

JUST IN TIME.

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

CHAPTER XXV.

"What shall we do now?" said Beatrice, laying aside the loose sheet covered with Anthony's handwriting, and looking anxiously at her cousin. To her surprise, Lillias turned upon her a face illuminated by the levellest of smiles.

"Have you in your inmost heart a doubt about the matter now? Don't you see for yourself, Beatrice, that Bertie has not a shadow of guilt upon his conscience? He says himself that he is giving help to the innocent and to the oppressed. If Mr. Lockhart were not so frightfully prejudiced, he would see it too!"

"I do not think that you need blame Mr. Lockhart, dear," said Beatrice. "Appearances were decidedly against Bertie; and even now—"

"Even now do you doubt?" cried Lillias, indignantly. "How can you, Beatrice? It is quite plain that even Mr. Lockhart was half convinced, though evidently against his will. See what he says about Bertie's dignity, and his 'winning' manner, and all that! Oh, I can fancy Bertie's looks and tones so well!"

"Thanks to Mr. Lockhart's candor," said Beatrice. "He does not spare himself at Bertie's expense. He is scrupulously anxious to say all he can for him."

"I don't agree with you," replied Lady Lillias, with some hauteur. "He seems to me to blacken Bertie's character as much as possible. I believe he wanted Bertie to have done a discreditable thing."

"How can you say so, Lillias?" Beatrice was beginning warmly, and then checked herself. Why should she defend Anthony Lockhart? Why should she feel so hurt, positively hurt, as though she herself had been injured—when he was attacked? It was unreasonable. But she knew that she must defend him if he were assailed unless she kept entire silence; and at that moment discretion seemed to her the better part of valor.

Lillias returned to the charge from a different point. "What is all this about Glenberrie?" she said. "How can Mr. Lockhart interfere?"

"Mr. Lockhart has in his possession a will by which Glenberrie was left to him," said Beatrice. "He has had it for some time—hesitating whether to put it in force or not."

"I wonder that he hesitated even," said Lillias, with sarcastic intent. "And so he means to turn Bertie out? How can he? How dare he be so wicked!" "Lillias! To take what is his own!" "He has done without it all his life, and he can do without it now. I hope Bertie will fight it out—contest the will, isn't that the proper phrase?—but I don't suppose he will. He is too generous to care!"

"Then you should be too generous to care, too," said Beatrice, with a faint smile.

"I believe, Beatrice," said her cousin, looking at her indignantly, "that you want to defend Mr. Lockhart!"

"I want to be just, at any rate, to everyone concerned. I think that Mr. Lockhart has a strong will and rather an overbearing temper, and that Bertie was certainly—provoking."

"Oh, if you think that," exclaimed Lillias, half scornfully, "there is no more to be said!"

There was a little silence. Lillias had moved away from her cousin, and stood looking out of the window. Beatrice turned over the pages of Anthony's journal, but was thinking less of what was written than of the writer. Her mouth was compressed with an expression which had within it something of sadness as well as severity. It was perhaps this look which brought Lillias back to her old allegiance when she turned round.

"Dear Beatrice, I was very cross to talk in that way," she said, coming back to her cousin and putting one arm round Beatrice's neck. "It is hard for me to be just in this case."

"Of course it is," said Beatrice affectionately. "You are retained for the defence, naturally. But Lillias, what are we to do now?"

"You said that you would help me, did you not?"

"Yes—and if I can I will."

"Don't say 'if you can'; it is a matter of will, simply," said Lady Lillias, her eyes lighting up with a look of animation which Beatrice was glad to see. "If you will do all I ask you—will you?—for that is the best way of helping me."

"If you don't ask anything unreasonable," said Beatrice. "Well, is this unreasonable?—Beatrice, let us go back to the Towers to-morrow."

"Tomorrow, my dear child? Impossible!"

"Not at all impossible," said Lillias eagerly. "And far the best way of settling the matter. When once we have seen Bertie and heard what he has to say, even you will not be able to doubt him."

