

A MODERN JUDAS.

OR, THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

'I feel certain you are,' said Octavius, gently; 'but, as you say, circumstances are strong against you. Tell me everything without reserve, and I may be able to advise you; otherwise, I am completely in the dark.'

'I believe you are my friend, Fanks,' said Roger, earnestly. 'I believe you know me too well to think I would be guilty of such a dreadful crime. Yes; I will tell you everything, and place myself unreservedly in your hands. But first tell me how it is you are so sure it was murder and not suicide!'

'Certainly! It is well we should both be on common ground for the better understanding of your explanation. Regarding the death of this Melstane, I own that at Jarlochester I was half inclined to believe in the suicide theory, and had it not been for the name Ironfields on that pill-box, which gave me a clew, would probably have acquiesced in the verdict of the jury. Following up the clew, however, I went to the chemists, Wosk & Co.'s, where the pills were made up, and discovered that originally there were twelve in the box. I could count for the disposal of six, so that ought to have left a balance of half a dozen.'

'True! but if I remember, when I counted them at Jarlochester there were eight.'

'Exactly! Two extra pills were placed in that box by some unknown person whom I believe to be the murderer of Melstane.'

'Why?'

'Because I took the pills to Doctor Japix, and he analyzed the whole eight; seven were harmless tonic pills, the eighth compounded of deadly morphia.'

'What! cried Roger, starting to his feet, and Melstane died of morphia?'

'He did! Now do you understand? The murderer, whoever he was, placed two morphia pills sufficient to cause death in the box. Melstane took one in complete innocence and died, the other was analyzed by Japix and found to contain sufficient morphia to kill two men.'

'It's wonderful how you have worked it out,' said Roger, with hearty admiration; 'but how do you connect me with the murder?'

'I did not say I connected you with the murder,' replied Fanks, hastily; 'I only said there were suspicious circumstances against you. For instance, you had morphia pills in your possession.'

'How do you know that?' asked Roger, with a start of surprise.

'Japix told me.'

'Yes, and Japix prescribed them,' cried Axton, starting to his feet. 'I own that does look suspicious; but I can set your mind at rest on that point. Will you permit me to withdraw for a moment?'

'Don't talk nonsense, Roger,' said Fanks, angrily; 'of course I will.'

Axton said nothing, but left the room, leaving Fanks considerably puzzled as to the cause of his departure. In a few minutes, however, he returned and placed in the detective's hands a box of pills.

'There,' he said, resuming his seat, 'if you count those pills you will find there are eleven. The original number was twelve; I only took one, and finding it did me no good, left the rest in the box. Am I right?'

'You are,' replied Fanks, who had counted the pills; 'there are eleven here.'

'If you have any further doubts you can ask Wosk & Co., who made up the pills.'

'There is no need. I believe you.'

'But I would prefer you doing so,' said Roger, urgently.

'Very well,' replied Fanks, calmly putting the box in his pocket; 'I will see about it to-morrow. But now you have set my mind at rest on this point, and I have told you my story, tell me yours.'

Roger paled a little at this request, and remained silent for a few moments.

'Fanks,' he said at last, with great solemnity, 'you have your suspicions of me now, and perhaps when I tell you all, you may consider them to be confirmed. What then?'

'What then?' echoed Fanks, cheerfully. 'Simply this: Knowing your character as I do, I don't believe you would be guilty of a cold-blooded murder, so when you tell me your story we will put our heads together and try to find out the true criminal.'

'I'll be only too glad to do that,' said Roger, gratefully, 'if only to regain your confidence which I have lost.'

'Well, go on with your story.'

'I told you a good deal of it at Jarlochester,' replied Axton, looking at the fire thoughtfully; 'but I will reveal now what I concealed then. The first time I met Judith Varlins was in this town, I came down with letters of introduction from a London friend to Mr. Marson, and he made me free of his house—in fact, he wanted me

to stay there; but though I am poor I am proud, so I preferred to put up at Binter's boarding-house.'

