

A MODERN JUDAS.

OR, THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

When Abraham had departed, his parent busied herself with sorting the letters and newspapers into their respective pigeon-holes, communing with herself aloud as she glanced at the address on each.

'Drat 'em!' she said, alluding to the writers of the letters. 'Where's their education, as they don't write plain? If I were a Board School, which I ain't, I'd school-board 'em, with their curly 'p's' and 'q's,' as like pigs' tails as ever was, to say nothin' of leavin' the 'i's' and 't's' undone for want of dottin'.' 'Ow do they expect 'em to be delivered straight wen I ain't no scholar to read their alphabets?'

'Mrs. Wevelspoke,' said a full, rich voice proceeding from a lady on the outside of the counter.

'P-h-o-h's-t,' spelled Mrs. Wevelspoke, slowly, not hearing that she was called, and not seeing that anyone was present by reason of her back being turned; that spells post, but it don't look like one. M.—that's for Mary, I dare say; M. J-u-h-l-e-h's; ho, it's for that Judas thing at Wosk's. If 'is name's Judas, why do he call himself G-u—'

'Mrs. Wevelspoke,' repeated the lady, rapping her umbrella on the counter quickly, 'is that letter for me?'

The postmistress, having a faint idea that she heard a distant noise, turned round slowly, and saw Miss Varlins leanin forward with an eager look on her face.

'Is that letter for me?' she repeated, pointing to the envelope still in Mrs. Wevelspoke's hand.

'This 'un?' said Mrs. Wevelspoke, seeing by the gesture what was meant. 'Oh dear, no, Miss Varlins. Your name ain't Mary—nor July, I take it.'

'But it's Judith.'

'What?' asked Mrs. Wevelspoke, deafly. 'Judith,' said Miss Varlins, very loudly. 'Oh, your fust name, miss. You speak so muddled like, mum, as I can't make out your 'ollerin', miss. But if your fust name's Judith, mum, your last ain't—ain't G-u-i-h-l-e-h's-u-d.'

'Mrs. Wevelspoke, let me look at the letter, please,' cried Judith, impatiently, taking the envelope from the old woman. 'I can tell you if it's for me in a moment.'

It certainly was not for her, as the direction was plain enough:

'M. JULES GUINAUD,
'C-o Wosk & Co.,

'Chemiste,
'Suburban Ironfields.'

'No, it's not for me,' said Miss Varlins, handing it back reluctantly with a sigh of regret. 'But are you sure you have no packet addressed to Miss Judith?'

'It ain't for her,' said Mrs. Wevelspoke, putting the Frenchman's letter into the pigeon-hole marked 'J.' 'You want a letter, I s'pose, miss?'

'Yes.'

'There ain't no Varlins,' said Mrs. Wevelspoke, after a cursory glance at the 'V's.'

'No, miss, your letters is all sent to the 'All.'

'This letter I want was addressed to Miss Judith, and would not be sent to the Hall.'

'To 'Judas?'

'To 'Judas?'

'said Mrs. Wevelspoke, catching the name wrongly. 'Ho, his letters go to the shop, mum.'

'I thought as much,' remarked a quiet voice behind Miss Varlins, as she turned to find herself face to face with the speaker and Roger Axton.

'We've been listening, Miss Varlins,' explained Roger, hastily, as she shook hands with him. Then seeing the startled look on her face, he went on hurriedly: 'I can explain the reason, but first let me introduce Mr. Rixton, a friend of mine.'

Judith bowed coldly, and waited for Roger's promised explanation, which was to be given by the gentleman called Mr. Rixton.

'Allow me, my dear Roger,' he said, genially. 'The fact is, Miss Varlins, my friend here told me about this packet of letters addressed to you as 'Miss Judith,' and I put forward a theory accounting for their non-delivery, so Mr. Axton and myself came here to see if my theory was correct.'

'But what is your theory?' asked Judith, rather bewildered.

