

A MODERN JUDAS.

OR, THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

CHAPTER XII—Continued.

THE CRAFT OF MONSIEUR JUDAS.

There is no doubt that Florry Marson was dangerously ill, for the sudden shock she had sustained in hearing of the unexpected death of Melstane had unsettled her brain. Weak, shallow, and frivolous, she was not the woman to stand bravely against calamity, and this first great sorrow of her life had rendered her completely prostrate. The poor butterfly which had rejoiced in the sunshine of prosperity was now lying on a bed of sickness, whence it seemed doubtful that she would ever rise. Through the long hours she lay helpless on her back, babbling incoherently of her past life, or else fought furiously with Judith to leave her bed, and go on imaginary errands; while her cousin, a patient and untiring nurse, never left her side. She loved Florry as a mother loves a wayward child, and although she was bitterly disappointed by the duplicity of which her darling had been guilty with regard to Melstane, yet she could not find it in her heart to be seriously angry with this poor, weak nature now broken down by a dangerous illness.

In truth it was a very melancholy house, for while Judith sat in the sick-room watching the patient, Francis Marson was pacing to and fro in his study, wondering what would be the end of all this trouble. One thing he saw clearly, that unless he could obtain a large sum of ready money he would be a ruined man in a very short space of time. Relying on the promises of Jackson Spolger, he had thought he would be able to tide over the commercial depression now existing in ironfields; but now that Florry was ill the marriage could not take place, and his future son-in-law absolutely refused to do anything to aid him. Unless his daughter recovered and married Spolger, he could expect no help from that quarter, and not knowing where else to turn for assistance, ruin, swift and irremediable, would be the end.

To and fro he paced with bowed head, revolving in his weary brain a thousand schemes, all of which he rejected as chimerical as soon as they were formed. With that curious noting of trivial things habitual to overtaxed and overworried brains, he mechanically marked the pattern of the carpet and planted each footstep directly in the centre of each square, counting the number with weary precision as he blindly groped for a way out of his difficulties.

'Spolger won't do anything. Five! six! No! he's too selfish, and unless the marriage takes place I can expect no help from him—fourteen squares from that wall. All those bills are now due in three months, and unless I can meet them there is nothing left but bankruptcy. I'll count back again. One! two! three! So the house of Marson & Son must go down after all, and Florry, poor child, how ill she is! I'm afraid she will not recover. Ten! ten! Ah, if I only had ten thousand, that would help me. Twenty, twenty-one! How my head aches! Who's that? Come in, Judith!'

It was indeed Judith who stood on the threshold of the room, looking pale and ghost-like in her white dressing-gown, with her long black hair loose over her shoulders. She held a candle in her hand, and the yellow light flared on her strongly marked features, ivory white under the shadow of her hair.

Francis Marson stood by his writing-table in the circle of light which welled from under the green shade of the lamp, but he made a step forward as Judith entered slowly and closed the door after her with great care.

'Is Florry worse?' asked Marson, with a look of despair on his haggard features.

'No! just the same,' replied Judith, placing the candle on the table and sinking into a chair. 'Doctor Japix says she will be like she is now for some time—until the crisis comes.'

'And then?'

Judith let her head fall on her breast. 'I don't know,' she said, in a monotonous voice; 'it means either madness or sanity.'

'Better she should die.'

'Yes, I think so,' answered Judith, with terrible calmness. 'Poor Florry, she was so bright and happy a few days ago, and now her life is spoiled; she will never be the same again.'

'And all through that cursed Melstane.'

'Yes!'

There was silence for a few moments, and Marson sunk slowly into his chair, shading his worn face with his thin left hand, while the other mechanically busied itself with two pens lying on the table. Judith, with her hands lying loosely clasped on her lap, stared straight in front of her with a thoughtful expression, as if she was engaged in solving some abstruse problem.

