

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

By

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PROLOGUE

IT was late August, the year 18- no matter the exact date, except that the century was growing old. A small house-party was gathered under the sixteenth century roof of that fine old Warwickshire house, "The Antlers."

"Very old famerly, very old t" the head coachman was fond of saying to sight-seers, and others. "Come over with William of Normandy, the first Duerdon did. Famerly allus kept 'emselves very eleck, cream-del-al-cream, as the saying is in hupper cirkles."

The coachman's estimate of the Duerdon House will serve all the purpose we need here, and enable us to move among the guests of the house-party though we have little to do save with two of them - the most striking female personality in the house, Judith Montmarte, and the latest society lion, Colonel Youlter, the Thibet explorer.

Judith Montmarte, as her name suggests, was a Jewess. She was tall - it is curious that the nineteen centuries of Semitic persecution should have left the Jewess taller, in proportion, than the Jew - Judith Montmarte was tall, with a full figure. The contour of her face suggested Spanish blood. Her hair - what a wealth of it there was - was blue-black, finer than such hair usually is, and with a sheen on it like unto a raven's wing. Her eyes were large, black, and melting in their fullness. Her lips were full, and rich in their crimson.

The face was extraordinarily beautiful, in a general way. But though the lips and eyes would be accounted lovely, yet a true student of faces would have read cruelty in the ruby lips, and a shade of hell lurking in the melting black eyes.

A millionairess, several times over, (if report could be trusted) she was known and felt to be a powerful personage. There was not a continental or oriental court where she was not well-known - and feared, because of her power. A much-travelled woman, a wide reader-especially in the matter of the occult; a superb musician; a Patti and a Lind rolled into one, made her the most wonderful songster of the day.

In character - chameleon is the only word that can in anyway describe her.

As regarded her appearances in society, her acceptance of invitations, etc., she was usually regarded as capricious, to a fault. But this was as it appeared to those with whom she had to do. She had been known to refuse a banquet at the table of a prince, yet eat a dish of macaroni with a peasant, or boiled chestnuts with a forest charcoal burner. What the world did not know, did not realize, was that, in these things, she was not capricious, but simply serving some deep purpose of her life.

She had accepted the Duerdon invitation because she specially desired to meet Colonel Youlter.

To-night, the pair had met for the first time, just five minutes before the gong had sounded for dinner. Colonel Youlter had taken her down to the dining-room.

Just at first she had spoken but little, and the Colonel had thought her fatigued, for he had caught one glimpse of the dreamy languor in her great liquid eyes.

An almost chance remark of his, towards the end of the meal, anent the mysticism, the Spiritism of the East, and the growing cult of the same order in the West, appeared to suddenly wake her from her dreaminess. Her dark eyes were turned quickly up to his, a new and eager light flashed in them.

"Do you know," she said, her tone low enough to be caught only by him, "that it was only the expectation of meeting you, and hearing you talk of the occult, of that wondrous mysticism of the East, that made me accept the invitation to this house - that is, I should add, at this particular time, for I had arranged to go to my glorious Hungarian hills this week."

Colonel Youlter searched her face eagerly. Had she spoken the tongue of flattery, or of the mere conventional? He saw she had not, and he began to regard her with something more than the mere curiosity with which he had anticipated meeting her.

In his callow days he had been romantic to a degree. Even now his heart was younger than his years, for while he had never wed, because of a love-tragedy thirty years before, he had preserved a rare, a very tender chivalry towards women. He knew he would never love again, as he had once loved, though, at times, he told himself that he might yet love in a soberer fashion, and even wed.

"You are interested in the occult, Miss Montmarte?" he replied.

She smiled up into his face, as she said:

" 'Interested,' Colonel Youlter? interested is no word for it, for I might almost say that it is a passion with me, for very little else in life really holds me long, compared with my love for it."

She glanced swiftly to right and left, and across the table to see if she was being watched, or listened to. Everyone seemed absorbed with either their plates or their companions.

Bending towards the man at her side, she said, "You know what an evening is like at such times as this. We women will adjourn to the Drawing Room, you men will presently join us, there will be a buzzing of voices, talk - 'cackle' - one of America's representatives used to term it, and it was a good name, only that the hen has done something to cackle about, she has fulfilled the purpose for which she came into existence, and women - the average Society women, at least - do not. Then there'll be singing, of a sort, and - but you know, Colonel, all the usual rigmarole.

"Now I want a long, long talk with you about the subject you have just broached. We could not talk, as we would, in the crowd that will be in the drawing-room presently, so I wonder if you would give me an hour in the library, tomorrow morning after breakfast. I suggest the library because I find it is the one room in the house into which no one ever seems to go. Of course, Colonel Youlter, if you have something else you must needs do in the forenoon, pray don't regard my suggestion. Or, if you would prefer that we walked and talked, I will gladly accommodate myself to your time and your conveniences."

