

A MODERN JUDAS.

OR, THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

'Departs for what place?' asked Fanks, making a note of the month in his book.

'I do not know,' replied Judas with a characteristic shrug; 'Monsieur Roger is not my friend. In November, my Sebastian, he says to me: 'It is well; I go to Jarcesterre.'

'What did he mean by 'it is well'?' 'But, Monsieur, I am in darkness. Yes, truly. He has visited the house of Monsieur le Pilule.'

'You mean Spolger's house?' 'Yes! He sees Monsieur le Pilule to speak of his love for Mees Mar-ron. When he returns to this pension, he says: 'It is well; I go to Jarcesterre'—no more. Then my friend, the brave Sebastian, goes to Jarcesterre, and I see him not more.'

'An interview between Melstane and Spolger could hardly have been satisfactory,' said Fanks, looking keenly at the Frenchman.

'Eh, monsieur, I know nothing of that,' answered Judas, with his guileless look.

'Why did Melstane go to Jarcesterre, of all places in the world?'

'I have told monsieur everything,' said M. Guinaud, with oily politeness.

'Humph! I'm doubtful of that,' muttered Fanks, thoughtfully. 'And is that all you know?'

'Eh! what would you?'

'It doesn't throw any light on the murder.'

'Wait, monsieur,' said Judas, earnestly, 'a moment. One night before my friend went away, Mees Var-rins stop her carriage at the shop. She comes in to me and says; I can not get a stamp of postage. Have you a stamp of postage? I say yes, and give her a stamp of postage. She places the stamp of postage on a letter, and goes away in the carriage. I see the letter.'

'And the name on the letter?'

'Monsieur Roger Axton, Jarcesterre,' said Judas, quietly; now! eh! you see?'

'I see nothing,' replied Fanks, bluntly. 'Miss Varling wrote to Axton at Jarcesterre. What of that? I know Axton was at Jarcesterre; I saw him there.'

'Is that so?' said M. Judas eagerly; 'then, behold, monsieur! Axton is at Jarcesterre; Melstane goes down also to Jarcesterre. Before he goes,' pursued Judas, bending forward and speaking in a whisper, 'he buy pills of morphia! eh! is that not so? My friend and Axton are enemies. At Jarcesterre they meet; the poor Melstane dies of morphia! What would you?'

'Do you mean to say that Roger Axton murdered Melstane?' cried Fanks, trying to control himself.

Monsieur Judas spread out his hands once more.

'I say nothing, monsieur. But because of 'Miss Mar-ron they fight—they fight desperate. Axton has the pills of morphia, Melstane dies of the pills of morphia! But no, I say nothing.'

'I think you've said quite enough,' retorted Fanks, coldly. 'I don't believe what you say.'

'Monsieur!'

'Don't ruffle your feathers, Monsieur Guinaud; I mean what I say, and in order to prove it, I'll ask Roger Axton to come down here and give his version of the story.'

'He can but say what I declare.'

'That's a matter of opinion.'

'Monsieur?'

'Sir.'

The two men had risen to their feet, and were standing opposite to each other. Fanks cold and scornful, Judas visibly agitated, with his eyes narrowed down into a dangerous expression. He looked like a snake preparing for a spring, and Fanks was on his guard; but at length, with a hissing laugh, Judas stepped back and bowed submissively.

'Let us not fight, I pray you, monsieur,' he said, gently; 'when Monsieur Axton comes you will see that I speak truly.'

'Till that time comes,' replied Octavius, putting on his coat, 'we need not meet.'

'As monsieur pleases.'

'Good-bye, Monsieur Guinaud.'

'Au revoir, monsieur.'

'I said good-bye.'

'Eh! yes! I replied 'Au revoir,' monsieur.'

Octavius turned on his heel without another word, and left the room. In the passage he met Mrs. Binter, hovering round in the hope of supper being ordered. She at once took Fanks in charge, and conducting him to the door, released him from prison with manifest reluctance.

Meanwhile M. Judas, left alone, was leaning against the mantel-piece with a smile on his evil face.

'Eh! Monsieur Axton,' he said to himself, in a whisper, 'you gave me the insult. To-night I have paid the debt—in part!