Only the steady ticking of the clock, the subdued crackling of the dying fire, and

shadows everywhere! In the corners of the room, overhead on the ceiling, where the bright glare of the study lamp made an unsteady circle, on the faces of the man and woman—shadows everywhere, and, the darkest of all, the shadow intangible, unseen, the shadow of horror, of guilt, of disgrace that hung over the whole splendid mansion!

'Are you going to see him to-night?'

It was Judith who spoke with sharp interrogation, and Marson lifted his head wearily as he said:

'Guinaud?'

'Yes.'

'I must see him. He wrote to me that he had to speak upon a matter of importance, and I promised to grant him an interview.'

'What time did he say he would be here?'

'Between seven and eight o'clock to-night.'

With a simultaneous impulse they both looked at the clock. It was half past seven.

'He will be here shortly,' said Judith looking at Mr. Marson.

'I presume so.'

'Don't see him.'

Marson raised his head quickly, and flashed a keen glance at her eager face.

'I beg your pardon, Judith?'

'Don't see him.'

'I must.'

Judith drummed with her fingers on the table, an anxious look appeared in her splendid eyes, and she frowned angrily.

Marson saw all the signs of a coming storm, and waited. He had not long to wait.

'That man is a scoundrel,' burst out Judith, in somber fury; 'he is coming here to tell you a lot of lies.'

'How do you know?'

'I'm certain of it. He was a great friend of Sebastian Melstane—a treacherous, cowardly friend, who played the traitor to his friendship.'

'How so?'

'Because he loves Florry.'

'Impossible!'

'It's true, I tell you,' said Judith doggedly; 'he knew Mr. Melstane loved Florry, but that did not deter him from loving her himself. He has shown by a thousand signs that he loves her, and he kept it from no one but his dead friend. Oh, he's not called Judas for nothing.'

'I don't see what all this has to do with the interview.'

Judith sprang to her feet, and crossing over to the table laid her hand lightly on his shoulder. He shrank from that light touch, but otherwise, gave no sign of emotion.

'Do you know why he is coming here to-night?'

'He is coming here to tell you something—something that is dangerous to you, and must be kept secret. He is coming to ask his price—that price is the hand of your daughter.'

Marson looked at her in surprise as she towered above him, and he was about to speak, when a knock came to the door.

Without waiting for an invitation to enter, a servant appeared with a card on a salver. He held out the salver to his master, but Judith picked up the card lying thereon and read it.

'Monsieur Jules Guinaud! Show him in here, Marks!'

The servant bowed and retired, while Marson looked suddenly at Miss Varlins.

'Are you going to wait?'

'Not here,' she said, pointing to a door masked by curtains at the end of the room; 'I am going into the next room.'

'To listen?'

'No! I am going upstairs to put on my dress, and will then come down and hear what Monsieur Guinaud has to say.'

'He wants the interview to be a private one.'

'Do you?'

Marson did not answer, but sat nervously plucking at his chin.

'You are dealing with a dangerous man,' she said in a whisper, not knowing how near Judas might be to the door; 'he needs a woman to deal with him. Hush! there is Guinaud! I'll go upstairs this way and be back shortly. Not a word.'

She went rapidly toward the masked door, and had just time to let the tapestry drop behind her, when Judas entered, preceded by the servant.

'Monsieur Guinaud!'

The servant retired, and Judas in his dark dress, with a crafty look on his bloodless face, stood looking at Mr. Marson.

'Will you be seated, sir?' said the latter gentleman, indicating a chair.

'Wis pleasure, monsieur,' said Judas, bowing. 'Speak you de Francais, monsieur?'

'Oui.'

'Tres bien,' replied Guinaud, with a satisfied smile; 'let us speak my tongue, monsieur, if you please! I am not at home in your English!'

He sat down with a self-satisfied smile, drew his gloves off his long, lean hands, and having thrown open his overcoat, rubbed his hands together slowly, as he looked at Marson with his most guileless expression.

'Eh! my faith, but it is cold in this England of yours,' he said, passing his hand over his smooth red hair. 'I am a child of the South, me, and find these skies of rain not pleasant, after my beautiful Province.'

