

* A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS. *

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

CONTINUED.

CHAPTER LXVII.—Continued.

Dr. Browne saw it, and preceded, more solemnly and impressively than ever—
"That is, of course, unless such confession of one's sins would right a wrong. There can be no true spirit of repentance without a desire to make reparation. If, by any sin of yours, you have injured another, and it is in your power to repair the injury before you leave this world, I exhort you, most solemnly, and in the name of God, who is your Maker, and must be your Judge, to devote your last moments to making such a confession as may most effectually undo your sin."

No priest could have spoken with a more thrilling solemnity and earnestness than did Dr. Browne, as he thus exhorted his dying patient.

His words were not without effect.

Rochefort turned to his sister with an imploring eye, and murmured, faintly—
"Leila, it must be so. I feel myself a coward at the last. I dare not face death with that load of guilt upon my soul."

She started forward, like one in mortal terror.

Her face blanched, her nostrils quivering.

"Louis!" she almost shrieked. "Reflect! Consider! Be firm! Die like a man. You have mocked at priestly juggling all your life. Do not fall a victim to it now."

The death-sweat stood in beads on Rochefort's brow.

He trembled in every limb.

The doctor saw his irresolution, and, with a firm, though gentle hand, held back the woman, as she would have flung herself on her knees beside her brother.

"You shall not!" she panted. "You shall not wrest his secret from him. This is my house. I bid you leave it. My brother shall die in peace. Go! I command you!"

And, with an imperious gesture, she pointed to the door.

But the young English doctor rose to the occasion.

"Madame," he said, in a low stern voice, while his awkward figure and plain features seemed invested with a new and striking dignity, born of the earnestness within him, "I refuse to recognise your right to banish me from a room where I have a dying patient. My place is by his side. I decline to leave him, and I warn you, that if you attempt to prevent him from making the confession, which alone can give him peace of mind, you will bring upon yourself a suspicion you may not find easy to remove. You will understand me better if I say I am the doctor who, last year, attended Miss Kate Vere in a certain mysterious illness, and that I am determined not to rest until I have restored that unfortunate young lady to her home and friends."

He had shot an arrow at a venture, but he saw, in a moment, it had found its mark.

The woman shrank beneath his clear, accusing gaze.

She trembled, and her face grew almost ashen pale as that of the dying man.

The doctor, conscious that he had conquered, and seeing clearly that Rochefort's life was ebbing away with appalling swiftness, drew a chair to the bedside; and, first administering a strong cordial, drew forth his pocket-book, and prepared, if need were, to take down some notes of the confession.

Leila had retired to the further end of the room, and was sitting with her face buried in her hands.

Rochefort turned his dying eyes toward her, and said, in a faint voice—
"Leila, forgive me!"

"I will not forgive you!" she answered, sullenly. "You will take my curse with you to your grave. A man who, for his own paltry fears, will destroy his sister, is so poor a coward, that I despise myself when I remember one mother bore us both!"

It was a bitter speech, and delivered with merciless resentment.

Rochefort, however, made another attempt to conciliate her.

"I shall not destroy my sister!" he said, with a faint return of energy. "Sooner than that, I would go down to my grave with my lips sealed—ay, though I knew I was going to perdition. But, Leila, you know, as well as I, how safely you may trust to Sir Gerald Vere."

"Fool!" said the woman, fiercely. "Is it Sir Gerald Vere alone we have to deal with? What of this man?"

And she pointed, with a passionate gesture, towards Dr. Browne.

Rochefort fixed his dark, hollow eyes on the doctor with a look of such haunting solemnity as only the dying can bestow.

"Swear!" he said, slowly, "swear by the God in whom you trust, that, no matter what the nature of the crimes I reveal to you, you will not seek to betray the perpetrators of them to justice. A priest observes inviolable whatever is imparted to him in confession. Swear to me that you will do the same."

"I swear it," said the doctor, firmly, "provided no one will be injured by my silence. Not otherwise."

"No one will be injured. Such wrongs as can be redressed, will be redressed. I only ask that you will abstain from giving a criminal up to justice for crimes which are things of the past, and quite irreparable."

"That I most solemnly promise."