"You forget your promise to Morven, you know he spoke of sending you to old Lady Janet Fairbairn in Devonshire—away from me—unless you promised not to communicate with Bertie at present—or if you broke your promise—"

Lillias' eyes drooped and filled with tears. Plainly she had for a moment forgotten the compact.

"What shall we do then?" she asked more faintly.

"Have patience," said Beatrice, with a smile that was as bright as it was tender. "If you can trust Bertie so entirely, you need not mind a little waiting."

But when she had tranquilized Lillias and sent her away comforted, Beatrice did exactly what she could not advise another person to do. She wrote a letter to Bertie, and then she also wrote to Morven, telling him what she had done.

The answers to her letters arrived within a few hours of each other—Bertie's first. She read it within her own room, with flushing cheek and kindling eye. And when she had read it she sat down and wept—but not exactly for sorrow. Not at any rate because she distrusted Bertie's vindication of himself. But she did not show Lillias the letter.

Then came Morven's epistle. Her fingers trembled as she opened the envelope. She was a little more afraid of him than she had ever owned. She wondered whether he would be angry.

Yes, there was no doubt of it: he was very angry indeed. "Dear Beatrice," the letter began—the first time that he had ever addressed her as anything but his "dearest." Morven could be tender when he chose. But this was the letter of an angry man; and before she had finished it, Beatrice was angry too. He reproached her for not keeping her word—though she had never given him her word that she would not write to Bertie. He said that he could trust her no longer—he who had always confided everything to her! He repeated that she should never give his consent to Lady Lillias' marriage with Bertie Douglas, and this was the culminating point—he laid his commands on Lillias to accept Mr. Wiggin's offer of marriage as soon as it was made. "I wish for alliance," he wrote, in his cold, stately way. "I consider it a suitable one, and will be of advantage to the whole family when accomplished." Beatrice's heart stood still. "Of advantage to the whole family?" Then was it true—the thing that Mr. Wiggin had said? Had Morven sold his sister in order to pay his debts?

She read the rest of the letter, full as it was of harsh reproaches and complaints, with inattention. She had other things to think of besides Morven's opinion of her conduct. And as she thought her face lost its softer lines, and took on an expression of relentless determination. She was grave and silent for the rest of the day, but very gentle with Lillias. She kept Morven's letter also to herself. She meant to answer it before she slept.

It was a difficult letter to write, and she sat over it far into the small hours of the morning. She was in a stern and watchful mood. Of Morven she now felt no fear. He had lost his influence over her when he lost her respect.

"I am sorry that you should be angry," she wrote to him, "for I am certain that in your heart of hearts you know that I am right. Lillias must not be sacrificed to a man like Mr. Wiggin. You are too late with your commands: she has already refused him. She will never marry anyone but Bertie Douglas—of that I am absolutely sure."

"And now, Morven, tell me one thing. Has this man slandered you or not? Is it possible that you consented to his proposal for Lillias in consideration of a sum of money offered to you? In one word, did you mean to sell Lillias to him?"

"I must have an answer. Mr. Wiggin has placed in my hands a letter from you to him, which he tells me will prove his statement. I have not read it. But I mean to read it unless you satisfy me on this point. Don't misunderstand me when I say I must be satisfied. If you were led by the pressure of money troubles to give your consent to this proposal and regret it—as I am sure you regret it—now, I will never think of it again. If you will only make amends! You know what I mean, dear Morven? Give your consent to the marriage of Lillias and Bertie, and we will forget all that has gone before. If not, how can you expect me to become your wife? How can I marry anyone whom I no longer respect—or love? I am almost tempted to make it a condition—to say I will not marry you unless you withdraw your opposition to Lillias' engagement. Morven don't drive me into saying that! And yet what else can I say? If you insist on making her unhappy, how can I have any faith in your sympathy—your love for me? Make me feel that you are your old self again—kind, just, and true—then I will try to be all and do all that you would have me!"

