

JUST IN TIME.

BY ADELINE SERGEANT. AUTHOR OF "JACOB'S WIFE," "THE PALM PRINCESS," ETC.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MEETING IN THE WOODS.

Late in autumn with its glistening leaves still tinged in the woods about Glenberrie. Many of the trees, indeed, were bare, and others clad in threadbare robes of scarlet, russet-brown, and gold. Each breath of the October breeze robbed the branches of their glories. But the air was soft and sweet, as the air of a Scotch October can often be; there was no touch of frost in the air, no murky clouds upon the translucent crystal of the sky. As Beatrice Esilmont trod the spring turf and inhaled the dying broken and decaying heather she seemed herself to be drawing in strength and vigour and clear judgment at every breath. She loved the Scotch hills and woods far better than the Alpine heights, and as gazed around her she sighed for very satisfaction at the place in which she found herself and the path she trod.

It was the spot where she had last seen Anthony Lockhart a few weeks ago. She hardly knew why she had come. She stood by the little stream in the hollow: it was no mere trickle now; it had been swollen by recent rains, and rushed vehemently over every obstacle in its course—stones, pebbles, and projecting roots—spreading at intervals into a wider sheet impossible for any one to cross with a stride, as Anthony had then done when he wished to approach her. She thought of this as she stood looking down at the eddying water. In some way the fact seemed to her typical of the two lives. Was the separation between them destined to grow greater day by day?

Suddenly she started and looked up. There was a crackling sound among the underwood; a man's firm step made itself heard upon the little path traversing the plantation on the banks of the stream. For a moment Beatrice drew back, then she regained her composure and watched the intruder with a quiet eye. His stately figure and dark, bent head were recognizable from a good distance. Anthony Lockhart had walked forth for his customary morning's walk: it lay very often in this direction.

Once before, when he had met Beatrice at this point, he had had the advantage, inasmuch as he had seen her first. This time it was she who was on the alert. As she watched him coming, she noted all the signs in gait and countenance that should tell a man's mood and humor to keen observer. She was not reassured by any of these outward tokens. His face, she saw, was pale and thin; his mouth had a bitter look. She could not see his forehead, for his head was bent, but she felt sure that it was contracted into a frown. There was something of dejection in the air with which he walked—something almost of sullenness. Beatrice felt that he was changed—not, perhaps, for the better—said her heart went out to him with a sudden impulse of yearning pity and desire. If she could but help him—but as yet she knew not how.

He came to the very brink of the stream without lifting his eyes from the ground. Then he looked up. And there, before him, but on the other side of the water, stood Beatrice Esilmont. Then Beatrice beheld a transformation. The man stood erect, drawing up his slouching shoulders and bent head; the frown cleared away from his forehead, the bitterness from his lips. A great light sprang into his eyes as he looked at her. He held out his hands—involuntarily as it seemed—and exclaimed, "Beatrice! Miss Esilmont! is it you?"

Beatrice was not quite sure whether she ought to be pleased or offended by this manner of greeting her. To begin with, there was the half utterance of her Christian name—yet this had been suspended and a mere formal title substituted—and the question "is it you?" had a warmer, more eager accent than she had expected to hear. It seemed as though there were actual relief as well as gladness for him in her presence.

Whatever she might feel, Beatrice showed no displeasure. She even smiled a little as she replied— "Yes, it is I, Mr. Lockhart."

"But I thought that you were in Switzerland?"

"I came home last night."

"Lord Morven too? And Lady Lillas?"

"No," said Beatrice seriously. "I came alone."

"Alone! But why—how? We cannot speak with this stream between us," he broke off impatiently; "wait one moment and I will be with you." And he backed a few steps from the edge.

"You cannot cross—it is too wide. Go round by the bridge," she said.

perhaps with its contrast with Lord Morven's habits. Morven would have gone miles round rather than leap a brook.

He lifted his hat with some return to his usual formality as soon as he was beside her. She gave him her hand politely in return. For a few moments they spoke of trivial subjects, and all the time Anthony's eyes seemed to be devouring her, until at last he threw questionally to the winds and interrupted her in the very midst of a correct little speech about the weather.

