

* A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS. *

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

CHAPTER I.

A REMARKABLE ADVENTURE.

An express train was starting from an important town nearly a hundred miles from London, London being its destination. The guard, John Morewood, stood at the door of his van, busily superintending the stowing away of the numberless packages which were consigned to him.

He was a striking-looking man, younger than railway guards usually are—perhaps something over thirty years of age.

His figure was truly noble in its proportions, and he carried it after a fashion which is said to belong only to gentlemen. His face was Saxon in character, a strong handsome face, with a beautiful mouth, and keen, rather dark blue eyes.

He was clean shaven, save for a well-kept fair mustache, which gave him a distinctly military appearance.

Presently a couple of porters approached the van.

They bore a heavy and mournful load—a coffin was to form part of the train's freight that night.

Morewood's eye rested on it with a gravely sympathetic glance as it was placed at the back of the van.

He did not know who its inmate was, not even whether it was man or woman; but the solemnity and majesty of Death appealed to him strongly, as it ever does to all but coarse and thoughtless minds.

In a minute or two, the signal was given, and the train started.

It was a dreary night in mid-winter. Snow lay upon the ground, giving the fields a curiously eerie look as the train flew by them in the darkness.

The wind moaned dimly; the cold was intense.

On such a night, there are far pleasanter places for a nervous or superstitious person than the guard's van of a train which is not expected to stop for nearly a couple of hours, and which is bearing a coffin to its last resting place.

Fortunately, John Morewood was neither superstitious nor nervous.

He enjoyed the inestimable privilege of a sound mind in a sound body.

Nevertheless, a certain sense of awe pervaded his mind whenever he looked at that solemn casket, which is our last gift to poor mortality.

It was an oaken coffin, with a plain brass plate and handles.

Once Morewood stooped over it, but it lay too much in the shadow for him to read the name on the plate; and he did not feel interest enough to fetch a light to his assistance.

The train had proceeded about thirty miles; the night grew colder and darker—the wind still moaned and howled.

Morewood was busy with his duties, when suddenly he started violently, and glanced towards the coffin.

He had fancied he heard a sound, a something resembling a human groan.

"Of course it must have been the wind," he muttered, doubtfully. "But I could have sworn it came from there. How easily the imagination deceives one."

Certainly there was no sound now, save the mournful sighing of the wind.

Morewood went back to his work again, humming a tune, and trying to forget what it was he had in the van with him.

But, a minute later, another sound fell on his ear—an unmistakable one this time. Something was beating against the coffin-lid.

He recognized the sound of human fingers tapping feebly, but eagerly, upon the wood.

He caught up a screw-driver, and quick as lightning, knelt down beside the coffin. He worked as though for his own life, and in an incredibly short space of time had wrenched off the lid.

He had heard no further sound.

Was he too late?

His heart beat furiously against his side as he asked himself the question.

In spite of his eager desire that help might not have come too late, he could scarcely help recoiling—certainly, he could not help a nameless thrill of horror when the face of a woman was thrown aside, and the seeming corpse raised itself slowly.

It was a woman—a young woman, and perhaps, a beautiful one.

It was difficult to tell, now that her face was hueless, and her garb that of the dead. One thing, however, Morewood was greatly impressed with, even in that first moment of amazement and horror, and that was the dark solemn beauty of the woman's eyes.

He had never seen such eyes in all his life before.

Without speaking—for it is difficult to find words at such a moment—Morewood put his arm round her, and lifted her bodily from that hateful receptacle which is but the lining of the grave.

His next step was to take off his own coat, and wrap it round her, and, finally, he poured a few drops of brandy between her lips, still supporting her with his strong arm.

A faint shiver ran through her frame.

She turned her head, and fixed her great dark eyes upon him.

There was terror in them—an awful look of terror.

Then Morewood spoke—

"You will be better soon," he said, cheerfully, taking her ice-cold hand, and chafing it in both his own.

"Did they think I was dead?" she whispered. "Are you sure they thought I was dead?"

"Yes; it is all a mistake, of course, for

you are going to live, and get quite well again. You needn't be afraid."

She still looked up at him as though she were half-mad with terror.

Vaguely it occurred to him that he didn't understand her state of mind.

"How do you feel?" he questioned, anxiously. "Better?"

"Yes—yes, ever so much better. I shall be almost quite well directly," she said, with strange eagerness and energy.