She sent off this letter by the earliest post, and awaited the reply with feverish anxiety. She was half ashamed of the passionate eagerness with which she had tried to drive Morven into a corner. She

hardly knew what to make of her own feelings. That he would refuse her request now that it was put in this form—now that he knew of Mr. Wiggin's dismissal—scarcely entered her thoughts as being within the limits of possibility. She knew that he loved her. Certainly she had never before tried to coerce him by his love for her; and she blushed with shame at the means which she was adopting; but she said to herself, "it is for Lillias' sake. I would never do it for my own. But I said I would help her, and I will." She added, with more conviction, "He will thank me for it by and by. He is really good: he will be glad that I have helped him to overcome a temptation. Dear Morven!"

She tried thus to lash herself up into something like tenderness; but all the time she was conscious that she did not love him as much as she wished she did. This deficiency made her wishful to have the matter settled without delay. "They say love comes to women after marriage," she reflected, walking restlessly up and down her room on the day when she might reasonably expect an answer to her letter. "If this is so, I may learn to care for him and by me more—even more, I mean—than I do now. It has been my fault that we were not married earlier. How he pressed it last winter! I wish I had! Oh, I wish I had! I don't know what held me back: some instinct, I suppose. I wish he would come and ask me to settle the date at once. I would make it very soon. And then I should be at rest. I would never look back on what I did and him only, and be a faithful, loving wife. If it were but over and done with!"

She threw herself into an easy chair with a deep sigh. It was a relief to her that her maid had entered with a letter which had just arrived. Beatrice looked for a moment at the envelope without opening it, in spite of her eager desire to know its contents. A sudden sharp dread filled her heart and stayed her hand. Her fate lay there before her. Was Morven worthy or unworthy of her trust?

She broke the seal and read. "My dear Beatrice,—"

"Pardon me for saying that your letter is thoroughly absurd. I thought you were so far superior to your sex as to know that matters cannot always be decided by one's feelings. Your question as to whether I had 'sold' my sister is couched in almost revolting terms. It is as if I had married Mr. Wiggin, that gentleman would certainly have been of service to me in many ways; but such an arrangement need not be called a sale or a bargain. The words are almost indecent, in such a connection. I am surprised at your failure in good taste on such a subject."

"Pray let me hear no more about Mr. Douglas. I shall never consent to his marriage with Lillias. Am I a child that you think you can coerce me with a foolish threat?—Yours, MORVEN."

"Mine, indeed!" said Beatrice passionately, as she threw the letter away from her, and stood glowing with shame and anger, in her lonely little room.

"Mine—when he refuses me the only thing I ask—the only thing I ever really wanted from him! A thing that he ought to do from a mere sense of right and justice! Failure in good taste! Is good taste the only thing worth living for? I cannot bear it. Am I to spend my life with a man whom I despise? The word escaped her involuntarily, and startled her as soon as it was uttered. Her face paled; her head dropped a little. "Is it possible that I do despise him?" she thought. "Has it really come to this? And if so, should I be doing right to marry him? What was I thinking of when I promised to be his wife? Oh, Ralph, Ralph, I did believe I loved you then!"

She hid her face in her hands and burst into tears. But the paroxysm of weeping was short. She seated herself in a chair by the table, wiped her eyes and again took up Morven's letter. This time she read it through carefully and deliberately; she weighed every word, every epithet; she pondered every sentence. It was fortunate for her that Lillias was spending the day with some English friends; else she would never have had time to spend in this way without interruption. But Lillias was out, safe and happy. Beatrice's mind was at rest about her, and she could attend to her own concerns.

After reading the letter she sat for a long time with her hands clasped before her on the table, her eyes seeming to explore the whole mystery of an unseen world. She went over, in her mind, all the incidents of her life at the Towers; the kindness shown her first by the elder, and then by the present, Lord Morven, whose admiration, as well as liking, seemed to be first kindled when Beatrice was just twenty, or his return from a long absence in the East; then the details of his courtship, the words in which he had proposed to her, the pleasure with which she had listened—in spite of an instinctive shyness which made her postpone all mention of marriage and stipulate for concealment of the engagement for a time—the delight that she had felt in making herself useful and necessary in his house and in completely superseding old Mrs. Elton,

