

## CHAPTER VII

### A MATRIMONIAL TALE

Before Geoffrey Bingham dropped off into a troubled sleep on that eventful night of storm, he learned that the girl who had saved his life at the risk and almost at the cost of her own was out of danger, and in his own and more reticent way he thanked Providence as heartily as did Owen Davies. Then he went to sleep.

When he woke, feeling very sick and so stiff and sore that he could scarcely move, the broad daylight was streaming through the blinds. The place was perfectly quiet, for the doctor's assistant who had brought him back to life, and who lay upon a couch at the further end of the room, slept the sleep of youth and complete exhaustion. Only an eight-day clock on the mantelpiece ticked in that solemn and aggressive way which clocks affect in the stillness. Geoffrey strained his eyes to make out the time, and finally discovered that it wanted a few minutes to six o'clock. Then he fell to wondering how Miss Granger was, and to repeating in his own mind every scene of their adventure, till the last, when they were whirled out of the canoe in the embrace of that white-crested billow.

He remembered nothing after that, nothing but a rushing sound and a vision of foam. He shuddered a little as he thought of it, for his nerves were shaken; it is not pleasant to have been so very near the End

and the Beginning; and then his heart went out with renewed gratitude towards the girl who had restored him to life and light and hope. Just at this moment he thought that he heard a sound of sobbing outside the window. He listened; the sound went on. He tried to rise, only to find that he was too stiff to manage it. So, as a last resource, he called the doctor.

"What is the matter?" answered that young gentleman, jumping up with the alacrity of one accustomed to be suddenly awakened. "Do you feel queer?"

"Yes, I do rather," answered Geoffrey, "but it isn't that. There is somebody crying outside here."

The doctor put on his coat, and, going to the window, drew the blind.

"Why, so there is," he said. "It's a little girl with yellow hair and without a hat."

"A little girl," answered Geoffrey. "Why, it must be Effie, my daughter. Please let her in."

"All right. Cover yourself up, and I can do that through the window; it isn't five feet from the ground." Accordingly he opened the window, and addressing the little girl, asked her what her name was.

"Effie," she sobbed in answer, "Effie Bingham. I've come to look for

daddie."

"All right, my dear, don't cry so; your daddie is here. Come and let me lift you in."

Another moment and there appeared through the open window the very sweetest little face and form that ever a girl of six was blessed with. For the face was pink and white, and in it were set two beautiful dark eyes, which, contrasting with the golden hair, made the child a sight to see. But alas! just now the cheeks were stained with tears, and round the large dark eyes were rings almost as dark. Nor was this all. The little dress was hooked awry, on one tiny foot all drenched with dew there was no boot, and on the yellow curls no hat.

"Oh! daddie, daddie," cried the child, catching sight of him and struggling to reach her father's arms, "you isn't dead, is you, daddie?"

"No, my love, no," answered her father, kissing her. "Why should you think that I was dead? Didn't your mother tell you that I was safe?"

"Oh! daddie," she answered, "they came and said that you was drowned, and I cried and wished that I was drowned too. Then mother came home at last and said that you were better, and was cross with me because I went on crying and wanted to come to you. But I did go on crying. I cried nearly all night, and when it got light I did dress myself, all but one shoe and my hat, which I could not find, and I got out of the house to

look for you."

"And how did you find me, my poor little dear?"

"Oh, I heard mother say you was at the Vicarage, so I waited till I saw a man, and asked him which way to go, and he did tell me to walk along the cliff till I saw a long white house, and then when he saw that I had no shoe he wanted to take me home, but I ran away till I got here. But the blinds were down, so I did think that you were dead, daddie dear, and I cried till that gentleman opened the window."

After that Geoffrey began to scold her for running away, but she did not seem to mind it much, for she sat upon the edge of the couch, her little face resting against his own, a very pretty sight to see.

"You must go back to Mrs. Jones, Effie, and tell your mother where you have been."

