

A DAUGHTER OF JUDAS.

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

CHAPTER X. BESIDE THE GRAVE.

It was a week or two later that Morewood, walking by the churchyard on the hill, one day, turned in—as he not un- frequently did—to stand opposite the grey marble headstone which bore the name of Madeline Winter.

That grave—of which he, alone, of all men, knew the secret—possessed a sort of inexplicable fascination for him.

Greatly to his surprise, he found a wreath of lilies—the flowers newly gathered, and arranged with deft, artistic fingers—hanging on the headstone.

Who could have placed them there? he wondered.

Who could hold the memory of the murderer in such tenderness as to desire to show it that mark of respect?

No relatives of hers were living in or near the place, and, assuredly, she could have no friend there, seeing she had not revisited it since she was a child.

Morewood might well wonder whose hand had placed those snow-white lilies—emblems of purity and innocence—above that grave.

While he stood there, deep in thought, a light footfall, close at hand, caused him to look up, a little startled, to see Lillian Delisle approaching from the other side of the church.

For one moment she seemed as though she would have retired at sight of him; the next, she came frankly forward, and stood at the head of the grave.

Suddenly—with one of those amazing flashes of memory which come to us at times—Morewood solved the riddle which so long had haunted him.

Those dark eyes of Lillian's, he knew where they so rarely shone—those of Madeline Winter, the woman who was supposed to be lying in the grave at his feet.

He uttered a startled exclamation.

Strive as he might, he could not repress it.

Lillian heard it.

She saw his intent, wondering look; she saw that flash of recognition leap to his eyes; and her face turned a little pale.

She leaned against the marble headstone almost as though she needed support.

Miss Delisle, said Morewood, seized with a sudden impulse to know the truth of all this mystery, 'did you ever see Madeline Winter, the woman whose name is on that stone?'

Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

She was painfully agitated.

'I ask you,' continued Morewood, very gently, 'because I wondered if you knew what a marvelous likeness you bear to her. It has vaguely haunted me often—that resemblance to some one I had seen before. But now I see it clearly. Only once in my life have I seen Madeline Winter, but as I remember her eyes they were marvelously like your own.'

Lillian bowed her face above the marble stone with a deep tearful sob.

A moment or two she stood thus, then she raised her head with a proud, brave gesture, as though she disdained to keep silence longer.

'No wonder I am like her,' she said, in a low, thrilling voice, 'for I was her sister. Why should I be ashamed to acknowledge her—my poor wronged Madeline? Yes, I am her sister, Mr. Morewood. I wonder you did not guess this long ago.'

Morewood was thunderstruck.

The frankness of the avowal as well as the avowal itself, might well amaze him; and, moreover, she seemed to speak as though she had known he had met Madeline Winter.

How could she know, unless she also knew her sister was still alive?

And, if she knew this, why should she come, in secret to put flowers on the grave? For now he could not doubt whose hand had placed them there.

'I will be very cautious,' he decided, within himself. 'I will see how much she really knows before I speak.'

He had not long to wait, for Lillian went on, quite frankly, though in a voice which was tremulous with unshed tears—

'The world may call her a murderer; but I know she was innocent. I know she was incapable of that awful crime. And, some day, I may—ah, Heaven knows how I long for it!—some day I may be able to clear her dear memory of its stain.'

'Her memory?' thought Morewood. 'It must be that she believes her dead.'

He spoke no word, however, feeling sure if he did but listen in silence, the girl would tell him all he needed to hear.

And he was right.

'Mr. Morewood,' she went on, her beautiful voice vibrating with deep feeling, 'I do not know what the service was you did my sister; but I have been told, by a dear friend, who loved us both, that you once did her a service so great, that the gratitude of a lifetime could not suffice to repay it. But I can, at least, thank you. Oh, if you but knew how I thank you in my heart!'

She clasped her beautiful white hands together in her emotion.

Her face was eloquent with grateful feeling.

'Miss Delisle, do you really mean you do not know what the service was I rendered you—Madeline Winter?'

She looked up at him in wonder.

Something in his tone struck her as being of peculiar significance.

'No,' she said. 'What was it, Mr. Morewood? Do you mind telling me?'

He answered evasively.

Since she did not know the tremendous secret, he was not prepared to tell it to her now.

