

CHAPTER V

ELIZABETH IS THANKFUL

Geoffrey, lying before the fire, newly hatched from death, had caught some of the conversation between his wife and the assistant who had recovered him to life. So she was gone, that brave, beautiful atheist girl--gone to test the truth. And she had saved his life!

For some minutes the assistant did not enter. He was helping in another room. At last he came.

"What did you say to Lady Honoria?" Geoffrey asked feebly. "Did you say that Miss Granger had saved me?"

"Yes, Mr. Bingham; at least they tell me so. At any rate, when they pulled her out of the water they pulled you after her. She had hold of your hair."

"Great heavens!" he groaned, "and my weight must have dragged her down. Is she dead, then?"

"We cannot quite say yet, not for certain. We think that she is."

"Pray God she is not dead," he said more to himself than to the other. Then aloud--"Leave me; I am all right. Go and help with her. But stop,

come and tell me sometimes how it goes with her."

"Very well. I will send a woman to watch you," and he went.

Meanwhile in the other room the treatment of the drowned went slowly on. Two hours had passed, and as yet Beatrice showed no signs of recovery. The heart did not beat, no pulse stirred; but, as the doctor knew, life might still linger in the tissues. Slowly, very slowly, the body was turned to and fro, the head swaying, and the long hair falling now this way and now that, but still no sign. Every resource known to medical skill, such as hot air, rubbing, artificial respiration, electricity, was applied and applied in vain, but still no sign!

Elizabeth, pale and pinched, stood by handing what might be required. She did not greatly love her sister, they were antagonistic and their interests clashed, or she thought they did, but this sudden death was awful. In a corner, pitiful to see, offering groans and ejaculated prayers to heaven, sat the old clergymen, their father, his white hair about his eyes. He was a weak, coarse-grained man, but in his own way his clever and beautiful girl was dear to him, and this sight wrung his soul as it had not been wrung for years.

"She's gone," he said continually, "she's gone; the Lord's will be done. There must be another mistress at the school now. Seventy pounds a year she will cost--seventy pounds a year!"

"Do be quiet, father," said Elizabeth sharply.

"Ay, ay, it is very well for you to tell me to be quiet. You are quiet because you don't care. You never loved your sister. But I have loved her since she was a little fair-haired child, and so did your poor mother. 'Beatrice' was the last word she spoke."

"Be quiet, father!" said Elizabeth, still more sharply. The old man, making no reply, sank back into a semi-torpor, rocking himself to and fro upon his chair.

Meanwhile without intermission the work went on.

"It is no use," said the assistant at last, as he straightened his weary frame and wiped the perspiration from his brow. "She must be dead; we have been at it nearly three hours now."

"Patience," said the doctor. "If necessary I shall go on for four--or till I drop," he added.

Ten minutes more passed. Everybody knew that the task was hopeless, but still they hoped.

"Great Heavens!" said the assistant presently, starting back from the body and pointing at its face. "Did you see that?"

Elizabeth and Mr. Granger sprang to their feet, crying, "What, what?"

"Sit still, sir," said the doctor, waving them back. Then addressing his helper, and speaking in a constrained voice: "I thought I saw the right eyelid quiver, Williams. Pass the battery."

"So did I," answered Williams as he obeyed.

"Full power," said the doctor again. "It is kill or cure now."

The shock was applied for some seconds without result. Then suddenly a long shudder ran up the limbs, and a hand stirred. Next moment the eyes were opened, and with pain and agony Beatrice drew a first breath of returning life. Ten minutes more and she had passed through the gates of Death back to this warm and living world.

"Let me die," she gasped faintly. "I cannot bear it. Oh, let me die!"

"Hush," said the doctor; "you will be better presently."

Ten minutes more passed, when the doctor saw by her eyes that Beatrice wished to say something. He bent his head till it nearly touched her lips.

"Dr. Chambers," she whispered, "was he drowned?"

"No, he is safe; he has been brought round."

