

A MODERN JUDAS.

OR, THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. SPOLGER TELLS A STORY.

Jackson Spolger, proprietor of that celebrated patent medicine, 'Spolger's Soother,' was a long, lean, lank man, with a somewhat cross face, and a mildly irritable manner. Spolger the father had been a chemist, but having invented the 'Soother,' made his fortune thereby, owing to lavish advertising and plenty of testimonials (paid for) from hypochondriacal celebrities. Having thus fulfilled his mission in this world, and benefited his fellow-men by the 'Soother' he departed therefrom, leaving his money and his 'Soother' to Spolger the son, who still carried on the advertising business, and derived a large income from it. He had been well educated, had traveled a good deal, and had a kind of social veneer, which, added to his money, entitled him to be called a gentleman. Although he suffered a good deal from ill-health, he never by any chance used the 'Soother,' which led ill-natured people to remark that it was made to sell and not to cure. Mr. Spolger, however, did not mind ill-natured people, being too much taken up with himself and his ailments, of which he was always talking. He chatted constantly about his own liver, or some one else's liver, prescribed remedies talked glibly of his near death, and altogether was not a particularly agreeable person.

Being thus a diseased egotist, he carried his mania for health even into his matrimonial prospects, and loved Florry not so much on account of her beauty as because she looked delicate, and in a wife of such a constitution he thought he would always have some one beside him on whom to practice his little curative theories. He always carried in his pocket a horrible little book called 'Till the Doctor Comes,' and was never so delighted as when he found some one sufficiently ill who would permit him to prescribe one of the remedies from his precious book. He preferred a chemist's shop to his own house, loved doctors above all other men, and contemplated passing his honeymoon in a hydropathic establishment, where there would be plenty of fellow-sufferers with whom to compare notes.

At present he was clad in a heavy tweed suit, and wore a thickly lined fur coat, galoches on his feet, and a roll of red flannel round his throat.

'How do you do, Mr. Marson?' he said, in a thin, irritable voice, as he shook hands. 'I hope you are well. You don't look it. Your hand is moist; that's a bad sign. Dry? Yes, mine is dry. I'm afraid it's fever. Diseases are so subtle. Miss Varlins, you look healthy. Florry, my dearest, what a thin dress for this weather!'

'Oh, it's all right, Mr. Spolger.'

'Jackson,' he interpolated.

'It's all right, Jackson,' said Florry, gayly. 'I'm quite healthy.'

'Ah, yes, now,' replied Mr. Spolger, darkly, sitting down; 'but that thin dress means a chill. It might settle on the lungs, and you might be in your coffin before you know where you are.'

'Nonsense, man,' said Marson, in a hearty voice; 'the room is quite warm. Won't you take off that heavy coat?'

'Not at present,' answered Mr. Spolger, emphatically. 'I always accustom myself to the temperature of a place by degrees. A sudden chill is worse than damp feet.'

'Will you have some tea, Mr. Spolger?' asked Judith, for the footman had now brought in the tea-pot and a plate of toast.

'No, thank you,' answered the hypochondriac, politely. 'I'm undergoing a course of medicine just now, and tea in my present condition means death.'

'Then have some toast,' said Florry, laughingly, presenting him with the plate.

'Battered,' said Mr. Spolger, looking at the plate. 'Horrible! The worst thing in the world for me! I take dry toast for breakfast, with a glass of hot water—nothing more.'

'I hope you don't intend me to breakfast like that,' said Florry, santly.

'My dear, you can eat what you like,' answered Mr. Spolger, solemnly producing his little book. 'Should you suffer from your indiscretion, I have always got the remedy in this.'

'Did the medicine Doctor Japix prescribed do you good?' asked Judith.

'Not a bit,' said Spolger, slowly taking off his coat. 'I still suffer from sleeplessness. However, I've got a new idea I'm going to carry out. Cold water bandages at the head, and a hot brick at the feet. There, now my coat is off I feel beautiful.'

'Well, well!' said Mr. Marson, rather impatient of all this medical talk. 'I hope you'll be quite well for your wedding.'

'I hope so, too,' retorted Spolger, with gloomy foreboding. 'I've arranged all the tour, Florry. We go first to Malvern, a

very healthy place, then to Bath to drink the waters. After that, if you like, we'll go abroad, though I much distrust the drainage of these foreign towns.'

'Oh, let us go abroad at once,' said Florry, eagerly; 'to Paris. If you find it too lively, you can walk every day in the Pere la Chaise Cemetery.'

'Don't jest on such a subject, Florry,' said Judith, reprovingly.

