

## JUST IN TIME.

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

CHAPTER XXIII.  
GERALD'S WIDOW.

All through the sunny months of that early summer in which Bertie Douglas came back to Scotland, all through the time of roses and sunshine and fresh breezes from the purple hills, there were hundreds—ay, thousands—of men and women and little children who lived pent up in stifling alleys and murky lanes of great cities, never able to escape even for a day from the crowded streets nor to feast their eyes upon the pleasant fields and babbling waters of their beautiful native land. While Lady Lillias Ruthven wandered about the park and watched the golden green of the sunlight as it played among leaves, or dreamed of her lover in some shady court where the plashing of the river water was faintly heard as in some lovely vision, did she ever think, I wonder, of the busy tolling lives of the working men and women in the great towns of her country, or of the poverty, the disease, the crime, which rendered the very existence of many a human being a burden to himself as well as to the State? It is possible that she did think of the poor sometimes, for she had a sympathetic nature and a compassionate heart; but she had seen so little of the world's woes that she would have been startled and sickened if she had been shown the place in which a girl, not very much older than herself, had spent three weary months in suffering, in poverty, and in that most wearing of heart sicknesses—as penance.

The room was a tiny garret, lit only by a window in the roof, through which the noonday sun poured its beams with dazzling brilliancy, searching out every dusty corner, displaying every scrap of faded coverlet or squalid garment, every atom of dirt and dust and rubbish, with an intensity which seemed almost cruel. The furniture consisted of a heap of rags a blanket or two, a broken table and a wooden stool, together with a few cooking utensils and a little cracked crockery. In this room—about eight feet by seven—three human beings lived together, ate, drank, slept, quarrelled and were reconciled, loved or hated, as is the manner of the race. There was an old woman, generally known as Granny Logan, and there was a young woman whom Granny Logan called Maggie. And then there was a baby-boy, scarcely a year old, whose name was Ronald.

The elder woman smoked an old black pipe and drank whiskey at intervals as she sat over the smoldering fire. She was always chilly, in spite of the bright sunshine that rested on her tangled grey hair and withered cheek—in spite of the stifling atmosphere of the little room below the heated leads. Her tattered bedgown and loose jacket were so soiled that their colour was almost indistinguishable, and her face looked as if dust and dirt had impregnated every wrinkle and engrained itself in every inch of shrivelled skin. She was not an attractive woman by any means, and the expression of animal satisfaction which crossed her face from time to time as a bright flame leaped up from the heap of smouldering cinders, or she lifted the whiskey bottle to her toothless mouth, was even uglier than the sallow countenance which she occasionally glanced at the miserable bed occupied by Maggie Logan and her child.

Here was a contrast. Here at least there was no lack of personal charm. Margaret Logan and her boy Ronald, in spite of their squalid surroundings, were beautiful as any poet's dream. The promise of the girl's childhood has been more than fulfilled.

She was twenty-two years of age, but she looked scarcely more than eighteen. Her features and her limbs were somewhat attenuated and sharpened by recent illness, but their beauty was undeniable. In fact, it might have been thought by many persons that illness had given a refinement to the girl's appearance, which her rounded outlines and brilliant coloring had hitherto lacked. Her skin was of that peculiar snowy whiteness, which sometimes goes with reddish hair, but the clear rose-tint of her cheeks and lips were so vivid that they looked as if they had been laid on with a brush instead of being perfectly natural. Her eyes were not, however, the blue eyes generally seen in persons of this type; they were of a yellowish brown, with curious yellowish reflections in them, and long brown lashes like the darker portions of her hair. Her hair varied in color, as some hair—often the loveliest—will often do. Almost auburn in its general tint, it had brown shades and golden lights which made the color difficult to decide; and when it was unstopped it covered her shoulders like a shining mantle, and hung down to her very knees. It was hair that would have been at once the admiration and the despair of any artist who tried to paint its wonderful gleams of reddened gold.

The little boy, who sat on the bed beside her, always laughed and crowded with delight when she let him play with her hair. He liked to thrust his tiny hands into the soft masses and twist the golden threads round his fingers. Sometimes she would throw it round him like a veil—but this was only in her happier moods; of late she had been too sad and desperate to care even to play with Ronald.

The little fellow was also fair, but with a weaker shade of coloring than hers. His eyes were blue, his hair almost flaxen. He was a bold, bright child, but pale and delicate as any child would be who had spent weeks and months in that little hot room below the roof. His mother had been ill for full three months, and although she was now recovering she seemed not to have sufficient energy to rise from her bed in order to creep out into the hot August sunshine. Certainly the streets round about the Trongate were not very attractive to a delicate woman just recovering from illness.