She sighed--a long-drawn sigh, half of pain, half of relief. Then she spoke again.

"Was he washed ashore?"

"No, no. You saved his life. You had hold of him when they pulled you out. Now drink this and go to sleep."

Beatrice smiled sweetly, but said nothing. Then she drank as much of the draught as she could, and shortly afterwards obeyed the last injunction also, and went to sleep.

Meanwhile a rumour of this wonderful recovery had escaped to without the house--passing from one watcher to the other till at length it reached the ears of the solitary man crouched in the shadow of the pines. He heard, and starting as though he had been shot, strode to the door of the Vicarage. Here his courage seemed to desert him, for he hesitated.

"Knock, squire, knock, and ask if it is true," said a woman, the same who had declared that she would have hugged her husband back to life.

This remark seemed to encourage the man, at any rate he did knock. Presently the door was opened by Elizabeth.

"Go away," she said in her sharp voice; "the house must be kept quiet."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Granger," said the visitor, in a tone of deep humiliation. "I only wanted to know if it was true that Miss Beatrice lives."

"Why," said Elizabeth with a start, "is it you, Mr. Davies? I am sure I had no idea. Step into the passage and I will shut the door. There! How long have you been outside?"

"Oh, since they brought them up. But is it true?"

"Yes, yes, it is true. She will recover now. And you have stood all this time in the wet night. I am sure that Beatrice ought to be flattered."

"Not at all. It seemed so awful, and--I--I take such an interest----" and he broke off.

"Such an interest in Beatrice," said Elizabeth drily, supplying the hiatus. "Yes, so it seems," and suddenly, as though by chance, she moved the candle which she held, in such fashion that the light fell full upon Owen Davies' face. It was a slow heavy countenance, but not without comeliness. The skin was fresh as a child's, the eyes were large, blue, and mild, and the brown hair grew in waves that many a woman might have envied. Indeed had it not been for a short but strongly growing beard, it would have been easy to believe that the countenance was that of a

boy of nineteen rather than of a man over thirty. Neither time nor care had drawn a single line upon it; it told of perfect and robust health and yet bore the bloom of childhood. It was the face of a man who might live to a hundred and still look young, nor did the form belie it.

Mr. Davies blushed up to his eyes, blushed like a girl beneath Elizabeth's scrutiny. "Naturally I take an interest in a neighbour's fate," he said, in his slow deliberate way. "She is quite safe, then?"

"I believe so," answered Elizabeth.

"Thank God!" he said, or rather it seemed to break from him in a sigh of relief. "How did the gentleman, Mr. Bingham, come to be found with her?"

"How should I know?" she answered with a shrug. "Beatrice saved his life somehow, clung fast to him even after she was insensible."

"It is very wonderful. I never heard of such a thing. What is he like?"

"He is one of the finest-looking men I ever saw," answered Elizabeth, always watching him.

"Ah. But he is married, I think, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, yes, he is married to the daughter of a peer, very much married--and very little, I should say."

"I do not quite understand, Miss Granger."

"Don't you, Mr. Davies? then use your eyes when you see them together."

"I should not see anything. I am not quick like you," he added.

"How do you mean to get back to the Castle to-night, Mr. Davies? You cannot row back in this wind, and the seas will be breaking over the causeway."

"Oh, I shall manage. I am wet already. An extra ducking won't hurt me, and I have had a chain put up to prevent anybody from being washed away. And now I must be going. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Davies."

He hesitated a moment and then added: "Would you--would you mind telling your sister--of course I mean when she is stronger--that I came to inquire after her?"

"I think that you can do that for yourself, Mr. Davies," Elizabeth said almost roughly. "I mean it will be more appreciated," and she turned upon her heel.