'What do you want to see me about?'

asked Marson, sharply, taking an instinctive dislike to the sleek, treacherous manner of Judas. 'I can not spare you much time, so please be quick.'

Judas shrugged his shoulders, smiled blandly, and came to the point by slow degrees.

'I am the friend of the late Sebastian Melstane, monsieur.'

'I have heard that!'

'Alas! he is dead!'

'I have heard that, also!'

'Eh! you know much, monsieur. Do you also know that he was murdered?'

'Good heavens! No!'

M. Guinaud lifted his eyes to heaven with a sad smile.

'But yes, certainly, monsieur. He died from a pill of morphia placed in his box of pills of tonic, which he had from the shop of Monsieur Wosk.'

'Who put the pill in the box?'

'Eh! monsieur, do you not know?'

'Of course I don't.'

Judas narrowed his eyes down to their dangerous expression, and shrugged his shoulders once more, but said nothing.

'And what has Melstane's death to do with me?'

asked Marson, coldly.

'Monsieur, he loved your child.'

'I am aware of that. A piece of infernal impertinence.'

'Then you are glad of his death?'

'I am neither glad nor sorry, Monsieur Guinaud. I don't know why you have done me the honor to seek this interview. If you will state your reason, I will be pleased.'

The Frenchman leaned back in his chair, placed the tips of his long fingers together, and smiled sweetly.

'Monsieur, Mar-son, my friend that loved your beautiful child is dead. I am full of regrets for him, but for myself I have the pleasure.'

'And why?'

'Can you not guess the secret of my heart? I love your angel.'

'You!'

Marson had sprung to his feet and was now looking angrily at the Frenchman, who, without moving his position, still smiled blandly.

'Even I, Jules Guinaud.'

The other looked at him in a contemptuous fashion; then, without a word, walked across to the fire-place and put out his hand to touch the ivory knob of the electric bell.

'One moment, monsieur,' said Judas, raising his voice slightly; 'what do you intend to do?'

'Have you turned out of my house.'

He pressed the knob, and remained standing by the fire-place in disdainful silence; but Judas, laughing softly, leaned back in his chair.

'Eh, truly? I think not. You won't do that when you hear what I've got to say.'

The servant appeared at the door.

'When you see, monsieur, what I can show you.'

'Marks, show this gentleman out.'

Judas took no notice of the order, but walked across the room with the feline grace of a tiger and whispered something in Marson's ear. The old man started, turned deadly white, and with an effort spoke again to the servant.

'You can go at present, Marks. I will ring if I want you.'

The servant retired and Guinaud returned to his seat, leaving Marson still standing by the fire-place. Now, however, he looked faint and ill, clinging to the mantle-piece for support. At length with an effort he pulled himself together, and staggered rather than walked to his seat.

'What are your proofs?' he asked Guinaud, in a harsh whisper.

M. Judas, with the same stereotyped smile on his face; took some papers out of his breast coat-pocket, and, still retaining his hold of them, spread them out before Marson.

A single look was sufficient.

'My God!' cried Marson, with sudden terror; 'I—I—my God!'

Judith, anxious to know the reason of Guinaud's visit, had rapidly changed her dress, and was about to go down again to the study when Florry's nurse called her in to look at the invalid. The girl was in one of these terrible paroxysms of excitement, common to delirium, when sick people possess unnatural strength, and Judith had to aid the nurse to hold her down. This took some time, and when at length Florry was lying comparatively quiet, Judith found that she had lost more than half an hour.

At once she went down-stairs again and

entered the adjacent room, intending to make her appearance by the curtained door. As she stood with her hand on the lock, the door being slightly ajar, she heard Guinaud's voice raised in triumph.

'Of course, monsieur, you will now permit me to be a suitor for the hand of Mees Mar-son?'

Hardly believing her ears, Judith listened intently for Marson's reply, but when it came it was so low that she could not hear it, and she only gathered its purport from the next observation of the Frenchman.

