

* A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS. *

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

CONTINUED.

CHAPTER XLV.

SIR GERALD VISITS MADAME SANTANELLO.

One cold morning, Sir Gerald Vere was walking down the principal street of Basingstoke, when the brass-plate which announced that Madame Santanello might be consulted daily met his eye.

He paused, walked on a step or two, paused again, and finally came back to the clairvoyante's door.

"Shall I go in and see her?" he muttered to himself. "I don't really believe in it; but that prophecy of Madge's was very wonderful. I should like to hear what this woman would say."

He rang the bell, and, having gone through all the needless preliminaries, found himself standing alone in the bare room with the grinning skull, and the curtain that looked like a pall.

Madame Santanello came to him there, emerging, majestically, from behind that mysterious curtain, just as she had done to Kate and to Vi.

She looked a little paler than when they came to consult her a fortnight ago, but her manner was as majestic and awe-inspiring as ever.

Sir Gerald, whose nature was peculiarly impressionable, fell under the magnetic influence of that manner at once.

All the latent superstition within him sprang suddenly into active life.

He was more than half disposed to place implicit faith in whatever this woman might say to him.

One keen glance she cast into his face when she first entered; and, if her own had not been so singularly immobile, one would have said she felt a species of satisfaction at seeing him there.

She went through the usual formula of looking at his hand with much seeming interest, then prepared the saucer of liquid and gazed into it for fully five minutes without speaking a word.

Finally, she turned to him, and, in an abrupt voice, asked him the very question she had before addressed to Kate—

"Do you wish me to tell you the whole truth?"

"By all means, madame!"

"Very well. It is unnecessary for me to speak of your past, save to remark that this present year is the most eventful of your life. The most important thing I have to tell you is, that your line of life is crossed by two influences—the one good, and altogether beneficent; the other, although not in itself evil, antagonistic to you, and likely to cause you much trouble."

"There is now about your path one who is your guardian-angel. Yield to her, and your future will be happy."

She paused, frowned a little, as though she saw some image which displeased her, then added, slowly—

"If it were not for that other influence, your life could not fail to be a happy one. I see, in connection with you, everything that can tend to make it so. Health, wealth, love. All these are yours. But there is a shadow I cannot quite understand. It threatens you, and yet it is possible it may pass away without materially injuring you. If only you can escape from the influence of that person, whose line of life is antagonistic to your own, all may yet be well."

Sir Gerald had listened to this mysterious utterance with an alternately flushing and paling cheek.

There was a gleam of excitement in his dark brilliant eye.

"Tell me one thing," he said, in a voice which he tried in vain to keep quiet and steady. "This person you speak of—is it man or woman?"

"Woman!" said the clairvoyante briefly.

After a moment she added—

"Seek not to meet her—never cross her path. There are signs that she may disappear from the horizon of your life. Should this come to pass, seek not to detain her. Let her once be removed, and there is nothing between you and perfect happiness. But if your paths meet and conflict, then beware!"

And with that solemnly uttered warning, she turned and left him, disappearing behind the black velvet curtain.

CHAPTER XLVI.

LOUIS ROCHEFORT.

Lady Vere looked a little pale as the winter approached, and not quite so sweetly cheerful of countenance as was her wont.

Sir Gerald declared she had never recovered from the strain she insisted on imposing on herself when Kate Lisle was ill. It might be so.

At any rate it is certain that, up to the time of Kate's illness, she was bright and well, and that, after that illness, she lost something of her lovely color, and had sometimes a weary, troubled look, as though she were not quite well.

She declared she was well, however, and although refused to consult a doctor.

Kate, on the other hand, was in excellent health again, and had gone back to The Towers.

Christmas was drawing near, when, one morning, Lillian looked up from her letters with a little exclamation.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sir Gerald.

"I am so surprised," she said, while a slightly troubled look flitted over her face.

"You remember my telling you about my cousin Louis—the one who had those wonderful adventures in Egypt?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

"Well, this letter is from him. I hadn't heard from him for ever so long, and now he writes to tell me he is coming to England."