"Look here, Miss Esilmont," he said, "why should we have any pretences? You have left Lady Lillas behind—you have come here suddenly, without warning—don't I know for what? You want to hear about Bertie."

She was silent for a moment. "Yes," she said after the pause, with a fine little smile, "I do want to hear about Bertie."

"I knew it. Why should we beat about the bush? I will tell you all I know."

He turned his face with a momentary darkening of the brow.

"Yes, tell me," said Beatrice. "You read my journal?"

"Yes."

"And you thought we harsh—prejudiced?"

"I thought," said she with some difficulty, "that there might be another explanation of his conduct than the one you attached to it."

"Did you?" he said eagerly. Then he drew back and looked a little hurt. What other explanation could there be? You don't think that I would willingly condemn him. Have you any theory—any reason to think—"

"I would rather hear anything you have to tell me," she said. "I suppose that nothing much has transpired since I heard from you?"

"Nothing much," he answered, fixing his eyes gloomily on the ground. "I don't see any way out of the complication, for my part, except one, and that—"

Then he suddenly changed his tone. "Miss Esilmont, I ought not to keep you standing here. You will be tired. You may catch cold. Shall we walk on?"

"Who could catch cold in this soft, mild weather?" said Beatrice. "But we will walk if you like, a little further along the bank. There is an old wall which has often furnished a seat for Lillas and myself, and we can discuss the matter at our leisure."

A few minutes walking brought them to the wall of which she spoke. It ran down the bank to the water's edge, and marked the limit, at that point, of Lord Morven's estate. Near the water it had fallen a little into disrepair. A couple of stones had been removed either by accident or design, and a seat was thus formed in the natural embrasure. Here Beatrice seated herself, while Anthony leaned against the higher portion of the wall and looked down at her as if awaiting her invitation to speak. He thought that she looked paler and graver than usual. Possibly she was angry with him and anxious about Lillas. This conjecture lent his voice a somewhat apologetic turn when at last she asked for his story.

"But there is little to tell, Miss Esilmont. I have not spoken to Bertie since I wrote. I have seen him—once or twice. I have heard a good deal about him."

"What have you heard?"

"I have heard of another visit to Glasgow in company with Mrs. Drummond. I have heard of frequent interviews. There are not wanting persons to say that the marriage day is fixed—or that they are married already."

Beatrice frowned. "And you believe these allegations?" There was some sarcasm in her tone.

Anthony flushed darkly and ground his heel into the soil. "If I had not believed them," he said sullenly, "should I have acted as I have done?"

"You have had no authentic information? Neither Bertie nor Mrs. Drummond has definitely told you that he thinks of marrying her?"

"Bertie did not deny it," said Anthony sharply.

"Did not deny? What does that mean? If I were accused of a crime by my dearest friend, do you think I would take the trouble to deny it? I should reply, as Bertie perhaps meant you to understand his reply—if you cannot trust my actions, you will never trust my word. I am surprised that you, who are so proud yourself, cannot understand this form of pride."

"I, proud! I have no cause for pride, God knows!" said Anthony, very bitterly. "I've done what I swore I would never do—deserted and betrayed the man that I care most for in the world—and I cannot help myself. Do you think I want to take his house and land from him? And yet, I can't take back what I've said. Nothing would make him keep Glenberrie now—I know him well enough to say that—and I don't want it. I'll turn the ruins into a hospital and spend the rents in supporting it. Or else I'll leave it to him by will, and take care to disappear shortly afterwards."

Beatrice looked up at him with a new sensation. He must have been sorely tried indeed before he could bring him-

self to talk like this. She had never had before so clear a view of the depths of his passionate nature, or realized his capacity to be wounded through the affections which had only found an outlet during the four years of his barren life. She felt herself strongly seized by an emotion—a pity which drove her to speak when she would rather have remained silent. Her face grew pale, and quiet eyes gave evidence to her sensations.