'Oh, I don't mind,' replied the lover, with gloomy relish; 'we'll all have to go to the cemetery some day, so it's as well to get accustomed to the idea.'

His three listeners looked rather depressed at this dismal prophecy, but said nothing, while Mr. Spolger told cheerful little stories of how his liver would treat him if he did not look after it. This led him to talk of medicine, which suggested chemists, which in their turn suggested Wosk & Co., so by and by Mr. Spolger began to talk of M. Judas.

'A most estimable young man,' he said, feeling his own pulse in a professional manner; 'he has had typhoid fever twice, and suffers from corns.'

'Tight boots?' asked Florry, flippantly.

'No; hereditary! Most curious case. But talking of Monsieur Guinand—'

'Judas,' said Miss Varlins smiling.

'Yes, I hear they call him Judas on account of his red hair,' replied Mr. Spolger, laughing carefully. 'Well, as a chemist, he takes a great interest in Florry.'

'In me?' cried the damsel, indignantly.

'Yes; he thinks you look delicate,' said Mr. Spolger, complacently; 'indeed, he suggested several remedies. And if you would see him—'

'No, no!' interposed Marson, quickly.

'Really, Jackson, I'm astonished at you. If Florry requires to see a medical man, there is Doctor Japix; but as to letting a man like that Frenchman meddle with her health—why, the very look of him is enough.'

'Consumption,' said Mr. Spolger, sagaciously; 'he looks delicate, I know.'

'I think he is a very dangerous man,' said Judith, in her quiet, composed voice; 'he was a great friend of—' Here she checked herself suddenly.

'Of Melstane,' finished Spolger, scowling.

'Yes, I know that. And talking about Mr. Melstane—'

'Don't talk about Mr. Melstane,' said Marson, sharply.

'Why not?'

Florry answered him, for she was evidently struggling with a fit of hysteria, and as he spoke she arose from her seat and fled rapidly from the room, followed by Judith.

'There,' said Marson, in an annoyed tone, 'how foolish you were to speak of that scamp!'

'I don't see why Florry shouldn't get used to his name,' replied Spolger, sulkily.

'Of course, I know she loved him, but it's all over now; he won't trouble her again.'

'Why not?' demanded Marson, quickly.

'Because he's gone away. He had the impudence to call on me before he went, but I soon settled him, though he upset me dreadfully.'

'What did he call about?'

Spolger was going to reply, when once more the door was thrown open, and the footman announced in stentorian tones:

'Mr. Roger Axton.'

'Oh, how do you do, Mr. Axton?' said Mr. Marson, going forward to meet the young man. 'I did not know you were down here.'

'No, I came by this morning's train from town,' replied Roger, shaking the old man's hand. 'I trust you are well, Mr. Spolger?'

'Down Winchester way,' replied Roger, raising his eyes suddenly and looking at Mr. Marson steadily.

'Oh, indeed!' answered that gentleman, with a start; 'then I suppose you were near Jarlchester?'

'I was at Jarlchester,' said Roger, emphatically, 'during the investigation of that case.'

Both his listeners were silent, as if some nameless fear paralyzed their tongues; then Marson looked at Spolger, and Spolger looked at Marson, while Roger glanced rapidly from one to the other.

At this moment Judith entered the room.

'Florry is better,' she said, advancing; 'she is—What Mr. Axton?'

'Yes; I came down here to see a friend, and thought I would look in,' replied Roger, as she greeted him.

'I am very glad you did not forget us,' she remarked, quietly resuming her seat.

'Will you have a cup of tea?'

'Thank you.'

They were seated beside the tea-table, and were quite alone, as Mr. Marson in company with his future son-in-law had left their seats, and were now talking together in low whispers at the end of the room.

Judith handed a cup of tea to Roger, and looked at him steadily as he stirred it with listless expression on his worn face.

'You don't look well,' she said, at length, dropping her eyes.

'Mental worry,' he responded, with a sigh. 'I have undergone a good deal since I last saw you.'

'In connection with that?' she asked, in a low voice.

'Yes. I received your letter in London, and went at once down to Jarlchester on a walking tour, that is, I made a walking tour an excuse for being there. I stayed there a week, and then received your second letter saying he was coming.'

'And he came?' asked Judith, with a quick drawn breath.

'He did.'

'You saw him?' she continued, looking nervously toward the two whispering figures at the end of the room.

'Yes!'

'And got—and got the letters?'

'Of course,' said Axton, in a tone of surprise. 'I sent them to you—to the post-office, as you desired.'

'My God!' she said, in a low voice of agony, 'I—I have not received them. I went to the post-office every day to ask for a packet directed to Miss Judith, but have been told it had not come.'

