

A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS.

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

CONTINUED.

Morewood was sure no hint of truth had reached her yet.

"When last I saw poor Madeline?" she said in a gravely wondering tone.

"Yes. If you don't mind telling me."

"Of course I don't mind. It will be five years ago next month—just before she started for Australia."

"But why do you ask Mr. Morewood?" she added suddenly, turning upon him an eagerly questioning look.

"I will tell you some other time," he murmured, evasively, relieved to see Lady Ruth come back into the room; for he would have been at loss to explain the reason of his question.

As he passed out of the Court gates, his eye fell on Madge's white washed cottage.

The sight of it brought back to his mind, in full force, that strange prophecy the old woman had uttered in reference to Sir Gerald and Madeline Winter.

"If he marries Lilian, and it—as may very well happen—her sister is discovered, and put on trial for her crime, would not that prophecy come awfully true?" he thought. "Madeline Winter would, indeed, have power to work him infinite misery, and shame, and woe. If I know anything of Vere, such a calamity would blight his whole future life."

While these thoughts were still disturbing his mind, he suddenly came upon Madge herself.

She was sitting on a rustic seat by the wayside, her hands folded over her stick, her brow bent in deep and apparently, anxious meditation.

"Good morning," he said, cheerfully. She returned his salutation with that air of quiet dignity which seemed to set her so much above the simple country folk.

"I'll sit and rest, for a minute or two beside you, if you don't mind," went on Morewood, moved by a sudden impulse. "It's hot, and I've had a long walk this morning."

"Surely!" said the old woman, and he sat down beside her.

"I was hearing something about you a little while back," he said, abruptly. "My friend, Sir Gerald Vere, told me you had prophesied, years ago, that harm would come to him from Madeline Winter, the murderess, whose grave is in Upton churchyard—that you prophesied this while both of them were children."

She raised her head, and looked at him, sharply.

There was something almost hawk-like in the flash of her black eyes.

She was startled—she was surprised; but she was on her guard.

This much Morewood could tell from that swift look of hers.

"Do you mind telling me," he went on, "what made you say such a thing as that? I am quite sure you are too sensible to talk nonsense merely for the sake of talking nonsense. Why, then, should you think Madeline Winter should ever be connected, in any way, with Sir Gerald Vere?"

"The Fates never lie!" was Madge's answer, uttered with perfect calmness and composure.

Morewood felt a little irritated; but he repressed it well.

His tone was perfectly pleasant, nay, even a little gay, as he said—

"And the Fates communicated their intentions to you, eh, Madge?"

"I do not pretend to read the future, if that is what you mean," she answered, coldly. "The past is enough for me; for, what is the future but the past repeated over and over again. I saw in the boy's eyes a look which showed him to be of a certain nature—a nature easily wrought upon. In the other child's eyes I saw power—the power to rule over just such a one as he. I did not believe her power over him would be exercised—if exercised at all—for good."

The old woman had spoken these words in a slow, level tone, with her eyes fixed upon the ground—more as though she were speaking to herself than to her companion.

Morewood could not but think that she herself honestly believed what she said.

"But, after all," he said, still bent on probing her, "you must admit your warning was unnecessary. Madeline Winter never crossed the path of Sir Gerald; and, surely, all danger is over now. A dead woman can work no ill."

Again she cast a swift, startled glance at him—a glance which seemed as if it would fain have read his inmost soul.

After a minute or two, she spoke, very slowly and deliberately, as if carefully weighing every word—

"I am only a superstitious old woman, sir; and so it's no matter what I say. Nevertheless, I know the Fates will have their will. If I had been Sir Gerald Vere, I would rather have sent Madeline Winter's dead body to the furthest end of the earth, than have had it brought here to his own gates."

"You say the dead can do no harm; but I know that evil could come to him—it the Fates willed it so—out of her very grave."

Having so spoken, with a dignity and deliberation impossible to describe, Madge rose and continued her journey, disregarding his entreaty that she would remain to rest herself a little longer.

She walked with a firm step, neither pausing nor looking back, until she reached her own cottage.

Then she sank into a chair, with the look of one who has been brought unexpectedly face to face with a new and startling train of thought.

"What interest has he in Madeline Winter?" she muttered. "He would not have

spoken like that without some motive. What motive could it be? Does he see a resemblance?—does he suspect a relationship? It must be so; and yet—"

She paused, considered deeply, then added, in a tone of resolute energy—

"I must know the truth. Why should I stay in this uncertain any longer?"

She rose, went to the window, and marked, with evident satisfaction, the storm-clouds which were approaching, in black, heavy masses, from the west.

"If the storm should come, I could not have a better time," she muttered. "Yes; there shall be an end of all this mystery. I will know to-night."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OPENED GRAVE.