'You must! Remember, I know all.'

'I can not! I can not! Besides, my daughter is ill—seriously ill.'

'Ah, bah! she will get well, the dear angel.'

'But she is to marry Mr. Spolger.'

'Quite a mistake, monsieur. She is to marry me! Eh, what do you say?'

'No.'

Guinaud and Marson both turned round, to see Judith standing beside them with a look of anger on her face.

'I say, no,' she reiterated.

'Eh, mademoiselle, but you are not the father,' said Judas, with a sneer.

'You marry Miss Marson,' cried Judith, angrily; 'you! How dare you, sir, come to the house of an English gentleman and make such a request? You—you—thief!'

'Thief, mademoiselle!' said the Frenchman, smiling.

'Yes! I know that you have stolen some letters from that packet addressed to me.'

'Eh, but it is true, mademoiselle. I have just been showing them to Monsieur Mar-son, and he is so delighted, this dear monsieur, that he says to me: "Take now the charming angel, Jules; she is for you."'

'I don't believe it! I don't believe it!'

cried Judith, turning toward the old man.

'Mr. Marson, you will never consent to give your daughter to this low spy!'

'Eh, mademoiselle, you are not polite.'

'Speak to this man, Mr. Marson; tell him you refuse to do his bidding.'

The old man raised his hands helplessly and sighed.

'I can not, Judith; I can not.'

'You will give Florry to this man for his wife!'

'I must.'

'You see, mademoiselle—'

'Be silent, monsieur,' she said, haughtily; 'I do not speak to you. Francis Marson, your daughter was left to my charge by your dying wish, and I say she shall not marry this man.'

'Judith! Judith! I have seen—I have seen the papers.'

'Ah! said Judith, with a long-drawn breath, 'you have seen the papers.'

'But yes, certainly,' observed Judas, with a sneer. 'And having seen them, monsieur is prepared to give me his child. Is it not so?'

Marson nodded his head mechanically, but Judith, standing beside him, turned suddenly on the smiling Frenchman, with such vehemence that he recoiled from her fury.

'You have threatened an old man,' she hissed, angrily. 'You have learned a secret by chance, and you use it for your own base ends. But it shall not be; I say it shall not be.'

'And I say it shall be,' said Judas, slipping off his smiling mask. 'Listen to me, mademoiselle. I come to you now with peace; let me go without my wishes being gratified, and I return with war. Eh! I mock myself of your anger. Bah! I care not for your wrath; not I! See you here Miss Varlins. In the one hand I hold, silence; in the other, ruin and exposure. Choose which you will. The world does not know how my friend Melstane came by his end, I speak, and all is told!'

Judith had fallen on her knees, and was hiding her white face against the chair on which sat Francis Marson; and he, worn, anguished, and terror-stricken, was looking in horror on the gibing enemy of them both.

'You kneel now—you kneel to me,' cried Judas, mockingly, 'to me—the spy, the thief! Eh, but I remember all. There is a guillotine in your land; but yes, I know it so. One word from me and then—oh, you know it well, I see, you gentle English lady—I could speak on and ruin all, but I am a man of honor. I wish to be kind, and I say to this dear monsieur what will be my desire. Now I go for a time—for a day. When I come back it is for you to say what you will. Good-night, my friends. Guinaud is no fool. He holds the cards, and he wins the game! chut!'

He walked out of the room with a mocking laugh, leaving Judith crouched in abject terror by the side of the old man, who sat as if turned to stone.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHO IS GUILTY?

Dr. Japix was a bachelor, therefore, by all the laws of domesticity, should have been badly served as far as regards home comforts; but then Dr. Japix had a good house-keeper, so was served excellently well in every respect. For instance, his dinners were famous for the quality of the food and wines, and Fanks and his friend Axton found by practical experience when they

dined with their unwedded host. He gave them a capital meal, undeniable wine, and as all three men were good conversationalists, they had a very delightful dinner. Afterward, they went to the doctor's study, a particularly comfortable room and smoked wonderfully good cigars over first-rate coffee.