"Swear it!" said the dying man, with feverish energy.

The woman still sat in that attitude of sullen despair, her face buried in her hands.

"I swear it—by the God who made me!"

said Dr. Browne, with deep solemnity, wondering much what would be this darkly mysterious confession he was about to hear.

"Then listen," said Louis Rochefort, in a faint, hollow voice, and he began his story.

Just as the first sunbeams glanced into that room, Louis Rochefort drew his last faint breath.

Dr. Browne, pale with the horrors of the night, closed the dead man's eyes reverently, and composed his limbs for burial.

Then he turned to the woman who still sat with her face buried in her hands.

The glance he cast upon her was strangely compounded of horror, pity and repulsion; but his voice was perfectly calm as he said—

"Listen to what I have to say."

She did not move—did not so much as raise her head.

"You hear me?"

With a gesture of her hand she showed him she was listening.

He went on, still in a very calm quiet voice—

"I want you to understand that you are free to make your escape from here, if such is your desire. Your brother's confession must, of course, be made known to Sir Gerald Vere, and Miss Lisle be restored to her friends at once. But I shall rigidly keep my word. No ill-consequences will fall on you, unless you wilfully draw them down on your own head."

She did not answer; and he, with another glance, in which horror and pity seemed to strangely mingle, passed out of the room, leaving her alone with the dead.

Then she sprang to her feet, swift as lightning, and, crossing to the bed, looked down at the lifeless form with furious passion in her eyes.

"Coward! Poltroon!" she hissed into the dead ear. "It that man is right, and there a life beyond the grave, I pray that my curse may reach you there! If I were sure of it, I would pursue you—to show you whether I fear death. As it is I curse you and rejoice to think that if there is a perdition it must needs yawn for such as you!"

Her eyes were ablaze with wrath.

She looked weird, unearthly, terrible.

Surely a more fearful malediction was never breathed than that which she was hissing into the ear of Death.

The servants at the golden horn were only just coming downstairs, when Dr. Browne, pale and jaded, rode up to the door on horseback.

"Sir Patrick Donovan is in his room, I suppose?" he said, and hurried up the stairs, and tapped at the baronet's door.

It was opened in a moment by Sir Patrick, fully dressed.

"Well, my boy, what news?" he questioned, gravely, as he drew the doctor inside the room.

"I have had a night of horror!" replied the doctor.

"Is the poor man dead?"

"Yes. He died at sunrise."

"And have you discovered anything?"

"I have discovered everything. The man made a full confession before he died. Sir Patrick, I tell you honestly, I shouldn't like to have such another experience in my life. I have listened to a story the most terrible, the most mysterious, that it is possible for the mind of man to conceive. Even to you I am not at liberty to reveal all that I have heard. But I may tell you this one thing, at any rate—that unfortunate young lady is Miss Kate Lisle. She has been the victim of the most diabolical plot I have ever heard of in my life."

"And where is she now?"

"She is in safe keeping. But, for the present, I can scarcely spare so much as a thought to her. The person I want to see is Sir Gerald Vere."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

A beautiful white house overlooking the Bay of Naples, though two or three miles from the town—a house with orange gardens, and flower-decked terraces, a piazza, and white marble balustrades.

It was the house Sir Gerald Vere had taken for himself and his wife during their stay in Italy.

In one of the shady rooms, whose hangings were of rose-coloured silk, Lady Vere lay on a couch, with a book in her hand which she was not reading, and her eyes fixed dreamily on the flower-wreathed columns of the piazza.

Her face was as lovely as ever it had been; but there was upon it now a look of languor, of delicacy, which seemed to hint that her health, either of body or mind, was not so perfect as it had been in England.

A servant entered with a visitor's card. She looked at it, and seemed to consider for a moment or two, then she said—

"I will see Madame la Comtesse. Bring her here, if you please."

The servant withdrew, and, in a moment or so, returned to usher in the visitor, a French countess, who was staying at Naples, and, having met Sir Gerald's beautiful young wife at one of the saloons, had taken a tremendous fancy to her.