Wait, Monsieur Axton; wait, Mees Var-lins: I hold you both. It is I, Jules Guinaud, that can strike—when I wish.'

EXTRACTS FROM A DETECTIVE'S NOTE BOOK.

'I don't believe second thoughts are best. I always go by first impressions.... My first impression of Judas—I give him his nickname—are bad.... He's a slimy scoundrel, very difficult to deal with.... In our interview of to-night I had to tell him more than I cared he should know.... But it was my only chance of finding out anything.... What I did find out looks very bad for Roger Axton.... He was at Ironfields, in spite of his denial.... He stayed at Binter's boarding house, and knew Melstane intimately.... I learn from Judas that they quarrelled bitterly.... This is very bad.... Roger left Ironfields in a rage against Melstane. When next seen he is down at Jarcesterre in the same house as Melstane.... He has a grudge against Melstane, and while he is under the same roof Melstane dies.... God forgive me if I should be suspecting my old school-fellow wrongfully, but things look very suspicious against him.... Another thing I learned from Judas viz., that Miss Varlins corresponded with Roger at Jarcesterre.'

Query. Can she know anything about the death? 'I have written to Axton, asking him to come down here and see me.... If he refuses, I'm afraid my suspicions will be confirmed.... I wish I could disbelieve Judas.... He looks a secretive scoundrel.... and yet his story against Roger is confirmed by my own experience.... I think—no, I dare not think.... I will wait to hear the other side of the story from Axton....'

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNWILLING BRIDE.

Francis Marson was one of the most prominent men in Ironfields, owing to his immense wealth, his clear head and his personal attributes. His father, a keen man of business, had been born and bred in the little village from which Ironfields had sprung, and when the discovery of iron in the vicinity had laid the foundations of the present world-renowned town, Francis Marson the elder had been one of the first to profit by the discovery. He watched his opportunity, bought land (with borrowed money) on which he believed rich veins of iron ore might be found, and when they were found, built a foundry, turned over the money, paid back what he had borrowed, and was soon on the high road to fortune. When firmly established he sent his son to college, and then took him into the business, which henceforward was known as that of Marson & Son. In the fulness of time he was gathered to his fathers, and Francis Marson the younger stepped into the enjoyment of unlimited wealth.

The younger Marson (now iron-gray, severe and stately) married the only daughter of Sir Miles Canton, of Canton Hall, and on the death of the old baronet that property came into the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Marson, who henceforth took up their residence in the old Tudor mansion.

Fortune having been thus kind to Francis Marson, thought it well to remind him that complete happiness was not the lot of any mortal, so robbed him of his wife, who died some years after giving birth to Florence Marson. On her death-bed, the young mother confided the child to her husband, and implored him to bring her up with Judith Varlins, the daughter of a distant relation. Judith, who was at that time twelve years of age and grave beyond her years, took this so to herself that little Florry was confided to her care, and henceforth devoted her life to the guardianship of the six-year-old child. Francis Marson, broken down by grief, went away on his travels, and the two children grew up together, went to school together, and when their school days were over returned to Canton Hall in company with its master.

Now Florry Marson was a charming, golden-haired fairy of twenty years of age, while Judith was a stately brunette some six years older. Blonde and brunette, day and night, dark and fair, they were both equally charming in their own way, but as different in disposition as in appearance. Judith was mistress of the Hall, looked after the servants, received the company, and in fact acted as the elder sister, while Florry, bright-eyed and frivolous, did nothing but amuse herself. Francis Marson was fond of both the girls, but simply worshipped Florry, who lighted up the whole house like a sunbeam. Both Judith and the father combined to spoil her, and up to the age of twenty the life of Florry had been nothing but pleasure, gayety and sunshine.