Her eyes had been dreamily fixed for some time upon the square of blue sky which she could see through the window in the roof. The boy laughed to himself as he played with her shining waves of hair. The old crooked woman, by the fire, and from time to time glanced at the mother which were full of a sour dislike. She was in very truth the girl's grandmother, but she bore no love either for Maggie or for Maggie's child.

"He'll no come back," she said at last, harshly and grimly. It was not the first time she had used these words. It was her pleasure to torment the girl.

Maggie's cheeks flushed and whitened again. She breathed quickly, but she would not speak. After a time the old woman went on in the same tone.

"A false, black-hearted loon! What gawd ye listen to him! Jock Saunders wou'd hae used ye better an' lo'd ye mair."

"And basten me when he was in drink and starved me when he was sober," was Maggie in tones of low but fierce indignation. "I prefer my own choice."

"Dinna knap at me wi' ye high English," said the old woman savagely. "Ye can speak guid Scotch when it pleases ye; I'll hae name o' yer fine laddy ways in my house. Why are ye awa' wi' him? If he cared for ye he wou'd hae left ye here—wi' me."

"He did care for me," said Maggie suddenly. "I winna heed what ye say. He's my ain true love—my ain true husband—an' he'll come back to me an' Ronald."

"He'll no come back," said the old woman. "He's in the living," cried Maggie passionately. "He swore to love me to his life's end, and he will—he will."

"He'll no come back. Maybe he died when he was awa'," said the old woman callously.

Her granddaughter suddenly sat up and pushed the child away from her. The little boy set up a complaining cry, but she did not attend to it. She turned her white face and blazing eyes towards Mrs. Logan and spoke in imperious yet quivering tones.

"What have ye heard? What'd ye ken o' my Gerald?" she said, forgetting all her "high English" in her excitement. "If he's dead, I'll dee, too—I canna live without him."

"Ye're aye the bairn," said the old woman sulkily.

"The bairn! What's the bairn to me compared wi' my man. Will the bairn give me back my Gerald?—Ah, granny, dinna drive me mad wi' hintin' at trouble, if ye've heard anything o' Gerald, for God's sake tell me the worst o't, and then—then—with a burst of sobbing—"then let me dee."

"Whisht, lassie, whisht!" said the old woman, less harshly than before. "Greetin' winna bring the deid to life again."

"The deid! the deid!" said Maggie, lifting her face, all disfigured with her tears, from the bundle of rags that served her as a pillow. "Wha says that Gerald's deid?"

"The newspapers say it," replied her grandmother tartly. "Gerald Ruthven—I kenned his name, though ye thought I didna—Gerald Ruthven, brither o' Lord Morven."

"When?" gasped Maggie. "Mair than two months syne. Ye'd begun to be ill, an' I thoct ye wad hae de'd without kennin' o't. I kept frae ye till ye got better, but ye're doin' fine noo, an' I'm richt weary o' yer yammerin' about yer braw husband. He's gone, and we maun an' anither for ye, my bonny doo."

But Maggie did not hear her words. With deathly-white face and straining eyes she was repeating the first words of the old woman's speech—

"Mair than two months syne!—When I was ill!—Then, tell me—how was it—how did he die?"

"The papers hadna muckle to say about it. He was hurt in a fire they said, an' he was ta'en to his ain home to dee."

"A fire!" said Maggie in a hoarse whisper. "Where was the fire?"

"In his ain house!"

"I'm nae sure o' that."

"Was it in a house that they ca' Glenberrie?"

"Ay, was it!" said the old woman. "I mind it noo, Glenberrie! that was the vera name."

"What was he doing there?" asked Maggie more of herself than of her grandmother. But Mr. Logan replied—

"He was juist savin' things like ither folk. The place was a' in a bleeze. A laddy found him lying on the floor wi' the boxes an' things he had saved, but they couldn't save him. He de'd fower days after."

"Ah," said Maggie, with a long-drawn wail of lamentation, "an' it was me sent him there. It was me that killed him. Oh, Gerald, Gerald, come back!"

And then she fell into hysterical fits of screaming and weeping, which lasted for hours, and left her in a state of complete exhaustion. The little boy had to be taken away from her lest she should do him some injury in her mad grief, and for two or three days she was indeed like one possessed by an evil spirit. But on the fourth day, as she lay upon her bed, white-lipped, haggard-eyed, with all the beauty and youth gone out of her worn countenance, a kindly neighbor entered with little Ronald in her arms and laid him down beside his mother. The child caught at once at a tress of the glorious auburn hair.