The storm did come that night.

About ten o'clock it broke—the lightning flashing, the thunder rolling, the rain pouring in such torrents as to drive almost everyone home who was not already there.

Doors and windows were bolted and barred earlier than usual.

It was not a night for anyone to care to be abroad.

A little before midnight the rain ceased somewhat, though still the lightning flashed, and the thunder rolled at intervals.

If anyone had chanced to pass through Upton Churchyard that night, they would have seen a sight almost as strange and affrighting as that which Tam-o'-Shanter saw, according to Burns's wondrous tale.

They would have seen the supposed grave of the murderess yawning wide open, the coffin raised, and resting slantwise at one end of it.

Beside the grave they would have seen a man—young, and strong, and brawny—from whose brow the perspiration flowed in streams, and in whose eyes there was a strange, unseeing look—almost the look of one who walks in sleep.

This man was loosening the coffin-lid; and, as the last crew was withdrawn, a figure, which had been hidden in the dark shadow thrown by the church, came forward, and stood within the light of the lantern that had been placed near the edge of the grave.

It was a tall figure, closely cloaked and hooded.

A flash of lightning revealed the face for a moment—a stern, dark face, surmounted with snow-white hair.

The face of Madge, the gipsy.

She advanced close to the grave, and stooped over it.

One end of the coffin was within her reach, and, waving the man to stand back, she herself lifted the coffin-lid.

One glance she cast within—one glance, and no more.

The reader knows what met her eye. No shrouded form—no mouldering dust!

"Hah!" she muttered, with an accent of fierce exultation. "Hah! Then I was right. She escaped, after all. I might have known it. The Fates have never deceived me yet. Surely I should have known it, if that had been her doom."

She had put the coffin lid into its place again, and was standing now with one arm outstretched to Heaven—her face upturned also.

A flash of lightning illumined her as she stood thus, lending a weird and quite indescribable dignity to her aspect.

She looked like a sibyl—a prophetess—with her snow-white hair, her stern mouth, and her black flashing eyes.

No wonder the villagers regarded her as an oracle—as they might have regarded a pythoness of old.

She possessed that subtle thing which men call power—with it she dominated all inferior wills.

The man by the grave stood mute, awaiting her commands.

"Screw down the lid!" she commanded imperiously.

He obeyed her, without a word.

"Replace the coffin!" was the next command.

Then—

"Fill up the grave!"

And, whatever she commanded, he did obediently, without so much as uttering a word.

He might have been a dumb man, for any evidence he gave to the contrary.

When all was finished to her satisfaction, even to the careful relaying of turf above the grave, she stretched out her hand towards Vivian Court, saying in a loud clear voice—

"Now go back to your home!"

And, once more, he silently obeyed.

The morning after the storm broke bright and clear.

Old Madge was early in her garden, examining the flowers, to see what mischief the rain had done.

An elderly woman, lame with rheumatism, hobbled across the lane to speak to her.

She lived in one of the cottages opposite Madge's, and was the widow of the sexton of the parish.

The old man had died a few months ago, and his son had succeeded him in the office.

Mrs. Dakin—that was the woman's name—accosted Madge very civilly—very deferentially even.

Madge had more than once given her some mixture which had done her rheumatism good, and she was grateful and respectful accordingly.

"Well, Mrs. Dakin, and how are you this morning?" asked Madge, in her firm clear voice, so superior in tone to that of the villagers around her. "Did the powder do you good?"

"Well, I suppose it did. It made me sleep powerful sound, anyway. And do you know, Dame Rivers, I do believe our Jem was walking in his sleep again last night!"

"Ah!"

"Yes, I do; and I'll tell you why. His boots and cloths are one mass of mire. You never saw such a sight. He might have fallen down in 'em. He's awake now, and I've asked him where he's been; but he only scratches his head, and says he ain't been anywhere. It's not a bit of good talking to him, Lord bless you! He don't know anything about it, he don't."

"Perhaps the lightning affected him a little," said Madge, coolly, every muscle of her countenance under perfect control. "People will walk in their sleep in a thunderstorm, if they've a tendency that way, such as your son has. I should just turn the key in his door, if I were you. A beautiful morning, isn't it? How sweet everything smells after the rain!"

At this moment Mrs. Dakin's door opened and her son came across the road—that same brawny young fellow who had rendered such complete obedience to Madge in Upton Churchyard last night.

"Good morning, Jem. Your mother tells me you were walking in your sleep last night."

Jem scratched his head shamefacedly, and with a very puzzled look, said—

"Ay, she says so; but blest if I can remember aught about it. I wish I could."