The study was a private snuggery, especially affected by the doctor, who had in it all his books, a few comfortable chairs, an enticing-looking writing-table, some good etchings by eminent artists, and plenty of warm red draperies to keep out the cold winds so general in Ironfields. On this night there was a blazing fire in the polished grate, and around it sat Japix and his two guests, enjoying the soothing weed and talking about the Jarlochester case. Luckily, Japix was perfectly free on this special night, and unless some unexpected call should be made on him, was permitted by those hard laws which regulate the lives of medical men to enjoy his smoke and talk to his friends as he pleased. All three had plenty to say, and as the night wore on toward the small hours, they gradually began to talk of Melstane's murder, a topic to which everything had been tending for a considerable time. It is true that they had referred to it in a desultory fashion, but it was not until ten o'clock that they settled down to a steady analysis of the case.

'Most extraordinary,' said Japix, in his subdued roar; 'reflects great credit on you, Fanks, for the way in which you have found it out.'

'I've not got to the end of my journey yet,' replied Octavius, grimly, 'so I won't halloo till I'm out of the wood.'

'You're out of the Jarlochester wood, at all events.'

'Yes, only to plunge into the deeper recesses of the Ironfields wood.'

'Well,' said Axton, reflectively, 'you've proved conclusively that I did not commit the crime.'

'You!' shouted Japix, in amazement.

'Yes, I!' replied Roger, serenely. 'Just fancy, doctor, you are sitting with a suspected murderer.'

'Not now,' remonstrated Fanks, good-humoredly; 'if I did suspect you for a moment, you soon cleared yourself in my eyes. But you must admit things looked black against you.'

'So black,' assented Axton, quickly, 'that had the detective been any other than yourself, I should now be in prison awaiting my trial on a charge of attempted murder.'

'Possibly,' answered Fanks, lighting a fresh cigar; 'not only that but even probably. However, you have proved your innocence, and Spolger has proved his.'

'Did you suspect him also?' asked the doctor, chuckling. 'I thought as much from your questions to-day, Monsieur Fouche.'

'Well, he had the fatal pill-box in his possession; he uses morphia for his Sootlers; he hated Melstane, so altogether—'

'There was a very nice little case against him,' finished Japix, with a gigantic laugh. 'Oh, I know your profession, Monsieur Lecocq; I have read Gaboriau's romances.'

'I'm afraid we're not so infallible as the great Lecocq.'

'Pooh! why not? I dare say he's modeled on Vidocq. At all events you've now got an enigma which would delight Monsieur Gaboriau.'

'Real life is more difficult than fiction.'

'There you are wrong. Fiction is a reflection of real life—a holding of the mirror up to Nature. Eh—author?'

'Shakespeare,' said Octavius, promptly, 'and quoted wrongly.'

'Never mind; the spirit if not the form is there.'

'We've strayed from the subject,' observed Axton, smiling, 'regarding this case. Since Spolger and myself are innocent, who is guilty?'

'Ask something easier.'

'Do you know, my good Vidocq,' remarked Japix, contemplating his large feet, 'that I wonder you have not turned your attention to Monsieur Judas?'

'I have done so,' said Octavius, quietly; 'but I can bring nothing home to him. He's very clever.'

'A scoundrel's virtue.'

'Yes, a scoundrel's safety.'

'Didn't you tell me the other day that you thought Judas held all the threads of the case in his hand?' said Roger, turning to Fanks.

'I fancy I said something like that,' replied Octavius, slowly; 'but, if I mistake not, you had suspicions of Judas yourself.'

(To be Continued.)

Dropped a Stitch.

The accident, madame, said the young surgeon, encouragingly, as he made his preparations to sew up the wound in the lip the infant had received in falling down a stairway, will leave a scar, of course, but twenty years from now, when the little fellow has grown to be a man and raised a moustache, it won't show a bit.

It isn't a baby of that kind, doctor, replied the anxious but entirely self-possessed mother.