

✱ A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS. ✱

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

CONTINUED.

'No, not ill, exactly; and yet I am troubled about him. He is restless—melancholy. He used to be so even tempered; but of late, during this last week or two, he has had fits of moodiness. Have you any idea whether he has anything on his mind?'

In a moment Morewood thought of Madeline Winter.

It was possible, quite possible, that some disquieting news concerning her had reached him.

Any such news would be likely to oppress his mind.

'If he has, he hasn't mentioned it to me,' he said, evasively.

And, even as he spoke, he suddenly realized that of late there had been a somewhat strange lack of confidential communications between himself and Sir Gerald.

He might have thought nothing of it but for Lady Ruth's suggestion; but, now that the matter was thus brought before his mind, he did remember that his friend had rather shunned conversation with him of late, and, as a matter of fact, had not once been over to Beech Royal during the last fortnight.

'I am sure Lillian notices it,' went on Lady Ruth, 'and that it makes her unhappy. But she never says a word of it to me. Lillian is so loyal. She thinks a wife should not hint at a husband's faults—even to his own nearest relations.'

'And he is moody and melancholy, you say?' said Morewood, thoughtfully. 'I haven't noticed it; but then, I must confess, I've seen very little of him lately. I don't know just how it is I haven't seen him. Perhaps he hasn't been feeling well.'

'He is well enough, bodily,' said Lady Ruth, 'and she seemed on the point of saying something further, but checked herself, half guiltily.'

'Well, I'll have a talk with him. He'll be all right in a day or two, never fear. I wouldn't worry, if I were you.'

Morewood spoke cheerily, but in his heart he felt a little anxious for his friend.

Was that prophecy of the dead gipsy about to be fulfilled at last?

The sound of wheels on the drive made Lady Ruth go to the window and look out.

'They are here!' she said. 'They can't have made many calls.'

A moment or two later, Sir Gerald and Lillian entered the room.

Morewood looked at them both with a quietly scrutinizing glance, and owned that Lady Ruth was right.

Neither of them looked quite as bright and happy as they had been wont to look. He wondered he had not noticed the change for himself.

Certainly he saw it plainly enough, now that it had been pointed out to him.

Lillian looked extremely pale, he thought, and her beautiful dark eyes held a wistful and anxious expression, as of one who sees and is trying to ward off, some approaching evil.

Her smile, however, was as sweet as ever as she greeted Morewood.

He thought he had never seen her look more beautiful than she did as she came towards him with that smile on her face, her hand extended with frank pleasure.

From her he looked to Sir Gerald, and though the change in him was a subtle one he recognized it and thought he understood what Lady Ruth meant.

A casual observer would, probably, have said Sir Gerald was looking remarkably well, but to Morewood's critically observant mind his eye was too brilliant.

It betokened a mind that was not at rest.

He crossed the room to give his hand to his friend; but—was it mere fancy or not?—it seemed to Morewood that his greeting was not so perfectly hearty as usual.

It was more the studiously courteous greeting of a mere acquaintance than of a close familiar friend.

Lillian went away to remove her hat and cloak.

Before she returned, the luncheon-bell rang, and Sir Gerald turned to his friend saying carelessly—

'You'll take lunch with us, Morewood?' Morewood was on the point of declining, when Lady Ruth repeated her nephew's invitation, and with so much real earnestness, that he could not but accept it.

A minute later Lady Vere came back.

'Mr. Morewood will lunch with us, Lillian,' said Lady Ruth.

Lillian smiled that sweetly gracious smile which was one of her own special charms; but, even as she smiled, the troubled, anxious look deepened in her eyes.

Morewood, watching her, felt an odd conviction that she would rather he had not remained to luncheon.

At the dining table he sat opposite Sir Gerald, and, mindful of Lady Ruth's hints, he watched him closely.

The first thing he noticed was, that he certainly took more wine than usual; the next, that he was developing an irritability of manner to which he had hitherto been a stranger.

A servant placed a glass of claret a shade too near his elbow, with the result that a few drops of the ruddy liquid were spilled on the table cloth.

In former days, Sir Gerald would have taken such an accident with the sweetest good temper; but now he looked round with a knitted brow and a flashing eye, and all but swore at the man for his heedlessness.