'You say Madeline Winter was your sister, Miss Delisle?' he said. 'I had heard she was an only child.'

'Yes; in a sense she was the only child of her father, but not of her mother,' said Lillian, quietly. 'I am her half-sister. When Mr. James Winter came here with his little baby girl Madeline, everyone thought his wife died abroad, but she had not. She outlived him, and married again after his death.'

'Her husband was Lieutenant Delisle. He was my father. I was some years younger than Madeline. I did not know she was my sister till I was about ten years old. Then we met in France I grew to love her dearly.'

'Ah Mr. Morewood, if only you could dream what I suffered when I heard of her death! And, oh! worse than all, that they had dared to call her a murderer. Can you wonder I came to Vivian Court, purposely that I might visit her grave?'

'See!' and she drew from her pocket a small Bible, bound in morocco, with silver clasps, and showed him a withered flower, tenderly pressed between the leaves. 'See! these forget-me-nots were gathered from here. Her memory is sweet to me—let this world scorn it as it may.'

She spoke with a sort of brave calm sadness, as of one who had borne and suffered much, learning the noble lesson of patience as she did to.

'It was not because I was ashamed of her dear memory. Ah, no, no; my sister, she broke off with a thrilling tenderness, laying her cheek against the cold grey marble of the headstone. 'It was not because I was ashamed that I have claimed no kinship with her Mr. Morewood. The friend whom I spoke to you a little time ago—it was she who told me it was best to remain unknown; and I allowed her to persuade me.'

'Oh, my! I should not have done it. I am not ashamed to call Madeline my sister before all the world, because I am certain she was innocent.'

'Miss Delisle, do you mind telling me who the friend was? I think you said it was she who first mentioned me to you?'

Morewood.

'He wanted to find out, if he could, how Lillian had heard of that mysterious service rendered to her sister.'

'Seeing that, at the time he rendered it Madeline Winter was believed to be dead, he might well be curious.'

'Oh, it was quite recently I heard about you,' said Lillian, simply; 'and the friend was a dear old French lady, a distant cousin of my mother's. Madeline and I knew her well, and she loved us both. About six months ago she saw your name in an English paper, and read it out to me, and said: "My dear, that man once did your poor sister, Madeline, as great a service as one human being can do another." But when I asked her what the service was, she would not tell me; only I was certain it was something very great.'

Morewood could not repress a faint, grim smile.

'The service had, in truth, been as great as one human being can render another.'

The old French woman had spoken literal truth there.

Had he not saved Madeline Winter's life? Nay, more, had he not saved her from the most ignominious of deaths?

Rapidly he threw thought upon thought together in his mind.

From what Lillian had said, it was clear to him that her sister had got away from London—to France, in the first instance, most probably—and that the old French cousin had been the confident and assistant.

Equally clear was it that Lillian had not been entrusted with the secret.

And this circumstance, confirmed in Morewood's mind, his previously strongly- formed conviction that Madeline Winter was, in very truth, guilty of the crime which had been laid to her charge.

Surely, if she had been innocent, she would not have hidden herself from this young sister who loved her so tenderly—to her, at any rate, she might have given what would have passed for proofs of innocence.

'Shall I tell her the truth?' he debated within himself. 'Shall I, or shall I not, tell her that her sister lives—that this grave is but a mockery and a sham?'

A moment or two he stood in silence, deliberating this question; and then he decided that it was kinder to let the girl remain in ignorance.

Better far, that she should think of her sister as dead, and at rest in this peaceful spot, than that she should live in dread of her being some day discovered, and made to expiate her crime.

Lillian—her fair face very pale, her hands loosely clasped in front of her—stood and watched him, with a deep questioning look in her deep velvety dark eyes.

'Mr. Morewood, when did you see my sister? Will you tell me that?'

Obeying a sudden impulse, he crossed over to her, and took her hand.

'My dear Miss Delisle, will you believe me when I say it will be better for you not to hear how or when I met your sister? It is a painful subject. It could only distress you. Believe me when I say so, and ask me no more.'

Again she looked up at him with wonder in her eyes, but acquiesced, nevertheless, with a brave, patient sadness, which thrilled him to the heart.

He did not release the soft, white hand he held.

Perhaps he was all the more disinclined

to do so when he felt it flutter in his clasp. 'You may trust me to keep your secret,' he said, softly, looking down into her beautiful eyes.