"My dear love," she said, seating herself on the couch by Lillian's side, and taking both her hands in hers, with all a Frenchwoman's effusion. "My dear love how pale you look—positively distraite, I do assure you. I am perfectly desolée to see you like this."

"I am quite well," said Lillian, smiling

faintly, "or should be if the heat were a little less intense."

"My dearest, the weather is delightful—truly delightful!" declared the countess, with energy. "If you complain of that you must be ill. The truth is you mope too much."

"Mope!" repeated Lillian, still smiling, but looking as though she was a little startled at the word.

"Yes, indeed, my love! What is it but moping, to lie on a couch on this too lovely day, when the sun is shining, and the birds are singing, and the flowers are blooming? Ah, my dear, when you are as old as I am you will know that life is too short for us to lose the brightness of any of its sunny days!"

"Yes; life is short!" said Lillian, in a slow musing tone, while a shadow stole into her lovely eyes. "And death lurks even among the flowers. Ah, countess! sometimes I sit and think about these things until my heart is heavy as lead within me."

To the young, death is so terrible, and yet it comes to them as well as to the old. I sit and wonder why it must be so."

"Ah, now you are getting positively morbid! I see I must carry you away, and find you cheerfulness. But where is Sir Gerald? I am wanting to give him one grand scolding. He is not what you call a model husband; he leaves you too much alone."

A wave of colour swept across the paleness of Lady Vere.

She looked up, eagerly, to say—

"Oh, no, indeed! You must not think that. Sir Gerald is all goodness. It is only when he cannot be with me, that I am left alone. He has so much business on his hands just now. If it were not for that, he would be with me always."

The French countess gave a shrill little laugh—a laugh of very genuine amusement.

"Mon Dieu! But you have plenty of faithful child. You are as innocent as one little daisy. Business! And you really believe in that? When I see Sir Gerald, I will tell him he has for a wife the most trusting angel in the world."

Lillian rose, with a look of gentle dignity.

"Indeed, countess," she said. "I assure you that, with a man like Sir Gerald, a wife needs only to be a true woman, not at all an angel, to be certain she can trust his word."

The countess laughed gaily, and shrugged her shoulders.

She was a veritable Frenchwoman, gay, good-humoured, kind-hearted, and volatile.

In her heart of hearts she thought that Sir Gerald, judging from what she had seen during her stay in Naples, was culpably neglectful of his beautiful young wife; but it she, the pure innocent, chose to defend him, why, it was no affair of Madame la Comtesse.

"At any rate, come out with me this afternoon!" she said, gaily. "I am going to the picture gallery. Vinadi's new picture is there, and everybody is raving over it, of course. Do come."

"Certainly I will if you really wish it. It is very good of you to want me," returned Lady Vere, gently. "I can dress in ten minutes, if you don't mind waiting."

In a very little more than ten minutes the two ladies drove away together, the French countess petite, vivacious, and altogether chic: Sir Gerald's beautiful wife calm and tranquil, but with a certain look of sadness in her eyes, which added to, rather than detracted from, her beauty.

She was dressed entirely in black, with a bunch of Neapolitan violets at her throat.

Not another touch of color about her, save her golden hair.

The countess, for all her elegance, and in spite of the fact that her mai-se-coloured carriage costume was one of Worth's own designing, narrowly escaped looking vulgar by contrast with that pale, tranquil loveliness.

They drove to the gallery where the picture of the year was being exhibited. A truly noble picture it was, but a very sad one.

In a garden, of exquisite beauty, a girl was standing, bending over a sundial, on which was inscribed the legend: "Life is short."

The girl's face was as fair as the morning, and as bright and blooming as the flowers that surrounded her on every side.

YOUTH and health alike seemed hers; but, from out a bower of roses behind her, a ghastly form was stealing—a skeleton shape, with a dart in its upraised hand, levelled at the maiden.

The artist had given to his picture a name which was at once short and striking.

It consisted of but one word—"Death."

The countess was voluble in her praise of the picture.

She fell into ecstasies over it, appraising its merits in English and French by turns.

Lady Vere, on the contrary, stood and gazed at it in perfect silence, her beautiful face very pale, a strangely sorrowful look in her dark eyes.