'That the letters were delivered by that old woman to Monsieur Judas, instead of to you.'

'But Judas is a nickname,' said Miss Varlins, quickly; 'all his letters would be addressed to Monsieur Guinaud.'

'Quite correct,' replied Octavius, quietly, 'but with such an unintelligent postmistress mistakes are sure to occur. I'm pretty certain she delivered the packet to our red-headed friend, and I'm going to try and find out. You posted the packet at Jarlochester on the 13th of this month, did you not, Roger?'

'Yes; on the morning of the 13th.'

'Then it would get to London late in the afternoon, and go on to Ironfields at once. I should think it would be ready for delivering here about midday on the 15th. Did you call here on the 15th, Miss Varlins?'

'No; I did not expect the packet so soon. But I came next day.'

'Too late, I'm afraid,' said Octavius, advancing to the counter. 'Here, old lady. Was there a letter here on the 15th, directed to Miss Judith?'

'Judas!' replied Mrs. Wevelspoke for the second time. 'Drat it, what's come to the man, sir, as you're all talkin' of him? He's at Wosk's if you want him.'

'Did you send any letters to him this month?' asked Fanks, loudly.

'Letters! all his letters go the shop,' retorted Mrs. Wevelspoke, obstinately.

'Were there any this month—November?'

'Remember!' cried the postmistress, twitching her bonnet, 'of course I remember—I can remember things afore you were born, young man. I sends all letters to Mr. Judas at the shop. Two this month, and there's another waitin' 'im.'

'Let me see it!' said Fanks, quickly glancing at Roger, 'it may reveal something, Miss Varlins.'

'Steal,' remarked Mrs. Wevelspoke, sharply. 'No, you don't steal here, sir! I'm an honest woman, I am.'

'And a very stupid one,' said Fanks, ruefully, in despair at getting any information out of this old dame.

'I have seen the letter she talks about, Mr. Rixton,' said Miss Varlins, quickly, 'and it is not the one we want.'

At this moment Abraham rolled into the office, and Fanks at once pounced on him as being more likely to give information than his superior.

'Oh, here's the postman,' he cried, radiantly. 'Here, postman, did you deliver a letter to Monsieur Guinaud at Wosk's shop about the beginning of this month?'

'I can't tell state secrets,' said Abraham, in his fat voice, 'it's treasins.'

'Oh, you won't come to Tower Hill for telling me this,' replied Fanks, good-humoredly.

'I don't know nothin' about your Tower Hills,' growled the portly one, sulkily, 'but I ain't goin' to tell nothin', I ain't. Mother and me's sworn, we are.'

Fanks did not want his true occupation to be known, but he saw perfectly well that he would get nothing out of the faithful Abraham unless he adopted strong measures, so he made up his mind how to act at once.

'Look here, my man,' he said, taking Abraham to one side and speaking sharply, 'I'm a detective, and you must give me a plain answer to a plain question.'

'I ain't bin doin' nothin' wrong,' whimpereed Abraham, edging away from the representative of the law; 'I'll tell you anythin' you like as long as it ain't state secrets.'

'This ain't a state secret,' said Fanks, quickly, putting a half crown into the lad's fat hand; 'just tell me if you delivered a thick packet to Monsieur Guinaud on the 15th of this month?'

The faithful servant of the state was not proof against bribery, so he answered at once:

'Yes, sir, I did. Only the letter was to Monsieur Judas.'

'Not to Miss Judith?'

'Lor, sir, I don't know; mother said it were Monsieur Judas, and as there's only one Judas here, I took it took it to him.'

'At Wosk & Co.?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did he take it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well, that will do,' said Fanks, in a gratified tone; 'now hold your tongue and say nothing to nobody.'

'But mother, sir?'

'Not even to your mother. If you told her, all the town would hear, she's so deaf. So Abraham the faithful grinn'd, and slipping his half a crown into his pocket, retired, while Fanks went outside, where he found Judith seated in her carriage and Roger talking to her.