the girl's chaperon and nominal head of the household; then her gradual awakening to the fact that she had needs for which Morven's nature was insufficient, and claims which he would always refuse to acknowledge—all these events and phases of feeling passed across her mind in ever changing phantasmagoria, rendering her unconscious of the lapses of time. Lillias' maid knocked at the door to announce that lunch was ready; but Beatrice replied that she wanted nothing. It seemed to her that she must argue the matter out with herself—that she must decide, once and for all, upon the line of duty to be pursued, that, above all, it was necessary for her to know whether she could conscientiously take upon herself the duties and responsibilities that would be hers as Morven's wife.

It was with a look of singular resolution that at the end of her reflections, she drew from her left hand the magnificent diamond ring which had once attracted Anthony Lockhart's attention, and placed it before her on the table. "I can wear it no longer," she said to herself. "That is impossible." And then she drew her writing materials towards her, and prepared to write her reply to Morven's letter.

It was needless to give her letter at full length. She could not make it a short one. She told him that she had long been doubtful of her own love for him, and recent events had only convinced her that she did not possess that affection for him which would make her happy as his wife. "Neither would it make you happy," she wrote. "You would require more than I could possibly give. Let us spare ourselves the pain, the disappointment that would ensue. It is in our favor that so few people know of our engagement. It is the least difficult to dissolve it. And I cannot help thinking, Morven, that although you love me as a cousin, you will some day love another woman better as a wife than ever you would have loved me. You will accuse me of breaking a promise. I acknowledge it with shame. But is it not better for both of us? Would it be right for me to promise to love you when I know that I could not do so? I care for you as a friend, a cousin, a sister, dear Ralph, if you will, but not as a wife. I send back the ring you gave me. You will still find some woman who loves you, and whom you love; give it to her." She concluded the letter by signing herself his "sincere friend and affectionate cousin, Beatrice."

Then she affixed a packet of the ring and letter, and sent it to the post—all without trembling hands or quivering of lips; her mind was so absolutely made up that the details of the separation gave her no cause for yearning. She was sorry for the pain to Lillias, and for the mortification to Lord Morven; but she did not believe that Morven's love for her was actually very great, and she knew that Lillias would be consoled when she learned that the change was for Beatrice's happiness. And it was for her happiness indeed! When the letter was actually despatched, she threw out her arms with a grand, free gesture of relief. She was a bond slave no longer, she was her own mistress, she was free! If she had doubted the wisdom of her decision before she could do it no longer. By the sudden rush of joy through all her veins, she knew that she was glad to have her liberty. She could never go back. The Rubicon was passed. She was a free woman once again. "If I had not been so young—if I had known what life meant—I never should have consented," she said to herself when a slight misgiving stole over her respecting the way in which Morven would receive the news. But she did not feel herself guilty at all. Her nature was thoroughly well-poised; and, having once made up her mind that what she was going to do was right, she didn't waste her strength in useless remorse or repine after it was done. There was a directness, an unwavering energy of purpose, in her character which might be calculated on to bear her strongly and safely to the end of what she had undertaken. And this did not mean that she was incapable of self-criticism. In after days she would often say, "Here I was in error," "Here I made a mistake," but the mistake and the error were then used as foundations for a truer knowledge—not needlessly lamented, but turned into "stepping-stones to higher things."

When she had despatched her letter, therefore, she waited gravely, but without any sensation of remorse for Morven's answer. She did not tell Lillias what she had done. As soon as Morven's reply came she thought it would be time to tell Lillias.

But the days went by and Morven returned no answer. At first she thought that her own letter must have miscarried or that he was ill; but when more than a week had elapsed he wrote to Lillias and mentioned carelessly and casually, as it seemed, "that he had received Beatrice's letter, and agreed to what she said. There was no need for her to write again." Was that all? Beatrice asked herself, with a strangely startled sensation. She had expected remonstrance, at least. After the first moment of surprise she decided that Morven's pride had not allowed him to make any further comment upon her letter and

that he wished to accept her decision in offended silence. Perhaps it was I letter so. Yet she wished that he had written to her.

