

JUST IN TIME.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT, AUTHOR OF "JACOB'S WIFE," "UNDER PALESTINE," &c.

CHAPTER IX. A STRANGER HOME-COMING.

There was a curious grave look on Anthony's face when he presented himself next morning at his cousin's bedside. One might have thought that he felt some reluctance at the idea of becoming Bertie's chosen confidant. Bertie himself was conscious of the still in his manner; but he did not mind. Mr. Bertie Douglas was a very acute young man, in spite of his last manner; and those soft brown eyes of his saw more than the world gave him credit for seeing. He had a keen perception of the state of Anthony's feelings towards himself and his family, and he was disposed to do something towards the amelioration of that state. But he knew better than to go straight to his end with a man like Lockhart. He entered at once upon the subject of his letter to Lord Morven.

"To tell the truth," said Anthony, abruptly, "I don't see what you want to do with the letter. I will write a letter or any number of letters, as you dictate, but there is absolutely no chance as to what you may want."

"What must I say?" Bertie asked.

"That you have no thought of leaving the army, and would be very glad to do anything without his sanction."

"Ah!" said Bertie, raising his eyebrows. "But suppose that isn't true? There was a suggestion of laughter in his dark eyes, which made Anthony impatient."

"Of course," he said, smiling a little between his finger and thumb, and bending his brows a little. "Of course, if you have made up your mind to do anything without his sanction."

Bertie laughed aloud, and it reached Anthony's ears almost simultaneously with his hand as white as paper, and as that of a delicate woman, and it was very different from his cousin's harsh, brown skin and strong features. "Don't be in such a hurry," he said. "I've got something to tell you—something that Morven doesn't know."

"Two days ago," said Bertie, deliberately. "I had a letter from a soldier in Bombay. It seems that my father held a Judgeship in Bombay for many years. He is just dead, but he has left his fortune, which was considerable, to myself. It is here it is, something like fifty thousand pounds. There's a windfall for a poor but deserving young man!"

He spoke in a light tone, but he carefully avoided looking into Lockhart's face. He need not have been so careful. There was nothing in Lockhart's face but what all the world might have seen. "A BOMBAY JUDGESHIP?"

"I congratulate you," Anthony said quietly. "No doubt this fact after matters. You will go home, I suppose, and marry Lady Lillias at once?"

"Ah, that's the mischief of it!" cried Bertie. "I am not to marry till I am twenty-five without Lord Morven's consent—which I don't believe that he will ever give. If I do forget Glenberrie?"

"And you are now—"

"Twenty-two."

"What a tyrant that grandfather of ours seem to have been!" said Anthony with a disgusted shrug of his shoulders. "At any rate, your course is clear. You will write at once to Lord Morven, and tell him of this change in your circumstances, and he will see no objection to your living in your own house if you wish to do so. This money comes to you unconditionally, I suppose?"

"Yes, I am free to make ducks and drakes of it as I choose and when I choose."

"What was the name of your father's friend?"

"Rutherford. I'm called after him, by the bye—I had almost forgotten the fact. And you think I should go home at once?"

"I did not say so. But I fancy you will have no choice. You will be invalided home for the present. I suppose, and the question will be whether you ought not to abandon all idea of Scotland and spend the spring in some southern city. I can tell you of a very good place on the Riviera."

Anthony was going on in his steady, somewhat cold and unimpassioned way, when he became aware that Bertie was not listening to him. He was lying on his back, with his eyes looking dreamily into the distance, and a faint smile upon his lips. When Anthony involuntarily paused his cousin started in with a remark which seemed, in Lockhart's opinion, to be strikingly irrelevant.

"Anthony," he said, "I want you to go home with me."

"Go home with you? I wish I could," replied Anthony, without showing the surprise that he certainly felt pleased at this proposition.

"Why can't you?"

"I am engaged by the proprietors of a weekly newspaper to send them news and sketches. I have neglected my work a good bit during the last few days, if I throw it up, I throw up my chances of other employment, don't you see?" Bertie's voice was raised little above a whisper, as he murmured—

"Throw them up."