'Yes, I know that place.'

'How so?'

'I went there to see a Monsieur Guinaud.'

'Then you saw an uncommonly good specimen of a scoundrel. He was a great friend of Melstane, and they both hated me like poison. I don't know why Judas—that's his nickname here—did but Melstane had a grudge against me because I put a stop to his secret meetings with Florry Marson by telling Judith.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Because Melstane was such an out-and-out scoundrel that I did not want him to marry that silly little thing. If he had done so he would have broken her heart. Well, when Judith became aware of these meetings, she took Florry off to Ventnor, I escorted them to London, where they stayed for a time, and then went on to the Isle of Wight. Shortly afterward I followed them. I told you all that took place there. On our return to Ironfields about the middle of October, I believe Melstane met Florry by stealth, and I taxed him with it. We had a furious row, and I went off to London. While there I received a letter from Miss Varlins, telling me that Florry was engaged to Mr. Spolger, and that Melstane was leaving Ironfields for Jarlochester.'

'How did she know that?' asked Fanks, sharply.

'I don't know; perhaps Florry told her. She, of course, could easily learn it from her lover; but what puzzles me is why Melstane went to Jarlochester at all.'

'You have no idea?' said Octavius, looking at him keenly.

'Not the least in the world. I'm quite at sea as to his reasons.'

'Hump! Go on!'

'Judith asked me to go to Jarlochester and await the arrival of Melstane, in order to obtain from him a packet of letters written by Florry, which he had in his possession.'

'Yes,' said Fanks, eagerly; 'go on!'

'I went down to Jarlochester ostensibly on a walking tour, and received a second letter from Judith telling me Melstane had left Ironfields, and was on his way down. On the day he was expected to arrive, I went for a walk, intending to return early. Unfortunately, however, I lost my way and did not get back until late at night. I found Melstane had arrived and gone to bed.'

'Did you ask if Mr. Melstane had arrived?'

'No! I asked casually if a stranger had arrived, and then they told me one had come from London, and described him, so of course I knew him at once.'

'But why all this mystery?'

'Judith implored me to be careful,' said Roger, quickly. 'You see Florry's good name was at stake, and I wanted to get the package of letters back with as little publicity as possible.'

'Nevertheless, you overdid the mystery business! Well, what did you do when you found Melstane had gone to bed?'

'I went to bed also, and made up my mind to see him the next morning. Thinking of the letters, however, and knowing he was in the next room, I could not sleep, so as it was not then ten o'clock, I thought I would go in and see him.'

'Curious thing to make a visit to a man's room at that time.'

'I dare say,' replied Axton, tartly; 'but you see, I was anxious to get the letters, and knowing that Melstane was a nervous man, particularly at night, I fancied I might get them back by playing on his fears.'

'A most original idea!'

'Rather wild, perhaps, but not without merit. Well, I put on my things, took my candle, and went into his room.'

'Ho! ho! so it was you that left the door ajar!'

'It was. I went into the room quietly, and saw he was sound asleep. On the table near the bed was a bundle of letters which he had evidently been reading.'

'How did you know it was the bundle you wanted?'

'Because I recognized Miss Marson's writing on the top letter.'

'Well, seeing that was the bundle you were in search of, what did you do?'

'Rather a mean thing—I stole them.'

'Stole them! Upon my word, Roger, you are a nice young man!'

'In fighting with a man like Melstane, I had to make use of his own weapons,' retorted Roger, coolly. 'It seems dishonorable to you for me to go into a man's room and steal a bundle of letters; but I was dealing with a scoundrel; those letters contained the honor of a young and inexperienced girl whom he held at his mercy. If I had awakened him there would have been a row, he would have raised the alarm, and I

would have got into trouble, so I did the best thing—the only thing to be done under the circumstances—and stole the letters.'

'Did you see the pill-box when you were in the room?'

'No, I was in such a hurry to go, having once secured what I wanted, that I did not stop to look at anything, but went back to my room.'