Maggie felt the small fingers touch her breast; she heard the soft baby laugh that she had always loved to hear. An exquisite thrill—whether it was of pleasure or pain, she hardly knew—passed through her, as the mother-love which for days had seemed dormant and almost dead, rose up and asserted its old claim over her heart. She drew the child into her arms, and pressed it to her bosom.

The tears had their way; henceforth there was no fear either for her life or reason, both of which had been endangered. But all the passionate love which she had spent on Gerald Ruthven—for it was indeed Lord Morven's brother who had wooed and won the girl once known as Maggie Logan of the milliner's shop in Sauchiehall street—all the love which she had given to him she lavished on his child. She had always loved little Ronald very tenderly; but her love now rose to the height of passion, almost of mania. For days she would not allow him to be taken from her; she spoke to no one else. She crooned little songs to him, she whispered words nobody else could hear. The old grandmother, the doctor, and acquaintances who came in sometimes to express sympathy and gratify curiosity, observed this conduct with wonder. They thought, one and all, that she was going mad. The doctor shook his head in private over the case. "I don't like it," he said to himself more than once. "If she isn't mad now, she looks as though she soon would be. There's a screw loose somewhere which will manifest itself in the long run. I wonder what she will do next?"

He had not long to wonder. The little boy fell ill, from long confinement and insufficient food, and the mother roused herself from her apathetic state to attend to his wants. Ronald's illness was perhaps the best possible thing that could have happened to her. She got up, she nursed him assiduously, she tried to eat and sleep in order that she might be strong enough to wait on him; and as he recovered she seemed to recover too.

Old Mrs. Logan had only been restrained by the doctor's most stringent orders from remonstrating daily and hourly with her granddaughter on the folly of her conduct. The doctor, however, spoke so sharply on the subject—telling her that the young woman would certainly go out of her mind if she were not allowed perfect rest and freedom to do as she pleased—that Mrs. Logan confined herself to inarticulate moans and murmurs which might mean as much or as little as the bearer chose. She was taken completely by surprise when one evening Maggie opened her lips and spoke.

"What way are ye groanin' like that?" she said sharply.

The old woman turned and looked at her. Maggie was sitting erect, with her sleeping boy in her arms. Her face was white and drawn, but there was a look in her eyes which told the old woman that some change had come over her. She was "herself" again.

"I was grievin' for your trouble, Maggie," said Mrs. Logan, with unwonted mildness.

"Ye needna grieve," said Maggie. "My trouble's my ain. I canna be fashed any longer wi' your greetin' an' groanin'; I'm awa' the morn's mornin' to my husband's folk."

"Havers!" said Mrs. Logan, contemptuously.

"It's no havers," returned her granddaughter, while a red spot began to burn on either cheek, and her eyes gleamed feverishly. "Ronald shall hae his rights."

"An' what are they?" said the old woman.

"The right to be trocht up as his father's son should be," said Maggie fiercely, "and not in poverty an' want an' wretchedness. He shall hae the best o' everything, my bonny man, even if they turn me from the door. But they'll take me in, too, for Gerald's sake."

"Ye'll hae a bit writing to show them, maybe," said Mrs. Logan cautiously. Maggie paused for a moment. "Na," she answered at last, in a lower tone, "I've nae writing to show."

"Ye'll hae witnesses then?" pursued her grandmother. "He ca'd ye his wife afore fouk—"

"I canna mind," said Maggie, rather faintly. Then, after a pause. "There was Johnnie Morrison an' Eliza Low—they were witnesses when he took me—I think they wrote their names on a paper, because he said he wanted no mistake about it—"

"And what cam' o' the paper then?"

"He had it."

"An' whaur are the twa witnesses?"

"Deid."

"Deid; the twa o' them?"

"Ay, Eliza Low deid an' de'd some after. Morrison was lost in the Tay Bridge accident."

"But ye'll hae ither fouk to swear t'illt," said Mrs. Logan with a wink of her eye. "I'll no mind swearin' myself that I heard him ca' ye his wife a dizen o' times—"

"Ye never saw him but once," interrupted Maggie, "an' I doot if his relations would think muckle o' your swearin'."

There was a fine scorn in her tone as she addressed these words to her grandmother. "The old woman watched her silently for some minutes; she had more faith in Maggie's powers of resource than she cared to acknowledge."