"Mr. Lockhart," she said, "you are not going yourself, justice. You talk as though—as though—you were a weak man, and you are not weak. None but a weak man would really regret the doing of what he thought to be just."

"Ah, but was it justice?" she inquired.

"You have acted and spoken as if you thought so."

"That is exactly what makes the torture of it," said Lockhart, almost angrily. "I have done a thing that no personal motive would, I hope, have driven me into doing. I have seized an advantage at Bertie's expense—would I have done that if I had not thought that Bertie deserved loss and punishment?"

"So now your only peace of mind lies in considering Bertie guilty?"

"Exactly."

"And therefore you won't listen to your own heart that pronounced him innocent?"

"Oh, my heart! my heart!" said Anthony, contemptuously. "What has my heart got to do with the matter? That is the way women always talk. How can one judge by one's feelings?"

"You mean," said Beatrice, "not at all offended by this outburst, that your feelings do urge you to acquit Bertie?"

"Well," he said reluctantly, "what if they do? I am not likely to be guided by them. I go by facts."

"Oh, no," said Beatrice quickly, "you don't go by facts; you go by the village gossip."

He sprang from his leaning place against the wall and faced her with a flash of the eyes which made her heart beat faster, although her face did not change. When he spoke, his tones were low and uneven, and his broad chest heaved as though his breath had suddenly grown short.

"No one but you should say that to me," he began. "What a fool you must think me! But go on; say what you like. You are my friend; not mine."

"I am your friend, too, Mr. Lockhart," said Beatrice, very gently. "And it is because I am your friend that I do not like to see you making a mistake which can only end in misery. You are not happy, as you have said; I am sure Bertie is not."

"Happy! I should think not. Could you expect it? But whether he referred to Bertie or to himself she could not tell."

"Then," she said, "you would be glad if Bertie could be acquitted of the charge you bring against him?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you are not reserving something; are you sure you don't want to fight against the proof of his innocence, for fear you should have to own yourself mistaken?"

"You put my character in a very ugly light, Miss Esilmont," said Anthony, rather sternly, "but I am willing to acknowledge that past events justify you. I will even acknowledge that I know what it is to be tempted to wish myself right at any cost; but that you have shown me the danger, I will do my best to fight the temptation. Yes; God knows, with my utmost heart I do hope and trust that Bertie is better than I took him for?"

"I believe you do," said Beatrice softly. Then, with a livelier manner—"But what will satisfy you? Bertie's word of honor?"

"Yes," he answered in a gloomy tone. "I suppose so. I should have no right to doubt it. But he won't give it to me."

"No; you asked it in a wrong way. But suppose he had given it to me?"

"To you!"—Anthony looked at her in amazement.

"Yes, to me. I did what perhaps was a little rash," said Beatrice, trying not to meet his eyes; "but I did not know what else to do. Morven did not wish me to correspond with Bertie, and I allowed him to think that I would not do so. But Lillas was ill and anxious. I wrote to Bertie for an explanation; and I wrote to Morven too—telling him what I have done and why—for naturally I could not do what he disapproved without letting him know it."

"And Bertie replied?"

"Bertie replied in the most satisfactory way imaginable."

Anthony still stood looking at her, as if he did know how to believe his ears.

"How did he satisfy you?" he asked.

"To begin with, he said that he still considered himself engaged to Lillas, and that his love for her was as great as ever. The stories about his possible marriage with Mrs. Drummond were pure fabrications or mistakes which he had not taken the trouble to contradict. His long conversations with Mrs. Drummond and his going to Glasgow with her

all related to the same thing—matters of business connected with her late husband, whom Bertie had known very well."

"Did he tell you what this business was?"

"Yes."

"And were you satisfied?"

"Perfectly. I offered him my help as quietly as I could."

There was a pause. Anthony seated himself again on the wall and looked straight before him. He had turned a little about the lips. Beatrice waited quietly.

"Can you," he said at last, very gently and slowly, "can you tell me what that business is?"

"I am afraid I cannot at present. You will know—all the world will know—in a short time."

"You are absolutely satisfied?"