Then she looked round her in bewilderment, asking—

"Where am I—where is this place?"

"It is the van of a train. I am the guard."

"Where were they taking me?"

He named a country place some considerable distance beyond London.

She seemed to brighten up all at once, and said, with curious relief and cheerfulness—

"Then they were going to bury me? You are quite sure?"

"Yes, they would certainly have buried you if you hadn't recovered consciousness. I suppose you have been in what they call a trance. And now I think it is my duty to communicate with the engine driver, and stop the train. You must be attended to at once."

To his amazement, this proposal seemed to fill her with horror.

Weak though she was, she seized hold of his arm as though she would have dragged him back.

"No! no!" she panted. "Don't do that! For Heaven's sake, don't let anyone know I am alive!"

Morewood looked at her with grave wonder.

He almost began to think she had gone mad—that her late terrible experience had turned her brain.

But as he looked at her, this idea faded from his mind.

There was no insanity in those great dark eyes. Her whole face, ashen-pale though it was, expressed a steady purpose. She knew what she asked, and why she asked it.

"Let me give you some more brandy then," he said, quietly. "It was only for your own good I wanted to stop the train, but if you would rather I didn't—why, there's an end of it. I must do the best I can for you myself."

She drank the spirits obediently, and, after a minute or two, he was relieved to see a little colour steal back into her lips.

It made her look less corpse-like.

It assured him she had recrossed the mysterious border line which separates life from death.

It was certainly an extraordinary adventure as ever an unromantic man was called upon to pass through.

Alone in the van of a train with a pallid, corpse-like woman in her shroud—the open coffin which held her lying at his feet, the night growing darker and darker as the train sped through it at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

Suddenly it occurred to his mind that that open coffin was a ghastly sight for that poor creature who had been shut up in it alive.

He carried it where it could no longer be seen by her.

As he did so his eye fell on the inscription that was graven on the lid—

"MADELINE WINTER.

"AGED 26."

The woman, watching his every movement with her great dark eyes, saw him read that brief inscription.

Her whole form dilated, she trembled, and clenched her hands so tightly that the nails must have entered the flesh.

She looked like one in an agony of mortal fear, but when she saw that Morewood's face underwent no change, the terribly strained look left her own.

She seemed to commune with herself, and to come a sudden resolution.

Morewood, having removed the coffin, came back to her, and inquired anxiously how she felt.

"I am better," she said, firmly. "In a little time I shall have quite recovered. But I am in great danger. Will you help me to escape?"

Seeing that he was too surprised to speak she went on, in a quick, low tone—

"You had better have left me in that coffin, unless you will assist me to leave this train in such a way that none will suspect I am still alive. The people who have tried to kill me will kill me, unless they can be made to think I am already in my grave."

"Do you mean," asked Morewood, "that you have been the victim of foul play?"

"I mean that I have been drugged. If once my enemies suspected I had escaped, nothing could save me from death—an awful death!"

And she shuddered violently, hiding her face in her hands.

"But the law would protect you!" exclaimed Morewood, with energy.

"It would not!" said the woman, in a strangely bitter tone. "I have nothing to hope from the law. My only hope is in heaven—and you."

Her voice was beautifully soft and musical.

As she spoke those last words, it thrilled with such unutterable pathos, that Morewood would have been less than man if he had not been moved by it.

She was quick to see the impression she had made.

She fixed her beautiful dark eyes full

upon his face, and, leaning forward, caught his hand.

"Will you save me?" she pleaded. "You can. Oh! will you—will you?"

"Whatever I can do, I will," said Morewood, with quiet earnestness.

She was still holding his hand, and now she just touched it with her lips, as though overcome with gratitude.

"I trust you!" she cried. "Oh, remember, it is with my life!"

"I accept the trust," he returned, without hesitation, and still speaking in that tone of quiet earnestness. "Now tell me just what it is you wish me to do."

"I want you to let me get away from the train in London without anyone knowing I have escaped. Unless you can do that, I shall meet with a more awful fate than would have been mine if you had left me there."

And she looked, with a shudder, towards where he had concealed the coffin.

Morewood stood for a moment in silence revolving plans in his calm, intelligent brain.

"I think I can manage it," he said, at length. "You may trust me."

It is no easy task he had undertaken to do.