Not a word was said by either of the ladies, but Lady Ruth cast a quietly significant glance at Morewood, and the

troubled expression deepened on Lillian's face.

During the meal, Sir Gerald looked across at Morewood, and said—

'Have you seen Lady Vere's portrait? It has come home.'

'I haven't seen it yet!'

'Ah! you surprise me. I should have thought she would have been sure to show it to you.'

Two things in this little dialogue struck Morewood unpleasantly.

One was, Sir Gerald's mention of his wife as "Lady Vere"—whereas, in speaking of her to his old friend, he had been wont to invariably mention her as Lillian; and the other way the tone in which he had said, 'I should have thought she would have been sure to show it to you,' with just a slight, and not altogether pleasant, emphasis on the last pronoun.

If Sir Gerald had been jealous of his friend, just so might he have spoken. Morewood might be hyper-critical to-day; but so, at any rate, it seemed to him.

Lillian interposed, speaking in a low and hurried, almost nervous tone—

'It only came home a few days ago, Gerald. I scarcely think Mr. Morewood has been here since.'

'Oh!'

Again Sir Gerald's voice, as he pronounced that monosyllable, sounded unpleasantly in Morewood's ears.

If he had not known his friend so well, he could have fancied it had a sarcastic intonation.

'You'd better go and see it,' he added, abruptly, after a pause. 'It's in the gallery; and a very fine picture it makes. Do you care to go?'

'Certainly. I shall be only too pleased.'

'Come, then.'

Luncheon was over by this time.

The whole party had risen, and were standing about the room. Sir Gerald led the way, and the others followed.

Lady Vere's portrait was hung in the centre of the picture-gallery.

It had been painted by one of the most eminent of living painters, and was a triumph of his art.

A more beautiful face no painter could have had to paint, and, certainly, few painters could have done more justice to a woman's beauty than this one had done.

The picture represented Lillian in a standing position, with a purple velvet curtain for a background.

She wore a gown of ivory-white satin, which fell about her in long, graceful folds. Her beautiful hair was drawn very loosely back from her white brow, and in her hand there was a bunch of yellow daffodils.

Her delicate, imperial loveliness had, perhaps, never appeared to greater advantage.

The perfect skin, the shimmering golden hair, the sunny serenity of the brow, the soft, sweet lustre of the eyes, were all illumined with the most exquisite faithfulness, and true artistic effect.

Cause enough to be proud of his wife's portrait had Sir Gerald Vere.

He thought before it for some moments in silence, looking at it with the eye of a lover rather than of a husband, so tenderly admiring was his gaze; then he turned to his friend, and said—

'Well, Moorwood, what do you think of it? Will it do?'

Morewood was delighted with the picture, and said so frankly.

'Do you intend to have it exhibited?'

'Certainly not,' replied Sir Gerald, almost brusquely.

'Oh you object to such exhibitions?'

'I do. To my thinking, a man shows himself a very poor-spirited fellow when he lets his wife's portrait be hawked about for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to stare at!'

Again Sir Gerald's tone was an unpleasant one.

The softened mood, caused by the sight of his wife's portrait, seemed to have deserted him.

He paced up and down the gallery, pausing every now and again to look at the portraits on the walls.

A very fine collection they were. There had been eighteen generations of Veres, and some of the canvases were centuries old.

Sir Gerald stood so long looking at one particular picture, that Moorwood joined him, and asked whom it represented.

It was the portrait of a lady, young and strikingly handsome, though with a certain look of melancholy in her dark, brilliant eyes.

Her dress was that of a beauty of Charles the Second's Court—a soft, rich, yellow satin, the colours looking as fresh as though it had been painted but yesterday.

'Is she an ancestress of yours, Vere?'

asked Morewood.

'My grandfather's great aunt.'

'What a striking looking woman! She would be a beauty in her day.'

She was, Sir Peter Lely painted this, and we have a tradition that he said she was the handsomest of all his women sitters. But tell me, Morewood, do you observe that look of melancholy in her eyes?'

'I certainly do; and now I come to think of it, you showed me this portrait once before and promised to give the lady's history at some other time. Wasn't there some romance about it?'