"As satisfied as if you said you would be if you had Bertie's word for what he has done."

"Ah, you," Anthony moved restlessly on his seat. "If I heard the words—if I knew there was no possibility of shuffling out of them! Miss Esilmont, you are braver and more reasonable than most women. Now tell me—you are not trying to patch up a quarrel, are you? From the ordinary, womanly, peacemaking motives. For, I tell you, they won't do here. If I am deluded—not by you, I don't mean by you, I mean by Bertie—into thinking him a right-minded, honorable man when he is not, after all that has passed between us, I should— Never mind what I should do: let us deal with the question now. Throw away your wish for a reconciliation and your hope of seeing Lady Lillas and your wife, and tell me straight out, on your sacred word, by all that you hold dear, that there is no possibility of doubt, that if the letter you speak of were made public it would clear him even in the eyes of women like old Miss Dewar and men like Cameron; or else—don't speak at all."

He had risen and stood before her, holding out his hands as if in supplication. Moved by a sudden impulse, she rose too, and looked him full in the face as she replied.

"On my sacred word," she said, "and by all I hold dear and true and holy, I fully believe that no doubt is possible, unless Bertie Douglas has told a downright lie. We don't believe that he would do that, do we? I am quite sure that the explanation he gives will clear him of suspicion in everybody's eyes—not only in reasonable eyes, but in Miss Dewar's eyes, and Mr. Cameron's eyes, and even, Mr. Lockhart, in your own."

Then, as if to soften the severity of her words, she placed her hand in his. He looked hard at her, wrung her hand, then turned away and seated himself once more—but this time with his elbows on his knees and his face between his hands.

"Then I've been an accursed fool," he heard him mutter. But for some moments he said nothing more.

"Mr. Lockhart," said Beatrice, finding the silence painful, "Bertie will forget the matter sooner than you will."

"Is it any comfort to me that Bertie is generous?" he asked, without looking up.

"I think it ought to be. You were unhappy, I believe, when you thought that he had seduced ungenerously."

He lifted his head.

"What depths of baseness you show me in my own nature!" he said. "It is a comfort—yes, it is—to think that Bertie is generous enough to forgive me some day for all I have said and done. But it is not a comfort to know that I needed his forgiveness."

"Still—you are convinced?"

"Convinced that I have been a dolt and an idiot? Oh, yes."

"I did not mean that," said Beatrice, half reproachfully. "You believe Bertie's word—that is what I meant."

"Yes," said Anthony, with a sigh which sounded, nevertheless, somewhat reluctant. "I believe his word—or, perhaps, I should rather say, I believe yours. Have you seen him since you came back?"

"Yes. I saw him yesterday afternoon."

"And he satisfied you?"—casting a keen glance at her face.

"Mr. Lockhart, you are not fair. Certainly he satisfied me. How else could I ask you to be satisfied?"

"I beg your pardon," said Anthony, somewhat out of countenance. "I am afraid I have got into the habit of doubting—of being suspicious—"

"Yes, I am afraid you have," remarked Beatrice uncompromisingly. "I have brought back your journal, Mr. Lockhart. If you read it again with a less prejudiced mind, you will see that Bertie's conduct throughout was that of a man who knew what he was doing. He warned you himself against your distrustful nature."

Anthony sat silent, accepting the reproach without a word. Presently, however, he said:

"Does he—Bertie—did he speak of me?"

"Yes. He is quite ready to forget—"

"Oh, that is rubbish," broke out Anthony roughly. "I beg your pardon, Miss Esilmont, but I said things that can't be forgotten. I shall never look

him in the face again. Because—this Glenberrie business—there's no hushing it up now, and if it goes on—"

"If it goes on you will settle down here and become a friend and a neighbor."

"A friend and neighbor to whom?" said Anthony, lifting his head, and looking at her intently. "To Bertie? He will not be here. To you? You will be Lady Lillas."

"No," said Beatrice, emphatically. "Never! What do you mean?" He was sitting at her side; he now altered his position a little so as to lean the ungloved right hand which she had rested on the wall. Are you not engaged to Lord Morven?"

