

JUST IN TIME.

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

CHAPTER XX (Continued.)

LORD MORVEN'S MASTER.

"Have you forgotten, sir, that this is my private room?" asked Morven of the doctor.

"Not at all. I have to consult you on particular business at this hour. Your lordship may have forgotten that you requested me to come to you here."

The doctor's bland assurance was particularly offensive to Beatrice. She glanced at Morven, expecting him to severely rebuke the intruder, but, to her surprise, he dropped her hand and moved away without a word. She rose to her feet.

"You can answer me in one word, Morven," she said in a low voice. "Tell me quickly; say 'yes,' and I will go." Morven turned round again, but looked at Dr. Airie and not at her. A thrill of astonishment again passed through Beatrice's mind. What was the meaning of Morven's singular behavior? He seemed to be looking to Dr. Airie for counsel—even for permission to speak! The doctor had fixed him with his glittering eyes, and Morven writhed under the gaze as if it had been that of the fabled basilisk. When he spoke he still did not remove his eyes from the doctor's face.

"I cannot answer you just now," he said. "Another time. At present I must attend to business."

"Business before pleasure, my dear Miss Esilmont," observed the doctor cheerfully. He relaxed his gaze, and Morven's eyes dropped to the floor. In fact the Earl looked so ill at ease that Beatrice, although offended and indignant, resolved to free him at once from the burden of her presence. She walked silently to the door, her head a trifle more erect, her cheek more deeply tinged, than usual—signs of displeasure that were not on either of the two men who watched her departure. Morven came forward to open the door for her, and she thanked him with a slight inclination of her stately head; but she did not look towards him, and the hasty words that she breathed into her ear—"Forgive me, Beatrice,"—passed unnoticed.

She shut the door carefully after her, locked it, and put the key in his pocket, then turned to Dr. Airie. But his face had changed; it was livid and almost convulsed with rage.

"How dare you interrupt me?" he said. "How dare you walk into my room without knocking? your position does not warrant your insolence. I will have no more of it."

"No!" said the doctor, ensconcing himself in the Earl's armchair and comfortably crossing his legs. "What will you do then?"

The question seemed to take away Morven's breath. He actually gasped as he stood in the middle of the room, and looked at his old tutor. "What shall I do?" he repeated in a bewildered tone.

"Yes, what will you do?" said Dr. Airie, coolly. Who will manage to keep your secrets for you as I do? Who will undertake the medical treatment of your friend—"

"Good heavens, Airie, hold your tongue," said Morven, advancing a few paces towards the doctor. "Someone might hear you."

"What if they did? A patient in whom we are both interested on scientific grounds—who would inquire further? It is fortunate that the rooms devoted to my scientific pursuits and my own needs have always been jealously guarded and kept secure from intrusion. If you get rid of me I do not see how you could prevent the servants from penetrating into these rooms—without, at least, exciting some suspicion. And that, in your case, my dear Lord Morven, would be a great pity."

"God knows I can't do without you," said the Earl, almost with a groan.

"Exactly. Then would it not be worth your while to be civil to me?" asked the doctor quietly.

Lord Morven signed deeply. He seated himself in a high-backed chair, and let his head rest wearily against the carved oak frame. Dr. Airie watched him curiously for a minute or two before he continued with his usual pleasant smile.

"It would be well perhaps for us to arrive at some clear understanding upon the point," he said. "You have lately chosen to change your tone towards me, to exhibit towards me, even in public, a haughtiness of manner, a sharpness of speech, which it is not consistent with my dignity to suffer. Permit me to remind you that I have rendered a good many services to your family—that I have saved its honor more than once—and that I ask very little in return; merely outward civility, a home, and a trifle towards the prosecution of my scientific discoveries. Some men in my position would have made a fortune out of you, Lord Morven. Upon my honor, when I think of the circumstances, I am like

Warren Hastings astonished at my own moderation."

"You seem born to be the evil genius of our family," said Morven gloomily. "You had a hold over my father which I never understood. I suppose that you established the same sort of tyranny over him as over myself and—Gerald." He said the name with difficulty, as if it were distasteful to him.