'Romance! well, it depends upon what you call romance,' said Sir Gerald, slightly smiling. 'Her life was a great tragedy, if that is what you mean. I'll tell you the story, if you like. But, wait a moment while I fetch Lillian. She must hear it, too.'

Lillian was standing at the other end of the gallery, with Lady Ruth.

Her husband went towards her, saying—

'Lillian, come and hear the story of Miss Judith Vere.'

'Why, you never would tell it to me, Gerald!' she said, in a tone of gentle reproach.

'Well, I'm going to tell it now. Come dear.'

And, as he spoke, he made a comfortable nest of cushions for her in the window seat, paid a similar attention to his aunt, then, flinging himself down full length on a great tiger-skin rug at their feet, prepared to tell the story.

His eyes were fixed on the picture of his beautiful ancestress, in her yellow satin gown, and Morewood looking from him to it, was suddenly struck with the wonderful resemblance between the pictured face and the living one.

That curious look of melancholy in the dark, brilliant eyes was the same in both. While he was thinking this, Sir Gerald commenced his story speaking in a slow, dreamy tone, as of one who communes with himself, rather than speaks to others.

'Judith was the daughter of Sir Vivian Vere—his only daughter, but not his only child. At twenty-three she was admitted to be one of the most beautiful girls in England, and she was beset with offers of marriage, some of them from men of the very highest rank.'

'All these offers she had refused, however, and she was beginning to be called cold of heart, when it became known that she had loved only too well and deeply, a certain Captain Forster, whom she had met at the house of a friend.'

'He was a man worthy of her love, brave, talented, and very handsome; but, unfortunately, he was of mean origin, and owed his fortune entirely to his own exertions.'

He made Judith an offer of his hand, but she refused him.

'She refused him?' questioned Lillian, looking up at the beautiful pictured face of her husband's ancestress with a look of the deepest interest, tinged by a gentle pity.

'She refused him?' repeated Sir Gerald.

'Judith Vere came of a proud race, and she was the proudest of them all. It was said she would, at any moment, have laid down her life to keep the family honour unstained. This being so, she deemed it her duty to refuse Captain Forster, simply on account of his ignoble birth.'

'In all other respects, he was a suitable match for her, for he was wealthy, and moreover stood high in favour at Court.'

Above all, she herself loved him to distraction. Nevertheless, she gave him up for the sake of the honour of the Veres, which, to her, was dearer than either love or life.'

'Poor girl!' murmured Lillian, almost beneath her breath. 'Poor girl!'

'Three months after her refusal of him,' resumed Sir Gerald, 'Captain Forster was killed in a duel. It was said, at the time, that his antagonist was a man who dared to speak slightly of Judith Vere.'

'However this might be, Judith, on hearing the news of his death, fell suddenly and seriously ill. The doctors said she had brainfever and when she recovered she was a mere wreck of her former self.'

'I told you she was not her father's only child. She had two brothers, the elder of them, Charles Vere, a young man of no very great capacity, two or three years older than herself. About the time of Captain Forster's death, this Charles fell madly in love with the daughter of an innkeeper in the neighbourhood, and was so infatuated that he announced his intention of making her his wife.'

'Sir Vivian, his father, was at this time an elderly man, and, moreover, a great invalid, paralyzed, and confined to his chair. He could do little to prevent the young man from carrying out his mad resolve.'

'Judith, however, implored and desought him not to bring this dishonour on his house. The memory of what she herself had given up to preserve the family escutcheon stainless, no doubt helped to make her all the more vehement against the possibility of the daughter of an innkeeper becoming Lady Vere. From entreaties she passed to threatenings; but her brother only smiled in scorn, telling her he was his own master, and should do as he liked. He was perfectly infatuated with the innkeeper's daughter, and it is most certain he fully meant to marry her.'

'There was a violent quarrel between the brother and sister, and at the close of it he quitted the house, declaring he would never come back while she was in it.'

Sir Gerald paused here.

His listeners, glancing at him, saw he was a little pale with emotion.

It was easy to see he was moved by the tale he himself was telling.

'Gerald, I wish you wouldn't tell that ghastly story,' said Lady Ruth. 'You know how greatly I object to it.'

'Oh nonsense, aunt! he returned lightly, and immediately resumed his narrative.'