'It is as I thought,' said Octavius, anticipating their questions; 'the postman told me he delivered the packet to Judas.'

Judith uttered an exclamation of horror, upon hearing which the detective glanced sharply at her.

'Are you afraid of Judas seeing those letters?' he asked, quickly.

Miss Varlins passed her handkerchief across her dry lips, and after a pause answered with great deliberation, showing thereby how strong was her self-control.

'I don't know anything of the man,' she said, quickly, 'beyond that he was a friend of Mr. Melstane; but that in itself is enough

to make me anxious. The letters contain nothing but the usual romantic nonsense a girl would write. At the same time, knowing this Frenchman to be, as I verily believe, an unscrupulous wretch, I am afraid he may use the letters for his own ends.'

'But what can he gain by showing them,' said Fanks, sagaciously, 'seeing they contain nothing of importance?'

He spoke with such pointed significance and emphasis that Judith, fiery-tempered by nature, flashed out suddenly with great spirit:

'I don't know how much Mr. Axton has told you, sir, but I question your right to speak to me in this manner.'

'Oh, Fanks doesn't mean anything,' interposed Roger, unthinkingly.

'Fanks!' cried Judith, with a start, looking at Octavius, 'I thought your name was Rixton?'

'My real name is Rixton,' said Fanks, glancing reproachfully at Roger, 'but I use the name of Octavius Fanks—'

'For your detective business,' finished Judith, coolly. 'Oh, you need not look surprised, sir. I have read the Jarlochester Mystery, and I know you have the case in hand.'

'If that is so, perhaps you will help me in the matter?'

'I—I cannot help you,' she said, faintly, again passing the handkerchief over her lips.

'You can in one way,' said Fanks, quietly.

She looked at him sharply, but unable to read anything on his impassive countenance, threw herself back in the carriage with an uneasy laugh.

'How so?'

'By letting me read those letters now in the possession of Judas.'

'No!'

She said it so firmly that both Fanks and Axton glanced at her in surprise, upon which she leaned forward with a pale face, and spoke hurriedly.

'There is nothing—really nothing in those letters beyond foolish girlish talk; I assure you, Mr. Rixton, there is nothing at all.'

'Then why refuse to let me see them?' asked Octavius, quickly.

'They are private.'

'Not when the law desires to see them. I am the law, and I intend to see those letters.'

'What do you mean, Fanks?' said Roger, angrily, indignant at this tone being used to Miss Varlins.

'What I say,' responded Fanks, coolly. 'Axton, Miss Varlins, this case is in my hands, and I am determined to find out who killed Sebastian Melstane, and for reasons of my own I wish to see those letters. Will you let me look at them?'

Judith twisted her handkerchief in her gloved hand, evidently trying to control herself, then putting up one hand to her throat gave a hysterical laugh.

'Yes, on one condition.'

'And that condition?'

'That you let me look over them before you read them.'

The detective fixed his hawk-like eyes on her face, as if he would draw the meaning of her words from her unwilling lips, but she gave no sign likely to guide him, and seeing that he had to deal with a will as iron as his own, compromised the matter.

'You can look over them,' he said, calmly, 'in my presence.'

Roger Axton turned furiously on his friend.

'How dare you insult Miss Varlins?' he said, fiercely. 'Are you a gentleman?'

'I am a detective,' replied Fanks, significantly.

'There is no need to quarrel, gentlemen,' said Judith, quietly. 'I agree to Mr. Rixton's request. If you will both get into the carriage we can drive to Wosk's, obtain the letters, and settle Mr. Rixton's doubts at once.'

Fanks bowed in silence, and stepped into the carriage without further remark, but Roger turned sullenly away.

'Thank you, I prefer not to come,' he said stiffly.

'I want you to come, please,' observed Fanks, quietly.

