

CHAPTER II

AT THE BELL ROCK

A mile or more away from where Beatrice stood and saw visions, and further up the coast-line, a second group of rocks, known from their colour as the Red Rocks, or sometimes, for another reason, as the Bell Rocks, juts out between half and three-quarters of a mile into the waters of the Welsh Bay that lies behind Rumball Point. At low tide these rocks are bare, so that a man may walk or wade to their extremity, but when the flood is full only one or two of the very largest can from time to time be seen projecting their weed-wreathed heads through the wash of the shore-bound waves. In certain sets of the wind and tide this is a terrible and most dangerous spot in rough weather, as more than one vessel have learnt to their cost. So long ago as 1780 a three-decker man-of-war went ashore there in a furious winter gale, and, with one exception, every living soul on board of her, to the number of seven hundred, was drowned. The one exception was a man in irons, who came safely and serenely ashore seated upon a piece of wreckage. Nobody ever knew how the shipwreck happened, least of all the survivor in irons, but the tradition of the terror of the scene yet lives in the district, and the spot where the bones of the drowned men still peep grimly through the sand is not unnaturally supposed to be haunted. Ever since this catastrophe a large bell (it was originally the bell of the ill-fated vessel itself, and still bears her name, "H.M.S. Thunder," stamped upon its metal) has been fixed upon the highest rock, and in times of storm

and at high tide sends its solemn note of warning booming across the deep.

But the bell was quiet now, and just beneath it, in the shadow of the rock whereon it was placed, a man half hidden in seaweed, with which he appeared to have purposely covered himself, was seated upon a piece of wreck. In appearance he was a very fine man, big-shouldered and broad limbed, and his age might have been thirty-five or a little more. Of his frame, however, what between the mist and the unpleasantly damp seaweed with which he was wreathed, not much was to be seen. But such light as there was fell upon his face as he peered eagerly over and round the rock, and glinted down the barrels of the double ten-bore gun which he held across his knee. It was a striking countenance, with its brownish eyes, dark peaked beard and strong features, very powerful and very able. And yet there was a certain softness in the face, which hovered round the region of the mouth like light at the edge of a dark cloud, hinting at gentle sunshine. But little of this was visible now. Geoffrey Bingham, barrister-at-law of the Inner Temple, M.A., was engaged with a very serious occupation. He was trying to shoot curlew as they passed over his hiding-place on their way to the mud banks where they feed further along the coast.

Now if there is a thing in the world which calls for the exercise of man's every faculty it is curlew shooting in a mist. Perhaps he may wait for an hour or even two hours and see nothing, not even an oyster-catcher. Then at last from miles away comes the faint wild call

of curlew on the wing. He strains his eyes, the call comes nearer, but nothing can he see. At last, seventy yards or more to the right, he catches sight of the flicker of beating wings, and, like a flash, they are gone. Again a call--the curlew are fighting. He looks and looks, in his excitement struggling to his feet and raising his head incautiously far above the sheltering rock. There they come, a great flock of thirty or more, bearing straight down on him, a hundred yards off--eighty--sixty--now. Up goes the gun, but alas and alas! they catch a glimpse of the light glinting on the barrels, and perhaps of the head behind them, and in another second they have broken and scattered this way and that way, twisting off like a wisp of gigantic snipe, to vanish with melancholy cries into the depth of mist.

This is bad, but the ardent sportsman sits down with a groan and waits, listening to the soft lap of the tide. And then at last virtue is rewarded. First of all two wild duck come over, cleaving the air like arrows. The mallard is missed, but the left barrel reaches the duck, and down it comes with a full and satisfying thud. Hardly have the cartridges been replaced when the wild cry of the curlew is once more heard--quite close this time. There they are, looming large against the fog. Bang! down goes the first and lies flapping among the rocks. Like a flash the second is away to the left. Bang! after him, and caught him too! Hark to the splash as he falls into the deep water fifty yards away. And then the mist closes in so densely that shooting is done with for the day. Well, that right and left has been worth three hours' wait in the wet seaweed and the violent cold that may follow--that is, to any

man who has a soul for true sport.