'Charles Vere went straight to the inn where the girl he loved lived. It was about a mile-and-a-half from the lodges. Keeping to his threat of not returning to the Court, he made arrangements for spending the night at the inn.'

'Some blabber must have told Judith of this, or perhaps, she guessed it. At any rate a little before midnight, the innkeeper was amazed by the appearance of Miss Vere, all unattended, and with only a dark cloak thrown hurriedly over her satin dinner-gown.'

'She asked for her brother, and was told he had retired for the night.'

'I must see him,' she said, 'at once! My business is of the greatest possible importance.'

'Of course they offered to fetch him; but this she would not hear of.'

'I will go to my brother myself,' she said. 'Let no one tell him I am here. Show me his room.'

'She had a very grand and dignified manner, and the simple folk at the inn, accustomed to yield all deference and obedience to the haughty Veres, never dreamed of disobeying her commands. They showed her to her brother's room. He was fast asleep, and she entered it alone.'

Again Sir Gerald paused.

Again it could be seen that all his nerves were thrilling with suppressed excitement.

'She did not remain in the bed-chamber more than two or three minutes, and when she came out, she was perfectly calm, though very pale, and her eyes, it is said, had a wild, unnatural gleam.'

'Pray attend to it that my brother is not disturbed till morning!' she said, and then wrapped her cloak about her, and prepared to return home.

'The innkeeper begged to be allowed to escort her, as the hour was so late; but this she would not hear of. She went away alone.'

'Her injunction that her brother was not to be disturbed was obeyed. But, in the morning, when they tapped at his door at the usual time for breakfast, they could get no answer. Alarmed, they went inside the room, and found Charles Vere lying in the bed, quite dead, and cold as marble. Evidently he had died in his sleep for his eyes were closed, and the face wore no look of pain. The cause of death was not hard to find. He had been stabbed through the heart. The dagger was still sticking in his body, and round the handle was a piece of paper, with this inscription, very neatly written—

'The gift of Judith Vere to her brother Charles. For the sake of the family honour!'

Morewood uttered an exclamation of horror; Lady Ruth gave a little shiver; Lillian neither spoke nor moved, but her face was ashen pale.

Of course, messengers were hurriedly sent up to the Court, resumed Sir Gerald, calmly looking round on his auditors, as though he rather enjoyed their emotion; 'but they were met by news of a further horror there.'

'Judith Vere had just been discovered dead in her bed. She had taken poison, and had died quite calmly, without summoning her maid even, though the death agonies, in her case, must have been intense.'

'There! that is the story of Judith Vere! That is how yon beautiful dame—and he waved his hand towards the picture—'saved the honor of her house!'

'She was mad, of course,' said Morewood. 'The trouble over her own lover had, doubtless, turned her brain.'

'Well, the Veres of that day—her married brother and his wife—favoured that theory, and circulated it as widely as they could. My own opinion is, that she was perfectly sane, and that she took what seemed to her the only course open to her to save the honour of the Vere from stain.'

'Murder she counted no stain, then?' said Morewood, dryly.

'It appears not,' replied Sir Gerald, dryly, too. 'And, to tell you the truth, I think I quite agree with her. I am prouder of her—and her crime—than ever I could have been of the daughter of an innkeeper, even if she had been the most virtuous woman in the world. And understand this: Judith Vere loved her brother dearly, almost idolized him, in fact. Th' everybody knew. She loved him, but she loved the race, from which both he and she had sprung, still more. That was why she gave him death rather than brook dishonour. A noble gift, say I!'

And Sir Gerald rose, and looked round him, almost haughtily as though defying anyone present to contradict his opinion.

Lady Ruth rose, too, and, in changing her position, she noticed the ashen paleness of Lillian's face.

'My dear, how white you are!' she said, anxiously. 'Gerald, you ought not to have told that dreadful tale. See how it has affected Lillian!'

'It was, indeed, a dreadful tale!' murmured Lillian, with eyes fixed on the pictured face of Judith Vere, like one fascinated.

'Gerald knows it is against my wish he ever tells it,' said Lady Ruth, more sharply than she was wont to speak. 'Come, Lillian, we will go into the drawing-room, my love.'