'You are very kind to me. I wish I knew how to thank you. Yes; I would rather keep my secret, if you will let me. It isn't that I am ashamed of my sister; but—everyone is so hard and bitter. I would rather they did not know. And it is really no concern of anyone's is it? It—'

it's a rosy blush dyed her face, and her eyes dropped; but, in a moment, she recovered herself, and continued, quite frankly and firmly—'if I were ever going to be married, then it would be different. I should feel it my duty to speak of Madeline, but not before.'

Morewood bent his head in mute assent.

He was thinking how beautiful she looked, with that rosy glow suffusing her features; her eyes bent downwards; the sunlight gleaming on her bright golden hair.

He was thinking this, and wondering whether she knew yet that Sir Gerald would bring deadly evil on him—through the moment, with that sweet and most lovely confusion.

'Will it make any difference when he knows?' he thought. 'Will he hesitate to take the sister of a murderer to be his wife?'

Then, suddenly there flashed across his mind a recollection of that wild prophecy of the old gypsy woman.

'She had said, that unless Fate severed Madeline Winter and Gerald Vere, and kept them far apart, she—Madeline—would bring deadly evil on him—through ruin, or death—in any case, misery and woe.'

When his friend had first repeated it to him, he had smiled in utter scorn; but now he was conscious of a curious sense of fear that he might yet live to see that grim prophecy fulfilled.

'Unless Fate kept them apart,' the old woman had said.

But what was Fate doing now? Surely weaving links between them, if she so willed it that Vere was to marry the murderer's sister.

It once Lillian Delisle became his wife, it was not only too probable that her sister's crime might overshadow both their lives?

Thus pondering, Morewood might well ask himself the question—'Will it make any difference when he knows?'

Following hard on this question, there came another—'If I loved her, would it make a difference to me?'

He looked at the rare, imperial loveliness of the girl who stood before him, and as he looked he answered that last question with an unhesitating 'No.'

Honor to his friend had bidden him crush down the love which he had detected springing up in his breast—he had so sternly fought with and repressed it that he could meet her honestly and calmly as the woman whom he believed destined to be the bride of his friend.

But he told himself now that if that scruple of honour and friendly fealty had not intervened—if he had learned to love her, nothing would have tempted him to give her up—no, not even the knowledge that she was the sister of a murderer.

CHAPTER XI. THE MUGGLETONS.

'Gerald,' said Lady Ruth, as her nephew came into her sitting-room one afternoon, 'have you heard the news about The Towers, I mean?'

'No. Is the place laid at last?'

'Yes; but you'd never guess to whom.'

'Well, then, tell me.'

'You will be surprised, and I expect, not very pleased. You know that man, Muggleton?—it's he who's to be your neighbour.'

'What! old Muggleton, the millionaire?'

'Yes; aren't you surprised?'

'Well, I don't know. I must say I'd never happened to think of him in connection with The Towers; but now you've mentioned him, I should say he'll be a fairly suitable tenant.'

'Oh, Gerald! But you are joking!'

'Indeed, I am not. Why shouldn't

Muggleton have the place if he's got the money to keep it up?'

'But a soap-maker—just think of it!'

'I daresay I shall think of it whenever I wash my hands. I shall rest of that Muggleton, born without any adventitious advantages whatever, has not only materially assisted in the purifying of his fellow beings, but has also raised himself to such a position that he may fairly be said to be the founder of a family. Who shall say that in future ages the Muggletons will not be greater than the Veres?'

'Gerald, how ridiculous you are!'

'Not at all, aunt. Let me tell you our merchant princes are great men nowadays. We have, useless beggars, who neither toil nor spin, are only too apt to underrate the dignity and importance of honest trade.'

'Yes, but such a trade!'

'Upon my word, I think it's one of the finest going. When you see the village children with their faces clean and shining, you must reflect that they, perhaps, wouldn't look like that if it were not for old Muggleton and his soap.'

Sir Gerald spoke with an air of easy lightness; his tone was a jesting one, but underneath it there was a touch of seriousness.

Highly-born and highly-bred himself, he had that large generosity which recognizes merit wherever it may be found.

He was thoroughly sincere in saying the successful soap-maker ought to be treated with respect.