"It's a bad habit lad," said Madge, gravely. "I should try to break through it, if I were you. If you don't, it may lead you into mischief."

CHAPTER XV.

KATE LISLE.

About this time, Morewood had occasion to go to London.

He spent a couple of days there, engaged in business, and started on his homeward journey one close September afternoon, when everybody in London was declaring the heat intolerable, and when he himself—albeit pretty well seasoned to extremes of both heat and cold—could not help thinking longingly of the delightful shades about Beech Royal.

The train was well nigh on the point of starting when he reached the station, and he opened the door of the first compartment he came to, and hurriedly took his seat.

The next moment the whistle sounded, and the train was off.

Then, and not till then, did he see that he had a travelling companion, and that a lady.

Moreover, a lady; and, moreover still, a very pretty one.

She was sitting at the further end of the compartment, looking out of the window; and she did not move as he came in—instead, looked out of the window a little more intently than before.

As she thus sat, only her profile was to be seen; but that was quite enough to satisfy Morewood on the score of her good looks.

And, let what may be said to the contrary, it is a very satisfying thing—to find that the fellow passenger with whom one is to be tete-a-tete for an hour or two, has a pretty face for one's eye to rest upon.

Morewood decided that this companion of his was more than pretty—she was beautiful.

True, he could not see her full face; but what he did see was enough to convince him—the slender white throat, the softly-tinted cheek, the silken eyelash, and the pretty turn of the white brow, above which waved masses of lovely hair of a perfect shade of copper-brown, with bright gleams of gold in the sunshine.

And this beautiful hair was so charmingly arranged, too.

Morewood really could not help admiring it.

So few women dress their hair "just right," he reflected, as he looked at his fair neighbour.

He had seen hair that was as sleek and smooth as velvet; he didn't care for that kind.

Again, he had seen hair which, in texture, resembled nothing so much as a bundle of hay, so rough and so sized was it; he didn't care for that kind either.

But this girl's was just perfect; neither too rough nor too smooth, prettily shading the white brow, and showing to perfection the fair neck and rosy little ear.

Her dress, too, was charming, refined, and lady-like, yet pretty and girlish.

A simple fawn-coloured costume, the coat opening over a white, lace-edged blouse, and black hat trimmed with a few graceful pink roses.

Two of these roses fell from underneath the brim, and rested on the bright brown hair.

John Morewood was not a great notice of ladies' dress, but it did occur to him to think he had never seen a daintier arrangement in his life.

He was by no means tired of watching the white neck and the softly tinted cheek; but he thought it would be very pleasant to see his fair companion from another point of view also.

And, just as he was thinking this, she obligingly turned from the unsympathetic window, and gave him his secret wish.

She was, indeed, beautiful; for her mouth was as sweet as one as ever graced a woman's face, and the long, silken lashes veiled a pair of lustrous, grey blue eyes, and an expression of mingled sweetness, intelligence, and gay good humour lighted up the whole.

Never before had John Morewood so felt the irksomeness of the etiquette which forbids a man to speak to a strange young lady in a railway-carriage.

Presently she drew out her purse, to assure herself her ticket was right, as women so often do.

The snap of the purse proved a little awkward, and, before she could refasten it, the train passed over a junction with so violent an oscillation that she was thrown forward.

The purse fell from her hand, and, it being still unfastened, its contents rolled over the floor of the compartment.

Here was an occasion which etiquette had clearly not foreseen, and for which John Morewood secretly thanked his lucky stars.

It is so very tantalising to have to sit opposite a pretty girl without opening one's mouth.

"Allow me!" he exclaimed, and was down on his hands and knees in a moment, groping under the seats for the half-sovereigns, six-pences, and shillings which had rolled about in all directions.

The girl went down on her knees, too; and, as there isn't too much room allowed for these exercises in a railway carriage, their faces were pretty close together.

"I don't know that I ever saw such a free, charming face," decided John Morewood to himself.

And, at that moment, he even forgot Lilian Dillie.

"Thank you so much," said the girl, as he handed the last coin to her. "It was very careless of me."

"Not at all. The oscillation of these trains is really abominable, at times. I wonder the line is not improved."

"Well, at any rate, I am very much obliged to you," said the girl, sweetly, the beautiful colour in her cheek deepening a little.

"Oh, pray don't mention it! But, are you sure you've recovered all?"

And he looked as though he would have gone down on his knees again.

"Quite sure, thank you!"

After this, silence no longer reigned between them.

Even etiquette herself—stern old harri-dan though she is—could hardly have expected that!

From talking about the delinquencies of the railway companies, Morewood got to a remark on the scenery through which they were passing, then glided on to another subject, and still another; and all with so much tact and courtesy, that the girl, even had she been the most timid and mistrustful of damsels, could have taken no alarm.