He assured her that he had made no plans for the morrow, and that he would be delighted to meet her in the library, for a good long 'confab' over the subject that evidently possessed a mutual attraction for them.

Mentally, while he studied her, he decided that her chief charm, in his eyes, was her absolute naturalness and unconventionality. "But to some men," he mused "what a danger zone she would prove. Allied to her great beauty, her wealth, and her gifts, there is a way with her that would make her almost absolutely irresistible if she had set her heart on anything!"

An hour later that opinion deepened within him as he listened to her singing in the drawing-room. She had been known to bluntly, flatly refuse an Emperor who had asked her to sing, and yet to take a little Sicilian street singer's tambourine from her hand, and sing the coppers and silver out of the pockets of the folk who had crowded the market-place at the first liquid notes of her song. She rarely sang in the houses of her hosts and hostesses. Tonight she had voluntarily gone to the piano, accompanying herself.

She sang in Hungarian, a folk-song, and a love song of the people of her own land. Yearning and wistful, full of that curious mystical melancholy, that always appealed to her own soul, and which characterizes some of the oldest of the Hungarian folk-songs.

Her second song finished, amid the profoundest hush, she rose as suddenly from the piano as she had seated herself. A little later she was missed from the company. She had slipped away to her room, after a quiet goodnight to her table-companion, Colonel Youlter.

* * * *

At ten-thirty, next morning, Judith Montmarte entered the library. The Colonel was there already. He rose to meet her, saying, "Where will you sit? Where will you be most comfortable."

There was a decidedly "comfo" air about the luxuriously-furnished room.

The eyes of the beautiful woman - she was twenty-eight - swept the apartment and, finally, resting upon a delightful *vis-a-vis*, she laughed merrily, as she said:

"Fancy finding a *vis-a-vis*, and of this luxurious type, too, in a library. I always think it is a mistake to have the library of the house so stiff, sometimes the library is positively forbidding."

She laughed lightly again, as she said. "I'm going off into a disquisition on interiors, so - shall we sit here?"

She dropped into one of the curves of the *vis-a-vis*, and he took the other.

For half-an-hour their talk on their pet subject was more or less general, then he startled her by asking:

"Do you know the Christian New Testament, at all?"

"The Gospels, I have read," she replied, "and am fairly well familiar with them. I have read, too, the final book, "The Revelation," which though a sealed book to me, as far as knowledge of its meaning goes, yet has, I confess, a perennial attraction for me."

She lifted her great eyes to his, a little quizzical expression in them, as she added:

"You are surprised that I, a Jewess, should speak thus of the Gentile scriptures!"

Then, without giving him time to reply, she went on:

"But why did you ask whether I knew anything of the New Testament?"

"Because, apropos of what I said a moment ago, anent the repetition of History, the CHRIST of the New Testament declared that **"as the days of Noe (Noah) were, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be."**

She nodded her beautiful head, as though she would assent to the correctness of his quotation.

"Now I make no profession of being ultra-Christian," he went on, "but I know the letter of the Bible quite as well as most Teachers of Christianity, and without intending any egotism I am sure I dare to say that I know it infinitely better than the average Christian. And if I was a teacher or preacher of the Christian faith I would raise my voice most vehemently against the willful, sinful ignorance of the Bible on the part of the professed Christians. Members of the various so-called 'churches,' seem to know everything except their Bibles. Mention a passage in Spenser, William Wordsworth, Whittier, Longfellow, Tennyson, Browning, or even Swinburne, William Watson, Charles Fox, Carleton, or Lowell, and they can pick the volume off the shelf in an instant, and the next instant, they have the book open at your quotation. But quote Jude or Enoch, or Job on salt with our eggs, and they go fumbling about in the mazes of Leviticus, or the Minor Prophets."

He laughed, not maliciously, but with a certain pitying contempt, as he said:

"The average professing Christian is about as much like the New Testament model of what he should be, as is the straw-stuffed scarecrow in the field, in the pockets of the costume of which the birds conceive it to be the latest joke to build. But I am digressing, I was beginning about the days of Noah and their near future repetition on the earth."

" 'Near repetition!' How do you mean, Colonel?"

Judith Montmarte leaned a little eagerly toward him. In the ordinary way, alone with a man of his type she would have played the coquette. To-day she thought nothing of such trifling. There was something so different in his manner, as he spoke of the things that were engaging them, to even the ordinary preacher.