'And you really intend to take notice of these people?' said Lady Ruth, with a look of mild horror which said plainly enough she did not know what the world was coming to.

'Of course I must be neighbourly with my neighbours. I should be a pretty good if I were to set myself up as being above them. Muggleton will give me a dinner, and I shall give him one; and we shall shoot a bit over each other's land. That will be about all, I expect.'

'But the women, Gerald. I am told that they are simply terrible—quite impossible you know.'

'My dear aunt, it's my impression that nobody who's got a million of money is quite impossible nowadays. But that's no concern of ours. All we've got to do is to be civil and neighbourly, thereby showing ourselves decently bred. As to the tales about Muggleton's women-folk, I daresay they're half of them lies. The old fellow himself isn't half so amiable. I met him at a dinner not long ago, and rather liked him. A plain, unpolished man, with no nonsense about him—a head on his shoulders, too.'

'I'm told he can neither read nor write.'

'Nonsense! A man who can't read or write doesn't make the money he's made; but I can see who's been talking to you—old Lady Cantrip. She tells more fibs than any other woman in Hamp-shire; and, mark my words, she'll be the first to leave her card at The Towers. She knows the value of a million of money. That old cherry satin of hers, and her false diamonds, are sure to be seen regularly at Muggleton's dinner table, unless the old fellow finds out what a false-tongued gossip she is, and warns her off.'

'Gerald, how can you?' exclaimed Lady Ruth, sitting to be highly shocked, though, in truth, she rather enjoyed her nephew's vigorous denunciation of Lady Cantrip, who was a cantankerous old dowager, with as malicious a tongue as ever wagged in a human head.

'You know very well it's true,' said Sir Gerald, laughing, as he got up from his chair, and prepared to leave the room. 'It that old woman got her due she'd be drummed out of every drawing room in Hampshire.'

It was not Lady Ruth alone who was exercised about the new people who were coming to The Towers.

All the country families were more or less interested in the subject, and it was the theme of conversation everywhere.

Sir Gerald had called the millionaire a soapmaker, and it was true that the greater part of his life had been spent in connection with that trade.

But it was not by soap-manufactures he had made his millions.

Oh! late years he had indulged in a little speculating.

The speculating had been lucky; and a specially fortunate 'hit,' made over the South African diamond mines, raised him to the proud position of millionaire.

He himself preferred life in London, but his family, consisting of a wife and three daughters, had urged him to buy a place in the country.

He had, good-naturedly, acquiesced, and the place finally decided upon was The Tower a very large and handsome house—indeed, a mile away from Vivian Court.

It had belonged to a sporting baronet, whom cards and horse-racing had brought the dogs, and who was now 'hiding his diminished head,' at Baden-Baden.

The necessary negotiations had gone on so swiftly and so secretly that by the time it had fairly coaxed out who the new tenant was to be, the Muggleton family were almost on their way to take possession of it.

It was an intensely hot afternoon when they arrived—in a 'special' train, as became the family of a millionaire.

The station-master at the little country station was quite bewildered at the vastness of the arrangements.

His grace the Duke of Oldacre, never made one-tenth part of the fuss when he came down to Normanby Castle.

But then, his grace—as the little station master remarked to his wife at supper that evening—had got used to his wealth, and that made a difference.

The Muggleton party seemed to quite fill—nay, to crowd—the station platform. First of all there was the millionaire himself, a stout, red-faced man of middle height, and something more than middle age.

The expression of his face was one of great good nature; his voice was loud, his manner boisterous.

Not a person of ultra-refinement, by any means, but a sensibly, keen-witted, good-hearted man, notwithstanding.

Then came his lady wife.

The term is used advisedly, for Mrs. Muggleton's whole energies were devoted to the study of what may be termed 'fineladyism.'

She carefully studied the best mode of dress, and with a conscientious diligence worthy of a better cause, framed her own manners upon them.

She had been pretty in her youth, and was still what would be termed a good-looking woman; only, the glance of her eye was a little too anxious, and she expressed a tendency to emboypoint so severely, and with such very tight corsets, as to impart a touch of redness to the tip of her nose.

Her teeth were excellent, having been applied by the most expensive dentist in Paris.

Her dark brown hair was still untouched by grey; and, altogether, she was a very presentable woman, and would have been still more so if she had been not quite so painfully conscious of her own appearance.