"And what shall I do for a living?"

"Come with me."

"With you?" Anthony was silent for a moment, when he laughed—"As a courier, valet, or general hanger-on and relation? Which?"

"I haven't considered the capacity," said Bertie, calmly. "As a brother, I think, rather than courier, valet, or any of the other functions you mention."

Lockhart started from his seat, a deep blush flushing the swarthy brownness of his forehead, on which the veins began visibly to swell. He stood regarding Bertie with an uncertain look, almost suspicious one. His under lip was nearly bitten through.

"Why do you make that proposal?" he said, harshly. "Have I asked you any help? Have I asked to give you your good fortune?"

"Good fortune, so?" said Bertie, sitting down, "my dear fellow, and don't forget to yourself, with the thermometer, no body knows how high in the shade. Be reasonable."

"I think I am reasonable enough," said Anthony, setting himself down impatiently with a restless expression, "but I don't know what you mean by that."

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Mr. Lockhart had undoubtedly inferred on Anthony's father seemed intolerable to him. He wanted nothing, as he said, but freedom to work for himself, a standpoint where he could use his powers to the utmost.

And yet—there was something left unexplained. Bertie could trace the existence of a feeling which he hesitated to define in his cousin's occasionally curt, defiant manner. It was rather like suspicion, almost like envy, a bitter and ardent strain which Anthony seemed anxious to suppress. And yet there was something too magnanimous about the man for it to be supposed that he would yield to the sway of these evil passions. Perhaps a thwarted ambition was at the root of the root of all Lockhart's bitterness. But if so, he did not let it appear; he professed himself contented with his lot, happy in his work; and Bertie's occasional attempts to penetrate the occasional reverse were unavailing. Bertie was not intrusive nor curious by disposition, although he sometimes put forth a feeble in order to discover Anthony's real character and opinions; but the latter did not often find any substance to which it could cling.

Before the end of the long journey was reached, however, a state of general acquaintance was established between the two.

Bertie's health steadily improved, especially during the voyage; and by the time they had reached the Mediterranean he was able to decide upon going straight on to Scotland instead of scouring for a time in the Riviera. There was still a good deal of lameness about him, suggestive of delicacy of health, and he sometimes suffered from the effects of the wind in his side; but in the whole both Anthony and the doctor were satisfied with his progress.

It was an exquisite night. The moon shone gloriously upon the waves a balmy breath of wind blew odours of orange and myrtle from the islands which they passed. The Mongolia was on its way from Alexandria to Brindisi and the passage was made under ideally favorable conditions. The night was a warm one. Douglas stayed late on deck. He was lying back in a long wicker chair, with a rug over his knees and another about his shoulders. Anthony had brought them out and laughingly threatened him with the doctor's displeasure if he did not make use of them. Lockhart was sitting near him in a much smaller and less comfortable chair, meditatively puffing away at a meerschaum pipe. Two or three other figures were peering about on the deck, but for the most part the passengers had gone below, and the captain could talk without fear of being overheard.

"Splendid passage," began Bertie.

"Yes, very good."

"We shall touch at native harbor in about ten days from now."

Lockhart made no answer. After a few seconds' silence he took his pipe out of his mouth, and spoke deliberately—

"You are so much better than I thought you would be that there is no occasion for me to go further than London with you."

Bertie was silent too for a moment.

"You promised," he said at last, gravely, as if the matter were of great importance; "you promised, you know, to see me home. I don't think I can wriggle with the fatigue of travelling from London to Glenberrie by myself."

"Yes, I have Donald."

"Yes, Donald's not exactly a companion. But if you want to throw me overboard—"

"Oh! I'll keep my word if you insist on it," said Lockhart shortly.

"Yes, I do. I want to consult you about Glenberrie."

"You don't think I'm going to stay with you there?" said Anthony, turning to his cousin with a steady look.

"Oh! for a day or two," said Bertie, looking out over the wide sea with an expression of complete vagueness. "Just to look round."