"Tyranny!" repeated the doctor gently. "Ah, what an ugly word! Allow that it is a beneficent tyranny, at any rate, my dear lord; a tyranny that has been exerted only to save you, in your turn, from misery and disgrace."

"It has not saved me from misery," said Morven heavily. "It should have done so. Contrast your present position with what it might be; if, for instance, I were forced, by your own demeanor to me, to unfold to the world the true story of the Ruthven family. The late Earl had his secrets as well as you, rot of a very reputable character, but we will pass over these. Poor Gerald's little escapades would make a pleasant paragraph in Truth or Vanity Fair; the story of his tendency to kleptomancy, his connection with a Glasgow milliner's girl, his attempt at burglary, and all the rest of it—I suppose nobody would be surprised to hear that this career was closed by insanity; but people might be surprised to find that the immediate cause of his insanity was a blow from Lord Morven's hand; and the account of his fate would probably ensure public disgrace, if not criminal prosecution, for Lord Morven himself. As I said before it is I, and I alone, who have hitherto chosen to prevent all this."

He laid a significant emphasis on the word "hitherto." Lord Morven, whose face was ashy white and contracted as if with pain, raised his head and uttered a few broken words.

"Say no more, Airie. You shall not have to complain again."

"Am I to take that speech as an apology?" said the doctor.

It was a merciless question. Lord Morven was a proud man, and he writhed under the necessity of conciliating an inferior. But he dare not defy Stephen Airie. He compelled himself to answer—almost inaudibly—

"If you like."

"That is not enough," said the doctor deliberately. I am like Shylock, you see. I want my pound of flesh and nothing else. You have been my pupil, Morven; I have made you apologise before now. Make decent amends for your discourtesy, or—"

"This is too much," said Morven, a dark flush discolored his forehead as he spoke. "I am not a boy now to be kept in bondage. You forget that I am, at any rate, the master of this house."

"I forget nothing," returned Dr. Airie softly. "Not even that I might get a search-warrant issued and have the Tower explored from top to bottom by the police tomorrow morning. And what would they find?"

"If I thought that, you should never leave this room alive," said the Earl, with sudden passion. He rose to his feet and touched with one hand the knob of a drawer in his writing-table. It flew open. He grasped something with his fingers—Dr. Airie could not see what; but he knew as well as if he had seen that it was a weapon—probably a revolver. There was a murderous gleam in Lord Morven's eyes, but the doctor did not flinch. He smiled in his patron's face.

"Do you think I have not foreseen that contingency?" he said. "And do you fancy that you would then be safe? In the event of my death, suddenly or by violence, I have instructed my lawyer to make use of certain documents now in my hands. These documents contain a full statement of the facts, and an investigation would be entered upon at once."

There was a silence. Morven's eyes fell, the dark color died slowly out of his face, his hand relinquished its hold upon the weapon.

"You are right," he said, turning away and throwing himself into his chair with an air of extreme dejection. "It is useless for me to struggle; you have the advantage of me in every way—just now." Then, as Dr. Airie still looked at him with an air of mild expectancy, he added sullenly, "I apologise."

The word seemed to be wrung from him almost against his will. Having uttered them he remained for some minutes in the same position—his hands resting listlessly on the arms of his chair, his head sunk on his breast—his whole attitude that of a man who feels himself defeated and disgraced, and has no heart to contend against his fate.

Dr. Airie was not ill-pleased to see the effect that he had produced, but he thought it well not to carry his triumph too far. He endeavored to smoothe matters over a little.

"Say no more, my dear Morven, I understand your feeling, and I trust that you will not misunderstand mine. In my position a man must sometimes stand upon his dignity—you, with your assured rank and character, need never do so. Forgive me in your turn if I have wounded you, I would never do so willingly."

And Dr. Airie, rising from his chair, approached the Earl and offered him his hand with all the appearance of enthusiastic friendship.