Into the midst of her uncertainties, a new element of perplexity was introduced. Dr. Airlie wrote again, making much of the local gossip about Bertie Douglas and Mrs. Drummond. The marriage day was certainly fixed. Mr. Douglas had not given great scandal to the neighborhood by his evident favour against his cousin, and by his expressed determination to supplant Bertie as laird of Glenberrie.

"This is too much," said Beatrice as she read the letter. "We shall never know the truth so long as we stay here." Then she mused for a few minutes. "Lillias," she said at last, "would you mind my leaving you with the Claremonts for a few days? They will be delighted to have you. I will take Saunders and go to Glenberrie myself."

"You, Beatrice! You cannot," ejaculated Lady Lillias.

"I can and I will," she answered. Her face had grown pale and determined as she spoke.

"We are getting to be entangled in a net-work of rumors and fancies—and lies. I must go myself and see what the truth is. You will be safe here, and I will make things right if I can."

"But, Bertie—Morven will be angry."

"Let Morven be angry—Lillias, I am not engaged to Morven now."

"Beatrice!"

"I could not, Lillias—I could not marry him," said Beatrice with a reproachful gaze. "It would have been as wrong for me to marry him as for you to marry—Mr. Wiggin."

"Oh, no, Beatrice! Because you like Morven, and I never liked Mr. Wiggin; and, besides, there is no Bertie in the case. You don't care for anyone else—Beatrice, what is the matter? Beatrice, do you mean—is it possible—oh, it can't really be—"

She stopped short. The rush of crimson to Beatrice's cheek and brow which had attracted Lillias' attention faded now and left her white as snow. But her eyes did not flinch.

"Have you broken off your engagement with my brother, because you are in love with someone else? asked Lady Lillias, with a touch of indignation which even her gentleness could not hide.

Beatrice answered steadily. "It was for no reason of that kind that I broke off my engagement."

"You do not love anyone else?" said Lillias eagerly. "Oh, then it may all come right again." But she was arrested by another change in Beatrice's face. The color had returned and concentrated itself in two burning spots upon her cheeks as she interrupted her cousin's fond anticipations.

"You are wrong. It will never 'come all right' in that sense. And I am wrong too. . . . Was I trying to deceive you? I once thought that I never should stoop to deception while I lived."

"I did not say that was not true, but I implied it. I did not break off my engagement to Morven because as far as I know—because I loved another man; there were other reasons; and yet, Lillias—there is some one else."

"And I only knew it this moment—only since you have spoken—but I know it now." And then Beatrice—proud and haughty as she was by nature—turned away from her cousin, hid her burning face in her hands, and burst into tears.

Lillias's arms were immediately thrown round Beatrice's neck; her voice murmuring comforting sentences in Beatrice's ear. But when tranquility was restored—not a long business, because Beatrice was used to self-control—Lillias ventured to show a little girlish curiosity.

"Who is it, Beatrice? Tell me, darling. We have always told each other everything. I understand exactly what you feel."

"Oh, no, Lillias! Nobody can understand!" said Beatrice, with a deep sigh.

"But I can," said Lillias, with a rapid delicate blush, "because of Bertie, you know. Do tell me, Beatrice, dear."

"I could not, Lillias. Don't ask me."

"You won't tell me, Beatrice?" in the most coaxing of silken whispers.

"Dearest, I would if I could. But I cannot tell anybody. Indeed, I have hardly told myself yet. I must have time to know what I feel."

"You will tell me some day will you not?"

"Some day! I don't know—Yes, I do. I shall never tell you, Lillias, never—as long as I live. I am ashamed of what I said already. If you love me never mention it to me again. It was only that I wanted to see—to understand—that I could never marry Morven."

Lillias said no more. She was very tender and sympathetic in her manner during the two or three days that elapsed before Beatrice left for Scotland, but there was a consciousness, a knowledge, in her eyes which Beatrice could not bear to see. She was glad when the hour came which bore her far from Lillias and the Swiss pension on her way to the Towers of Glenberrie.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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