Again Anthony was silent; then he spoke with rather a troubled accent and a decided loss of his usual courteous manner.

"You can't imagine what it is, Bertie, to have this feeling against going to Glenberrie that I have just now. It seems to me as if some harm would come of it—an absurd, womanish notion, no doubt, but one that I cannot get over. I would rather not see Glenberrie again."

"Again! Why, when have you seen it?" exclaimed Bertie.

Lockhart leaned forward, and seemed bent upon examining his pipe very closely. Bertie fancied that by the moonlight his face looked pale through all its brownness.

"I saw it," he answered slowly, "after my mother died."

"Yes! When was that?"

"You don't remember it?" said Lockhart, lifting his head and looking searchingly into his cousin's face. "You don't remember that a beggar boy of ten years old came to Glenberrie with a story which nobody believed, with papers which nobody took the trouble to look at; who was chased away with whips, and there was when I saw Glenberrie—when I saw you, too, a little chap of five years old, crying because I was ordered off the premises. I remember, if you don't."

Bertie had raised himself into a sitting posture. There was a look of deep interest on his face. "Surely my grandfather did not know?" he said.

"Did not know?" Lockhart uttered a short, hard laugh. "It was he who ordered the dogs to be loosed. It was he who struck me first. It was he who turned me away from my rightful home to live as I did, in poverty—in dishonour and shame for aught he cared."

"He thought you were an impostor?" queried Bertie, somewhat doubtfully.

"Oh, no." Anthony's answer was grimly spoken. "He knew me. But he did not choose to take me in. I was a young ruffian—in rags, half starved, wholly unrecognized; no credit to any respectable house. I appreciate his motives."

"Your mother was dead?"

"Yes. She had told me her story before she died. I came straight from the pipes to Glenberrie in the hope of finding a friend. I found—your grandfather."

"What did you do then?"

"I lived by my wits. I sold myself for a trifling to a travelling showman for the sake of the tricks that I had learnt amongst my people. I fiddled at fairs; I drew pictures in blue and red chalk on pavement—with some success, too; I acted in plays. I fell into bad company more than once, and saw the inside of a prison, not altogether by my own fault. When I was twelve I could barely read and write. I have not, you see, had the advantage of what is called a liberal education."

"You are one of the best informed men I know," said Bertie, rather amazed.

"How can you tell that? I'm but a good classic anyhow. I can speak five modern languages, I can draw, play the violin, write a telling newspaper article, ride, swim, and shoot. That's my boast. I don't say I could do half as much as his cousin."

"Add to that, that though I have been half the countries under the sun, and know all manner of men and women, high and low, I have never been in a English or Scottish drawing room in my life, nor exchanged more than half a dozen words with one of my own country women. And it is this uneducated poet that you want to introduce to your friends—to your future wife? Think better of it; let me stay in London. I don't want to go to Glenberrie."

"Lillias will not be the woman I take her for if she does not accord to you in every respect as you can give."

"I don't care," said Bertie, with more earnestness than usual. "First, as my cousin; secondly, as the man who stood by me when I was almost dead."

"That is not the matter," said Anthony, crossing and uncrossing his long legs restlessly.

"Who, thirdly?" continued Bertie, "nursed me through a bad illness, and threw up his professional work to go back with me to Scotland when I was too weak to travel alone. I don't say much about it, Anthony, but I shall never forget what you have done."

"Any man would have done as much."

"I doubt it. You might have visited my grandfather's shortcomings on me," said Bertie, with a smile. "I wonder you had no temptation that way. To abandon me to my fate would have seemed a righteous retribution."

A little to Bertie's embarrassment, Anthony made no immediate reply. He turned his face aside and sat perfectly still, with his eyes fixed on the horizon. His dark, strongly-marked profile was as motionless as if it were carved in stone. But after a few minutes of this strangely intense stillness he spoke. His voice was low and hoarse; it seemed an effort for him to get the words out.

