

✱ A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS. ✱

By the Author of "Sir Lionel's Wife," "The Great Moreland Tragedy," Etc.

CONTINUED.

"He is a most excellent landlord," continued Lady Ruth placidly. "His business in London is entirely connected with his estate. He spares neither trouble nor expense to ensure the comfort of his tenants. I wish there were more land owners like him."

The faint shadow passed away from Miss Delisle's face.

She drew a long, low breath of relief, as though some weight had been lifted from her mind.

The old sunny look came back to her brow; her lips, as she bent over her pupil, wore a sweet, bright smile.

Lady Ruth had quite a number of calls to make; and at each cottage she stopped at she had so many questions to ask and so much council to bestow, that it was nearly noon when the little pony phaeton again approached the Court.

"I have one more call to make," she remarked, "though this time I have nothing to take with me. It is a rather remarkable person I am going to visit, Miss Delisle. The people say here she is a foreigner and a gipsy. I daresay she is. However, she is a very independent old soul, and quite comfortable off; and I know I should only offend her if I were to offer her so much as a packet of tea. Some of these people have ridiculously high notions you know."

The phaeton stopped in front of a delightful little cottage; its white-washed walls without a spot or stain; its little garden gay with roses.

The window was open; its broad sill was filled with scarlet geraniums, and behind them appeared the face of a handsome old woman, with piercing black eyes, and snow white hair.

"Come with me, Miss Delisle," said Lady Ruth, "and let Sylvia come too, please. She will like to see the old lady's Persian cat."

Madge rose with dignified courtesy to receive her visitors.

Indeed, she had a far grander manner than Lady Ruth, who was the daughter of an earl.

"I have called to ask you how you are, Madge, and I have brought Miss Sylvia to see you; also her governess, Miss Delisle."

Lilian had been standing a little behind her ladyship, and in the shadow of the doorway; but at this mention of herself, she stepped forward with a smile and a pleasantly-uttered word of greeting.

Madge raised her head and looked at her and, as she looked, a startling change came over her face.

Her clear brown skin grew pale, her lips twitched, and her black eyes dilated as though with an astonishment too great for words.

Lady Ruth and Lilian must both have noticed this had not their attention been diverted, just at that moment, by the appearance of the magnificent Persian cat which was the pride of the village.

Little Sylvia begged to be allowed to hold it in her arms.

Her aunt and governess were engaged in instructing her how to hold it properly, and, by the time they turned to Madge again, she had composed her features, though she was still quite pale.

She put out chairs for her visitors.

The cottage was exquisitely neat and clean, and Lady Ruth was not disinclined to stay awhile.

She was rather proud of the good order which prevailed in the cottages on the Vere estate, and took a pleasure in pointing it out to Lilian.

Madge resumed her seat in the window, and prepared to reply, with fitting civilities, to the many questions put by Lady Ruth; but, whether she spoke, or whether she listened, her eyes never once wandered from the face of Lilian Delisle.

How beautiful Lilian looked, sitting in that humble cottage, no words can tell. Sir Gerald had said that Nature had intended her to be a queen, and certainly there was something imperial in the character of her beauty.

Her snowy throat was carried with such a swan-like grace; the head above it was so grandly poised.

There was such a look of power in the velvet depths of her eyes, and on the broad, white brow, that one felt as though an imperial crown should, of right, be worn above them.

Beautiful as a poet's dream she was; but she was something more.

She had a power greater than even the power of beauty—a subtle magnetism which dominated the wills of those who came into contact with her.

One could imagine a Joan of Arc possessing just such power—compelling all men to follow where she led.

She did not seem to notice Madge's intent and earnest gaze.

Perhaps she was accustomed to be looked at. With such a face, she could not expect to pass as one of the ordinary throng.

She talked very kindly to the old woman—with gentle words, and in soft, sweet accents; and as she talked, Madge's eyes were fixed upon her more and more intently, while the paleness grew and deepened on her olive complexioned face.

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE CHURCH.

Madge Rivers—for that was the old woman's full name—had the reputation of being reserved, and even taciturn.

She never invited a visitor to her house; she never set her foot inside anybody else's.