"Not that," she answered. But it cost her a tremendous effort to make the answer; an effort which sent the blood racing in torrents to her neck, chin and brow.

"You are free?" said Anthony after a long pause.

His voice had altered; the jarring tones had gone out of it and left it deep and soft. She bowed her head but did not speak a word. "Then," he went on in the same deep tone, "I am at any rate at liberty to say to you what I thought I should live and die without saying. I never loved a woman until I saw you. I shall never love another. I don't expect you to answer me—I have no hope, I never had; but I must tell you this. Once and for all I must say to you that I—love you, Beatrice."

She was silent. Her hands looked themselves before in her lap. She did not want him to see that they were trembling. When she was able to command her voice she meant to answer him, but she could not speak just then. She was not silent from any desire to protract his period of suspense. Beatrice's mind rose far above desire of feeble triumphs of that sort. So he went on:

"I never thought it fair that a man should be forbidden to tell a woman that he loved—as long as she was not promised to anybody else—however much he might be below her—"

But here she found voice. "You are not below anybody," she said.

"Bless you for saying so!" he exclaimed fervently. "I might have known that you would despise social conventions—that you would judge a man rather by his aims and aspirations, than by his position or his rent roll! I am worthy of you so far. I care for the things you care for the most. In other things I know I am far beneath your notice."

Beatrice had recovered something of her usual self-possession by this time. A faint smile came to her lip.

"In what way are you beneath my notice?" she asked quietly.

Anthony started and looked at her. It was not the response that he had expected.

"I have told you something of my history. Have my antecedents made me a fit companion for you? I have known poverty and disgrace. I have been in prison. I have been a vagrant, a tramp and a jail-bird—"

"And having been all that," interrupted Beatrice, with shining eyes. "I honor you the more for what you are now, and for what you will be hereafter."

Anthony drew a long breath. He stood before her as one stupefied.

"You think so?" he said at last, in a strangely stifled, unnatural voice. "You know all this—and yet—"

"And yet," said Beatrice softly, "I think you worthy of all respect—all honor—all—(she elevated and dropped her voice still lower)—"all love" she ended of last.

"All love, Beatrice?" he said, coming nearer, but yet not daring to believe what her words implied. "Do you mean that you could love me—in spite of all I have done and left undone?"

"In spite of all," she answered. He made a sudden gesture as if to clasp her in his arms, but she drew back and lifted her hand as if to bid him wait.

"Listen first," she said. "I have something else to tell you. I am free, as I said free to tell you that I love you, but not free to say I will ever marry you. I have sent back my ring to Lord Morven; I have broken off my engagement to him, and he has set me free. Understand me—I will never be his wife. But unless—unless—he consents—and I cannot tell that until I have seen and spoken with him—I will not be the wife of any other man."

"You deceived me!" cried Anthony. "You said that you were free."

She rose from her seat and looked at him with a pride which was only equalled by his own.

"And I am free?" "Is not my heart free? Have I not thrown off the yoke that forbade me to say to myself, or to you that I love you? I can say it to him too. What other freedom do I desire? If one is free to love, that is all that one need ask."

"I want more," said Anthony. "I want to make you my wife."

The two regarded each other in silence for a moment. His brow was stern, his eyes glistened below it like fire beneath a rock. Beatrice's face was pale and almost stubborn; but even as she looked it softened; a new light came into her

eyes, an exquisite smile trembled upon her lips. She held out her hand to him, appealingly.

"Ah, forgive me, Anthony, I was wrong—I love you, and I cannot let you go away. I will do what you wish."

Then she lifted her face to his, and he kissed her on the lips.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DR. AIRIE'S ROOMS.

For once Beatrice had taken Dr. Airie by surprise. Her arrival was unannounced and unexpected. She herself had no reason to suppose that her coming should disconcert the doctor; but that is what it did disconcert him was for a moment or two visible enough. When the little shock had passed off, however, nobody could have been more urbane, more charming to see her once again in her old home, more complaisant and yet more discreet. He met her in the hall, as if the Towers belonged to his rather than to Lord Morven. He welcomed her with even a slight air of patronage. For the moment Beatrice wondered whether he knew that she had broken off her engagement with her cousin. She was a poor dependent; she was no longer the future Countess. Possibly Dr. Airie intended her to feel the difference.