'Leaving the door of No. 37 ajar,' said Fanks, reprovingly, 'foolish man.'

'Ah! you see I was not experienced in midnight burglaries.'

'Well, after you got back to your own room, what did you do?'

'I went to bed and slept soundly. Next morning I sent the packet of letters to Judith, and went off on a stroll. When I came back at night, I was horrified to learn Sebastian Melstane was dead. The rest you know.'

'When you spoke to me, did you really and truly believe he had committed suicide?'

'Yes, I did,' replied Roger, honestly. 'I thought he found out the loss of the letters, and seeing that his hold over Florry Marson was lost, had committed suicide in desperation.'

'How did you account for the morphia?'

'I didn't attempt to account for it. All I knew was that I had secured the letters, that Melstane was dead, and that Florry was safe.'

'So that's all. I wish you had told me all this at Jarlochester.'

'I tell you I was afraid to do so. Look how black the case appears against me. I fight with a man here; I follow him down to Jarlochester; I have morphia pills in my possession; I go into his room at night, and in the morning he is found dead of morphia. Why, if I had told all this, I would have been arrested. Florry's name would have come up. That infernal Monsieur Judas would have put his spoke in, and I would very probably have been hanged on circumstantial evidence.'

'I don't wonder you were afraid,' replied Octavius, thoughtfully; 'but seeing I was your friend, you might just as well have trusted me.'

'You are a detective.'

'I am your old school-fellow.'

'Then you believe I am innocent?'

'I do. If you were guilty, you would not have told a story so dead against yourself.'

'Will you shake hands, then?' asked Roger, coloring and holding out his hand.

'By all means,' replied Fanks, solemnly, and the two friends shook hands with honest fervor.

'Now, then,' said Octavius, when this ceremony was concluded, 'the next thing to be done is to find out who killed Melstane.'

'It's an impossibility,' cried Roger, in despair.

'No, I don't say that,' answered Fanks, coolly. 'At Jarlochester I had nothing to go upon, and yet look what I've discovered.'

'You are a genius, Octavius.'

'Egad! I've need to be to unravel this case,' said Octavius, smiling. 'It's the most difficult affair I ever took in hand.'

'Do you suspect any one?'

'I can't say at present till I get things more in order. The first thing I want to know is, what were the contents of those letters?'

'I can not tell you. I did not read them, of course, but simply packed them up and sent them to Miss Varlins.'

'Oh, then she has got them?'

'No, she hasn't.'

'Where are they, then?'

'Lost.'

'Lost! How so?'

'I can't tell you,' said Roger, helplessly.

'You see, Miss Varlins did not want them sent to the Hall, as Florry Marson might have got hold of them, and if she had, she's such a little fool, and was so much in love with Melstane, that she probably would have sent them straight back.'

'Well, as they did not go to the Hall, where did they go?'

'To the post-office in this place. The postmistress, however, knows Miss Varlins, and had the packet been addressed in that name, would have sent them up to the Hall. To make things safe, however, I directed the letters to Miss Judith, Post-Office, Suburban Ironfields, and she was to call for them.'

'I suppose she called?'

'Yes, every day, but the postmistress said no packet had arrived.'

'Strange! The postal arrangements are very good as a rule. Letters don't often go astray. Addressed to Miss Judith, you say?'

'Yes.'

Fanks pinched his chin thoughtfully between his finger and thumb, looked frowningly at the fire, and then looked up suddenly:

'Is the postmistress here intelligent?'

'No, the reverse. A snuffy old idiot.'

'Oh!' said Fanks, smiling to himself; 'then I wouldn't be surprised if she delivered that packet to the wrong person.'

'But there's no one else about here called Judith.'

Mr. Fanks did not reply, but leaving his chair, went to the sideboard and brought back pen, ink, and paper, which he placed on the table near Roger.

'You're a very bad writer!' he said, calmly arranging the paper.

'No worse than the usual run of literary men.'

'I'm sorry for the printers, if that is the case. The letter you sent me here, saying you were coming, is most illegible.'