Morven let his fingers be squeezed by the doctor's plump white hand without any responsive warmth. But when his hand was freed his natural fastidiousness won the day. "Good heavens!" he muttered, audibly enough, "this is sickening work!" And then he drew out a handkerchief and brushed his hand with it as though to get rid of the doctor's contaminating touch. He scarcely knew how great an insult was conveyed by the action—it was instinctive, almost involuntary—until he happened to catch sight of the expression on Steven Airie's face—an expression of mingled rage, hate and cunning—before which Lord Morven quailed in spite of himself. But no sooner was it seen than it was gone. Morven hastily rose from his chair—he had some idea of making another apology, far more sincere than the one which he had made before—but before the words fell from his lips Dr. Airie spoke in his usual measured tones.

"I fear," he said, "that I interrupted a pleasant conversation this afternoon. Miss Esilmont was asking you for something, perhaps?"

"Yes," the Earl admitted reluctantly, "she was."

"I think that I can guess the nature of that request. Ah, how easily women's hearts are led astray! She is deeply interested in the love fortunes of Lady Lillias and Mr. Douglas, without a doubt."

"She is."

"She has been retained for the defence," said the doctor, casting a wicked glance at the Earl's impassive countenance. "Mr. Douglas' emissary has done his work very well."

"Who is Douglas' emissary?" asked Morven, frowning.

"What! I said the doctor, apparently much surprised. "You do not know then that Anthony Lockhart meets Miss Esilmont in the woods and sends messages through her to Lady Lillias?"

Morven started and seemed about to say something violent, then recovered himself and answered quietly—

"Miss Esilmont has perfect liberty to meet anyone she likes. I have confidence in her discretion."

The doctor bowed. "She is at one with you in your decision then?" he said urbanely.

"No—no—not exactly."

"What then—exactly?"

Morven looked away and set his teeth for a moment. Then he turned to the doctor and spoke with unwonted emotion and almost trembling eagerness.

"Look here, Airie," he said, "Lillias is ill. That poor lad, Bertie, has been almost at the point of death. Why should they not marry? Why should I make them miserable? I would gladly take back what I said to them in the first moment of my anger—God knows my pride has been humbled to the dust since then!"

"Since then?" repeated Dr. Airie with a placid smile. "What has happened since then?" "When you turned Douglas out of the house you had surely then learnt all that there was to know. No other disgraceful story has come to light since then?"

"I had then not stooped to deception," said Morven sternly. "I had certainly learned for the first time the extent of my brother's moral weakness, but I had not consented to hide it or to let a wrong go unrepaired which I might have righted. I had still the right to my pride in the house to which I belonged. But now what have I to be proud of? My whole life life is a lie. Lillias only the right to be happy—she deserves happiness, and you force me—me—to withhold it!"

"This is a new development indeed!" said the doctor calmly. He seated himself and regarded Lord Morven with a professional eye. "I have seen you under many conditions," he went on; "but I never saw you unmanly or cowardly before. This is very interesting."

"You make my life a hell to me," broke out Morven, bitterly. "As if things were not bad enough already—as if I had not enough to bear—you are always at my elbow to edge me on to more and more infamous deeds, and to taunt me when I refuse to carry out your suggestions. Why do you not leave me in peace? For heaven's sake go away from the house. I will give you what you like: the half of my property; the whole, if it would free me from you, so that I might never look upon your face again."

"Tut, tut, tut!" said the doctor soothingly. "Why, you are very far gone, my dear boy. It's fever. Let me feel your pulse a moment—no? Well, well, you had much better go to bed and get a good night's rest after all this excitement. You really have not the physique for this sort of melodrama, Morven. You'll get yourself into a very unwholesome state of cerebral disturbance if you don't take care."

"If you mean that you are driving me mad you are correct enough," said Morven bitterly. "Don't trifle with me, Airie; I can't bear it. Lighten my burden as much as you can, and don't interfere with my sister's marriage!"

The doctor looked at him and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You are curiously excited," he said. "I have not seen you like this for many years, Morven. I remember that when you were quite a boy you had the same sort of ideas that facts could be modified by special pleading. You used to find out your mistake whenever you had to deal with me; you will find it out now."