Roger did not reply, but looked at Judith, who made him an almost imperceptible sign, upon which he sprang in without further objection, and the carriage went on to the chemist's at once. Octavius had noticed the sign, and wondered thereat, but like a wise man said nothing.

'I can afford to wait,' he thought, rapidly; 'but I wish I saw the end of this case. I'm afraid of what I may find out.'

At the door of the shop of Wosk & Co. they all alighted, and Miss Varlins, followed by the two men, entered. Judas came forward as they stood by the counter, and on seeing his visitors narrowed his eyes down at once to their most dangerous expression.

'Humph!' thought Fanks, grimly, 'Judas knows our errand.'

'Monsieur Guinaud,' said Judith, calmly, 'there was a packet directed to Miss Judith at the post-office here, which, I learn, was

delivered to you by mistake. May I ask you to return it to me?'

Judas shot a glance of amazement at Fanks, with whom he credited this tackling of the letters, and opening his crafty eyes to their widest, looked guilelessly at the lady.

'Mais oui, mademoiselle,' he said, with a shrug, 'de lettres you do tell me of are with me. C'est bien certain ze postage was mistook. Mais why to you I gif zem?'

'Because the packet was meant for me.'

'Yes; I posted it,' said Roger, quickly.

'It was given to you by mistake.'

'It is de name 'Mademoiselle Judith,' observed Guinaud, doubtfully.

'Which was how the mistake occurred,' explained Fanks, easily. 'Come, Monsieur Guinaud, hand over those letters at once, if you please.'

'Eh, tres-bien,' answered Judas, promptly. 'I haf no wis to them keep. Zey are noising to me, I did not know ze person zey were to.'

'Well, you know now,' cried Fanks, sharply. 'Please give them to this lady without delay.'

'Mais certainement,' replied the Frenchman, with a bow. 'Pardon, monsieur.'

He retired quickly, and in a few minutes returned with the packet of letters—open.

'Have you read these?' cried Judith, indignantly, as she took the packet.

M. Judas smiled in a deprecating manner, and shook his head.

'I am a man of the honor, mademoiselle,' he said, with great dignity, 'an' I haf not read ze letters. I tawt de lettres pour moi, and I did open zem. But wen I do zee zem in anglais I see it is mistook, an' read zem not.'

Fanks kept his eyes on Judas as he spoke, to see if he was speaking the truth, but was quite unable to arrive at any decision, so calm was the Frenchman's voice, so immobile the expression of his face.

'Well, at all events we have got the letters,' he said to Miss Varlins. And now—'

'Now you can take them home to read,' replied Miss Varlins, contemptuously, tossing the packet to him.

'But are you not going to examine them?'

'I have done so.'

'Are all the letters there?'

'Monsieur,' cried Judas, 'do you tink—'

'I'm addressing Miss Varlins,' retorted Fanks, coldly. 'Are all the letters there, Miss Varlins?'

'Yes, I think so,' she replied, with faint hesitation.

'You are not sure?'

'As sure as I can be,' she replied, keeping her temper wonderfully. 'I think they are all there. Will you please read the letters, and then return them to me?'

'Certainly.'

'Thank you. Good morning,' replied Judith, coldly. 'Mr. Axton.'

Roger bowed and conducted her to the carriage, while Fanks, with the bundle of letters in his hands, stood looking after her in an irresolute manner.

Suddenly he felt a cold touch on his hand, and turned round to see Judas looking at him with a strange smile on his crafty face.

'You are afraid,' he said, in French.

'Of what?' answered Fanks, coldly.

'Of those,' pointing to the letters; 'of her,' indicating Judith; 'of him,' nodding in the direction of Roger; 'of all. You are afraid, monsieur, of what you may discover.'

Fanks looked steadily at him, made no reply, and walked quickly out of the shop.

CHAPTER XI.

NO SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE.