'Well, that letter has nothing to do with the case,' said Roger, impatiently.

'I think it has a good deal to do with it, seeing it told me you were coming down here,' replied Fanks, coolly. 'However, this is not to the point. Take up that pen.'

Roger did so, looking considerably bewildered at the manner in which his friend was behaving.

'Now write me down the address you put on the packet.' Axton obeyed quickly, and produced a very illegible scrawl:

MISS JUDITH,
Post Office,
Suburban Ironfields.

'Humph!' said Fanks, looking at this specimen of calligraphy. 'Most careless writing. Observe; you use the old-fashioned "s." You don't dot your "i's," nor cross your "t's," and, moreover, you curve your "i," toward the next letter in the fashion of "a." So far so good. Now write Monsieur Judas.'

Roger did so with no idea of what his friend had in his mind.

MONSIEUR JUDAS.

'There,' observed Fanks, when this was completed, 'do you see much difference between Judith and Judas, according to your writing?'

'No,' said Roger, honestly, looking at them, 'I can't say that I do. But what do you mean?'

'I mean that the postmistress—old and stupid, as you say she is—has made a mistake, and delivered the packet to Monsieur Judas.'

'Absurd!'

'Not at all. Judith Varlins is generally called Miss Varlins, I presume, so the Christian name Judith would not occur to this old woman. On the other hand, the odd name Judas would, and knowing that extraordinary-looking Frenchman to be called Judas, she—I mean the postmistress—would naturally hand the packet over to him.'

'But surely he would refuse to receive it?'

'I don't know so much about that. In the first place, he might have thought the packet was for him, and in the second, his natural curiosity would make him take it home to examine. When he found what the packet contained, he kept it.'

'But why should he keep it?'

'How dense you are, Roger!' said Fanks, irritably. 'He was a friend of Melstane, and seeing the letters were addressed to Melstane, he very likely kept them by him to return to his brother scamp.'

'Then you think Monsieur Judas has the packet?'

'I'm certain of it. We'll call and see what we can do to-morrow.'

'All right; but why are you so anxious to get the packet?'

'For several reasons. I believe that packet to contain letters to Melstane, not only from Miss Marson, but from her father also; and I further believe,' continued Fanks, sinking his voice to a whisper, 'that in that packet is contained the secret of Melstane's death.'

'But you surely don't suspect Mr. Marson?' cried Roger, aghast.

Octavius rolled up the paper upon which Roger had been writing and threw it into the fire as he answered, with marked emphasis on the latter part of his reply:

'I suspect no one—at present.'

EXTRACTS FROM A DETECTIVE'S NOTE-BOOK.

'... I feel much more at ease now I have seen Roger.... He has explained away my suspicions.... It is true that his story tells very much against him, but to my mind this fact assures me of his innocence, as no guilty man would tell a story so much against himself.... Yes, I am sure he is not guilty.... He acted foolishly in obeying Miss Varlins' instructions—in keeping the truth from me at Jarlochester.... Nevertheless, his conduct has not been that of a guilty man, and whosoever poisoned Sebastian Melstane, it was certainly not Roger Axton....'

'... I am much troubled about the disappearance of those letters, and would like to see them.... There must be something in them which may throw light on this mysterious affair.... I have no grounds for declaring this, but I think so.... If Mr. Marson, who did not want his daughter to marry Melstane, wrote, his letters must be in that packet.... It is his letters I wish to see.... Now, however, by the unfortunate mistake of the postmistress, the letters are in the possession of Judas.... This again implicates him in the affair.... I don't like the attitude of Judas at all.... Could he—but no, it's impossible; he has no motive.... Sebastian Melstane was his friend, so there was no reason he should

wish him out of the way.... I believe that Judas holds the letters in order to make capital out of them with Mr. Marson.... I'll thwart him on the point, however....'

'Mem.—To see the postmistress to-morrow and find out for certain if the packet was delivered—as I verily believe—to Judas.'

CHAPTER X.

THE MISSING LETTERS.