But after that day when Lady Ruth took Lilian Delisle to her cottage, the old woman grew suddenly sociable, and

might often have been seen in her garden, chatting quite genially with some neighbour across the gate.

"The poor old soul is breaking up!" some people said, observing this. "She feels her end drawing near. That's why she doesn't care to be so much alone."

If this was so, there was no sign of it in Madge's outward appearance.

The person whom she was fondest of talking to at this time was a woman who lived only a few doors away—a highly-respectable widow, with one daughter, a neat modest girl, who had rather taken the fancy of Lady Ruth.

Indeed, her ladyship kept her at the Court as a sort of personal attendant, and was training her to take a really good situation as lady's maid.

"And so Miss Sylvia has got a governess," said Madge, to this neighbour of hers, one day, as she leaned over the privet hedge, which separated her cottage from the road.

"Yes. Have you seen her, Dame Rivers?"

"Yes. Her ladyship brought her into the cottage the other day. She is a rare one for beauty. Who is she? Do you happen to know?"

The neighbour came and leaned over the hedge like one ready for a chat.

She was a clean industrious woman, but wonderfully fond of retailing a bit of news.

"Why, my Jane was telling me a good bit about her the other day. It appears she's quite a lady by birth, but has no money so she's forced to go out governing."

She's been educated in France—at one of them convent-places they're so fond of over there. I'm sure I don't know why, but we're getting quite like the papists ourselves. I declare we are! Did you see them candles as were stuck on the table in church last Sunday, dame?"

"I don't often go to church," said Madge, briefly.

She didn't want the conversation to be diverted from Lilian Delisle to the High Church practices of the new rector.

"And so the young lady was educated in France?" she said. Did you say she'd got neither father nor mother, Mrs. Shaw?"

"Not a relation in the world, my girl! I say, dame, you wouldn't think her ladyship would feel easy to have such a beautiful young lady about the house, seeing as Sir Gerald is a bachelor?"

"You wouldn't think so. But you may depend the gentleman knows how to manage their own affairs," said Madge; then, having assured herself that she knew all that her neighbour could tell concerning Lilian Delisle, she said good-morning, and retreated into her own cottage, where she drew forth some secret depository an old book, wherein some dates and names were recorded.

These she pored over with a heavily-knitted brow, and a look in her black eyes which seemed to say she was face to face with a mystery which all her acuteness could not unravel.

Finally, she rose, carefully looked away the book in its hiding place, donned her scarlet cloak and set out for a walk.

A very long walk for a woman of her years, for she never halted until she reached that little churchyard on the hillside, where stood the grey headstone which bore the name of Madeline Winter.

CHAPTER VI.

The churchyard was nearly two miles from Madge's cottage; but she was wonderfully hale and agile, and, assisted by her trusty stick, she made the journey without showing any signs of fatigue.

Entering the churchyard, she went straight towards the grave in which Madeline Winter was supposed to be sleeping her last long sleep, and stood leaning upon her stick, while she read the brief inscription on the headstone over and over again, as though it had some nameless fascination for her—just such a fascination as it had exercised on John Morewood.

"Madeline Winter, Aged 26," she kept muttering to herself. "And to think I should be living, hearty and well, while she lies here! Ah! they little knew what my thoughts were then as I watched that coffin lowered into the grave. They took no heed of old Madge, the gipsy, being there. Perhaps they thought I'd come to get a charm out of a new made grave. Oh! I know they believe in some rubbish! And I let 'em. It suits me well."

While she thus muttered to herself, she saw an approaching form, and recognized it in a moment as that of Lilian Delisle.

"Ah! is she coming here?" muttered the old woman. "Who is she? What does she know? If it were not madness I should say—no, that is impossible, and yet—"

She paused, then added— "Whoever she is, better she should not see me here. I'll hide me in the church, and watch."

To the church she went.

The door was open, and she stationed herself at a window which commanded a view of that grave with the grey stone at its head.

Evidently she was quite certain it was to visit that Lilian had come. And she was right.

Straight to the isolated grave came the girl, looking neither to the right-hand nor to the left, and stood quite motionless at its foot, gazing at the marble headstone.