Just such an experience as this had befallen Geoffrey Bingham. He had bagged his wild duck and his brace of curlew--that is, he had bagged one of them, for the other was floating in the sea--when a sudden increase in the density of the mist put a stop to further operations. He shook the wet seaweed off his rough clothes, and, having lit a short briar pipe, set to work to hunt for the duck and the first curlew. He found them easily enough, and then, walking to the edge of the rocks, up the sides of which the tide was gradually creeping, peered into the mist to see if he could find the other. Presently the fog lifted a little, and he discovered the bird floating on the oily water about fifty yards away. A little to the left the rocks ran out in a peak, and he knew from experience that the tide setting towards the shore would carry the curlew past this peak. So he went to its extremity, sat down upon a big stone and waited. All this while the tide was rising fast, though, intent as he was upon bringing the curlew to bag, he did not pay much heed to it, forgetting that it was cutting him off from the land. At last, after more than half-an-hour of waiting, he caught sight of the curlew again, but, as bad luck would have it, it was still twenty yards or more from him and in deep water. He was determined, however, to get the bird if he could, for Geoffrey hated leaving his game, so he pulled up his trousers and set to work to wade towards it. For the first few steps all went well, but the fourth or fifth landed him in a hole that wet his right leg nearly up to the thigh and gave his ankle a severe twist. Reflecting that it would be very awkward if he sprained his ankle

in such a lonely place, he beat a retreat, and bethought him, unless the curlew was to become food for the dog-fish, that he had better strip bodily and swim for it. This--for Geoffrey was a man of determined mind--he decided to do, and had already taken off his coat and waistcoat to that end, when suddenly some sort of a boat--he judged it to be a canoe from the slightness of its shape--loomed up in the mist before him. An idea struck him: the canoe or its occupant, if anybody could be insane enough to come out canoeing in such water, might fetch the curlew and save him a swim.

"Hi!" he shouted in stentorian tones. "Hullo there!"

"Yes," answered a woman's gentle voice across the waters.

"Oh," he replied, struggling to get into his waistcoat again, for the voice told him that he was dealing with some befogged lady, "I'm sure I beg your pardon, but would you do me a favour? There is a dead curlew floating about, not ten yards from your boat. If you wouldn't mind----"

A white hand was put forward, and the canoe glided on towards the bird. Presently the hand plunged downwards into the misty waters and the curlew was bagged. Then, while Geoffrey was still struggling with his waistcoat, the canoe sped towards him like a dream boat, and in another moment it was beneath his rock, and a sweet dim face was looking up into his own.

Now let us go back a little (alas! that the privilege should be peculiar to the recorder of things done), and see how it came about that Beatrice Granger was present to retrieve Geoffrey Bingham's dead curlew.

Immediately after the unpleasant idea recorded in the last, or, to be more accurate, in the first chapter of this comedy, had impressed itself upon Beatrice's mind, she came to the conclusion that she had seen enough of the Dog Rocks for one afternoon. Thereon, like a sensible person, she set herself to quit them in the same way that she had reached them, namely by means of a canoe. She got into her canoe safely enough, and paddled a little way out to sea, with a view of returning to the place whence she came. But the further she went out, and it was necessary that she should go some way on account of the rocks and the currents, the denser grew the fog. Sounds came through it indeed, but she could not clearly distinguish whence they came, till at last, well as she knew the coast, she grew confused as to whither she was heading. In this dilemma, while she rested on her paddle staring into the dense surrounding mist and keeping her grey eyes as wide open as nature would allow, and that was very wide, she heard the report of a gun behind her to the right. Arguing to herself that some wild-fowler on the water must have fired it who would be able to direct her, she turned the canoe round and paddled swiftly in the direction whence the sound came. Presently she heard the gun again; both barrels were fired, in there to the right, but some way off. She paddled on vigorously, but now no more

shots came to guide her, therefore for a while her search was fruitless. At last, however, she saw something looming through the mist ahead; it was the Red Rocks, though she did not know it, and she drew near with caution till Geoffrey's shout broke upon her ears.

She picked up the dead bird and paddled towards the dim figure who was evidently wrestling with something, she could not see what.

