CHAPTER III

A CONFESSION OF FAITH

"Are you ready?" he said, recovering himself from the pleasing shock of this serge-draped vision of the mist.

"Yes," said Beatrice. "You must head straight out to sea for a little--not too far, for if we get beyond the shelter of Rumball Point we might founder in the rollers--there are always rollers there--then steer to the left. I will tell you when. And, Mr. Bingham, please be careful of the paddle; it has been spliced, and won't bear rough usage."

"All right," he answered, and they started gaily enough, the light canoe gliding swiftly forward beneath his sturdy strokes.

Beatrice was leaning back with her head bent a little forward, so that he could only see her chin and the sweet curve of the lips above it. But she could see all his face as it swayed towards her with each motion of the paddle, and she watched it with interest. It was a new type of face to her, so strong and manly, and yet so gentle about the mouth--almost too gentle she thought. What made him marry Lady Honoria? Beatrice wondered; she did not look particularly gentle, though she was such a graceful woman.

And thus they went on for some time, each wondering about the other and

at heart admiring the other, which was not strange, for they were a very proper pair, but saying no word till at last, after about a quarter of an hour's hard paddling, Geoffrey paused to rest.

"Do you do much of this kind of thing, Miss Granger?" he said with a gasp, "because it is rather hard work."

She laughed. "Ah," she said, "I thought you would scarcely go on paddling at that rate. Yes, I canoe a great deal in the summer time. It is my way of taking exercise, and I can swim well, so I am not afraid of an upset. At least it has been my way for the last two years since a lady who was staying here gave me the canoe when she went away. Before that I used to row in a boat--that is, before I went to college."

"College? What college? Girton?"

"Oh, no, nothing half so grand. It was a college where you get certificates that you are qualified to be a mistress in a Board school. I wish it had been Girton."

"Do you?"--you are too good for that, he was going to add, but changed it to--"I think you were as well away. I don't care about the Girton stamp; those of them whom I have known are so hard."

"So much the better for them," she answered. "I should like to be hard as a stone; a stone cannot feel. Don't you think that women ought to

learn, then?"

"Do you?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly."

"Have you learnt anything?"

"I have taught myself a little and picked up something at the college. But I have no real knowledge, only a smattering of things."

"What do you know--French and German?"

"Yes."

"Latin?"

"Yes, I know something of it."

"Greek?"

"I can read it fairly, but I am not a Greek scholar."

"Mathematics?"

"No, I gave them up. There is no human nature about mathematics. They

work everything to a fixed conclusion that must result. Life is not like that; what ought to be a square comes out a right angle, and x always equals an unknown quantity, which is never ascertained till you are dead."

"Good gracious!" thought Geoffrey to himself between the strokes of the paddle, "what an extraordinary girl. A flesh-and-blood blue-stocking, and a lovely one into the bargain. At any rate I will bowl her out this time."

"Perhaps you have read law too?" he said with suppressed sarcasm.

"I have read some," she answered calmly. "I like law, especially Equity law; it is so subtle, and there is such a mass of it built upon such a small foundation. It is like an overgrown mushroom, and the top will fall off one day, however hard the lawyers try to prop it up. Perhaps you can tell me----"

"No, I'm sure I cannot," he answered. "I'm not a Chancery man. I am Common law, and I don't take all knowledge for my province. You positively alarm me, Miss Granger. I wonder that the canoe does not sink beneath so much learning."

"Do I?" she answered sweetly. "I am glad that I have lived to frighten somebody. I meant that I like Equity to study; but if I were a barrister, I would be Common law, because there is so much more life

and struggle about it. Existence is not worth having unless one is struggling with something and trying to overcome it."

"Dear me, what a reposeful prospect," said Geoffrey, aghast. He had certainly never met such a woman as this before.

"Repose is only good when it is earned," went on the fair philosopher, "and in order to fit one to earn some more, otherwise it becomes idleness, and that is misery. Fancy being idle when one has such a little time to live. The only thing to do is to work and stifle thought. I suppose that you have a large practice, Mr. Bingham?"

"You should not ask a barrister that question," he answered, laughing; "it is like looking at the pictures which an artist has turned to the wall. No, to be frank, I have not. I have only taken to practising in earnest during the last two years. Before I was a barrister in name, and that is all."