"I can't, daddie, I've only got one shoe," she answered, pouting.

"But you came with only one shoe."

"Yes, daddie, but I wanted to come and I don't want to go back. Tell me how you was drowned."

He laughed at her logic and gave way to her, for this little daughter

was very near to his heart, nearer than anything else in the world. So he told her how he was "drowned" and how a lady had saved his life.

Effie listened with wide set eyes, and then said that she wanted to see the lady, which she presently did. At that moment there came a knock at the door, and Mr. Granger entered, accompanied by Dr. Chambers.

"How do you do, sir?" said the former. "I must introduce myself, seeing that you are not likely to remember me. When last I saw you, you looked as dead as a beached dog-fish. My name's Granger, the Reverend J. Granger, Vicar of Bryngelly, one of the very worst livings on this coast, and that's saying a great deal."

"I am sure, Mr. Granger, I'm under a deep debt of gratitude to you for your hospitality, and under a still deeper one to your daughter, but I hope to thank her personally for that."

"Never speak of it," said the clergyman. "Hot water and blankets don't cost much, and you will have to pay for the brandy and the doctor. How is he, doctor?"

"He is getting on very well indeed, Mr. Granger. But I daresay you find yourself rather stiff, Mr. Bingham. I see your head is pretty badly bruised."

"Yes," he answered, laughing, "and so is my body. Shall I be able to go

home to-day?"

"I think so," said the doctor, "but not before this evening. You had better keep quiet till then. You will be glad to hear that Miss Beatrice is getting on very well. Hers was a wonderful recovery, the most wonderful I ever saw. I had quite given her up, though I should have kept on the treatment for another hour. You ought to be grateful to Miss Beatrice, Mr. Bingham. But for her you would not have been here."

"I am most grateful," he answered earnestly. "Shall I be able to see her to-day?"

"Yes, I think so, some time this afternoon, say at three o'clock. Is that your little daughter? What a lovely child she is. Well, I will look in again about twelve. All that you require to do now is to keep quiet and rub in some arnica."

About an hour afterwards the servant girl brought Geoffrey some breakfast of tea and toast. He felt quite hungry, but when it came to the pinch he could not eat much. Effie, who was starving, made up for this deficiency, however; she ate all the toast and a couple of slices of bread and butter after it. Scarcely had they finished, when her father observed a shade of anxiety come upon his little daughter's face.

"What is it, Effie?" he asked.

"I think," replied Effie in evident trepidation, "I think that I hear mother outside and Anne too."

"Well, dear, they have come to see me."

"Yes, and to scold me because I ran away," and the child drew nearer to her father in a fashion which would have made it clear to any observer that the relations between her and her mother were somewhat strained.

Effie was right. Presently there was a knock at the door and Lady Honoria entered, calm and pale and elegant as ever. She was followed by a dark-eyed somewhat impertinent-looking French bonne, who held up her hands and ejaculated, "Mon Dieu!" as she appeared.

"I thought so," said Lady Honoria, speaking in French to the bonne.

"There she is," and she pointed at the runaway Effie with her parasol.

"Mon Dieu!" said the woman again. "Vous voilà enfin, et moi, qui suis accablée de peur, et votre chère mère aussi; oh, mais que c'est méchant; et regardez donc, avec un soulier seulement. Mais c'est affreux!"

"Hold your tongue," said Geoffrey sharply, "and leave Miss Effie alone. She came to see me."

Anne ejaculated, "Mon Dieu!" once more and collapsed.

"Really, Geoffrey," said his wife, "the way you spoil that child is something shocking. She is wilful as can be, and you make her worse. It is very naughty of her to run away like that and give us such a hunt. How are we to get her home, I wonder, with only one shoe."

Her husband bit his lip, and his forehead contracted itself above the dark eyes. It was not the first time that he and Lady Honoria had come to words about the child, with whom his wife was not in sympathy. Indeed she had never forgiven Effie for appearing in this world at all. Lady Honoria did not belong to that class of women who think maternity is a joy.