To get away from a London railway station a woman in a shroud, with a dead-white face and striking eyes, was a task which might well puzzle the most ingenious mind; but Morewood, glancing coolly round his van, thought it could be managed.

A roll of travelling-rugs lay in one corner. He untasted it, and found it to consist of a couple of woollen shawls, very thick, and a dark Scotch plaid.

"Could you dress yourself in these?" he said, holding them out to her.

She nodded, and, with deft, clever fingers, fastened one of the shawls round her waist, so that it hung like a skirt to her feet; the other she threw round her head and neck, completed a costume in which she might pass through a station by night without attracting any very great attention.

Morewood looked at her critically, and felt quite satisfied of this.

"You must have some boots, he said. "Luckily, I have a pair here. Can you wear them?"

And he drew forth an old pair of his own.

They were, of course, too large for her, she could walk in them, and she slipped them on with alacrity.

As she did so, he could not but notice the beauty of her foot, with its arched instep and slender ankle, as he had already noticed the magnificent masses of her raven black hair.

He was beginning to see that this woman, when in health, would possess no ordinary share of beauty, and, indeed, she exercised a nameless fascination over him even now.

All matters of dress adjusted, she looked with anxious eyes, towards the empty coffin.

"About that?" she questioned. "Can anything be done? If not, I shall be lost. I cannot take you into my confidence. I would if I could, but I dare not. I can trust you because your face is good and true, and because you believe me when I tell you that unless that coffin is buried, under the belief that I lay dead inside it nothing can save me from the most horrible of deaths. Oh, help me if you can! Heaven will reward you if you do!"

"I have thought about the coffin," said Morewood quietly. "It will be all right. Do not fear."

As he spoke, he knelt down and began to fill the coffin with various parcels which lay heaped together in one corner.

They were a consignment of goods from an ironmonger, and were very heavy. Half-a-dozen of them would be quite equal in weight to that of a delicate woman.

Taking care to pad them tightly with old rags and pieces of paper so that nothing could betray them, he screwed down the lid as it had been before.

Of course, he was well aware that these goods, as well as the rugs would be missed but he did not despair of being able to account in some way for their absence.

And he would certainly pay for them, too.

He had no desire to steal—even for a woman newly-risen from the dead.

CHAPTER II.

BEECH ROYAL.

Beech Royal was one of the show houses of Hampshire, a great grey mansion, plain but massive, dating from the time of the Tudors, and showing, as yet, no sign of decay as it faced summer sun and winter rain.

It stood in the middle of a spacious deer-park, where the antlered monarchs of the forest roamed at will beneath the shade of the magnificent beech trees, from which the house took its name.

Rose gardens, with a white marble fountain in the midst, lay beneath the front window and beyond, separated only by a balustrade, there flowed a river, calm and beautiful as a lake.

On one side of the park was a wood, almost filled with the noble beeches; beyond were a couple of villages, nestling sweetly at the foot of a hillside; and all this fair domain appertained to Beech Royal.

The master of the house, standing at his library window, could see no spot of ground that was not his own.

A tall man he was, with a fair, strong, Saxon face, lighted up by dark blue eyes; in fact, none other than that John Morewood who had assisted, all unwittingly, a murderess to cheat the gallows.

A striking change from being a guard in the employment of a railway company, to being master of Beech Royal; but Fate is proverbially capricious, and, in one of its fits of caprice, it had wrought this wonder for John Morewood.

The son of a younger son, he had never dreamed of inheriting the family honours and estates.

His branch of the family had been at

their respective owners should be recompensed for the losses they had sustained.

Madeline Winter had watched his every movement with breathless interest, and as the last screw was replaced in the coffin, she drew a deep sigh of relief while a faint color tinged her cheek.

Morewood, glancing at her, was struck afresh by the beauty of her eyes.

They reminded him of nothing so much as of a moonlit tarn.

Light and darkness mingled so thrillingly in their soft depths.

By this time the train was rapidly nearing London.

Madeline Winter sat in a corner with clasped hands, her eyes dilated, her whole form quivering with nervous agitation.

It was easy to see she dreaded being noticed and detained in London.

Morewood took what money he had in his pocket, and gave it to her.

"Take it," he said. "You can do nothing without money. You will need it."

She did not thank him in words, but raised her dark thrilling eyes to his face with a look he never forgot.

After a moment or two, she said, beseechingly—

"You will not follow? You will not seek to know who I am?"