This is the episode of Mr. Spolger, which came about in this wise. Roger was very indignant with his friend for speaking so plainly to Judith, and told him so in somewhat strong language when the carriage had departed. Fanks said nothing at first, being much exercised in his own mind over the peculiar attitude taken up toward him by Miss Varlins, but Axton was so very free in his condemnations, that for the moment he lost his self-control, and answered sharply:

'I've taken up this case, Roger, and I intend to carry it out to the bitter end, if only for your sake; but you must let me act in every way as I think best, otherwise—'

'Otherwise!' repeated Axton, angrily, as Octavius paused.

'I will throw up the whole affair.'

'No, you must not do that,' said Roger, quickly. 'I want to see the end of this for my own sake, as you very truly say, so don't leave me in the lurch for the sake of a few hasty words. But you must admit, old fellow, that you spoke rather sharply to Judith.'

The philosophic Fanks thereupon recovered his temper and said, sententiously: 'Women are the devil!'

'Eh, how so?'

'They cause trouble whenever they get mixed up in any affair. This case was difficult yesterday; to-day it is more difficult because feminine influence is at work.'

'With whom?'

'With me, with you, with Judas, with us

all. May I say something without being thought-rude?'

'If it's about Judith—'

'It is about Judith.'

'Then don't say it,' retorted Roger, in a huff.

'Very well,' replied Fanks, resignedly; 'but if you take away my guiding stars, I'll never find my way across the ocean of mystery.'

Roger made no reply, but walked on rapidly with a frown on his good looking face. Suddenly he stopped so dead short that Fanks, also using his legs in no slow fashion, shot past him a yard or so before he could pull up.

Quoth Roger savagely:

'Say your say and have done with it.'

Mr. Fanks surveyed his friend with a quiet smile, and then took him gently by the arm.

'Come and have luncheon with me,' he said, persuasively.

'No.'

'They've got an excellent cook at the Foundryman.'

'I won't come.'

'I can give you a good bottle of claret.'

Axton exploded furiously.

'Confound it, Fanks, why do you treat me like a child?'

'Because you are one at present.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Roger, with a sneer, 'from your point of view.'

'From a common-sense point of view,' replied Fanks, with great good-humor.

'Come, don't be silly, my good fellow! You're sore because I don't worship your idol. Be easy, I'll do so when this case is finished.'

'But if—'

'Oh, come to luncheon,' said Fanks, and marched him off without further parley.

The luncheon was good, both as regards victuals and wine, while Fanks, in the capacity of host, behaved in a wondrously genial fashion, so by the time they finished and were smoking socially by the fire, Roger had quite recovered his temper, and felt ashamed of his fit of ill-humor.

'But you know,' he said, guiltily, 'I'm in love.'

'Business first, pleasure afterward,' quoth the philosopher, sagely.

'Apropos of what?'

'This case. I know you are in love, I know the lady you love. I quite approve of that love. Marriage, however, should begin with no secrets between man and wife.'

'Fish!'

'In this case the wife would have a secret from the husband.'

'Rubbish!'

'It may be, but it's rubbish that concerns those letters.'

'Perhaps you'll accuse Judith of the murder,' cried Roger, in great wrath.

A blank wall would have been more expressive than the face of the detective.

'Why didn't she want me to read those letters?' he said, quietly.

'There are the letters—read them.'

'Thank you,' replied Fanks, imperturbably, 'I will.'

And he did so slowly and carefully, taking note of the dates and arranging the letters in due order. Having finished, he tied the letters up again and handed them over to Roger.

'Please deliver them to Miss Judith.'

'Oh, ho,' said Roger, slipping the parcel into his pocket. 'So the letters are no use to you?'

'Not the letters that are there.'

'What, do you think some of the letters are missing?'

'I'm certain of it.'

'Then who is the thief?'

'Judas.'

'Oh!'

Roger flung himself back in his chair with a sigh of relief, as if he had half expected to hear another name, and that a name similar in sound.

'There are in that bundle,' said