"Here is the curlew, sir," she said.

"Oh, thank you," answered the figure on the rock. "I am infinitely obliged to you. I was just going to swim for it, I can't bear losing my game. It seems so cruel to shoot birds for nothing."

"I dare say that you will not make much use of it now that you have got it," said the gentle voice in the canoe. "Curlew are not very good eating."

"That is scarcely the point," replied the Crusoe on the rock. "The point is to bring them home. Après cela----"

"The birdstuffer?" said the voice.

"No," answered Crusoe, "the cook----"

A laugh came back from the canoe--and then a question.

"Pray, Mr. Bingham, can you tell me where I am? I have quite lost my reckoning in the mist."

He started. How did this mysterious young lady in a boat know his name?

"You are at the Red Rocks; there is the bell, that grey thing,
Miss--Miss----"

"Beatrice Granger," she put in hastily. "My father is the clergyman of Bryngelly. I saw you when you and Lady Honoria Bingham looked into the school yesterday. I teach in the school." She did not tell him, however, that his face had interested her so much that she had asked his name.

Again he started. He had heard of this young lady. Somebody had told him that she was the prettiest girl in Wales, and the cleverest, but that her father was not a gentleman.

"Oh," he said, taking off his hat in the direction of the canoe. "Isn't it a little risky, Miss Granger, for you to be canoeing alone in this mist?"

"Yes," she answered frankly, "but I am used to it; I go out canoeing in all possible weathers. It is my amusement, and after all the risk does not matter much," she added, more to herself than to him.

While he was wondering what she meant by that dark saying, she went on quickly:

"Do you know, Mr. Bingham, I think that you are in more danger than I am. It must be getting near seven o'clock, and the tide is high at a quarter to eight. Unless I am mistaken there is by now nearly half a mile of deep water between you and the shore."

"My word!" he said. "I forgot all about the tide. What between the shooting and looking for that curlew, and the mist, it never occurred to me that it was getting late. I suppose I must swim for it, that is all."

"No, no," she answered earnestly, "it is very dangerous swimming here; the place is full of sharp rocks, and there is a tremendous current."

"Well, then, what is to be done? Will your canoe carry two? If so, perhaps you would kindly put me ashore?"

"Yes," she said, "it is a double canoe. But I dare not take you ashore here; there are too many rocks, and it is impossible to see the ripple on them in this mist. We should sink the canoe. No, you must get in and I must paddle you home to Bryngelly, that's all. Now that I know where I am I think that I can find the way."

"Really," he said, "you are very good."

"Not at all," she answered, "you see I must go myself anyhow, so I shall be glad of your help. It is nearly five miles by water, you know, and not a pleasant night."

There was truth in this. Geoffrey was perfectly prepared to risk a swim to the shore on his own account, but he did not at all like the idea of leaving this young lady to find her own way back to Bryngelly through the mist and gathering darkness, and in that frail canoe. He would not have liked it if she had been a man, for he knew that there was great risk in such a voyage. So after making one more fruitless suggestion that they should try and reach the shore, taking the chance of rocks, sunken or otherwise, and then walk home, to which Beatrice would not consent, he accepted her offer.

"At the least you will allow me to paddle," he said, as she skilfully brought the canoe right under his rock, which the tide was now high enough to allow her to do.

"If you like," she answered doubtfully. "My hands are a little sore, and, of course," with a glance at his broad shoulders, "you are much stronger. But if you are not used to it I dare say that I should get on as well as you."

"Nonsense," he said sharply. "I will not allow you to paddle me for five miles."

She yielded without another word, and very gingerly shifted her seat so that her back was towards the bow of the canoe, leaving him to occupy the paddling place opposite to her.

Then he handed her his gun, which, together with the dead birds, she carefully stowed in the bottom of the frail craft. Next, with great caution, he slid down the rock till his feet rested in the canoe.

"Be careful or you will upset us," she said, leaning forward and stretching out her hand for him to support himself by.

Then it was, as he took it, that he for the first time really saw her face, with the mist drops hanging to the bent eyelashes, and knew how beautiful it was.