And she drew the arm of her nephew's young wife through her own, with a tenderly sympathetic pressure.

Sir Gerald did not offer to go with them. Instead, he looked after their retreating

figures with a half-smile, and said to Morewood—

'My good aunt doesn't like to hear that tale, because she thinks it points to a taint of insanity in us Veres. But she need not fear. Judith Vere was no more mad than I am. What she did was the outcome of a steady purpose. She is not the first woman—or man either—who, while retaining full possession of the senses, has preferred death to dishonour, I tell you candidly, Morewood, I honor that beautiful, merciless, courageous Judith Vere!'

As he spoke, he went close to the picture, and stood looking at it with something approaching veneration in his gaze.

Again Morewood, looking from the pictured face to the living one, was impressed with the remarkable resemblance between them—a resemblance which lay almost entirely in the expression of the dark, brilliant, and yet melancholy, eyes.

Old Madge had said that the possessor of those eyes must needs meet with much sorrow in life; and an early, if not a violent death.

The story of the ill-fated Judith Vere lent support to that prediction.

She had had those eyes, and her death had been both early and violent.

What had Fate in store for this young scion of her house, who had inherited her wonderful eyes?

John Morewood's heart was oppressed with a heavy sense of dread, as he asked himself the question.

CHAPTER LV.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NIGHT.

About a week after the story of Judith Vere, Morewood again spent some little time at Vivian Court.

During that week he had studied his friend carefully, on more than one occasion and had come to the conclusion that Lady Ruth was right in what she had said concerning him.

Most certainly he was an altered man—greatly altered—and not at all for the better.

His spirits were uneven—at one time almost boisterously gay, at others moody and depressed.

He was irritable, nervous, and excitable. Other people noticed the change in him.

Even the servants began to say their master was very different from what he used to be.

As yet, however, no one had put into actual words what it was they feared.

That was, indeed, to terrible a thing to be lightly named.

It was a stormy night in April when Morewood, according to arrangement, went to dinner at the Court.

A day or two before, Lady Ruth had remarked—

'Gerald you never have a game of chess with your friend now. How is it? and Sir Gerald had looked up, promptly, and challenged Morewood, who was present, to come and engage in a match with him.'

'Come and dine with us, on Wednesday, old man!' he said. 'We'll make a regular night of it. The ladies shall be umpires.'

When Wednesday came, the night proved cold and wet.

But Morewood, caring little for wind and rain, kept his engagement, driving over to the Court in a dogcart.

The drawing-room made a very pleasant picture as he entered it.

A ruddy fire was glowing between the polished bars of the grate.

The violet velvet curtains were closely drawn, and a profusion of both flowers in bowls and vases, gave an almost fairy-like brightness to the room.

On one side of the fire Lady Ruth—gowned in delicate grey silk—sat, serene and smiling.

On the other was Lillian, in spotless white, with a few purple violets at her bosom.

She was fonder of white than of any other color, and always wore it in the evening.

She too, looked serenely happy.

And her husband, standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire, was gazing down at her, with a world of tender feeling in his eyes. He was looking remarkably well.

Evening dress became him, and, moreover, his face wore the old frank pleasant look which had been so sadly missed by his friends during the last week or two.

To-night he seemed perfectly happy—content with himself and with all the world.

It quite rejoiced Morewood's heart to see him thus.

All through dinner he was, the life and soul of the little party.

A keenly intellectual man, and widely travelled as well as well read, he could be the most fascinating of companions and, to-night he seemed exerting himself to please.

He talked of art, literature, and science—of poetry and music—and all he said was marked by power and freshness of thought. His wit, too, was overflowing, and yet delicately refined.

Lady Ruth's gentle face was perfectly irradiated with pleasure as she sat and listened.

As for Lillian, she seemed positively to hang upon his words.

Her eyes rarely left his face, and when he addressed her specially, as he frequently did, her eyes shone with pleasure, her smile was sweet as a gleam of sunshine.

When dinner was over, and they returned to the drawing room, Sir Gerald was still in the same delightful mood.

The chess table was brought out and set, and, as he seated himself opposite Morewood at it, he passed his arm caressingly round his wife's waist, and drew her into a chair beside him.