

JUST IN TIME.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT, AUTHOR OF "JAGGER'S WIFE," "UNDER FALSE PRETEXTS," &c.

CHAPTER XIII (continued).

There was a knock. Beatrice stood aloof from the door and regarded him with a look of startled inquiry, not mingled with a sort of horror. But Morven neither looked nor spoke.

"Don't excite yourself. He is doing well enough. You have not hurt him. Beatrice uttered an involuntary exclamation of thankfulness. But Lord Morven did not look up.

"Will he recover?" he asked. "I hope so. I think that he may. His condition is better than I expected. Lord Morven gave me no sign of gladness. He sat perfectly still as he had sat before; only a line between his brows grew deeper and blacker as he looked before him and said nothing. The doctor glanced at him, and then at Beatrice, before he returned to his patient. Beatrice interpreted the look as an appeal—the doctor wanted her to say something to cheer or comfort her cousin. She was rather of opinion that Morven was best left to himself, but she deferred to Dr. Airlie's judgment. She made a step towards him, and opened her lips to speak.

But Morven took her by surprise. He lifted his hand and said in hoarse tones: "Don't ask me to tell you what he said. He has disgraced himself. If he lives, I—I will never see him—never speak to him again. If he dies, I shall be thankful."

"Some explanation must be made to Mr. Lockhart or Mr. Douglas," said Beatrice. "Why? They have no right to demand explanations when—when their property is restored," said Lord Morven, with haughty bitterness. "Good heavens! to think that Gerald should try to rob another man!"

"It could not be," said Beatrice. "Oh, Morven, it is impossible." "I have his own word for it. Why do you force me to say so? This was robbing the house—robbing Beatrice. Douglas's house—when you found him. There is no other explanation. He does not deny it. He only said that he had a worthy object. A worthy object indeed! I heard no more."

"He cannot be in his right mind. Some delusion must have taken hold of him. Dr. Airlie says such delusions are possible. And do you not remember," said Beatrice, gaining courage as she went on, "that when he was little boy, he had some odd fancies—optical delusions and things of that kind?"

Lord Morven had recovered his calmness by this time. He rose and took his cousin by the hand. "My dear Beatrice," he said, "Gerald's delusions never led him to steal. In this case he accuses himself of stealing. He avows it; one might almost think that he gloried in it, I wish I had reason to doubt his word."

Beatrice loved her youngest cousins with a sister's love. Lillias was well worthy of her affection; but Gerald, wild, wayward, erratic, as his course had always been, received perhaps a larger share of her tenderness than he by any means deserved. It was this strong, warm misty feeling that welled up in her heart and caused to risk even Morven's displeasure—usually a somewhat formidable thing—by pleading in Gerald's favor.

"You will help to save him, will you not, Morven?" she said. "You will not be cruel to him? You would not surely—surely—give him up?" She stopped, not daring to say more, although he was usually less afraid of her cousin than anyone else in that household. "I shall do nothing," said Morven stonily. Then, as he turned away, Beatrice heard him murmur, "I have done too much already."

She would have made some rejoinder but for Dr. Airlie's re-appearance. The old man expressed some surprise at her remaining up so long after her evening of excitement and fatigue, and recommended her in polite but peremptory terms to go to bed. Beatrice accepted her dismissal meekly, only bargaining to be called if any dangerous symptom should declare itself or she could be of any use. Lord Morven seemed to take little notice of her departure. He was leaning against the wall, as if some unwonted physical weakness had overtaken him; his face was deadly pale, and his eyes were riveted to the floor. It was Stephen Airlie who opened the door for Miss Esilmont, and bowed her out with that serene fatherliness which characterized him in company with young people. Lord Morven did not hear the doctor whisper in the girl's ear as she left the room. "Keep those papers to yourself, so he said."

Beatrice bent her steps mechanically towards her own room, but when she stood upon its threshold she remembered that Anthony Lockhart was waiting for her somewhere—waiting, also for the promised explanation. And she had no explanation to give? For a moment Beatrice's heart sank; then it rose again on a wave of bitter indignation. What right had this stranger to interfere on behalf of Beatrice's interest? A kinsman he might be, but he had known his cousin for a few weeks or months only, while they—the Ruthvens—had been intimate with Beatrice from her very boyhood. Beatrice did not reflect that the circumstances of difficulty and danger into which the cousins had been forced together were likely to have linked them far more closely than years of casual acquaintance. She resented the idea of Anthony's possessing a larger share than herself and Morven and Gerald of Beatrice's confidence. She left Lillias out of the question. The relation between Beatrice and Lillias was separate and apart.

