Oh, there's more in this case than meets the eye! I can't say which would please me most, to find out the real murderer, if Hume didn't do it, or prove Mr. Brett to be in the wrong!"

CHAPTER VII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

Brett did not hurry on his way to the Hall. Already things were in a whirl, and the confusion was so great that he was momentarily unable to map out a definite line of action.

The relations between Capella and his wife were evidently strained almost to breaking point, and it was this very fact which caused him the perplexity.

They had been married little more than six months. They were an extraordinarily handsome couple, apparently well suited to each other by temperament and mutual sympathies, whilst their means were ample enough to permit them to live under any conditions they might choose, and gratify personal hobbies to the fullest extent.

What, then, could have happened to divide them so completely?

Surely not Capella's new-born passion for Helen Layton. Not even a hot-blooded Southerner could be guilty of such deliberate rascality, such ineffable folly, during the first few months after his marriage to a beautiful and wealthy wife.

No, this hypothesis must be rejected. Margaret Capella had drifted apart from her husband almost as soon as they reached England on her return as man and wife. Capella, miserable and disillusioned, buried alive in a country place—for such must exist in Beechcroft mean to a man of his inclinations—had discovered a startling contrast between his passionate and moody spouse, and the bright, pleasant mannered girl whose life fortune it was to create discord between the inmates of the Hall.

This theory did not wholly exonerate the Italian, but it explained a good deal. The barrister saw no cause as yet to suspect Capella of the young baronet's murder. Were he guilty of that ghastly crime, his motive must have been to secure for himself the position he was now so liberally impelling—all for a girl's pretty face.

The explanation would not suffice. Brett had seen much that is hidden from public ken in the vagaries of criminals, but he had never yet met a man wholly bad, and at the same time in full possession of his senses.

To adopt the hasty judgment arrived at by Hume and Mrs. Eastham, Capella must be deemed capable of murdering his wife's brother, of bringing about the death of his wife after securing the reversion of her vast property to himself, and of falling in love with Helen—all in the same breath. This species of criminality was only met with in lunatics, and Capella impressed the barrister as an emotional personage, capable of supreme good as of supreme evil, but quite sane.

The question to be solved was this: Why did Capella and his wife quarrel in the first instance? Perhaps, that way, light might come.

He asked a footman if Mrs. Capella would receive him. The man glanced at his card.

"Yes, sir," he said at once. "Madam gave instructions that if either you or Mr. David called, you were to be taken to her boudoir, where she awaits you."

The room was evidently on the first floor, for the servant led him up the magnificent oak staircase that climbed two sides of the reception hall.

But this was fated to be a day of interruptions. The barrister, when he reached the landing, was confronted by the Italian.

"A word with you, Mr. Brett," was the stiff greeting given to him.

"Goodday. But I am going to Mrs. Capella's room."

"She can wait. She does not know you are here. James, remain outside until Mr. Brett returns