Then came the episode of Sebastian Melstane, who had met Florry in London, and she reckless in all things, had given away,

her frivolous little heart to this handsome, dark-haired artist. On making inquiries, Mr. Marson had found out sufficient about Mr. Melstane's past life to make him resolve his darling should never marry such a scamp, and he forbade Florry to think of him. Upon which Miss Florry, with her silly little head stuffed full of poetry and romance, regarded Melstane as a persecuted hero, and on his coming to Ironfields met him by stealth, wrote him letters, exchanged presents, and in fact did everything a foolish girl would do when flattered and loved by a romantic scamp. Roger Axton, knowing Melstane's bad character, had put an end to these stolen meetings by telling Judith and Florry was carried off to Ventnor. While there she still sighed after her lover, and when she returned to Ironfields saw him with difficulty, as Judith was too vigilant to let her remain long out of her sight. Then Melstane went to Jarcesterre, and Florry said to Judith with many tears and sighs that she would be true to him, although she had now been engaged for some time to Mr. Jackson Spolger, the son of a man who had made his money out of a patent medicine.

Francis Marson had set his heart on this match, and although Florry violently protested against it, insisted that she should become engaged to Mr. Spolger, as he was anxious to place her beyond the power of Sebastian Melstane, and moreover, Jackson Spolger was too wealthy a suitor to be rejected lightly.

Some days after Fanks' visit to M. Judas at the end of November, Judith and Florry were both in the drawing room of the Hall having afternoon tea.

It was a large, handsome apartment, furnished with great artistic taste, principally due to Miss Varlins, who had a wonderful eye for color and effect. A curiously carved oaken ceiling, walls draped with dark red velvet which fell in heavy folds to the velvet pile carpet of the same color, plenty of somber pictures in oil in tarnished gilt frames, many small tables covered with knickknacks (selected by frivolous Florry), numbers of comfortable lounging chairs, inviting repose, and a handsome grand piano littered with loose music (Florry again)—it was truly a delightful room. Then there were cabinets of rare china, monstrous jars of quaint design and bizarre colors, and flowers, flowers everywhere. Both ladies had a perfect passion for flowers, and even in this bleak month of November the most exquisite exotics were to be seen throughout the room in profusion, filling the air with their heavy odors.

Four windows at the other end of the room looked out on to the garden, but were now closed, for it was a cold afternoon, and the driving rain beat against the glass and on the leafless trees outside. A blazing fire in the old-fashioned fire-place with its quaint Dutch tiles, a low table drawn near the hearth, on which stood the tea service, and Miss Varlins in a chair knitting quietly, while Florry fitted about the room like a restless fairy in the waning light.

A handsome woman, Judith Varlins, with a proud, dark face, and a somewhat stern expression, which always relaxed to tenderness when it rested on the diminutive form of Florry. And that young lady was very tiny, more like a piece of Dresden china than anything else, with her delicate complexion, her piquant face, glittering golden hair, and dainty figure. Clothed in white—Miss Marson always affected white—in some lacy material, soft and delicate like a cobweb, she formed a strong contrast to the somber beauty of Judith in her plain, black silk dress.

And the little figure went flitting here and there, now at the window, looking out into the chill twilight, then bending over some great bunch of flowers inhaling the perfume, at the piano striking a few random chords, hovering round the tea table, flashing into the red fire-light, melting into the cold shadows, like to some will-o'-the-wisp, some phantom, some restless shadow rather than anything of this earth.

'Florry, my pet,' said Judith, at length, pausing in her knitting, 'you will tire yourself running about so much.'

Whereupon the fairy floated airily toward the fire, and settled lightly down, like thistledown, on a footstool, where she sat clasping her knees with her arms with a cross expression of countenance, a very discontented fairy indeed.

'For really,' she said, at length, pursuing a train of thought that was in her shallow mind, 'to be called Spolger—Mrs. Jackson Spolger. It's horrid! so is he. The monster!'

'Florry, Florry! don't talk like that about your future husband,' remonstrated Judith; 'it's not nice, my dearest.'

'Neither is he,' retorted Miss Marson, pressing her chin on her knees and staring into the fire; 'he's so lean, like a skeleton, and so crabbed—oh, so crabbed!'

'But he loves you, dear.'

'Yes, like a dog loves a bone. I know he's one of those men who hit their wives over the head with a poker; he looks like a poker man. I wish he was Sebastian, and Sebastian was he.'