"Oh! Well, we shall be very glad to see him here, of course."

"Do you really mean that?" asked Lady Vere looking at her husband a little anxiously.

They were breakfasting alone that morning, Lady Rath being confined to her room with a headache.

"Now, why shouldn't I mean it?" he asked laughing a little at her serious look.

"I—I thought you mightn't want to have Louis here!"

"My darling, I shall be delighted! From what you tell me of him, he seems a very fine fellow, and I don't doubt he'll be a great acquisition to our Christmas festivities. Write at once, and say we shall be very glad to see him. We'll show him how we keep Christmas in Hampshire."

"I hope you'll like him, Gerald," said Lady Vere, still a little anxiously. "But—but I'm not quite sure."

"Well, my dear, even if I don't there'll be no very desperate harm done. But I should be sorry to seem lacking in courtesy to any relation of yours."

"You are a great deal too good to me, Gerald," said Lillian, softly, while a sudden wave of color overspread her face.

And so Louis Rochefort was invited to Vivian Court, and it was settled that he should arrive a week or two before Christmas.

The day of his arrival was bitterly cold, and snow was falling fast.

Sir Vivian was a great deal too careful of his young wife to suffer her to drive to the station to meet her cousin, especially as she had not seemed quite strong lately; but he himself went, generously anxious to show all possible courtesy to Lillian's kinsman.

As he walked up and down the platform, before the train came in, he wondered what his visitor would be like.

Lillian had said he was handsome and clever, but he fancied she did not particularly like him, cousin though he was.

Since Sir Gerald had proposed that he should visit them, she had said very little of him, but in their honeymoon days she had told many stories of this Cousin Louis's stories of his pluck, audacity, and cleverness, which had interested Sir Gerald, and made him wish to see him.

"My darling is so very delicate-minded!" he was saying to himself, as he paced up and down the platform. "If this gay dashing cousin went ever so little out of the beaten track, she would be horrified. But I've no doubt I shall think him a capital fellow."

At this moment the train steamed in.

Sir Gerald, hurrying along the length of it, saw the door of a first class compartment thrown open by a hand as white as a woman's, and the next moment there stepped on to the platform a very slenderly built man, of slightly over middle height.

He was enveloped in an overcoat bordered with rich fur, and, even in the first hurried glance, Sir Gerald could see he was exceedingly handsome.

His complexion was a clear, pale olive, his nose slightly aquiline, his eye dark and brilliant, reminding Sir Gerald of Lillian, and his air one of great distinction.

"Louis Rochefort, of course!" said Sir Gerald, stepping up to him.

"Yes. And I have the pleasure of speaking to Sir Gerald Vere!"

And then the two men gripped hands, with an air of being mutually satisfied.

"And how is my Cousin Lillian—perhaps I ought to call her Lady Vere?" said Rochefort.

"Certainly not. Lillian is fairly well, thank you. She says she is quite well; but I sometimes think she is delicate. That was why I wouldn't let her come to the station."

"I'm glad you didn't. Whew! how cold it is. You'll excuse me for abusing your precious climate at a start; but, really, it's a stinger!"

They were outside the station now, where a high dog-cart was in waiting, a groom holding the head of a spirited horse, which champed at the bit and pawed the frozen ground, impatient to be gone.

"Your luggage?" asked Sir Gerald, seeing that Rochefort was preparing to take his seat.

"Oh, my man will see to that!" he answered, carelessly. "We needn't wait."

And then Sir Gerald noticed a slight, dark man, who had followed at a respectful distance, and now stood awaiting his master's orders.

"Valet" was written all over him.

"The baronet concluded that this cousin of Lillian's must be decently off to be able to afford the luxury of a man servant."

"I thought you wouldn't care for a closed carriage," remarked Sir Gerald, as the horse started off at a tremendous pace. "I hate them myself!"

"So do I. There's no pace to be got, do as you will. This is what I like, now!"

And, accepting the cigar Sir Gerald offered him, he lighted it, folded his arms, and gave himself up to the pleasure of being whirled through a blinding snowstorm, at the rate of sixteen miles an hour.