"I had the temptation," he said. It was a confession that evidently cost him dear; and, having made it, he said nothing more.

Bertie also said nothing, but he made no further experiments to find out Anthony's state of mind. Henceforth he took him completely on trust.

"You must have got on wonderfully," he observed at last, in a tranquil, commonplace way.

The tension of Anthony's attitude seemed to relax.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I supposed I did. I went to London when I was fourteen. An artist took notice of me, and apprenticed me to an engraver. I went to evening classes and educated myself as well as I could. I tried my hand at literature before I was twenty for recreation, and I drew on wood and stone for a living. Then—oh, I went through various vicissitudes. I'll tell you all about them some time or other. I took to soldiering, then to making sketches and writing articles, which attracted some notice, and ultimately got my discharge. A man interested himself in me, got me on the staff of a paper or two, where they sometimes sent me out as a special. It was in that way I came to India. I suppose I am what people call prosperous—in a narrow groove. I have done what few men in my position do, I believe—saved money."

There was a grating tone in his voice.

His very property seemed to irk him. He despised it more than ill fortune.

"Well," said Bertie slowly, "I see nothing in all you tell me but what is to your honor. And I repeat my invitation, not from mere friendliness, but because I need you."

"I don't see why. But if you need me—" Then Anthony paused. He passed his hand over the lower part of his face, as if to hide some momentary twitch of emotion, and said quite simply, "I'll come."

Thus in a quiet half-hour's conversation on deck, in the purple light of a glorious sunset on the Mediterranean, this man made the decision that turned all his future life into a different channel, and that sealed the fate of other men and women whom as yet he scarcely knew by name.

The rest of the journey to Scotland was very uneventful. In London, where he had letters for a day or two, Bertie received formal congratulations on his accession of fortune, and inviting to the Towers. But Bertie replied that he would prefer to go to his own house—at first, at any rate—and that he would visit Lord Morven at a later date.

They went by easy stages towards Glenberrie, as Bertie was still weak and easily fatigued. It was late in the afternoon of a rather chilly day in June when they reached the railway station of the little town to which they were bound. It was a mile and a half to the gates of Bertie's house, and then there was more than half a mile of park road and avenue to be traversed, a distance which Bertie was unequal to walking after the exertions of his long journey. Anthony, who had almost supposed himself as a factotum, looked round for a guide.

"They might have sent us a machine from the Towers," said Bertie with a touch of drollery in his voice. He was sitting on a pile of portmanteaux, looking rather apologetically at his friend.

"I'm awfully sorry," he added. "I ought to have wired to the stationmaster or somebody to get us a cab. But I daresay they have one at the hotel."

"I'll send for one," said Anthony. "I suppose they know—up at your house—that you are coming."

"Yes, I thought old Macfarlane would have been here to meet us. Something must have detained him."

I struck Anthony that if all householdings were like him one they were very particularly pleasant things. The train had left the station, and the little platform was almost deserted. The portmanteaux gathered together in a knot at one end; the stationmaster had gone inside the little stone house; Bertie's servant had disappeared. Bertie himself, on his heap of rugs and bags; Anthony, with arms crossed and a rather vexed expression upon his face, occupied the middle of the platform. A clear blue sky overhead, melting into a golden haze above the row of black-pointed firs and pines behind the railway line, gave in its absolute emptiness an added touch of calm desolation to the scene.

Suddenly a clatter of hoofs on the hard, white road outside the gate, the sound of wheels and voices, broke upon the stillness of the air. Bertie raised himself into a listening attitude. "I think I know that voice," he said. Anthony looked towards the road, but the station house hid the occupants of the carriage from his sight. He could see the heads of a pair of very fine bays, but he could see nothing more.

In another moment, however, Donald re-appeared, with a broad smile upon his face. "It's the Earl's animal," he said, touching his cap to Bertie with a look of real pleasure and relief. For Donald was from that neighborhood, and considered the Earl's appearance to be a mark of proper respect to the young master whom he well highly adored.

Bertie rose. Anthony also arose and watched the meeting of guardian and ward with some interest.