'Don't talk about Sebastian, my dear Florence,' said Miss Varlins, severely—that is, as severely as she could be to Florry; 'your father would never have agreed to your marrying such a scamp!'

'He's no worse than other people,' muttered Florry, rebelliously.

'I don't know about other people,' replied Judith coldly; 'but I'm certain Sebastian Melstane would have made you a bad husband. However, he's gone now, and you'll never see him again.'

'Never!'

'No, never! Mr. Melstane has passed out of your life entirely,' said Judith, looking steadily at Florry, who appeared to be rather scared.

'What horrid things you say, Judith, you horrid thing,' she whimpered at length.

'I don't know why Sebastian went away, and I don't know why he hasn't written to me. I thought he loved me, but if he had, he would have written. But he'll come back and explain everything.'

'I'm certain he won't!' answered Judith, sternly.

'Why are you certain?'

'I have my reasons,' said Judith, quietly.

It might have been the twilight or the dancing shadows of the fire, but as she spoke her face seemed to grow old and haggard for the moment, even to Miss Marson's unobservant eyes. Florry with her own blue eyes wide open, a terrified expression on her face, and a tremulous under-lip, suddenly burst into tears, and rising from her footstool, flung herself on her knees at the feet of her cousin, sobbing violently.

'Come, come!' said Miss Varlins, smoothing the golden head as it lay in her lap. 'I did not mean to speak severely; but really, Florry, I was very sorry that Mr. Melstane loved you.'

'I—I can't help it if he did,' sobbed Florry, passionately; it's not my fault if people will love me. There's Mr. Spolger—he's always making love, and that horrid, red-haired Frenchman; every time I go out he never takes his eyes off my face.'

'What! that man at Wosk's?' cried Judith, with great indignation. 'Surely he has not such impertinence!'

'No, he hasn't,' replied Florry, sitting up and drying up her eyes; but he will look at me in such a way. I'm sure he's in love with me—the horrid thing.'

'He was a friend of Mr. Melstane, I believe,' said Judith angrily, 'and you, no doubt, saw him during those foolish meetings with that man.'

'No, I didn't,' answered Florry, going back to her footstool; 'I never saw him at all. And our meetings weren't foolish. I love Sebastian very much, only papa will make me marry this horrid Spolger thing.'

'How many times did you see Mr. Melstane?'

'Five or six times here and once in London.'

'Florry!'

'Well!' said Miss Marson, pettishly, 'you asked me? I saw him in London that day I went to see Aunt Spencer, when we stopped in London on her way to Ventnor.'

'Why didn't Aunt Spencer tell me of it then?'

'She didn't know,' answered Florry, penitently. 'I met Sebastian on the way, and we were together for two hours. Then I went on to Aunt Spencer and told her nothing.'

'And told me nothing also,' said Judith, severely. 'Upon my word, Florry, I did not think you were so deceitful! You met Mr. Melstane in London, and this is the first I hear about it.'

'Well, you were so horrid, Judith,' pouted Florry, playing with her handkerchief; and Sebastian told me to say nothing.'

'He's a bad man?'

'No, he's not,' retorted Miss Marson, angrily; 'he's a very nice man, and I love him very, very much, in spite of Mr. Spolger—there!'

Judith was about to make some angry reply, feeling thoroughly disgusted at Florry's duplicity, when the door was thrown open, and Mr. Marson entered the room.

A tall, severe-looking man, this Francis Marson, with a worn, worried expression on his face. He sighed wearily as he sat down near the fire.

'Oh, what a sigh—what a big sigh!'

cried Florry, recovering her spirits and posing herself on the old man's knee.

'What is the matter, papa?'

'Nothing, child, nothing,' replied Marson, hastily smoothing the golden hair of his darling. 'Business worries, my dear; what I spoke about the other day.'

'Oh!'

Florry drew down the corners of her mouth as if she were going to cry; then, suddenly changing her mind, she threw her arms round her father's neck, and placed her soft face against his withered cheek.

'Don't talk about business, papa,' she said, coaxingly; 'I hate it; it's so disagreeable.'

'So it is for a frivolous young person, like you, dear,' said Mr. Marson cheerfully;

'but it's very necessary all the same. What would become of your thousand and one wants but for this same business you so disapprove of?'