Sir Gerald was very much disposed to like this cousin of his wife's.

There was a quiet geniality in his manner, which he found very attractive, and, when he told some fascinating story of adventure he had met with last year, he showed himself the possessor of all the qualities which go to make a good raconteur.

"He's the finest specimen of a Frenchman I've ever seen," thought Sir Gerald, "and speaks English like a native." "I'm very glad he's come!"

It was dark when they reached the Court.

Lamps had been lighted, and a very pleasant picture the great hall made, with a roaring fire at each end, casting a ruddy glare on the bearskin rugs, and on the trophies of the chase which adorned the walls.

But the very prettiest bit of the picture was the young mistress of the Court, who had come into the hall to receive her kinsman.

She was standing in the full glow of the firelight.

Her tea-gown was of thick white silk, bordered with dark fur.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed, her hair shone like gold.

Rochefort stepped up to her, and, with a graceful inclination of the head towards Sir Gerald—as though asking his permission—kissed her on the lips, then held her at arm's length from him, and looked critically into her face.

"Why, Lily!" he said, "little Lily, I believe you have grown!"

"If I have, it wouldn't be so very strange seeing I was only seventeen when last you saw me!" she said, laughing, and flushing a little.

"Seventeen! Time flies so fast. You were at the pension then. How pleased you were when I came to see you—best pleased of all when I got madame's permission to take you for a walk. Do you remember?"

"I remember you used to take me for a walk sometimes, but I don't remember being so wonderfully pleased, as you say," she answered, smiling, though Sir Gerald thought she did not greatly care for these reminiscences.

"You were such a shy, demure little Lily in those days!" went on Rochefort. "A Lily of the valley. You are a queen-lily now. You have blossomed into a beautiful flower little cousin."

And he bowed before her with mock ceremony, a look of deep admiration in his eyes.

Easy to see he was well-pleased and proud to note the sweetly imperial beauty of his young cousin—perhaps none the less pleased because it had won for her a high position in the land.

He must have been hard to please, indeed, if he had not found it pleasant to come, as a guest, to such a house as Vivian Court.

All through the evening, Rochefort went on winning golden opinions for himself.

At dinner he was introduced to Lady Ruth, and quite charmed the heart of the gentle little spinster by the graceful courtesy of his manners.

Little Sylvia, who had most earnestly petitioned to see the visitor, was as pleased with him as Lady Ruth was.

As to Sir Gerald, he had made up his mind, before the night was over, that Louis Rochefort was one of the nicest fellows he had met in all his life.

He had been in Egypt during the Sudan war, had penetrated as far as Khartoum, and had marvellous tales to tell about the Arab hordes, the Derwishes, and the ancient Egyptian race.

It was evident he had been in many a desperate adventure, but he never seemed to talk of himself, or only in the most careless fashion.

Whatever might be Louis Rochefort's faults, self glorification was not among them.

Curiously enough, the person who, according to all the laws of nature, ought to have looked with most kindness of the visitor seemed to regard with secret disapproval.

This was Lady Vere herself.

She was perfectly courteous towards him, she neglected nothing, as hostess, which might promote his comfort; but she could not be said to greet him with that gracious, almost affectionate, warmth

which usually exists between cousins who are on good terms with each other.

Sir Gerald noticed this, and taxed her with it in a tone of good-natured reproach.

"Lily!"—he often called her by that pet name when they were alone together—"Lily, your not very fond of your cousin!"

They were in her boudoir, late at night. She was unclipping her jewels as she sat before the fire; he was standing opposite, watching her with a look of tender love.

She looked up at him, quickly as though a little startled.

"How do you know that, Gerald?" she asked.

He laughed.

"My darling, you are such a transparent soul, that you can conceal nothing. Now tell me why you don't like your cousin?"

"But I do like him, Gerald!"

"Yes, in a way, I suppose you do. He's your near relation, and blood's thicker than water. But, apart from that, you don't care for him greatly. Oh I can see it in your eyes, sweet-heart, when you look at him! I could see it when he kissed you this afternoon."