The Earl of Morven was a tall man, of stately bearing and remarkable distinction of appearance. He was slight, but so well proportioned that his movements were full of unusual grace; his face was rather long, and he wore a short pointed beard, which gave him the look of a cavalier in one of Vandyrke's portraits. His hair was black, and threw the pallor of his complexion into strong relief. His skin was of the peculiar whiteness and fineness of grain which is more often found in a woman than a man, and which is said to be generally indicative of ancient descent. His eyes were so dark that they were generally called black; they were steady, piercing, rather cold eyes, somewhat deeply set. Anthony fancied as he looked at him that he had either seen this man before or read a description of his appearance. But he could not remember where.

The greeting that passed between Lord Morven and Bertie Douglas was cold enough; but it was not so cold as the glance cast by the Earl at Lockhart when he was introduced. The Earl's eye seemed to scan the newcomer from head to foot in a moment's time; he bowed slightly, but made no remark. There would have been some embarrassment but for the appearance of a young lady on the platform—a young lady who

seemed to about twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, and was welcomed by Bertie with great warmth.

"It can't be Lady Lillias," said Anthony to himself. "She is fair and blue-eyed, by all accounts, while this girl is as brown as a berry. What a fine figure she has—but not handsome; oh, no, not handsome a bit—though there's something striking about her top."

And then he found himself being presented to her, and learned that this tall, dark girl was Lady Lillias' cousin, Beatrice Esaimont.

Miss Esaimont's figure was undoubtedly her strong point. She was tall, slim, graceful and dignified; so beautiful, indeed, in movement, that the comparative plainness of her face was a disappointment to a stranger. Her friends, however, would not allow that she was plain at all. Her magnificent hair, black as a raven's wing, her broad low forehead and superb dark eyes, her proud lips and finely moulded chin, made them forget the thinness of her cheek, the shallow paleness of her complexion. And when Beatrice was excited—when the fire came into her eyes and the crimson to her cheeks—she could outshine many a far more strictly handsome woman by the charm of her wild irregular beauty.

"The horses won't wait, Morven," she said, addressing the Earl in very clear and decided tones. "You are going to drive Bertie and Mr. Lockhart to Glenberrie, I believe. Come, Bertie, leave your traps, they'll follow your man. Where is your man, by the way? Donald? Oh, I remember him. How are you, Donald? Get a cart from the hotel for your master's luggage, and we will drive him home."

The way in which Miss Esaimont took the command of everything and everybody, including the Earl, struck Anthony—and perhaps even Bertie—with amazement. "But nobody thought of disputing her orders. Even when they took their places in the wagolette, nobody except the newcomers seemed to think it remarkable that, after a word or two—lower tone to Lord Morven, she should calmly take the reins from the groom and assume driver's position, leaving the Earl and his friends to seat themselves at the back.

"Can you really manage those horses, Bertie?" Douglas asked her from behind.

"Of course I can. Have you forgotten my abilities as a whip? You needn't be afraid; I will take you safe home." And then they started.

Puffed and frosty was the conversation between the three men in the carriage. As they neared the park gates it died almost entirely away. Bertie was, in the old landmarks with an air of sagacious interest, while Anthony seemed absorbed in his own reflections. Perhaps he was thinking now, if right had been done, his home might have been here—where he was as a stranger in the land.

The lodge seemed to be deserted; the gates stood wide open, but nobody could be seen. For a little space they drove on in silence, until a sudden sweep in the road brought them to a spot where Beatrice checked the horses and cast a few hasty words over her shoulder to the gentleman behind her.

"Something is the matter," she said; "look at the smoke—the glare—Bertie, Glenberrie is on fire!"

"They have got up a bonfire for my homecoming," said Bertie, coolly.

"A strange bonfire!" said Miss Esaimont, pointing with her whip to the lurid smoke and reddening sky which she had decreed behind the thickly planted trees of the park or either hand.

"And," she added, in a lower tone. "I am afraid, a strange home coming!"

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