"Then why did you suddenly begin to work?"

"Because I lost my prospects, Miss Granger--from necessity, in short."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she said, with a blush, which of course he could not see. "I did not mean to be rude. But it is very lucky for you, is it not?"

"Indeed! Some people don't think so. Why is it lucky?"

"Because you will now rise and become a great man, and that is more than being a rich man."

"And why do you think that I shall become a great man?" he asked, stopping paddling in his astonishment and looking at the dim form before him.

"Oh! because it is written on your face," she answered simply.

Her words rang true; there was no flattery or artifice in them. Geoffrey felt that the girl was saying just what she thought.

"So you study physiognomy as well," he said. "Well, Miss Granger, it is rather odd, considering all things, but I will say to you what I have never said to any one before. I believe that you are right. I shall rise. If I live I feel that I have it in me."

At this point it possibly occurred to Beatrice that, considering the exceeding brevity of their acquaintance, they were drifting into somewhat confidential conversation. At any rate, she quickly changed the topic.

"I am afraid you are growing tired," she said; "but we must be getting on. It will soon be quite dark and we have still a long way to go. Look

there," and she pointed seaward.

He looked. The whole bank of mist was breaking up and bearing down on them in enormous billows of vapour. Presently, these were rolling over them, so darkening the heavy air that, though the pair were within four feet of each other, they could scarcely see one another's faces. As yet they felt no wind. The dense weight of mist choked the keen, impelling air.

"I think the weather is breaking; we are going to have a storm," said Beatrice, a little anxiously.

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when the mist passed away from them, and from all the seaward expanse of ocean. Not a wrack of it was left, and in its place the strong sea-breath beat upon their faces. Far in the west the angry disc of the sun was sinking into the foam. A great red ray shot from its bent edge and lay upon the awakened waters, like a path of fire. The ominous light fell full upon the little boat and full upon Beatrice's lips. Then it passed on and lost itself in the deep mists which still swathed the coast.

"Oh, how beautiful it is!" she cried, raising herself and pointing to the glory of the dying sun.

"It is beautiful indeed!" he answered, but he looked, not at the sunset, but at the woman's face before him, glowing like a saint's in its golden

aureole. For this also was most beautiful--so beautiful that it stirred him strangely.

"It is like----" she began, and broke off suddenly.

"What is it like?" he asked.

"It is like finding truth at last," she answered, speaking as much to herself as to him. "Why, one might make an allegory out of it. We wander in mist and darkness shaping a vague course for home. And then suddenly the mists are blown away, glory fills the air, and there is no more doubt, only before us is a splendour making all things clear and lighting us over a deathless sea. It sounds rather too grand," she added, with a charming little laugh; "but there is something in it somewhere, if only I could express myself. Oh, look!"

As she spoke a heavy storm-cloud rolled over the vanishing rim of the sun. For a moment the light struggled with the eclipsing cloud, turning its dull edge to the hue of copper, but the cloud was too strong and the light vanished, leaving the sea in darkness.

"Well," he said, "your allegory would have a dismal end if you worked it out. It is getting as dark as pitch, and there's a good deal in that, if only I could express myself."

Beatrice dropped poetry, and came down to facts in a way that was very

commendable.

"There is a squall coming up, Mr. Bingham," she said; "you must paddle as hard as you can. I do not think we are more than two miles from Bryngelly, and if we are lucky we may get there before the weather breaks."

"Yes, if we are lucky," he said grimly, as he bent himself to the work. "But the question is where to paddle to--it's so dark. Had not we better run for the shore?"

"We are in the middle of the bay now," she answered, "and almost as far from the nearest land as we are from Bryngelly, besides it is all rocks. No, you must go straight on. You will see the Poise light beyond Coed presently. You know Coed is four miles on the other side of Bryngelly, so when you see it head to the left."