"I promise you I will not. Not a word shall pass my lips about you to anyone. As to the coffin, it will go on in another train. But I will see to it. You need have no fear."

She seemed reassured, though still her agitation was very great.

Her nerves were strung almost to snapping point.

The train glided smoothly into the great London station.

There was only about a dozen people on the platform, and Morewood, opening the door of his van immediately, extended his hand to his companion, and helped her out, unobserved by anyone.

"Go to that exit," he whispered, "and you will be in the street in less than a minute. Walk quickly; no one will notice you."

Again she flashed upon him a look of gratitude, then sped away in the direction he had indicated, and passed through the archway into the street beyond.

The strangest object, surely, in all that great city that night—a woman just escaped from her coffin and still wearing her shroud.

The next day, Morewood was at the town from which the coffin had come on the preceding evening.

He had half-an-hour to spare before he joined his train; and as he stood on the platform, deep in thought about Madeline Winter, a porter came up and entered into conversation with him.

"Miss Marshall is to be buried to-day," was one of this man's first observations. "Strange affair, that, wasn't it, Morewood?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," was Morewood's answer.

"You don't mean to say you haven't heard of the murder at Brookstone?"

"I haven't, indeed. I very rarely read the papers, nowadays."

"Ah, but everybody's talking about it—everybody about here!"

"Yes, but you see I don't live here. What is the murder, Tom?"

"Why, Miss Marshall of Brookstone, has been poisoned by a young lady who lived with her as companion; and when the companion found she was suspected, she poisoned herself as well. Oh, it's made a regular sensation here I can tell you!"

"I've no doubt it has," said Morewood; but he spoke abstractedly.

He was still thinking of Madeline Winter still picturing the glances he had received from those dark, unflinching eyes.

Another porter who had come up a moment ago, here struck in with—

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard about the Brookstone Tragedy, Morewood? Well, that's a rum 'un, for you'd the body of the murderess with you in your van last night. It was brought in very quietly; and not many knew about it because the authorities didn't want a demonstration; but it was Madeline Winter who was in that coffin you took to London with you! A good thing she killed herself, for the case against her was as clear as daylight. Nothing could have saved her from the gallows!"

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His branch of the family had been at

deadly feud with the reigning one; and when, at the termination of his university career, his father died suddenly, leaving him without so much as a penny piece by way of inheritance, he disappeared from the ranks of life in which he had hitherto walked.

His friends soon ceased to make enquiries after him.

He had simply "gone under," to use a time-honoured phrase, as so many young men had done before him.

Certainly no one dreamed of looking for him in the guard's van of a railway train; but he, desirous of earning an honest living, and having that chance flung in his way, accepted it, and thereby laid the foundations for the great tragedy of his life.

Two months after that snowy winter's night on which he had rescued the murderess from her living tomb, he had heard of the death of his uncle, the master of Beech Royal.

Another uncle had died the year before, and six months later the deaths of two of his cousins, in rapid succession, made him the heir to one of the finest estates in the south of England.

There was no title to be inherited, but then no title was needed.

The very name of Morewood was enough. That name had stood out grandly in English history ever since the first Lionel de Morewood "came over" in the train of Norman William.

In the stormy days of the Stuarts, the Morewoods had shown themselves willing to shed their last drop of blood in defence of their king; and Beech Royal had been one of the places in which Charles the second had found succour when he fled after what Cromwell called "the Lord's crowning mercy of Worcester."

In this instance, it is sadly too few others, the careless monarch has proved himself not ungrateful.

Beech Royal was restored to its owners, and the officer of an earldom went with it; but this honour had been declined.

No reward could be accepted for plain duty done—for service to king and country; and besides, what title could add lustre to the name of Morewood?

And so it happened that the quondam railway guard, for all his vast wealth and almost princely blood, was only plain John Morewood of Beech Royal.

It was more than two years since he came to the inheritance, but it was only during the last few weeks he had settled down in Hampshire.

He had been abroad, travelling with a friend.

A pleasant smile played round his mouth as he turned away from the library window after a lengthy survey of the fair expanse of park and woodland which owned him for its lord.

He could earn his bread among the sons of toil if need were, but none the less did he thrill with pride and pleasure to know he was master of Beech Royal.

He touched the bell, and gave orders for his horse to be saddled and brought round.

He was going to see the friend with whom he had been travelling abroad, and whose estate adjoined his own.