The three heir daughters of the house of Muggleton stood dual behind their lady-mother, looking very demure, and even a little abashed and awe-struck, for, after all, it was a daring thing for 'new people' like themselves to come and take possession of a lordly estate in the very midst of a circle of old-blooded aristocrats.

Now that the crucial moment had come, the Misses Muggleton were not perfectly certain they had courage enough to carry them successfully through the ordeal which lay before them.

The eldest Miss Muggleton was twenty-seven, the next was twenty-six, and the youngest only just nineteen, three other children having died in infancy.

The two eldest were much alike—well-grown, rather stout girls; not ultra-refined perhaps, but quite sufficiently good-looking.

They had bright blue eyes, fresh complexions.

Their hair, however, inclined to that hue which is vaguely described as 'sandy,' a circumstance which both the young ladies secretly deplored.

They had been christened respectively Mary and Jane; but these time-honoured names were not considered grand enough for the daughters of a millionaire, so later they had been in the habit of signing themselves 'Marie' and 'Janetta.' Their mother, too, was punctilious in so addressing them.

The only remaining member of the family to be described was the youngest girl—Victoria, or Vi, as she was more often called.

She had been born at a time when Mr. Muggleton was rapidly rising to something like wealth, and her mother had insisted on giving her a high-sounding name.

She was assuredly the flower of the family.

A pretty, dark-eyed girl, slender and graceful, with a complexion like a rose, a bright smile, a sweet voice, a high spirit, and a cheerful temper.

Her father idolized her, and her mother had secret hopes of some day seeing her name in the British Peerage.

The Muggletons saw an elderly lady, rather small and slight, almost entirely in black, and wearing a look of great placidity on her pale, high-bred features.

By side her was a young lady, very simply dressed in silvery grey, but with a face of imperial loveliness, crowned by masses of gleaming golden hair.

On the opposite seat there sat a gentleman, young, dark-eyed, and handsome.

Greatly did the Muggleton ladies wonder who those patricians could be; and inter-cribable was the flutter which stirred their bosoms, when the gentleman, leaning forward, caught sight of Mr. Muggleton, and very politely raised his hat, with the air of a man who has been in danger of forgetting an acquaintance, and is very glad he has not so forgotten.

'Oh, papa, who is it?' asked the Muggleton girls, breathlessly.

'Why, dash me if I don't think it must be Sir Gerald Vere! He lives at that pretty place over there. You know—not a mile from The Towers. I've met him at one or two public dinners, but I'd almost forgotten him. He seems a very civil young fellow; but I should never have dreamed he'd have remembered me.'

Mrs. Muggleton's bosom swelled with gratified pride.

Now she did, indeed, begin to feel as though she stood firmly on those splendid heights which for years she had pined to climb.

To be recognized by a baronet, with an earl's daughter sitting opposite to him—for Mrs. Muggleton knew perfectly well who lady Ruth was—was an earnest of what they might expect when they were fairly settled in their new home.

The good lady took a rapid, but blissful, survey into the future, and saw there a vision of baronets and earls swarming round her daughters as thick as bees.

And why not? Did they not possess that which the world, by common consent, has decided to be the sweetest of all human things?

'But, mamma, did you notice the young lady?' asked Vi. 'I think I never saw a more perfectly lovely face in a my life.'

She was a truly refined and well-educated girl, having enjoyed far greater advantages than her sisters.

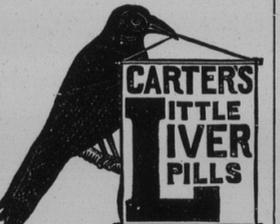
Up to the last half-dozen years, Mr. Muggleton had been simply a wealthy tradesman, content to live in one of the London suburbs, and with no dream of leaving behind him a fortune of more than sixty or eighty thousand pounds.

Accordingly, his eldest daughters had been educated at second-rate boarding schools, and had not mixed in what their mamma emphatically termed 'the best society.'

But with Vi the case had been different.

Just as she was budding into girlhood, her father was blossoming into a full-blown millionaire, and she had been placed at the most exclusive of all exclusive educational establishments, with a view to fitting her for the dizzy heights in which she would have to tread.

At fifteen the mud and mudders were both.



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