However, she was neither timid nor mistrustful; and, having assured herself she was in the company of a gentleman, conversed with that sweet, modest frankness which only a lady can command.

Much did Morewood wonder who she was, and whether she was going; but, for all her pleasant frankness, she said not a word which could throw light upon either subject.

Her dress was plain, but it was that of a lady—yes, from the crown of her dainty hat to the point of her neat little patent shoe.

Nevertheless, he had an impression—how gained he could scarcely have told—that she was poor rather than otherwise.

For one thing, she was travelling without an attendant; and, for another, the little purse had held more silver coins than gold ones; and she had seemed quietly glad when those few gold coins had been restored to her.

Her initials were "K. L."

At any rate those were the letters he deciphered on the pretty little bag of Russian leather, which lay on the seat beside her.

"K. L." he kept saying over and over again to himself, fitting them to imaginary names which he thought would suit his charming travelling companion.

"What a fool I am!" he muttered. "Why should I feel this interest in the girl, just because she happens to have a lovely face? A thousand times to one I shall never see her again."

Even as he was thinking this, she glanced across at him, and said—

"Can you tell me what time this train is due at Little Cleeve?"

Now, Little Cleeve was the station nearest The Towers, and, consequently, was not so many miles away from his own home Beech Royal.

"This train doesn't stop at Little Cleeve," he said.

"Doesn't it?" cried the girl, with a startled glance. "Oh, I thought it did!"

"No; if you had wanted to get out at Little Cleeve, you ought to have changed at the last station. We passed the junction a few minutes ago."

She looked troubled—almost distressed. Morewood could see she was in a quandary.

"You wished to alight at Little Cleeve?" he asked, gently.

"Yes. It is to a place called The Towers I am going," she added, frankly—an appealing look in her eyes, as though she thought he might be able to help her. "My friends will be at the station to meet me, and they will think I haven't come—and—oh dear! I really don't know what I had better do."

"Oh! I think you won't find much difficulty in getting to The Towers," said Morewood, with a reassuring smile.

He felt secretly pleased that the charming girl was to be, for a time, at least his neighbour; and secretly surprised that she should be a friend of the Muggletons.

But he permitted neither emotion to betray itself in his looks.

"Will you please tell me what station I had better get out at?—the one nearest to The Towers, I mean," she said, anxiously.

"Your best course will be to get out at Southwood. That is the next station we come to. It is about five miles from The Towers; but you will easily meet with a conveyance of some sort. I get out there, and shall be most happy to be of use, if you will allow me. Unfortunately, my own carriage is not to be at the station, or I would have asked you to make use of it. But, as it happens, I am walking home. As I am a neighbor of Mr. Muggleton's and have the pleasure of his acquaintance, you will, perhaps, let me give you my card."

"Oh, thank you," said the girl, gratefully. "It is very, very kind of you. And I must tell you who I am," she added, frankly. "I am Miss Lisle, and Vi Muggleton is my friend. You know her, perhaps?"

"Oh, yes; quite well—quite well; that is to say, considering the Muggletons are almost strangers here. I met them all at the house of a friend a few evenings ago."

"Vi is my very dearest friend," said Miss Lisle, with emphasis.

When the train stopped, Morewood handed her out, wondering, in his own mind, what the other initial stood for.

"Kate," he felt quite certain.

No other name would suit her half so well, he thought.

Kate Lisle! what a very charming name.

"If you don't mind sitting in the waiting-room for a few minutes," he said, "I'll attend to your luggage, and see about the best way of getting to The Towers."

"Thank you!" she said, and retired to the waiting-room accordingly.

In a little while he came back to inform her he had got a conveyance.

It was a phaeton, belonging to the innkeeper, and the innkeeper's son, a lad of eighteen, was to be the driver.

Morewood would have liked to drive the girl himself; but his gentlemanly instincts told him this might be regarded as an unnecessary attention.

Therefore he contented himself with reflecting that he could see her again whenever he chose to pay a call at The Towers.

I sent a telegram to the station-master at Little Cleeve, he remarked, as he handed her into the vehicle. "He will communicate with whoever comes from The Towers so they will understand how it is you are not there."

"Oh, thank you!" said the girl, with a radiant smile. "I was troubling about that—wondering whatever they would think."

"I hope you will be comfortable," he said, after he had adjusted everything.

"I am sure I shall be. Thank you so much—thank you again and again."

And she put out her hand frankly—such a pretty, dainty little hand, as d in a perfectly fitting glove.

"Good-bye!"

And then the phaeton moved away in one direction, and John Morewood in another.

But he would not have felt quite so well content as he did, if he had not known he should meet that charming girl again.

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