"What will ye dae?" she asked at length, rather timidly.

Maggie did not answer at once. She laid the child on the bed, smoothed his fair curls back from his forehead, and then stood up and placed one hand behind her head in a reflective attitude. Wasted and worn as she was, she made a fair picture, with the light of the setting sun reflected in her ruffled, red-gold hair, and her torn dress falling away from her white neck and shapely arm. There was an expression in her eyes, however, which might have detracted from her beauty in some people's opinion; a subtle, crafty look, as of one who was willing to use all means for the attainment of her own end.

"I'll tell you what I winna dae," she said after a long pause; "I winna see my bairn brocht up as I was when I was a bairn. He shanna hunger an' thirst as I hae done. I'll steal for him rather. I'll sell my ain self, body an' soul, before I'll see him come to want. Whether he'll hae his rights or no, I'll make a gentleman o'm, as his father was afore."

"An' hoo'll ye dae't?" said the old woman mockingly.

"I'll try fair means first," said Maggie. "An' then I'll try foul. But I'll hae my will."

"Ye were aye a masterful lassie. But ye're a sair task afore ye. An' what will ye're 'fair means' be, if a body may be speirin'?"

"Oh, ye may speir an' welcome," returned Maggie, disdainfully. "I'm gaun to Lord Morven, an' I'll tell him my story. Gerald had the bit writing in his pocket book; his brother will maybe be wonderin' at this time whaur I'm gaun."

"An' if no?"

"If no," said Maggie quietly, "we'll see after the ither witnesses. Maybe we'll ask ye what ye've seen an' heard, grandmother." She smiled as she spoke, and there was a cool resolve in her smile that filled her grandmother's breast with admiration.

"Ye're a clever jaud, Maggie; ye aye wis," she said, feeling, for the black bottle that was generally to be found beside her chair. "Tak' a wee drappie, it'll no harm ye; juist a drap."

"Na, I'll nae o't," said Maggie, angrily pushing away the proffered bottle. "D'ye think I'd drink whisky out o' a bottle that way? I'll hae to dress like a laddy and talk like a laddy noo, if it's only for Ronald's sake."

"An' wha'll gie ye the money to dress like a laddy?" said Mrs. Logan with a sneer, as she raised the despised black bottle to her lips.

"Ye will," said Maggie boldly.

"Me?" the old woman almost screamed. "Me that has scarcely enough to keep starvation from the door! Me that has had the feeding an' nursing o' your bairn for the last fower months! No a bawbee will ye get frae me, lass; an' that I tell ye."

"It would be for your ain advantage," said Maggie, quietly facing her grandmother. "I'll pay ye back, double what it costs ye, an' set ye up for life beside, as soon as I get my rights."

"Ay, but suppose your dipna get them!"

"I'll mak' it up tae ye, some way. I'll come back an' work for baith. I can get a living at the theatre if in no other way," said Maggie with an involuntary glance at her magnificent hair which was hanging half loose about her shoulders. "Ye'll be nae loser. But if ye refuse, I'll neither gie ye saught when I gain, nor do a hand's turn for ye when I've lost. Help me noo, or I'll never see ye face again."

Her steady determination carried the day. The old woman considered the

matter for a few moments and then said sulkily.

"Hoo muckle shall ye be wainin' then?"

"Ten pounds to begin wi'."

"Ten pounds! But that's a fortin! I hysna ten pounds in the world."

"That's a lee," said Maggie, in an unmoved voice. "Ye're mair than twenty in the savings bank; and then there's the big bank on the stocking fut."

"How come ye to know a'that, lass?"

"I've watched ye mony a time when ye didna ken. Come, granny, I'll pay it back, an' gie ye interest tae the bargain. It's for your own guid as weel's mine."

The old woman was silent for a few moments. Then she said in low, reluctant tones.

"I'll len' ye ten pound, Maggie. I'll len' ye twal pound if ye'll tell me what I'm gaun tae speer."

"An' what's that?"

"Why ye said ye had sent your husband to Glenberrie. Why ye said ye had killed him?"

Her eyes turned with irresistible curiosity to Maggie's face as she asked the question. The young woman changed color, and took a step backward before she replied.

"When did I say that?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"Tell me the haill story, or I'll no gie ye a bawbee."

"There's naething to tell."

"Then I've naething to gie."

Maggie sat down and crossed her hands helplessly before her. Her face had turned very pale, and there was a look of trouble, almost of fear, in her eyes. For some minutes there was complete silence.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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