"Mon Dieu! Is it not charming—ravishing—sublimely magnificent?" cried the countess, as her raptures reached a climax.

"It is very sad," said Lillian slowly. "Very sad, and very terrible."

And she gave a little shiver as she turned away from the picture, and walked to the further end of the gallery, as though she resolved not to look at it again.

Two young men were sitting on a velvet lounge—both Italians, and artists—looked after her with glances of deep interest and admiration.

"Did you ever see anything so perfectly lovely as that girl's face?" said one. "Who is she, I wonder? Just notice the pose of her head. How gloriously regal! That is just the sort of woman you ought to paint for an empress or a queen."

"I'm she is wonderfully beautiful. I don't know that I ever saw a more perfect face. But, Verdi, the most striking thing about her you don't seem to have noticed at all."

"Sacre! And pray what is that?"

"Why, the look in her eyes is exactly the look in the eyes of the girl there."

And he pointed to the painting.

"Impossible! Vinadi's maiden has eyes of the loveliest summer blue. They are the colour of forget-me-nots. Miladi's there are as dark as night. They have all the depth of colouring of a purple pansy."

"I spoke not of colour but of expression," said the other impatiently. "It is possible you don't see what I mean? Vinadi has painted his maiden with eyes such as you never see except in those who die an early death. That, to my mind, is one of the greatest beauties of his picture. And the English miladi has just that look. She is not long for this world. Mark my words."

"Bah! What a superstitious dreamer you are!"

"I seem so to you, you mean, because you look only on the surface; and, as I've told you thousands of times, you haven't the true artistic soul. To you Vinadi's maiden is simply a girl in perfect health. You note her ruddy lip, and perfect skin, and cannot see that he has painted her doom in her eyes. But, this I will say, you never see that look in the elderly or middle-aged. Whosoever has it, is the favourite of the gods, inasmuch as they die young. You beautiful lady will never wear the mark of Time's furrow on her brow."

"What nonsense! I declare you grow worse every day."

And then the two friends sauntered from the gallery together.

The countess and Lady Vere lingered for half-an-hour among the pictures, then re-entered the former's carriage.

"You will go home with me?" said the countess.

"Thank you; but, if you will excuse me, I will return home at once. I am feeling a little tired, and not quite well."

"You are certainly very pale," said the countess, with ready sympathy. "You shall do just as you please then, ma chère; but, remember, I am expecting you at my 'At Home' to-morrow."

They were driving by the side of a cemetery, and, at this moment, a coffin, borne on four men's shoulders, was being carried in at the gate.

The countess's coachman had to rein in his horses to allow the mournful cortege to pass.

"They say it is unlucky to have to make way for a coffin," said the countess, briskly. "However, thank goodness, I am not superstitious. There are heaps of stupid people who would say this forbade an early death to either you or me."

Lillian had been pale before, but she grew paler than ever as she watched the coffin being carried, slowly, to the grave.

Every vestige of color seemed to have left her face.

She was pallid, even to the lips.

"My dear, I am afraid you are ill," said the countess, with good-natured concern. "Surely you are not superstitious, my love; you are not alarmed because of that?"

And she nodded her head in the direction of the coffin.

Lillian seemed to recover herself with a great effort.

"I am not superstitious," she said, very gently; "but we seem to have seen and heard of nothing but death this afternoon. It has pursued us like a spectre. First, that picture; now, this coffin. It was a cypress leaf that fell into the carriage a moment ago; and, see! there is a raven on that tree just above our heads."

"My dear child, you are nervous. I shall positively recommend you to consult Dr. Ramonzi. He is the cleverest physician in Naples and nerves are his speciality. He will look in at my 'At Home' to-morrow. I shall certainly have to talk to him about you."

"I beg you will not," said Lillian smiling faintly.

Her beautiful face, however, remained perfectly colourless.

If the young Italian artist could have seen her then, he would have said, more positively than ever, that in her eyes there lurked the shadow of a coming doom.

Late that night Sir Gerald Vere entered his own apartments, having only just returned home after an absence of several hours, spent in walking gloomily along the white dusty, roads outside the town of Naples.

His face was flushed, but his eyes had a terribly haggard look.