"Anne," he said, "take Miss Effie and carry her till you can find a donkey. She can ride back to the lodgings." The nurse murmured something in French about the child being as heavy as lead.

"Do as I bid you," he said sharply, in the same language. "Effie, my love, give me a kiss and go home. Thank you for coming to see me."

The child obeyed and went. Lady Honoria stood and watched her go, tapping her little foot upon the floor, and with a look upon her cold, handsome face that was not altogether agreeable to see.

It had sometimes happened that, in the course of his married life,



Geoffrey returned home with a little of that added fondness which absence is fabled to beget. On these occasions he was commonly so unfortunate as to find that Lady Honoria belied the saying, that she greeted him with arrears of grievances and was, if possible, more frigid than ever.

Was this to be repeated now that he had come back from what was so near to being the longest absence of all? It looked like it. He noted symptoms of the rising storm, symptoms with which he was but too well acquainted, and both for his own sake and for hers--for above all things Geoffrey dreaded these bitter matrimonial bickerings--tried to think of something kind to say. It must be owned that he did not show much tact in the subject he selected, though it was one which might have stirred the sympathies of some women. It is so difficult to remember that one is dealing with a Lady Honoria.

"If ever we have another child----" he began gently.

"Excuse me interrupting you," said the lady, with a suavity which did not however convey any idea of the speaker's inward peace, "but it is a kindness to prevent you from going on in that line. One darling is ample for me."

"Well," said the miserable Geoffrey, with an effort, "even if you don't care much about the child yourself, it is a little unreasonable to object because she cares for me and was sorry when she thought that I

was dead. Really, Honoria, sometimes I wonder if you have any heart at all. Why should you be put out because Effie got up early to come and see me?--an example which I must admit you did not set her. And as to her shoe----" he added smiling.

"You may laugh about her shoe, Geoffrey," she interrupted, "but you forget that even little things like that are no laughing matter now to us. The child's shoes keep me awake at night sometimes. Defoy has not been paid for I don't know how long. I have a mind to get her sabots--and as to heart----"

"Well," broke in Geoffrey, reflecting that bad as was the emotional side of the question, it was better than the commercial--"as to 'heart?'"

"You are scarcely the person to talk of it, that is all. I wonder how much of yours you gave me?"

"Really, Honoria," he answered, not without eagerness, and his mind filled with wonder. Was it possible that his wife had experienced some kind of "call," and was about to concern herself with his heart one way or the other? If so it was strange, for she had never shown the slightest interest in it before.

"Yes," she went on rapidly and with gathering vehemence, "you speak about your heart"--which he had not done--"and yet you know as well as I do that if I had been a girl of no position you would never have offered

me the organ on which you pretend to set so high a value. Or did your heart run wildly away with you, and drag us into love and a cottage--a flat, I mean? If so, I should prefer a little less heart and a little more common sense."

Geoffrey winced, twice indeed, feeling that her ladyship had hit him as it were with both barrels. For, as a matter of fact, he had not begun with any passionate devotion, and again Lady Honoria and he were now just as poor as though they had really married for love.

"It is hardly fair to go back on by-gones and talk like this," he said, "even if your position had something to do with it; only at first of course, you must remember that when we married mine was not without attractions. Two thousand a year to start on and a baronetcy and eight thousand a year in the near future were not--but I hate talking about that kind of thing. Why do you force me to it? Nobody could know that my uncle, who was so anxious that I should marry you, would marry himself at his age, and have a son and heir. It was not my fault, Honoria. Perhaps you would not have married me if you could have foreseen it."

"Very probably not," she answered calmly, "and it is not my fault that I have not yet learned to live with peace of mind and comfort on seven hundred a year. It was hard enough to exist on two thousand till your uncle died, and now----"

"Well, and now, Honoria, if you will only have patience and put up with

things for a while, you shall be rich enough; I will make money for you, as much money as you want. I have many friends. I have not done so badly at the Bar this year."

