

JUST IN TIME.

BY ADELINA SERGEANT, AUTHOR OF "JACOB'S WIFE," "UNDESIRABLE PARTNERS," &c.

CHAPTER X. SKELETON KEYS.

Miss Easimont's words were received with incredulity. The other occupants of the carriage, sitting at a lower level, and behind her, could not see so much as she could of the fire that certainly existed. There was a great smell of burning; clouds of smoke already filled the air; but Lord Morven maintained his tranquillity.

"Some of the outbuildings, probably," he said, with his wonted air of calm. "It is impossible that any great fire should have broken out without our being informed of it."

"You forget," said Beatrice, turning her head once more for a moment, "that we have driven down the private way, and that the townspeople would come in on the other side of the grounds."

Lord Morven was silent. Lockhart felt uneasy, but Beatrice, though she had a sign of discomposure, even asked a totally irrelevant question.

"Lady Lilia is well, I hope?" he said to the Earl.

"Perfectly well, thank you. She is at home," said Lord Morven, with great urbanity, "but she did not like to leave a few friends whom she had been entertaining, and—in fact, the afternoon drive would have been too cold for her. She will be no doubt pleased to see you tomorrow—or whenever."

He did not finish his sentence. A rush of smoke, a cinder or two struck him in the face. "Ouf," he murmured, drawing back his head, "this is very unpleasant."

Earl laid his white hand gently on Beatrice's arm. "My dear fellow," he said, "I am very sorry for you. But there is no use in risking your health for the sake of a sentiment. You can do nothing; I can do nothing. It would be better to retire."

"You can retire if you like," answered Beatrice, with a cold smile. "But I must stay—I must stay and see the end."

"No body can save the place," remonstrated Anthony. "You'll be laid up with fever tomorrow—I am sure of it. I'll join you at the inn by-and-by. They say there is a good inn near the bridge."

"An inn?" interposed Lord Morven, with a touch of stately surprise. "I trust that you will not insult my hospitality by going to an inn at such a moment. You and your friend Douglas—I beg pardon, your cousin—are heartily welcome to Morven House."

Anthony made a quick movement of refusal, but his snicker was cut short. Beatrice's face had been growing whiter and whiter during the last few words; he recoiled now, and would have fallen to the ground but for Anthony's quickly extended arm.

"Good heavens!" said Lord Morven, putting on his eye-glass, and surveying poor Beatrice's pallid face and half-closed eyes with a kind of disgusted alarm, "is he often like this?"

"Only when he has had a dangerous illness, and seen his house burnt down before his eyes," said Anthony sharply, as he laid his cousin gently on the grass and left for his own flask. "That's all."

Lord Morven looked at him doubtfully as if astonished by the irony which Anthony infused into his voice; but dropped his eyes and moved immediately and moved backward a few steps.

And indeed the work of destruction had gone so speedily and so completely that there was little hope of saving much from the interior of the house; and few persons had been willing so imperil their lives or limbs by venturing near the blazing building. The absence of firemen and fire-engines had been severely felt.

"I'll go back," Anthony exclaimed, rather suddenly, as he perceived that the efforts of the men who had been trying to save the small West wing were fruitless in the absence of a leader.

"I'll go back and do what I can, now that you are better," Lord Morven said to Anthony, "I believe, and Miss Easimont."

"There's nothing in the house worth your running any risk for," said Beatrice. "Any property is worth saving," answered Anthony solemnly. And then he turned to rejoin the group of men with whom he had been working until Beatrice's fainting fit caused him to pause, and on turning, he saw something which caused him first to start, and then to be seized with a slight inexplicable feeling of annoyance.

Lord Morven's attitude to Miss Easimont was at that moment curiously egotistical—a casual observer might have said lover-like. He had taken her hand in his, and was holding it as if he listened to what she had to say with a look of unaccustomed eagerness upon his face.

"You must not stay," Lord Morven had been saying in reply to some remark from Beatrice. "It is not fit for you; and I cannot allow it."

"Then you must pardon it," said Beatrice, looking up at him with a quick resolute smile, "for I mean to stay."

"Beatrice, be guided by me," he said to her, and then he put his hand on hers. "For my sake."

"Is the man a perfect brute?" said Miss Easimont, indignantly. She was so seldom thwarted that his implied blame made her wince. But his words acted on her as a spur to exertion. She would show this insolent stranger what she could do! A woman was not always a weak, useless creature; she had sometimes as strong a head, as steady a nerve, as any man!

The west wing was comparatively uninjured. If the fire-engines had been present, it might have been saved. But as the flames were still spreading, though they seemed just now to rage less furiously, the only thing that could be done was to save the furniture; and the men from the village were busily engaged in tearing down pictures from the walls, throwing curtains and cushions, and carpets and bedding and books, out of the windows. A very well furnished suite of rooms that had been occupied by old Mr. Lockhart in former days was situated in this wing; and his library and collection of curiosities were well worth saving.

Anthony at once went forward and threw himself into the work. A good deal could yet be done, and his great strength, his untiring energy, were invaluable. What vexed him from time to time was to meet Miss Easimont, busy as herself, and quite as energetic, if not as strong. He could not refuse her a tribute of admiration; her courage, her agility, and her spirit were all remarkable, but he disapproved even while he admired.