"You mean—"

"I mean," said Dr. Airie, in quiet but very clear and incisive tones, "that I forbid the marriage between Lillias and Bertie Douglas."

"You forbid it! How dare you!" Morven began. His face was livid with rage and shame. But he was not allowed to finish the sentence.

"I forbid it absolutely," said the doctor. "How dare I do it? And how dare you—blind, insensate fool that as you must needs be—dispute my authority in matter? Do you not know your master yet, my lord? I do not threaten what I cannot perform. You know me of old."

"Do indeed?" muttered Morven between his teeth.

"And you know that I never fail to carry out my intentions. Let the dispute end there. You have made me almost as hot as yourself, dear boy. Forgive my intemperate expressions. I did not mean to speak so sharply. But you try my patience a good deal. Are you, or are you not, anxious for the welfare of your house?"

"You know that I am."

"You did not tell me the condition in which you stand? You are in want of money. You live here in a magnificent house, but almost every acre of your land is mortgaged. Your only hope lies in connecting yourself with a wealthy house. You are engaged to Beatrice Esilmont, who has not a penny. I have not asked you to give her up."

"No, indeed!"

"You may thank me for my consideration in that matter. Lady Lillias is the person who can retrieve the fortunes of the family. I will tell you now why I opposed her marriage with young Douglas."

"You made me believe young Douglas' position far worse than it is. You opposed it on that ground."

"Certainly. You were too proud to look into matters for yourself; too stupid to believe that other men would defraud you; and the consequence is that I could depend upon your believing implicitly every word that I chose to utter. Douglas' affairs are in a very flourishing condition. He would be a suitable match for Lady Lillias under ordinary circumstances. But he would not—he could not—pay off the encumbrances on the estate. The young man whom Lady Lillias is to marry both can, and will."

"And this young man—"

"His name is Wiggins," said the doctor deliberately, "Josiah Wiggins. Not a euphonious name, I grant you, but the poor young man cannot be blamed for that. His father was a cotton-spinner. My dear Morven, I know your objections; kindly reserve them for the present. Young Wiggins is under obligations to me and will act according to my wishes. He has seen Lady Lillias at a garden party, and has fallen passionately in love with her. He will make large settlements, and he will also make a gift—or a loan we might call it, to save appearances—of a sum not less than sixty or seventy thousand pounds towards the clearing of the estate. You will not meet with munificence of this kind every day."

"And I am to sell my sister—in order to clear the estate!"

"You have sold a great deal already," insinuated the doctor smiling.

"I have sold my soul," said Lord Morven turning away with a shudder which he could repress.

But the doctor only shrugged his shoulders in reply.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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"Who is that poor old ragged-looking man, pap?"

"That's an inventor, child. He invented entirely new ways of saving time, money and labor in the production of useful articles."

"Who are those gentlemen with big gold chains and diamond studs? They aren't inventors, are they?"

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How a Telephone Girl Crushed a Musical Rival.

There is a young woman whom the telephone girl does not like. This young woman has aspirations for an exalted musical career—expects to become a prima donna in fact, and the telephone girl, who is something of a singer herself, has more than once expressed the opinion that she is perfectly horrid. The other evening this young lady called up Professor Catterwall after the aesthetic concert and inquired:

"Professor, what did you think of the singing this evening at the concert?"

"Very good, my dear, very good!"

"How did you like Miss Highnote's effort, professor?"

"Excellent, my dear, excellent!"

"And Mrs. Howling—how did her rendition of the staccato polka impress you, professor?"

"Favorably very favorably, my dear!"

"Are you Miss Wheeler? Ah! yes, of course you are. Well my love, I will tell you. You did very well, indeed, but you remind me of a—"

At this juncture the wicked telephone girl switched on a man who had just said to a veterinary surgeon, "Why, I want you to come over and treat—and Miss Wheeler received the conclusion of the sentence as if it were a continuation of the professor's remark:

"Cow that has lost her cud and had a dish rag rammed down her throat with out doing her a bit of good."

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