Suburban Ironfields being, as has been stated, a poor relation of the opulent city, fared badly enough in all respects, after the fashion of all poor relations. Every comfort, every luxury, every improvement pertaining to nineteenth-century civilization was to be found in Ironfields itself; but the quondam village from whence it had sprung retained many of its primitive barbarisms.

This was especially the case with the post-office, a low-roofed, dingy little house squeezed into an odd corner of the crooked main street, and presided over by an elderly lady named Mrs. Wevelspoke and her son Abraham. Ironfields magnates—dwellers in the palatial residences beyond the village—received their correspondence straight from the prompt, business-like office of the city itself; but this unhappy little town depended for the transmission and delivery of its letters on old Mrs. Wevelspoke and her snail-footed son.

Many complaints had been made about the disgraceful way in which this place was conducted; but as the complainants were mostly poor people, no attention was paid to their remonstrances, and Mrs. Wevelspoke and her son went on in their own quiet way, delivering letters late, delivering them to the wrong people, and very often not delivering them at all.

The postmistress herself was a snuffy old woman of great antiquity, with a shriveled face, two dull eyes like those of a dead cod-fish, a toothless mouth, and a wisp of straggling gray hair generally hid under a dingy black straw bonnet with rusty velvet trimmings; she wore a doubtful black gown, which had acquired a greenish tinge from great age, a tartan shawl of faded colors pinned over her bony shoulders, and rusty mittens on her skinny hands. She always wore her bonnet—it was her badge, her symbol, her sign of authority; and although, perhaps, she did not, as scandal averred, sleep in it all night, she certainly wore it all day. She was deaf, too, and spoke to other people in a shrill, loud voice, like a querulous wind, as if she thought, as she did, that they suffered from the same infirmity. She was so doubtful as to her powers of vision, so it can easily be seen that the Suburban Ironfields had good ground for complaint against her. As to Abraham, he was a dull-looking youth, who thought of nothing but eating, and only delivered the letters because walking gave him an appetite for his meals. He never hurried himself, and at the present moment was deliberating as to whether he would then take the letters in his hand to their recipients, or let them wait until the afternoon.

'Now then, Abraham,' piped Mrs. Wevelspoke, viciously, 'ain't you gone yet?'

'You see I ain't,' growled Abraham, in a fat voice.

'Don't say you won't go,' said his mother, shrilly, 'cause you've got to earn your bread and butter. Not that it's good, for that baker's fallin' off awful, and as to the butter, it ain't got nothin' to do with the cows, I'm certain. But bread and butter's butter an' bread, so git out and git it.'

'I'm goin', I'm goin'!' grumbled Abraham, slowly, putting on his hat, 'but I ain't well, mar, I ain't. That corfsee's a-repeatin' of itself like 'istory, an' the h'eggs weren't fresh! Poach 'em, fry 'em, or billed, they taste of the chicken.'

'Pickin', said Mrs. Wevelspoke, giving her rusty bonnet a hitch, 'pickin' up the letters, which you don't do, Abraham. Do 'urry, there's a good boy. Mrs. Wosk is waitin' for that blue 'un—a bill, may be—and Mr. Manks is gettin' noos of 'is son from Australy in that thin paper un, an' there's Drip and Pank and Wolf all waitin' to 'ear the 'nocker, so lose no time, my deary.'

'It's all right as I don't lose no letters, mar,' retorted Abraham, going to the door. 'I'm orf, I am, mar. I'll be back by six, mar, and do see arter the tripe yourself; it don't agree overcooked.'

(To be Continued.)

Knew His Congregation.

A story comes from Sacramento that a minister of that place some time ago became involved in some disagreement with his audience and as a result announced his intention to resign. Pending its acceptance he cast about for other employment and through the instrumentality of a number of political friends succeeded in securing an appointment as chaplain in the State prison. When this had been accomplished he announced the fact to his congregation and proceeded to preach a most touching sermon from the text, "I go to prepare a place for you."

The effect is said to have been astonishing.