He obeyed her, and they neither of them spoke any more for some time. Indeed the rising wind made conversation difficult, and so far as Geoffrey was concerned he had little breath left to spare for words. He was a strong man, but the unaccustomed labour was beginning to tell on him, and his hands were blistering. For ten minutes or so he paddled on through a darkness which was now almost total, wondering where on earth he was wending, for it was quite impossible to see. For all he knew to the contrary, he might be circling round and round. He had only one thing to direct him, the sweep of the continually rising wind and the

wash of the gathering waves. So long as these struck the canoe, which now began to roll ominously, on the starboard side, he must, he thought, be keeping a right course. But in the turmoil of the rising gale and the confusion of the night, this was no very satisfactory guide. At length, however, a broad and brilliant flash sprung out across the sea, almost straight ahead of him. It was the Poise light.

He altered his course a little and paddled steadily on. And now the squall was breaking. Fortunately, it was not a very heavy one, or their frail craft must have sunk and they with it. But it was quite serious enough to put them in great danger. The canoe rose to the waves like a feather, but she was broadside on, and rise as she would they began to ship a little water. And they had not seen the worst of it. The weather was still thickening.

Still he held on, though his heart sank within him, while Beatrice said nothing. Presently a big wave came; he could just see its white crest gleaming through the gloom, then it was on them. The canoe rose to it gallantly; it seemed to curl right over her, making the craft roll till Geoffrey thought that the end had come. But she rode it out, not, however, without shipping more than a bucket of water. Without saying a word, Beatrice took the cloth cap from her head and, leaning forward, began to bale as best she could, and that was not very well.

"This will not do," he called. "I must keep her head to the sea or we shall be swamped."

"Yes," she answered, "keep her head up. We are in great danger."

He glanced to his right; another white sea was heaving down on him; he could just see its glittering crest. With all his force he dug the paddle into the water; the canoe answered to it; she came round just in time to ride out the wave with safety, but the paddle snapped. It was already sprung, and the weight he put upon it was more than it could bear. Right in two it broke, some nine inches above that blade which at the moment was buried in the water. He felt it go, and despair took hold of him.

"Great heavens!" he cried, "the paddle is broken."

Beatrice gasped.

"You must use the other blade," she said; "paddle first one side and then on the other, and keep her head on."

"Till we sink," he answered.

"No, till we are saved--never talk of sinking."

The girl's courage shamed him, and he obeyed her instructions as best he could. By dint of continually shifting what remained of the paddle from one side of the canoe to the other, he did manage to keep her head on to

the waves that were now rolling in apace. But in their hearts they both wondered how long this would last.

"Have you got any cartridges?" she asked presently.

"Yes, in my coat pocket," he answered.

"Give me two, if you can manage it," she said.

In an interval between the coming of two seas he contrived to slip his hand into a pocket and transfer the cartridges. Apparently she knew something of the working of a gun, for presently there was a flash and a report, quickly followed by another.

"Give me some more cartridges," she cried. He did so, but nothing followed.

"It is no use," she said at length, "the cartridges are wet. I cannot get the empty cases out. But perhaps they may have seen or heard them. Old Edward is sure to be watching for me. You had better throw the rest into the sea if you can manage it," she added by way of an afterthought; "we may have to swim presently."

To Geoffrey this seemed very probable, and whenever he got a chance he acted on the hint till at length he was rid of all his cartridges.
Just then it began to rain in torrents. Though it was not warm the

perspiration was streaming from him at every pore, and the rain beating on his face refreshed him somewhat; also with the rain the wind dropped a little.

But he was becoming tired out and he knew it. Soon he would no longer be able to keep the canoe straight, and then they must be swamped, and in all human probability drowned. So this was to be the end of his life and its ambitions. Before another hour had run its course, he would be rolling to and fro in the arms of that angry sea. What would his wife Honoria say when she heard the news, he wondered? Perhaps it would shock her into some show of feeling. And Effie, his dear little six-year-old daughter? Well, thank God, she was too young to feel his loss for long. By the time that she was a woman she would almost have forgotten that she ever had a father. But how would she get on without him to guide her? Her mother did not love children, and a growing girl would continually remind her of her growing years. He could not tell; he could only hope for the best.