Thinking of these things she questioned whether it would not be better to go to Beatrice himself and tell him the whole story. He was tender-hearted and whole-hearted enough, she thought, to hear the worst of Gerald and to forgive. But she shrank a little from the experiment. She did not know that he had spoken definitely to Lillias of his love for her; and she, with her sensitive pride on the alert, as she had her tender care of Lillias's happiness, was inclined to fear that the knowledge of Gerald's wrong going about would hurt her away from a family of which one had disgraced himself as poor Gerald had done.

On the other hand, would it be honorable to let his name be mentioned without telling him the story? Between love for her cousins, concern for her old friend Bertie, regard for the honor of the family to which she belonged, Beatrice lost something of the clear, calm judgment and haughty decision for which she was renowned. She felt herself weak and wavering as a child. She wondered that neither Lillias nor Bertie seemed to be aware of Gerald's condition. Neither of them had come to inquire after him. She learned afterwards that Dr. Airlie had taken precautions against their knowing the extreme gravity of the situation, and that after waiting for an hour or so and receiving an encouraging letter from the doctor, Lillias had gone peacefully to bed. Beatrice turned from her room to her cousin's—the two rooms—ad and looked at the pretty golden-haired creature as she lay asleep. The early dawn was creeping in between the curtains of the room. Beatrice bent down in the dim light and kissed her cousin's forehead. "No harm shall come to you if I can avert it, my darling," she murmured, as she turned away. "I will sacrifice anything to your happiness."

She went back to her own room, and there had half by unconscious movement upon the packet of paper that had fallen out of the box in the burning house. She drew them out and set them on the table before her. Should she keep them to herself, as the Doctor had counselled? Even—rash thought—destroy them, as links in the chain of evidence that might one day be used for the proving of Gerald's crime? Which should she do?

She looked down at them thoughtfully. A new determination moulded the curves of her lips and changed the expression of her eyes. "At any rate," she said to herself half aloud, "I will read them first."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEATRICE'S BARGAIN.

Dull, dispirited, and entirely ill at ease, Anthony Lockhart had waited for what seemed to him an eternity of time. Miss Esilmont had certainly promised to see him again and, if possible, to explain to him the suspicious circumstances under which Gerald Ruthven had been found in Bertie's house; but she stayed away so long that he began to wonder whether she had forgotten her promise, or whether he had been mistaken as to what she had said. He had chosen to make the long corridor his resting-place; there were plenty of seats ranged here and there along the sides, and numerous pictures and weapons on the walls with mind to occupy his attention. But Anthony was to seriously disturbed in mind to give any thought to these distractions. He was beginning to awake to a keen sense of the unpleasantness and untenability of his position. After all, as Miss Esilmont had said, he had no special right to interfere. If Lord Morven—Bertie's guardian—were satisfied, Lockhart could do and say nothing. He knew well enough that the circumstances in which he had been found might easily be explained—that he himself would scarcely have thought them suspicious but for the facts in Gerald's past career, which made him, in Anthony's eyes, for ever untrustworthy. He had known for years that it was Gerald Ruthven, Lord Morven's brother, who committed the theft from the bookstall for which Anthony had been punished

in his boyhood. He knew that Dr. Airlie had screened his own pupil by a false oath in order to save the reputation of Lord Morven's family. And out of this great wrong, over which he had brooded in silence for many years, there had grown up in Anthony's heart a sense of bitterness and injury which rendered him peculiarly ready to think the worst and hope the least from men and women who held high positions in the world. He believed that they were all alike—self-seeking, insolent and false; that true nobility of soul dealt with those who toiled and strove for their daily bread; and that riches corrupt the heart like sin itself. He despised luxury and wealth, loathing the temptations that they brought. The one point on which he was vulnerable and even weak was his desire to do work that the country would value—to be in some way or another a leader of men; and the unlikeliness of his success in this direction was a bitter drop in his cup which he owed also to Gerald Ruthven. For he had arrived by reflection at a pretty clear idea of the state of his grandfather's mind when old Mr. Lockhart came to the Police Court to hear his case. He was pretty sure that but for that conviction of guilt—so cleverly contrived by Dr. Airlie—he would never have been master of Glenberrie. He did not grudge Bertie Douglas his good fortune, but he had never forgiven Gerald Ruthven. It was one of the regrets which had animated his life for years—that some day he would tax Gerald Ruthven with his guilt and make him "eat dust," as the Easterns say, for his shameful cowardice. He had never meant to stay seven for an hour under Lord Morven's roof; as it was, he had not yet broken broken bread in the house, and did not intend to do so; but his revengeful project had been stayed. He could do nothing while Gerald lay senseless, perhaps dying; but he bitterly resented the position of fortune into which he had been thrown. In spite of Lord Morven's illness he would have made a clean breast of his suspicions to Bertie, but for Beatrice's intercession. Beatrice had interceded for him; he felt himself bound to show Beatrice some little consideration, and yet he wished he could never see her. He wished with all his heart that she was not a relation of the man whom he had vowed for years to punish, and whom destiny seemed at last to have placed within his hands.