'Oh, I wish I had a fairy purse,' cried Florry, clapping her hands, 'with a gold piece in it every time I opened it. It would save such a lot of trouble.'

'A fairy world,' said Mr. Marson, looking at her fondly; 'that is what you would like. And you the lovely princess whom the handsome prince comes to awaken.'

'Well, Florry has a prince,' said Judith, quietly; the Prince of the Gold Mines!'

She had not been paying much attention to the conversation between father and daughter, as she was evidently thinking deeply, and her thoughts, judging from the severe expression of her countenance, were not particularly pleasant. The last words of Mr. Marson, however, enchaind her attention, and she made the remark about the prince on purpose to see if the old man knew how disagreeable the Spolger alliance was to his child.

'A prince!' echoed Florry, tossing her head. 'And what a prince! He's more like an ogre.'

'A very devoted ogre, at all events,' said Judith significantly.

'Spolger's a good fellow,' observed Marson, hurriedly; 'a little rough, perhaps, but his heart is in the right place. Beauty is only skin-deep.'

'I suppose you mean—' began Florry, when her father interrupted her quickly.

'Florry,' he said, angrily, 'I forbid you to mention that man's name. I would sooner see you in your grave than married to Sebastian Melstane.'

'There's no chance of that occurring now,' interjected Judith, with somber earnestness.

The fairy looked from one to the other with a scared expression of countenance, and seeing how severe they both looked, subsided into a white heap on the hearth rug, and burst into tears.

'How horrid you are, papa,' she cried, dimly; 'and so is Judith. I'm sure Mr. Melstane's very nice. He's so handsome, and talks so beautifully about poetry. He's like Conrad, and Mr. Spolger isn't, and I wish I was dead with a tombstone and a broken heart,' concluded Miss Marson tearfully.

Judith looked at Mr. Marson, and he looked at Judith. They both felt quite helpless in dealing with this piece of frivolity, whose very weakness constituted her strength. At last Mr. Marson, bending down, smoothed Florry's head fondly, and spoke soothingly to her.

'My dear child,' he said quietly, 'you know that all I desire is your happiness; and, believe me, you will thank me in after life for what I am now doing. Sebastian Melstane is a scamp and a spendthrift. If you married him, he would neglect you and make you miserable. Jackson Spolger will make you a good husband, and protect a delicate flower like you from the bleak winds of adversity.'

'But he's so ugly,' sobbed Florry childishly; 'just like what's-his-name in Notre Dame.'

'If you have such an aversion to marry him, Florry, then don't do it,' said Judith, quietly. 'I'm sure your father would not force you into a marriage against your will.'

'By no means,' said Marson, hastily. 'I placed the case before you the other day, Florry, and I place it now. As you know, I have had great losses lately, and unless I can obtain a large sum of ready money I will be irretrievably ruined. Jackson Spolger has promised to put money into the business if you become his wife. I told you this, and you consented, so it is childish of you to go on like this. If you dislike Spolger so much, I will not force you to marry him; but I warn you that your refusal means ruin.'

'You won't let me marry Sebastian Melstane,' said Florry, obstinately.

'No, I won't,' retorted her father, angrily. 'You need not marry Mr. Spolger unless you like, but you certainly shall not marry Sebastian Melstane with my consent; I would rather see you in your grave.'

'Then I suppose I must marry Mr. Spolger,' said Florry, dolefully drying her eyes.

'That is as you please,' replied Marson, rising to his feet and walking to and fro. 'I don't want to sell my child for money. I simply place the case before you, and you are free to refuse or accept as you please. Yes means prosperity, no means ruin, and the choice is entirely in your hands.'

Florry said nothing, but sat on the hearth rug twisting her handkerchief and staring at the fire.

'I would like to say one word, Florry,' said Judith, bending forward. 'If you did not intend to marry Mr. Spolger, you should have said so at first; now the wedding day is fixed for next week, your dresses are ready, the guests are invited, so it would be rather hard on the poor man to dash the cup of happiness from his lips just as he is tasting it.'

'Nevertheless,' said Marson, stopping in