"Two hundred pounds, nineteen shillings and sevenpence, minus ninety-seven pounds rent of chambers and clerk," said Lady Honoria, with a disparaging accent on the sevenpence.

"I shall double it next year, and double that again the next, and so on. I work from morning till night to get on, that you may have--what you live for," he said bitterly.

"Ah, I shall be sixty before that happy day comes, and want nothing but scandal and a bath chair. I know the Bar and its moaning," she added, with acid wit. "You dream, you imagine what you would like to come true, but you are deceiving me and yourself. It will be like the story of Sir Robert Bingham's property once again. We shall be beggars all our days. I tell you, Geoffrey, that you had no right to marry me."

Then at length he lost his temper. This was not the first of these scenes--they had grown frequent of late, and this bitter water was constantly dropping.

"Right?" he said, "and may I ask what right you had to marry me when you don't even pretend you ever cared one straw for me, but just accepted me

as you would have accepted any other man who was a tolerably good match?

I grant that I first thought of proposing to you because my uncle wished it, but if I did not love you I meant to be a good husband to you, and I should have loved you if you would let me. But you are cold and selfish; you looked upon a husband merely as a stepping-stone to luxury; you have never loved anybody except yourself. If I had died last night I believe that you would have cared more about having to go into mourning than for the fact of my disappearance from your life. You showed no more feeling for me when you came in than you would have if I had been a stranger--not so much as some women might have for a stranger. I wonder sometimes if you have any feeling left in you at all. I should think that you treat me as you do because you do not care for me and do care for some other person did I not know you to be utterly incapable of caring for anybody. Do you want to make me hate you, Honoria?"

Geoffrey's low concentrated voice and earnest manner told his wife, who was watching him with something like a smile upon her clear-cut lips, how deeply he was moved. He had lost his self-control, and exposed his heart to her--a thing he rarely did, and that in itself was a triumph which she did not wish to pursue at the moment. Geoffrey was not a man to push too far.

"If you have quite finished, Geoffrey, there is something I should like to say----"

"Oh, curse it all!" he broke in.

"Yes?" she said calmly and interrogatively, and made a pause, but as he did not specially apply his remark to anybody or anything, she continued: "If these flowers of rhetoric are over, what I have to say is this: I do not intend to stay in this horrid place any longer. I am going to-morrow to my brother Garsington. They asked us both, you may remember, but for reasons best known to yourself, you would not go."

"You know my reasons very well, Honoria."

"I beg your pardon. I have not the slightest idea what they were," said Lady Honoria with conviction. "May I hear them?"

"Well, if you wish to know, I will not go to the house of a man who has--well, left my club as Garsington left it, and who, had it not been for my efforts, would have left it in an even more unpleasant and conspicuous fashion. And his wife is worse than he is----"

"I think you are mistaken," Lady Honoria said coldly, and with the air of a person who shuts the door of a room into which she does not wish to look. "And, any way, it all happened years ago and has blown over. But I do not see the necessity of discussing the subject further. I suppose that we shall meet at dinner to-night. I shall take the early train to-morrow."

"Do what suits you, Honoria. Perhaps you would prefer not returning at all."

"Thank you, no. I will not lay myself open to imputations. I shall join you in London, and will make the best of a bad business. Thank Heaven, I have learned how to bear my misfortunes," and with this Parthian shot she left the room.

For a minute or two her husband felt as though he almost hated her. Then he thrust his face into the pillow and groaned.

"She is right," he said to himself; "we must make the best of a bad business. But, somehow, I seem to have made a mess of my life. And yet I loved her once--for a month or two."

This was not an agreeable scene, and it may be said that Lady Honoria was a vulgar person. But not even the advantage of having been brought up "on the knees of marchionesses" is a specific against vulgarity, if a lady happens, unfortunately, to set her heart, what there is of it, meanly on mean things.