"Never was a man so bound by circumstances," he said to himself, angrily. "I must show some gratitude to the woman who worked with me for Bertie's sake, only a few hours ago. But I will be forced into silence. Unless some explanations are forthcoming I'll have the whole story out to the light of day. People will believe me now. I have told hard enough to get into a position where they would believe me. I'm not going to be balked of my revenge, although Miss Esilmont may come to me a hundred times and beg me to keep the secret. Of all things in the world a secret is what I hate. I will not be bound down to keep this one. And yet—it's a horribly hard thing to refuse her—under the circumstances."

He gnawed his black moustache and looked down at the floor. He had stopped short in his walk, and was leaning against a marble pillar which formed one of the supports to an archway about halfway down the corridor. Thus absorbed in thought, he did not hear the rustle of a woman's dress beside him, and not until a gleam of light from a candle fell upon his face was he conscious that Miss Esilmont had come at last.

She started and changed his position, looking at her with involuntarily admiring eyes. There was something in her appearance which compelled his admiration. She was still pale with fatigue and pain, but there was a light in her eyes which told of a triumph which he could not understand. She had not changed her dress, but from some womanly instinct, perhaps, of adding dignity to her appearance, she had caught up and flung round her graceful shoulders a rich, soft shawl of Indian manufacture, where gold threads gleamed out from between the dull blue and crimson and amber hues—a garment fit for a queen's daughter, which Lord Morven had himself presented to her on a return from a trip to India. Beatrice's left hand was in a sling; she held the candle in her right, and as she raised it she looked calmly and proudly into Anthony's face.

"May I trouble you," she said, "to come with me into the library? We may be interrupted here at any moment, and I have something important to say to you."

Anthony bowed and followed. He felt conscious that he ought to apologize, that he ought to tell her that he could trust her and would wait for an explanation until it was convenient for her to give him one; but his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth. He could not speak.

She led the way to the library, a great dark room in which her candle made a mere flicker of light. She set it down on the table, and then signed to him to take a chair. A casket could not have been more coldly distant in manner, or more courteously mindful of her visitor's convenience.

Here Anthony found voice. "I beg your pardon," he said, in a harsh, vexed tone; "I did not know—at least, I think we had perhaps better put off this conversation until tomorrow. Don't you think so?"

"Why?" said Miss Esilmont, drily. "He stammered out something about the lateness of the hour and her need of repose. As he spoke he looked at her curiously out of his half-sharpened, half-angry eyes, and thought that she was the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen. But his reluctant and almost sullen manner told nothing of his admiration."

Beatrice's lip curved with a rather scornful smile. "It is useless to say that now," she answered. "I am prepared to speak to you, and I wish to get the matter over as soon as possible."

She had set the candle on the table and lighted a lamp which stood close by while she was speaking. "Now," she went on, "we can see each other's faces. I always like to see the faces of those with whom I have to do. Well, Mr. Lockhart, have you anything to say before I begin?"

With one hand resting upon the square library table, and her eyes calmly regarding him, she looked so resolute and so self-possessed that Anthony was somewhat taken aback. No woman, he thought, would look and speak in that manner unless she were sure of her own ground. This reflection shows us that Mr. Lockhart knew very little about women; for women will use an assured manner as a weapon of self-defence when they are forwardly quaking with doubt and fear. And Beatrice knew that she was about to enter upon a duel, of which the issue was extremely problematical.

"No," said Anthony, with an effort, "I have nothing to say, except that I trust that Mr. Gerald Ruthven is recovering."

"He is better, I believe. I come, as you know, Mr. Lockhart, in fulfilment of a promise," said Beatrice, in fulfilment of a promise. "I promised to give you Gerald's explanation of his presence at Glenberrie."

"I understand," said Anthony, with a slight bow and satirical smile. "You find that the matter cannot be explained satisfactorily, and family pride prevents your acknowledging the truth. I understand perfectly."

"Excuse me," said Mr. Gerald Ruthven, who was unable to make any representations to her on the subject? "If he has," said Beatrice, courageously. "I am not at liberty to lay them before you."

"Then," said Anthony, tentatively, "you are prepared for my placing the whole matter in Bertie's hands?" "No; a thousand times no."

"You are very hard," said Beatrice, almost passionately. "What makes you so hard?" Have you no pity? I thought, from what Bertie told us about you, that you were at least a kind hearted man."