For several minutes she stood thus, and the silent watcher inside the church scanned her countenance with a sort of devouring eagerness.

She noted her very feature; the wonderful eyes, the perfect skin, the sunny golden hair.

"Heavens! How like she is!" she muttered. "I will know the truth. There is a way if only I could get the chance to use it."

She considered a moment or two, then took up her place nearer the window, and cast a still more intent and searching look on the girl outside.

Upon the grave, just in front of the headstone, a root of forget-me-nots was blooming—set by whose hand no one knew.

The villagers said it was a strange chance which had caused the grave of a murderer to be brightened by that sweet and lovely flower.

However, there the forget-me-nots were; and Lilian Delisle was stopping to gather a spray or two, which she placed with care, almost with tenderness, inside the bosom of her dress.

"Ah!" muttered Madge. "She baffles me. This is stranger than all. I cannot understand it. Why not make sure now? There may never be a better time."

Eagerly watching, she saw a look of irresolution pass over Lilian's face.

She stood looking round her in a hesitating fashion, as though uncertain which way to go, then moved slowly, but steadily, towards the entrance of the church.

With a look of exultant joy, Madge hid herself behind the curtain which hung in front of the vestry.

Lilian, meanwhile, entered the church, and came slowly up to the chancel.

Her eyes were opened very widely, but they had a strange, unseeing look—the look of one who walks in sleep.

She seemed as though she would have lifted the vestry curtain and passed behind it; but no sooner did she raise her hand for this purpose, then it fell heavily by her side, and she herself sank on to a chair, and closing her eyes, remained like one deprived of sense and motion.

As soon as this had happened, Madge emerged from her hiding-place, and, going down the aisle, locked the church door so as to secure herself from interruption, while she did what she had to do.

Then, hastening to the unconscious Lilian, she leaned over her, and placed her hand, first on her pulse, then on her heart.

"It is well," she muttered, "it is very well. Ah! who says the old woman has lost her power?"

Standing a little back, she contemplated, with a sort of admiring wonder, the beauty of the face before her.

The exquisite color was gone, but the healthful crimson still dyed the perfect lips, and the long dark lashes rested softly on the delicately cheeks.

That pure paleness seemed, if possible, to add to and emphasize Lilian's beauty.

"Now for the proof," muttered Madge. "If it is as I think, the proof is here."

With wonderful quickness she removed the shoe from one of the feet of the unconscious girl, then the stocking, revealing a naked foot, white as a lily, and soft as satin.

It was a foot which a sculptor might have rejoiced to copy, so perfect was its symmetry.

But Madge bending close, saw on a blemish on the soft, white flesh.

At the side of the ankle was a mark—a streak of vivid red.

Such a mark as persons are sometime born with, and which they carry to their dying day.

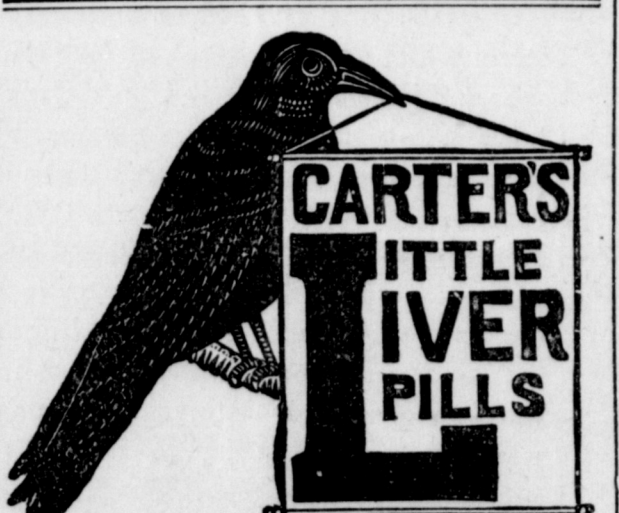
"Hah!" exclaimed Madge, with a long drawn sigh, and a look which seemed curiously made up of the mingled emotions of love and hate, joy and dread. "It is the birthmark! Who should know if not I? Now to unearth the rest of the mystery. How comes she here, and why did she pluck the flower from off that grave?"