'Good heavens!' said Roger, with a start of surprise. 'I hope they have not gone astray—I ought to have registered them.'

'If you had I could not have obtained them,' replied Miss Varlins hurriedly; 'you forget. The packet was addressed to Miss Judith, and the postmistress knows me so well, I could not have signed any but my own name without causing remark.'

'You ought to have allowed me to send them here.'

'Yes! and then Florry would have seen them.'

'Nonsense!'

'There is always a possibility,' said Judith, quickly; 'but if these letters have gone astray, what are we to do?'

'Well, if—'

'Hush!'

She laid her hand suddenly on his arm to arrest his speech, for at moment the voice, thin and peevish, of Mr. Spolger, was heard saying a name:

'Sebastian Melstane.'

Judith and Roger both looked at each other, their cheeks pale, their manners agitated, and he was about to speak again when she stopped him for the second time.

'Gentlemen! gentlemen!' said Francis

Marson, plainly, 'you are in my house.'

'I beg your pardon, Mr. Marson,' said Roger, ceremoniously, 'I only asked Mr. Spolger a simple question.'

'To which he declines to reply,' replied Mr. Spolger, coolly.

'Why?'

Judith had risen to her feet and stood clinging to Francis Marson's arm, while Roger and Spolger looked steadily at each other. The whole four of them were so intent upon the conversation that they did not see a little figure enter the door and pause on the threshold at the sound of the angry voices.

'You agitate me,' said the valetudinarian, angrily. 'I am not used to be agitated, sir. I was telling my friend a private story, and you should not have listened.'

'I apologize,' replied Roger, bowing. 'I did not intend to give offense, but I wondered how it was you guessed Melstane would never return.'

The little figure stole nearer.

'What do you mean?' asked Spolger, quickly.

Judith leaned on Marson's arm with her face deadly white and her eyes dilated, waiting—waiting for what she dreaded to think.

'I mean about the Jarlchester mystery. Mr. Marson said nothing, but with a face as pale as that of the woman on his arm, stared steadily at Roger Axton. At the mention of Jarlchester the figure behind came slowly along until Florry Marson, with a look of terror on her face, stood still as a statue behind her lover.'

'I have read in the papers about the Jarlchester Mystery,' said Spolger, in an altered tone.

'I guessed as much, and that was the reason you said Melstane would not return.'

'No, no! What do you mean?'

'Mean that Sebastian Melstane died at Jarlchester, and you know it.'

'Sebastian!'

They all turned round, and there stood Florry, with one hand clasped over her heart, and the other grasping a chair to steady herself by.

'Sebastian,' she whispered, with white lips, 'is—is he dead?'

Roger turned his head.

'Dead!' she cried, with a cry of terror. 'Dead—murdered!' and fell fainting on the floor.

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE SUSPICION.

Eight o'clock in the evening by the remarkably incorrect clock on the mantelpiece, eight-thirty by Mr. Fank's watch, which was never wrong, and that gentleman was seated in a private room of the Foundryman Hotel, awaiting the arrival of Roger Axton.

The Foundryman was not a first-class hotel, nor was the private room a first-class apartment, but it was comfortable enough, and Mr. Fanks was too much worried in his own mind to pay much attention to his wants. He was much disturbed about his old school-fellow, as everything now seemed to point to Axton as a possible murderer—the conversation at Jarlchester, the evidence of Dr. Japix, the delicately insinuated suspicions of Judas—it seemed as though no doubt could exist but that Roger Axton was the person responsible for the death of Sebastian Melstane.

In spite, however, of all this circumstantial evidence, the detective hoped against hope, and resolved within his own honest heart not to believe Roger guilty until he had heard his own explanation of the affair. He well knew that circumstantial evidence was not always to be depended upon, and Axton's prompt arrival in answer to his letter had inspired him with the belief that the young man must be innocent, otherwise he would hardly dare to place himself in a position of such peril. So Mr. Fank's, with the perplexity of his mind showing even in his usually impassive face, sat watch in hand, awaiting Roger's arrival and casting absent glances round the room.