And for himself! What would become of him after the short sharp struggle for life? Should he find endless sleep, or what? He was a Christian, and his life had not been worse than that of other men. Indeed, though he would have been the last to think it, he had some redeeming virtues. But now at the end the spiritual horizon was as dark as it had been at the beginning. There before him were the Gates of Death, but not yet would they roll aside and show the traveller what lay beyond their frowning

face. How could he tell? Perhaps they would not open at all. Perhaps he now bade his last farewell to consciousness, to earth and sky and sea and love and all lovely things. Well, that might be better than some prospects. At that moment Geoffrey Bingham, in the last agony of doubt, would gladly have exchanged his hopes of life beyond for a certainty of eternal sleep. That faith which enables some of us to tread this awful way with an utter confidence is not a wide prerogative, and, as yet, at any rate, it was not his, though the time might come when he would attain it. There are not very many, even among those without reproach, who can lay them down in the arms of Death, knowing most certainly that when the veil is rent away the countenance that they shall see will be that of the blessed Guardian of Mankind. Alas! he could not be altogether sure, and where doubt exists, hope is but a pin-pricked bladder. He sighed heavily, murmured a little formula of prayer that had been on his lips most nights during thirty years--he had learnt it as a child at his mother's knee--and then, while the tempest roared around him, gathered up his strength to meet the end which seemed inevitable. At any rate he would die like a man.

Then came a reaction. His vital forces rose again. He no longer felt fearful, he only wondered with a strange impersonal wonder, as a man wonders about the vital affairs of another. Then from wondering about himself he began to wonder about the girl who sat opposite to him. With the rain came a little lightning, and by the first flash he saw her

clearly. Her beautiful face was set, and as she bent forward searching

the darkness with her wide eyes, it wore, he thought, an almost defiant air.

The canoe twisted round somewhat. He dug his broken paddle into the water and once more brought her head on to the sea. Then he spoke.

"Are you afraid?" he asked of Beatrice.

"No," she answered, "I am not afraid."

"Do you know that we shall probably be drowned?"

"Yes, I know it. They say the death is easy. I brought you here. Forgive me that. I should have tried to row you ashore as you said."

"Never mind me; a man must meet his fate some day. Do not think of me. But I can't keep her head on much longer. You had better say your prayers."

Beatrice bent forward till her head was quite near his own. The wind had blown some of her hair loose, and though he did not seem to notice it at the time, he remembered afterwards that a lock of it struck him on the face.

"I cannot pray," she said; "I have nothing to pray to. I am not a Christian."

The words struck him like a blow. It seemed so awful to think of this proud and brilliant woman, now balanced on the verge of what she believed to be utter annihilation. Even the courage that induced her at such a moment to confess her hopeless state seemed awful.

"Try," he said with a gasp.

"No," she answered, "I do not fear to die. Death cannot be worse than life is for most of us. I have not prayed for years, not since--well, never mind. I am not a coward. It would be cowardly to pray now because I may be wrong. If there is a God who knows all, He will understand that."

Geoffrey said no more, but laboured at the broken paddle gallantly and with an ever-failing strength. The lightning had passed away and the darkness was very great, for the hurrying clouds hid the starlight. Presently a sound arose above the turmoil of the storm, a crashing thunderous sound towards which the send of the sea gradually bore them. The sound came from the waves that beat upon the Bryngelly reef.

"Where are we drifting to?" he cried.

"Into the breakers, where we shall be lost," she answered calmly. "Give up paddling, it is of no use, and try to take off your coat. I have loosened my skirt. Perhaps we can swim ashore."

He thought to himself that in the dark and breakers such an event was not probable, but he said nothing, and addressed himself to the task of getting rid of his coat and waistcoat--no easy one in that confined space. Meanwhile the canoe was whirling round and round like a walnut shell upon a flooded gutter. For some distance before the waves broke upon the reef and rocks they swept in towards them with a steady foamless swell. On reaching the shallows, however, they pushed their white shoulders high into the air, curved up and fell in thunder on the reef.

The canoe rode towards the breakers, sucked upon its course by a swelling sea.

"Good-bye," called Geoffrey to Beatrice, as stretching out his wet hand he found her own and took it, for companionship makes death a little easier.

"Good-bye," she cried, clinging to his hand. "Oh, why did I bring you into this?"

For in their last extremity this woman thought rather of her companion in peril than of herself.

One more turn, then suddenly the canoe beneath them was lifted like a straw and tossed high into the air. A mighty mass of water boiled up

beneath it and around it. Then the foam rushed in, and vaguely Geoffrey knew that they were wrapped in the curve of a billow.

A swift and mighty rush of water. Crash!--and his senses left him.