Even while she thus reflected, she was busily at work, replacing the stocking and shoe on Lilian's foot.

Having done this, she left her, sitting pale and motionless in the old chair, and, unlocking the church door, quietly made her way to her own home.

In a few minutes Lilian stirred—uneasily as one stirs in sleep.

A minute or so more, and she opened



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her eyes, then gazed about her with a bewildered and frightened look.

"What am I doing here—inside the church?" she murmured, passing her hand over her brow as she tried to collect her thoughts.

She rose, and looked about her.

The sacred edifice was wrapped in solemn stillness.

She was alone—quite alone, and yet she had a curious fancy that someone had been bending over her while she sat in the chancel chair.

"I remember," she mused, "thinking I should like to see inside the church. I remember coming as far as here, and then I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more. What made me faint, I wonder? The day is hot, but I don't think it was that. Beside I don't feel ill. Has anyone been with me? I seem to think so. Perhaps some one came, and has gone away to fetch water or something. I will wait and see."

She did wait—waited nearly a quarter of an hour in the old church porch, but no one came; then, slowly, and in deep thought, she took her way homewards.

As she entered the Court gates, old Madge was sitting at her window.

She watched the graceful figure till it was out of sight, strained her eyes to catch the last gleam of the muslin gown and golden hair, then she muttered, perplexedly—

"I cannot feel quite sure even now. There is one more test. Would it be possible?—ay, it shall be!"

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT FRIENDSHIP DEMANDED OF JOHN MOREWOOD.

Sylvia's education was not of a very exacting sort, Lady Ruth wisely deciding that, while the child was so young, she should not give more than four hours a day to lessons.

A very great portion of the rest of her day was spent in going out walks with her governess.

It happened, therefore, that Lilian Delisle was very frequently to be seen, not only in the park glades, but also in the pretty Hampshire lanes around the Court.

John Morewood, walking through one of these lanes one morning, met her and her pupil, and could not deny himself the pleasure of lingering a little to look into that rarely-beautiful face.

He did linger—he walked with the governess on one side of him and the child on the other; but although it was to the child he chiefly spoke, it was not at the child he looked.

At a turn in the path they met Sir Gerald.

Morewood, glancing at Lilian, saw her face flush ever so slightly—he noticed, too, that something like a cloud passed over the face of his friend.

Sylvia ran forward to take her brother's hand, and chatter to him, with childish volubility.

He affected to laugh and to listen, but the cloud did not vanish from his brow.

"You here, Morewood?" he said, as he came up, Sylvia still clinging to his hand. I thought you had gone over to Marlow."

"I did go, but came back last night."

"Oh!"

Sir Gerald did not seem himself.

He was neither so genial nor so bright as usual.

Morewood wondered if anything had worried him, and then, swift as lightning, a vague suspicion crossed his mind.

Could it be that Sir Gerald was vexed to see him with Lilian Delisle?

All four walked on together a few yards, then Miss Delisle said, addressing Morewood but looking at Sir Gerald—

"Sylvia and I must be going home. Good morning, Mr. Morewood."

Sir Gerald looked up quickly, opened his mouth to speak, then suddenly checked himself.

Morewood fancied he had been about to say he would turn and go back to the Court with them.

Whether this had been in his mind or not he did not say.

Instead, he quietly raised his hat to Lilian said "Good-by" to his little sister, and walked on with his friend.

"Are you coming over to dine with us tonight?" he asked a little abruptly. "Lady Ruth said she had asked you."

"Yes, she did. Do you want me to come old man?"

"Of course I do. I'm going to give you a regular drubbing at chess."

"You're welcome to do it if you can," laughed Morewood. But even while he laughed he was still thinking about Lilian Delisle—wondering whether she would be in the Court drawing room to night.

He had a feeling that to listen to her singing, and to look on her peerless beauty would be a more fascinating occupation than all the chess-playing in the world.

Evening came. Morewood drove over to the Court, according to promise; but when after dinner, he and Sir Gerald repaired to the drawing-room, no Miss Delisle awaited them there.

Lady Ruth, gowned in slate-coloured silk sat by the window alone.