Owen Davies ventured no further remarks. He felt that Elizabeth's manner

was a little crushing, and he was afraid of her as well. "I suppose that she does not think I am good enough to pay attention to her sister," he thought to himself as he plunged into the night and rain. "Well, she is quite right--I am not fit to black her boots. Oh, God, I thank Thee that Thou hast saved her life. I thank Thee--I thank Thee!" he went on, speaking aloud to the wild winds as he made his way along the cliff. "If she had been dead, I think that I must have died too. Oh, God, I thank Thee--I thank Thee!"

The idea that Owen Davies, Esq., J.P., D.L., of Bryngelly Castle, absolute owner of that rising little watering-place, and of one of the largest and most prosperous slate quarries in Wales, worth in all somewhere between seven and ten thousand a year, was unfit to black her beautiful sister's boots, was not an idea that had struck Elizabeth Granger. Had it struck her, indeed, it would have moved her to laughter, for Elizabeth had a practical mind.

What did strike her, as she turned and watched the rich squire's sturdy form vanish through the doorway into the dark beyond, was a certain sense of wonder. Supposing she had never seen that shiver of returning life run up those white limbs, supposing that they had grown colder and colder, till at length it was evident that death was so firmly citadelled within the silent heart, that no human skill could beat his empire back? What then? Owen Davies loved her sister; this she knew and had known for years. But would he not have got over it in time? Would he not in time have been overpowered by the sense of his own utter

loneliness and given his hand, if not his heart, to some other woman? And could not she who held his hand learn to reach his heart? And to whom would that hand have been given, the hand and all that went with it? What woman would this shy Welsh hermit, without friends or relations, have ever been thrown in with except herself--Elizabeth--who loved him as much as she could love anybody, which, perhaps, was not very much; who, at any rate, desired sorely to be his wife. Would not all this have come about if she had never seen that eyelid tremble, and that slight quiver run up her sister's limbs? It would--she knew it would.

Elizabeth thought of it as for a moment she stood in the passage, and a cold hungry light came into her neutral tinted eyes and shone upon her pale face. But she choked back the thought; she was scarcely wicked enough to wish that her sister had not been brought back to life. She only speculated on what might have happened if this had come about, just as one works out a game of chess from a given hypothetical situation of the pieces.

Perhaps, too, the same end might be gained in some other way. Perhaps Mr. Davies might still be weaned from his infatuation. The wall was difficult, but it would have to be very difficult if she could not find a way to climb it. It never occurred to Elizabeth that there might be an open gate. She could not conceive it possible that a woman might positively reject Owen Davies and his seven or ten thousand a year, and that woman a person in an unsatisfactory and uncongenial, almost in

a menial position. Reject Bryngelly Castle with all its luxury and opportunities of wealth and leisure? No, the sun would set in the east before such a thing happened. The plan was to prevent the occasion from arising. The hungry light died on Elizabeth's face, and she turned to enter the sick room when suddenly she met her father coming out.

"Who was that at the front?" he asked, carefully closing the door.

"Mr. Davies of Bryngelly Castle, father."

"And what did Mr. Davies want at this time of night? To know about Beatrice?"

"Yes," she answered slowly, "he came to ask after Beatrice, or to be more correct he has been waiting outside for three hours in the rain to learn if she recovered."

"Waiting outside for three hours in the rain," said the clergyman astonished--"Squire Davies standing outside the house! What for?"

"Because he was so anxious about Beatrice and did not like to come in, I suppose."

"So anxious about Beatrice--ah, so anxious about Beatrice! Do you think, Elizabeth--um--you know there is no doubt Beatrice is very well favoured--very handsome they say----"

"I do not think anything about it, father," she answered, "and as for Beatrice's looks they are a matter of opinion. I have mine. And now don't you think we had better go to bed? The doctors and Betty are going to stop up all night with Mr. Bingham and Beatrice."

"Yes, Elizabeth, I suppose that we had better go. I am sure we have much to be thankful for to-night. What a merciful deliverance! And if poor Beatrice had gone the parish must have found another schoolmistress, and it would have meant that we lost the salary. We have a great deal to be thankful for, Elizabeth."

"Yes," said Elizabeth, very deliberately, "we have."