Whether by accident or by design, the events of her first day's sojourn at the Towers brought this hitherto disregarded fact forcibly to Beatrice's mind. The servants were too strongly attached to her personally for her change of position to make much difference with them; but even they had assumed a rather resentful air, as much as to say that they felt slighted by her slight to their master. It should be understood that the secret of Beatrice's engagement had long been a very open one, and that although she had desired that it should not be made known, few persons could live in the house for a week and not become well aware of it. Mrs. Elton was called the mistress of the household; but practically Beatrice was at the head.

Was it possible then that Morven had written to Dr. Airie, and that Dr. Airie meant to show her by his own behavior and that of the servants in Morven's employ how much her position had been changed? The thought flashed through Beatrice's mind and was gone in a moment; but it returned again and yet again.

"I beg pardon, ma'am," said the housekeeper, in the first hour of her arrival. "I have only the small red room ready for you. If I had known that you were coming—"

"Oh, my room will do," said Beatrice. "The room near Lady Lillas; there is no need to get another ready."

The housekeeper looked awkwardly embarrassed. "Your old room, ma'am," said she, "has been dismantled—during the last few days—in accordance with my orders."

"Dismantled! My room!" exclaimed Beatrice. It was a room which she had occupied for her last twelve years and more. What was the meaning of this change! "Orders from whom?" she asked hardly keeping the surprise out of her voice.

"From my Lord, ma'am—as I understand. It was Dr. Airie that gave me the order after receiving a letter from his lordship." Then observing the still startling look upon Beatrice's face, the woman added in a rather apologetic tone—"We have standing orders to obey Dr. Airie, ma'am, in his lordship's absence and yours."

"Exactly," said Beatrice, recovering herself, and speaking in a quiet, but somewhat stern tone. "The room that you have prepared will do for me very well, Eliza."

She thought at first of questioning Dr. Airie on the subject, but decided to let the matter drop. There was no need to expose herself to rebuke. And yet—to be lodged out of her own room!—surely there must be some mistake.

The servants were certainly less attentive than usual. She could not get what she wanted without difficulty. Perhaps they were all disgruntled—demoralized—by the absence of this family. Miss Esilmont was displeased by the state of things, but remembered, with an odd thrill, that she had no longer any right to interfere. "It is plain that I cannot stay here," she said to herself. "I am only an interloper—an upstart, as I heard myself called when I was ten years old—a poor relation—I must go and earn my own bread somehow—be a teacher at a school, or a governess, or a housemaid. I can work as well as other people, I suppose." And the thought of Anthony Lockhart. But she never thought of the chance that she might become Anthony Lockhart's wife. She had as yet no reason to believe that he cared for her.

In the course of the afternoon (her arrival took place early in the morning) she saw Bertie Douglas. Her interview with him made her anxious to question Dr. Airie on the subject of his letter to Lillas. About five o'clock in the evening she sent a message to him asking him to join her in the library. To this message she got no answer. Neither did he make his appearance. When she asked for him again—after waiting for half-an-hour—she was told that he had gone out. Later in the evening he sent her word, curtly enough, that he would not be engaged until the next day. Beatrice was positively puzzled by this cavalier treatment, of which she had received so little in her life. She hardly knew what to say or do. She supposed that Dr. Airie wished to avoid her; but in this she was wrong. He only wished to show her that he was at her beck and call no longer.

The dull warmth and pleasant quietness of the following day tempted Beatrice out to one of her old haunts before she had seen him. And there she met with Anthony—an encounter which so far surpassed anything she could have thought of, that she forgot all about Dr. Airie for some time. It was not, indeed, until the following day, when her pulses had calmed down a little, that she took any active steps to bring about the conversation which she meant to hold with her former tutor.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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