No white-robed form, with a flower like face crowned by gleaming golden hair, sat beside her.

The chess-table was drawn out and the two young men began to play.

Both were excellent players, and passionately fond of the game; but to-night they seemed not to put forth their usual skill.

Sir Gerald, in particular, was abstracted and restless.

At length, after suffering a checkmate, he swept his very fingers at the board.

"I'm tired of it," he said. "I'll not show how this, but I'll be out in a bit tonight. Let's go out and smoke a cigar in the lawn, shall we?"

They went out.

It was a glorious moonlight night.

The oaks and elms were silvered with the moon's pure rays.

It shone full upon the house, making all around it seem almost as light as day.

The two men crossed the lawn, and passed into an avenue of limes.

They had not taken many steps down this when Sir Gerald suddenly uttered an exclamation, and drew his companion back.

"Hush! Don't let her see us," he said; "keep in the shadow of the trees."

Morewood followed the direction of his glance, and saw, on one of the terraces, barely a dozen yards away, the graceful form of Lilian Delisle.

She was dressed all in white, and the moonlight fell full upon her, etherealizing her beauty.

The dark velvety eyes were upturned to the silent heavens.

A white lace scarf rested lightly on her gleaming golden hair.

It would be impossible to conceive a more beautiful picture than she made standing thus.

Sir Gerald leaned against a tree, will back in the shadow; and gazed and gazed as though his whole soul was in his eyes.

Morewood, silently watching him, could doubt no longer that he had lost his heart to the girl whose sweetly serious eyes were fixed on the dark blue heavens.

It ever love showed itself plainly on the face of mortal man, it showed itself that night on the face of Gerald Vere.

After a minute or two, Lilian left the terrace, and entered the house by an open window.

Sir Gerald, as he lost sight of her, gave vent to a passionate, deep breathed sigh. His friend caught him by the arm, and said—the words rising to his lips on the spur of the moment—

"Gerald, you love her?"

"God knows I do!" was Sir Gerald's answer, given with unmistakable sincerity and fervour.

After a moment or two, he added— "How could I help it? You see how beautiful she is. Heavens! I think woman so beautiful never walked God's earth before! And yet her beauty is almost the least of her charms. She is so sweet, so pure, so gifted. Seeing her every day as I have done, how could I help but love her?"

"And what do you mean to do?" asked Morewood, conscious of a curious pang of disappointment at his heart—disappointment which he would not stop to analyse at present.

"Do? I intend to marry her if she will have me."

"Oh! you have made up your mind to that?"

"Made up my mind—yes. Good heavens. Morewood! You surely do not imagine I could have any other thought?"

"No, no! Don't think that, old fellow. I know you are the soul of honor. All I meant by the question was, are you quite sure your affection for Miss Delisle is deep enough, and durable enough, to make you feel willing to overlook the—well, the disadvantages of a marriage with her? That she herself is a perfect lady, anyone may see; but she is only a governess, and I daresay you know very little of her connections."

Even as Morewood said this, he had a guilty consciousness of being something like a hypocrite; for deep down in his heart he knew that he himself had felt that very day that, if Lilian Delisle could be won to love him, he would, in spite of her dependent position and the dubiousness of her connections, make her his wife before all the world.

No wonder the cold pang of disappointment filled his heart, as he heard the confession of his friend.

I know nothing of her connections," declared Sir Gerald, with generous ardour. "If she were a queen or an empress, I could not love her more. If she were a beggar, and the child of a beggar, I could not love her less."

"And does she know of this—of your love for her, I mean?" asked Morewood, a little awkwardly.

"It was hard not to be more or less constrained, with the chill disappointment still gripping at his heart.

"No; I have never breathed a word of it to her. I am afraid of startling her if I speak too soon. She is pure and delicate-minded. Yes, and she is proud, too, for all her sweetness. In my heart, I know there is only one way of winning her to be my wife."

"And that is?" said Morewood, as he paused.

"To win her love."

Sir Gerald spoke with thrilling earnestness—nay, almost with solemnity.

They had emerged from the shady avenue now, and were standing on the lawn, in the full moonlight.