"Gerald, how you watch me!"

She smiled, but a little rose-flush mantled her cheek, as though she was embarrassed, nevertheless.

"Don't we always look at what we love?" he questioned, softly, coming to her side, and resting his hand caressing on her soft shoulder. "But, Lily, you've been evading my question all this time. What has Louis done to vex you? There's something I'm sure."

"If I tell you, you'll only laugh at me!"

"I swear I won't!"

"Well, then, I think—I fear—Louis is cruel. That's why I don't like him very much."

"Cruel?—in what way?"

"I don't quite know. Sometimes, when I look at him, I think I see something cruel in his eyes. And once, when I was a girl at school, he—killed a little dog I loved; and I think I've never quite forgiven him."

"How was it? Tell me, Lily."

And the husband's hand pressed the wife's shoulder very tenderly.

"It was his dog, but I loved it dearly; and it was even tender of me than it was of him. He was very stern with it, trained it to obey his lightest word. And one day the poor little thing disobeyed him. I forget what it was he wanted it to do, but it wouldn't do it, and he was very angry. He picked it up in his arms, and went out of the room with it. I begged him not to beat it, and I shall always remember his look—so cold and cruel—as he answered me. 'No, Lily; I shall not beat it!' he said, 'simply because chastisement is no good for disobedience of this kind!' and then—"

"Then what, dear?" Sir Gerald said, as she paused, though, in truth, he guessed the end of her story.

Lillian shivered, and covered her face with her hands.

"He shot it, Gerald!" she said, in a low voice. "Poor little Fidele—who loved him so! I have never quite liked Cousin Louis since."

"My Lily, you are so sensitive," said Sir Gerald. "According to your sweet code of morals, it is a sin to kill a fly!"

"Yes, it is, if the fly loves you. Gerald, you know quite well that you wouldn't have done that!"

"Perhaps not. Different men have different ways. Your cousin isn't the first man who has shot a dog for disobedience. You'll have to forgive him, dear."

Sir Gerald spoke lightly.

He himself was the most tender-hearted of men, and kindness was the only law he used with the animals under his control.

But he knew enough of other men's methods not to be greatly shocked at that bygone act of Louis Rochefort's.

Some men, as he knew, were wonderfully stern with their dogs, and, in a moment of great anger, a man, not naturally and wantonly cruel, might choose to punish canine disobedience with death.

"You'll have to forgive him, dear!" he repeated, as he stooped to kiss his wife.

But she did not answer—only shivered a little again, as though at the very memory of that cruel act of her cousin Louis.

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CHAPTER XLVII.

ROCHEFORT TAMES A HORSE.

The very next day, Kate drove over to the Court with Vi Muggleton.

Rochefort was not in the drawing-room when the visitors were announced.

He came in through the conservatory five minutes later, with little Sylvia on his shoulder.

They had been pelting each other with flowers, and the child was radiant with happiness.

Rochefort looked radiant too; his pale, olive skin, was slightly flushed with his exertions, his dark eyes were even more than ordinarily brilliant.

He did not seem in the faintest degree discomposed as he walked into the draw-

ing-room with the child on his shoulder and found visitors there.

Lillian introduced him.

Kate as she noted his slender figure and dark, handsome face, could not but recall the words of Madame Santanello: "The man to whom you will ultimately unite yourself is dark and slender, and he will come from foreign lands."

She recalled that strange prophecy with something like a shudder; and then, as a feeling of repulsion to Rochefort swept over her, she remembered that that, also, had been foretold.

"At first you will feel a repulsion to him," the clairvoyante had said; "but, ultimately, you will love him passionately, and will be willing to pass through fire and water to be his wife. The Fates have said it!"

How vividly Kate remembered every word!

"It is impossible it should ever come true!" she whispered to herself. "Impossible! monstrous! How foolish of me to think of it!"

Again she looked at Rochefort, and again that shiver of repulsion thrilled through her veins.

He sat down in an easy chair, with Sylvia standing at his knee.

A