In his opinion Beatrice Easimont was an uncommonly woman. Her determination to face the difficulty and danger of an enterprise which should have been undertaken only (he thought) by the strongest and bravest men; for remaining on the spot at all without protector, without assistance, her eagerness to work with her own hands, even for the saving of her own possessions, struck him as decidedly contrary to all ideas of feminine propriety. And yet she was so triumphantly, defiantly handsome, and did such astonishingly useful work, and that he could not but acknowledge, grudgingly enough—that her services were worth those of two or three slowly moving laborers from the village.

But the smoke grew thicker every moment in the rooms of the West wing. The floors grew hot, the woodwork began to crumble like tinder and burst into flame. The upper room caught fire first, of all, and the work of destruction made more progress than was at first suspected. Lockhart and his helpers were speedily driven from their work, and had collected silently at some distance from the house to watch its final destruction, when a word was spoken which drove the blood from every cheek.

Where was Miss Easimont? "Surely she is here," said Anthony, almost angrily. "Miss Easimont—!" But there was no answer to his call. "Who saw her last?"

There was a confused hubbub of voices in reply. One had seen her upstairs, tearing down books and pictures and curtains to throw out of the windows; another had met her in a corridor, with her hands full of silver and china; another had seen her in the shrubbery outside. But a vague report was current that she had rushed back into the house, saying that there was yet time to save some of the valuable books in old Mr. Lockhart's library.

"And that room was in the west wing," said one, looking up at the windows, and part which a storm of smoke and fire was being driven by the rising wind. Anthony made a rush forward—not a minute too soon. A window in the upper story was suddenly thrown open, and a woman's form appeared in the aperture. Yes, it was Beatrice herself; Beatrice, who through some rashness or misadventure, had run into terrible danger from which she was totally unable to extricate herself.

"A man!" exclaimed Anthony, in amazement, as he leaped into the room, which was already full of smoke, through which a man's figure lying on the floor could barely be discerned. "I must get you down first," he said to Beatrice.

"No. I can get down myself. He must be carried—if you can do it."

"Go then," said Anthony, peremptorily. "You can get down while I am lifting him. Do; you cannot help me—except by going at once."

Beatrice made no answer. She saw that he spoke the truth. She gathered up two or three articles which were scattered on the floor, and began to descend the ladder, while he fitted the man—who had fortunately a light, spare figure—and followed her to the window.

She descended safely, and a shout of joy came from the watching crowd. Then Anthony followed—slowly and carefully making his way down the rungs of the ladder, frightfully encumbered with his burden, but never for one moment losing his presence of mind in face of the danger which threatened him. For some time he had been the peril which he stood. The flames darted upward as if they wanted to seize upon him like fiery serpents of destruction—the walls seemed to shake as if they would collapse before his very eyes.

But the ground was reached at last, and only just in time. Through the cry of exultation that greeted him, Anthony heard a crash of falling beams and woodwork. He saw a burst of fire from the window immediately below the one he had just quitted, which would have signally cut off his retreat, had it not occurred two minutes previously. Some part of the building had evidently fallen in, and all hope of further rescue of property or human life—if any was in danger—was at an end. The whole house seemed to be wrapped in flames.

Anthony waved away the little crowd that pressed forward to applaud and congratulate him; he carried the rescued man to some distance from the fire, and laid him on the ground, then he turned to Beatrice.

"Is a doctor here?" he said. "This young fellow seems to be injured. Do you know him?" "Yes—yes, I know him," said Beatrice, in strangely agitated tones.

"You are detestable!" Miss Easimont broke out passionately.

"She had a fiery temper and a strong will, and she was not accustomed to misce her words. Her exclamation was accompanied by a scornful flash of her dark eyes, and an impatient movement of her hand. "Any other man would do what I wished! You—you only—"

"I am very much obliged to you," said Anthony, with a jeering smile on his lips, as he knelt down to examine into the state of the man whom he had saved. He did not call, however, for further assistance. Beatrice was too angry to notice the fact, but she remembered it afterwards.

There were noble elements in the characters of these two, this man and this woman, but it must be allowed that at that moment such elements were not very visible. Anthony was hard and suspicious; Beatrice was anxious, frightened, and passionately angry at all once. Several persons again drew near to help, but she waved them back with the air of authority which seemed so natural to her: "Please keep away for a few minutes," she said in her clear, haughty tones. "The man needs air—he is not hurt."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Anthony, in an undertone. "At this point the man opened his eyes and gazed wildly about him. Anthony took the opportunity of looking at him attentively. Now that the brown tint was removed from his features and the black ring from his head it could be seen that he was a young and handsome man—fair, light-haired, blue-eyed. In spite of coarse and shabby garments, in spite of a position in which he had been found, Anthony was forced to admit that the fellow looked like a gentleman; not like a common house-breaker. But what was Miss Easimont's relation to him?"

"What is it? Where am I?" said the young man, trying to raise himself, but falling back again. Then he uttered a groan—a groan of despairing anguish which rang for many a long day in the ears of those who heard it. "God help me!" he said. "I remember now. All's lost."

"What is lost?" said Beatrice, bending over him.

"He seemed to become aware of her presence for the first time. "You here?" he said. "You? "What is the matter? Can I help you?" she asked.

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