A comfortable room enough in an old-fashioned way! All the furniture seemed to have been made at that primeval period when Ironfields was a village, but here and there some meretricious hotel decoration spoiled the effect of the whole. Heavy mahogany arm-chairs, a heavy mahogany table, a heavy mahogany sideboard stood on a gaudy carpet with a dingy white ground, and sprawling red roses mixed with painfully green leaves. An antique carved mantle-piece, all cupids and flowers and foliage, but on it a staring square mirror with an ornate gilt frame swathed in yellow gauze, and in front of this a gimcrack French time-piece, with an aggressively loud tick, vividly painted vases of coarse china, containing tawdry paper flowers, and two ragged fans of peacocks' feathers. The curtains of the one window were drawn, a cheerful fire burned under the antique mantle-piece with its sombre barbarisms, and an evil-smelling lamp, with a dull, yellow flame, illuminated the apartment. Mr. Fanks himself sat in a grandfatherly arm-chair drawn close to the fire, and pondered over

the curious aspect of affairs, while the rain outside swept down the crooked street, and the wind howled at the window as if it wanted to get into the comfortable warmth out of the damp cold.

A knock at the door disturbed the somber meditations of Octavius, and in response to his answer, Roger walked into the room with flushed face and a somewhat nervous manner. He did not attempt to shake hands (feeling he had no right to do so until he had explained his previous behaviour at Jarlchester), but sat down near the fire, opposite to his friend, and looked rather defiantly at the impassive face of that gentleman, who gave him a cool nod.

'Well,' he said, at length, breaking a somewhat awkward silence, 'I've lost no time in answering your letter.'

'I'm glad of that, Roger,' responded Fanks, gravely; 'it gives me great hopes.'

'How? That I'm not a criminal, I suppose.'

Fanks said nothing, but looked sadly at the suspicious face of the young man.

'Silence gives consent, I see,' said Axton, throwing himself back in his chair, with a harsh laugh. 'Well, I'm sorry a man I thought my friend should think so ill of me.'

'What else can I think, Roger?'

'He calls me Roger,' said Axton, with an effort at gayty. 'Why not the prisoner at the bar—the convict in the jail—the secret prisoner?'

'Because I believe you to be none of the three, my friend,' replied Fanks, candidly. Roger looked at him with a sudden flush of shame, and involuntarily held out his hand, but drew it back quickly, before the other could clasp it.

'No, not yet,' he said, hastily; 'I will not clasp your hand in friendship until I clear myself in your eyes. You demand an explanation. Well, I am here to give it.'

'I am glad of that,' replied Fanks for the second time.

'I'm quite aware,' continued Roger, flushing, 'that now you are at Ironfields you must be aware that I concealed certain facts in my conversation with you.'

'Yes! You said you had not been to Ironfields, and that you did not correspond with Miss Varlins. Both statements were false.'

'May I ask on whose authority you speak so confidently?' demanded Axton coldly.

'Certainly. On the authority of Doctor Japix.'

'Japix!' repeated Roger, starting, 'do you know him?'

'Yes! I met him some time ago in Manchester, and I renewed my acquaintance with him down here.'

'Why?'

'Because I wanted him to analyze those pills I found in Melstane's room after his death.'

He looked sharply at Roger as he spoke, but that young man met his gaze serenely and without flinching, which seemed to give Fanks great satisfaction, for he withdrew his eyes with a sigh of relief.

'Octavius,' said Roger, after a pause, 'do you remember our conversation at Jarlchester?'

Mr. Fanks deliberately produced his secretive little note-book and tapped it delicately with his long fingers.

'The conversation is set down here.'

'Oh,' said Roger, with sardonic politeness. 'I was not aware you carried your detective principles so far as to take a note of interviews with your friends.'

'I don't do it as a rule,' responded Fanks, coolly; 'but I had an instinct that our interview might be useful in connection with Melstane's case. I was right, you see. Roger,' he cried, with a burst of natural feeling, 'why did you not trust me?'

Roger turned away his face, upon which burned a flush of shame.

'Because I was afraid,' he replied, in a low voice.

'Of being accused of the murder?'

'Yes.'

'But you can exculpate yourself?' said Fanks, in a startled tone.

'I hope so,' replied Roger, gloomily; 'but on my word of honor, Fanks, I am innocent. Have you read Edwin Drood?'

'Yes!' responded Fanks, rather puzzled at what appeared to be an irrelevant question, 'several times.'

'Do you remember what Dickens says in that novel?' said Axton, slowly. 'Circumstances may accumulate so strongly even against an innocent man that, directed, sharpened, and pointed, they may slay him.'

'True, true,' answered Fanks, approvingly nodding his head, 'such things have occurred before.'

'And may occur again,' cried Axton, with a look of look of apprehension. 'I know that you suspect me; I know that circumstantial evidence could be brought against me which would put my life in danger; but on my soul, Fanks, I am innocent of Melstane's death.'

(To be Continued.)

In the reign of Edward I it was declared that the dealers in fish should not be permitted to make a larger profit than one penny on each shilling's worth sold.