"You were mistaken," said Anthony bitterly. "I am not kind hearted, I have no cause to be. I have been wronged all my life by—"

"There is more in your determination than lies on the surface. You have some special grudge against Gerald. You hate him for some cause or other?" "You draw conclusions rapidly," said Anthony. But she noticed that he said neither or no.

"It is not generous," said Anthony. "Your cousin would scarcely like to see Gerald injured—or disgraced—"

"My cousin must submit to have justice done," said Anthony, almost sternly. "The head of the family! Of a family that would ever hear my name, never recognize my existence!" cried Anthony. "If it were not for Bertie, do you think I should be here now? He is the only one of the Lockharts who ever stretched forth a hand to me. I am grateful to him; but I owe nothing to any other of the Lockharts."

"Your grandfather relented, perhaps—at last," said Beatrice slowly. "Relented!"—Anthony's sneer was a forced one, and covered more pain than irony, but Beatrice did not like it. "Relented! I do not know that he did relent; and if he did, I should give him no thanks for his change of mind. Do you know that he drove me from his door with threats and blows when I was a homeless, destitute lad of ten years old? It was a wonder that I did not go straight to the devil—Again I beg your pardon; I know that that is a word which one does not use in a lady's presence, but I am not accustomed to ladies. I was starved and beaten and driven from pillar to post for years. I don't say this by way of complaint. I rejoice now that I had that experience; it taught me many things that I should never have learnt without it. It taught me, amongst other things, to put no faith in any man—especially if he be prosperous."

"That was a hard lesson," said Beatrice, who was watching him attentively. "Ay, it was hard. I learnt it in prison."

"In prison?" "Yes, Miss Esilmont. You are talking to a man who was once in jail for theft."

The grim triumph of his tone, the straightforward glance of his keen dark eyes, led Beatrice to exclaim, impulsively— "Ah, but you were not guilty!" "No," he said, and a sombre look came into those piercing eyes; "no, I was not guilty. But I bore the punishment. I am not really any the worse for that experience either; only—it was not a pleasant one. I do not forgive the persons who brought it upon me."

"And now," said Beatrice, with a strange little catch in her voice, "now that you have made your way in the world, now that you are known and respected and independent, now you regret that you have not the pestilence which would have been yours by right if your grandfather had not disinherited his son?"

"No," said Anthony sternly. "No, I do not regret it."

"You could have gone into Parliament. You could have been a leader of men. You would have had a great career."

The man's eyes flashed at the sound of the softly spoken sentences. Then he smiled, and folded his arms. "You read character quickly, Miss Esilmont. It is a dangerous gift," he said.

She knew that he would not acknowledge to her that her words were like a clarion-call to him; that she had laid her finger unerringly on the sore place in his heart—the consciousness that he must necessarily remain obscure for many years, even if he obtained success in the end, because of his poverty, and the bad start that he had had in beginning life. How she divined all this she scarcely knew. Perhaps the needs of the spirit are easily divined by those who have felt the same. And Beatrice was of an ambitious disposition.

But, seeing that he would not show the pain she believed he felt, she changed her tact; she was not speaking at random; she had a point in view. She thought she saw a way of bending even this proud man to her will. The color began to rise in her cheeks as she went on; in spite of her usual calmness she felt her hands tremble. She had a secret in her possession, and she did not mean to give it for nothing. How much would he pay her for the knowledge of what she knew? "Even if you care so little about your own future," she said—knowing all the time that Lockhart cared for it as passionately as any man could do—, even if you are perfectly willing that your younger cousin should enjoy your position and possess all the advantages of which you would make so much more use than he—still you might care a little for an expression of your grandfather's real feeling for you. You might perhaps like to know that he grieved for his harshness, that he thought of you and tried to provide for you at the last. Would that not soften your feelings towards him?"

"I might do so, said Anthony, looking at her intently. Then, with a sudden change of countenance, "You mean that you know something about him that I don't know. Yes, I should like to hear."

"I do know something," Beatrice responded softly. "I know how to reverse the positions that you and Bertie hold. Do you understand? You may be master of Glenberrie if you like. You have only to say the word."

"What word?" "Say that you will not harm Gerald—and I will tell you all."

She had made her venture now. She had thrown her bait; would the fish rise? For the moment she held her breath; the role that she was playing was new to her; she had never bargained for anything before.

The silence lasted for a minute or two. It was broken by a strange laugh from Anthony—an agitated, unmitigated laugh. "Good heavens!" he said, and then he laughed again. "I believe the girl thinks that she can bribe me to keep 'the secret'!"

TO BE CONTINUED.

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