A keen observer of human nature would have said that a man with such a look as that was either the bearer of, untold misery or the perpetrator of some dark and secret crime.

He threw himself into a velvet lounging-chair, with an air of being thoroughly worn out, and, fixing his eyes on vacancy, seemed to fall into a train of moody thoughts.

A soft tap at the door made him look up impatiently.

The next moment the door opened, and Lady Vere, timidly hesitant, stood upon the threshold.

He started up from his chair, amazement writ legibly on his brow.

"You?" he said, incredulously, as though he deemed it passing strange that she, his wife, should come to her husband's room.

"Yes, it is I," she said, gently, and with a supplicating look. "Gerald, may I come in?"

He did not answer in words at all.

He sank into his chair again, and signed to her, with an imperative, almost a fierce, gesture, to close the door.

She obeyed, and then advanced into the room with that slow, undulating grace of movement which was at once the envy and the despair of every woman who knew her.

She was all in white, a robe de chambre, of thick ivory satin, falling in long straight folds to her feet.

Her face still wore that interesting delicacy, that look of languor which so heightened her beauty.

Her long golden hair was unbound, and fell, in rippling masses, below her waist.

"Gerald," she said, standing in front of him, and speaking with a beseeching timidity which contrasted painfully with the grand imperial character of her loveliness. "Gerald, will you listen to me?"

He averted his eyes from her shading them with his hand, while his teeth all but met through his nether lip.

"Gerald!" she took a step nearer to him, while her voice sank to a low entreating whisper. "Oh my husband! if you only would have faith in me!"

Something like a smile—a bitter, cruel smile of derision—crossed his face, though still his teeth were biting fiercely at his lip.

"Have faith in you!" he repeated, after a momentary silence. "Faith! In you! My God! what shall I hear of next?"

There was a note of passion in his voice—a warning note it seemed to that beautiful, pale-faced woman, for she clasped her white hands together in an agony of appeal, and looked at him with the eyes which might surely have moved to pity the flintiest heart that ever beat in the breast of man.

It was as though she knew that his passions were like caged beasts within him and might, at any moment, break loose from restraint. Yes, trust me," she cried, falling on her knees at his feet, and clasping one of his hands tightly in both her own. "I am your wife, Gerald! Your wife! Oh, my husband, remember that!"

"I do remember it," he said, in a sombre tone, still averting his eyes from her pale, lovely face, with its veil of golden hair. "God in Heaven! why does she remind me of it? Am I likely to forget?"

Still she clasped his hand; nay, she pressed her lips to it, timidly, and as though she feared to anger him.

"Dearest, if you would but let me prove to you how cruelly you are wronging me!" she pleaded.

He laughed sardonically, a bitter, mocking laugh.

"Gerald, I can prove it. Oh, believe me? I swear that I am innocent."

"Liar!" he hissed between his clenched teeth, and would have thrust her from him with a fierce, almost brutal, movement, if she had not clung to his hand.

He was fast lashing himself into a condition of ungovernable fury.

The light of madness seemed to leap out of those darkly brilliant eyes.

His lips were livid and drawn.

"Gerald," she breathed in a pathetic whisper her voice breaking into a sob, "if you only knew how much I need your love and kindness now!"

"Her lovely head drooped lower and lower till it all but rested on his knee."

"Gerald," she panted again, be kind to me—be kind to me and love me as you used to do. I need your love—you do not know how much. If you will not love me, I shall be glad to die; but I want to live, for, before—this year—has gone—I shall have a—little—child."

Slowly, and almost inaudibly, the words fell from her lips.

Lower and lower drooped her beautiful head as she uttered them.

For one moment Sir Gerald seemed not to grasp her meaning.

When Sir Gerald grasped her meaning, he leaned suddenly forward, and, sweeping back the veil of golden hair, looked into her face as though he would read the innermost secret of her soul.

"If I thought it was true!" he breathed from between his set teeth. "My God! if I thought it was true!"

Quite early the next morning, a rumour ran through Naples, like wildfire, that the beautiful wife of Sir Gerald Vere had been found dead in her bed—poisoned by an overdose of chloral, taken to induce sleep.

CHAPTER LXIX.