The pair were as utterly alone as though they had been on the wide, wide sea together in an open boat. She had said truly, over-night, "no one ever comes near the library."

"I mean," he said, replying to her question, "that the seven chief causes of the apostasy which brought down GOD's wrath upon the Antediluvians, have already begun to manifest themselves upon the earth, in such a measure as to warrant one's saying that as it was in the days of Noah, so it is again today, and if the New Testament is true in every letter - we may expect the Return of CHRIST at any moment."

She was staring amazedly at him-enquiring, eager, but evidently puzzled. But she made no sound or sign of interruption, and he went on:

"The first element of the Antediluvian apostasy was the worship of GOD as Creator and Benefactor, and not as the Jehovah-GOD of Covenant and Mercy. And surely that is what we find everywhere to-day. People acknowledge a Supreme Being, and accept CHRIST as a model man, but they flatly deny the Fall, Hereditary Sin, the need of an Atonement, and all else that is connected with the Great Evangel. The Second cause of Antediluvian apostasy was the disregard of the original law of marriage, and the increased prominence of the female sex."

Judith Montmarte smiled back into his face, as she said:

"Oh that you would propound that in a convention of New Women! And yet-yet-yes, you are right, as to your fact, as regards life, to-day."

The pair had a merry, friendly spar for a moment or two, then, at her request, he resumed his subject, and, for a full half hour, he amazed her with his comparisons of the Antediluvian age with the present time. He was an interesting speaker and she enjoyed the time immensely. But, presently, when he came to his seventh and last likeness between the two ages, since it had to do with a curious phase of Spiritism, she became more intensely interested.

"There seems to me," he said, "but one correct way of interpreting that historical item of those strange, Antediluvian days:

'The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.'

“The superficial rendering of this, sometimes given, that it signifies nothing more than the intermarriage of Cainites and Sethites, will not suffice when a deeper examination is made in the languages. The term '**Sons of God**' does not appear to have any other meaning in the Old Testament, than that of angels.

"Some of the angels, with Lucifer, fell from their high estate in Heaven, and were banished from Heaven. Scripture clearly proves in many places that these fallen ones took up their abode '**in the air,**' the Devil becoming, even as CHRIST Himself said: '**Prince of the power of the air.**'

"Now both Peter and Jude, in their epistles allude to certain of these fallen, air-dwelling angels, leaving their first estate, and the mention of their second fall is sufficiently clear to indicate their sin - intermarriage with the fairest of the daughters of men. Their name as given in the old Testament, '**Nephilim**' means '*fallen ones.*' In their original condition, as angels in Heaven, they '**neither married nor were given in marriage.**' It is too big a subject, Miss Judith-."

Hurriedly, eagerly, for she wanted him to continue his topic, she said:

"Call me Ju, or Judith, or Judy, Colonel, and drop the 'Miss,' and do please go on with this very wonderful subject."

"Thank you, Ju," he laughed, then continuing his talk, he said:

"It is far too big a subject, Ju, in all its details, to talk of here and now, but, broadly, the fact seems to me to remain, that fallen angels assumed human shape, or in some way held illicit intercourse with the women of the day, a race of giant-like beings resulting. For this foul sin GOD would seem to have condemned these doubly sinning fallen angels to Tartarus, to be reserved unto Judgment.

" '**Now as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be in the coming of the Son of Man,**' and-"

Judith Montmarte caught her breath sharply, and, in an unconscious movement of eager wonder, let her beautiful hand drop upon his wrist, as she gasped "you don't think - you don't mean - er - er -, tell me, Colonel, do you mean to say that-"

"I do mean," he replied, "that I am firmly convinced that so far has demonology increased - the door being opened by modern spiritualism - that I believe this poor old world of ours is beginning to experience a return of this association between fallen spirits and the daughters of men. Of course, I cannot enter into minute detail with you, Ju, but let me register my firm conviction, that I believe from some such demoniacal association, there will spring the '**Man of Sin**' - 'The Antichrist.'

At that instant, to the utter amaze of both of them, the first luncheon gong sounded.

They had been talking for nearly three hours. With the request from Judith, and a promise from him to resume the subject at the first favourable opportunity, they parted.

Intensely, almost feverishly excited, Judith went to her room. Beautiful in face and form as she was, she was fouler than a Lucretia Borgia, in soul, in thought. And now, as a foul, wild, mad thought surged through her brain, she murmured, half-aloud:

"Demon or man, what matters! If I thought I could be the Mother of The Antichrist, I would - so much do I hate the Nazarene, the CHRIST-."

She spat through the open window as she uttered the precious, though to her the hated name of the Son of GOD.

~ end of Prologue ~

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