

## CHAPTER VIII

### EXPLANATORY

About two o'clock Geoffrey rose, and with some slight assistance from his reverend host, struggled into his clothes. Then he lunched, and while he did so Mr. Granger poured his troubles into his sympathetic ear.

"My father was a Herefordshire farmer, Mr. Bingham," he said, "and I was bred up to that line of life myself. He did well, my father did, as in those days a careful man might. What is more, he made some money by cattle-dealing, and I think that turned his head a little; anyway, he was minded to make 'a gentleman of me,' as he called it. So when I was eighteen I was packed off to be made a parson of, whether I liked it or no. Well, I became a parson, and for four years I had a curacy at a town called Kingston, in Herefordshire, not a bad sort of little town--perhaps you happen to know it. While I was there, my father, who was getting beyond himself, took to speculating. He built a row of villas at Leominster, or at least he lent a lawyer the money to build them, and when they were built nobody would hire them. It broke my father; he was ruined over those villas. I have always hated the sight of a villa ever since, Mr. Bingham. And shortly afterwards he died, as near bankruptcy as a man's nose is to his mouth.

"After that I was offered this living, £150 a year it was at the best,

and like a fool I took it. The old parson who was here before me left an only daughter behind him. The living had ruined him, as it ruins me, and, as I say, he left his daughter, my wife that was, behind him, and a pretty good bill for dilapidations I had against the estate. But there wasn't any estate, so I made the best of a bad business and married the daughter, and a sweet pretty woman she was, poor dear, very like my Beatrice, only without the brains. I can't make out where Beatrice's brains come from indeed, for I am sure I don't set up for having any. She was well born, too, my wife was, of an old Cornish family, but she had nowhere to go to, and I think she married me because she didn't know what else to do, and was fond of the old place. She took me on with it, as it were. Well, it turned out pretty well, till some eleven years ago, when our boy was born, though I don't think we ever quite understood each other. She never got her health back after that, and seven years ago she died. I remember it was on a night wonderfully like last night--mist first, then storm. The boy died a few years afterwards. I thought it would have broken Beatrice's heart; she has never been the same girl since, but always full of queer ideas I don't pretend to follow.

"And as for the life I've had of it here, Mr. Bingham, you wouldn't believe it if I was to tell you. The living is small enough, but the place is as full of dissent as a mackerel-boat of fish, and as for getting the tithes--well, I cannot, that's all. If it wasn't for a bit of farming that I do, not but what the prices are down to nothing, and for what the visitors give in the season, and for the help of Beatrice's

salary as certificated mistress, I should have been in the poor-house long ago, and shall be yet, I often think. I have had to take in a border before now to make both ends meet, and shall again, I expect.

"And now I must be off up to my bit of a farm; the old sow is due to litter, and I want to see how she is getting on. Please God she'll have thirteen again and do well. I'll order the fly to be here at five, though I shall be back before then--that is, I told Elizabeth to do so. She has gone out to do some visiting for me, and to see if she can't get in two pounds five of tithe that has been due for three months. If anybody can get it it's Elizabeth. Well, good-bye; if you are dull and want to talk to Beatrice, she is up and in there. I daresay you will suit one another. She's a very queer girl, Beatrice, quite beyond me with her ideas, and it was a funny thing her holding you so tight, but I suppose Providence arranged that. Good-bye for the present, Mr. Bingham," and this curious specimen of a clergyman vanished, leaving Geoffrey quite breathless.

It was half-past two o'clock, and the doctor had told him that he could see Miss Granger at three. He wished that it was three, for he was tired of his own thoughts and company, and naturally anxious to renew his acquaintance with the strange girl who had begun by impressing him so deeply and ended by saving his life. There was complete quiet in the house; Betty, the maid-of-all-work, was employed in the kitchen, both the doctors had gone, and Elizabeth and her father were out. To-day there was no wind, it had blown itself away during the night, and the

sight of the sunbeams streaming through the windows made Geoffrey long to be in the open air. He had no book at hand to read, and whenever he tried to think his mind flew back to that hateful matrimonial quarrel.

It was hard on him, Geoffrey thought, that he should be called upon to endure such scenes. He could no longer disguise the truth from himself--he had buried his happiness on his wedding-day. Looking back across the years, he well remembered how different a life he had imagined for himself. In those days he was tired of knocking about and of youthful escapades; even that kind of social success which must attend a young man who was handsome, clever, a good fellow, and blessed with large expectations, had, at the age of six-and-twenty, entirely lost its attractiveness. Therefore he had turned no deaf ear to his uncle, Sir Robert Bingham, who was then going on for seventy, when he suggested that it might be well of Geoffrey settled down, and introduced him to Lady Honoria.

Lady Honoria was eighteen then, and a beauty of the rather thin but statuesque type, which attracts men up to five or six and twenty and then frequently bores, if it does not repel them. Moreover, she was clever and well read, and pretended to be intellectually and poetically inclined, as ladies not specially favoured by Apollo sometimes do--before they marry. Cold she always was; nobody ever heard of Lady Honoria stretching the bounds of propriety; but Geoffrey put this down to a sweet and becoming modesty, which would vanish or be transmuted in its season. Also she affected a charming innocence of all vulgar

business matters, which both deceived and enchanted him. Never but once did she allude to ways and means before marriage, and then it was to say that she was glad that they should be so poor till dear Sir Robert died (he had promised to allow them fifteen hundred a year, and they had seven more between them), as this would enable them to see so much more of each other.

At last came the happy day, and this white virgin soul passed into Geoffrey's keeping. For a week or so things went fairly well, and then disenchantment began. He learned by slow but sure degrees that his wife was vain, selfish and extravagant, and, worst of all, that she cared very little about him. The first shock was when he accidentally discovered, four or five days after marriage, that Honoria was intimately acquainted with every detail of Sir Robert Bingham's property, and, young as she was, had already formed a scheme to make it more productive after the old man's death.

They went to live in London, and there he found that Lady Honoria, although by far too cold and prudent a woman to do anything that could bring a breath of scandal upon her name, was as fond of admiration as she was heartless. It seemed to Geoffrey that he could never be free from the collection of young men who hung about her skirts. Some of them were very good fellows whom he liked exceedingly; still, on the whole he would have preferred to remain unmarried and associate with them at the club. Also the continual round of society and going out brought heavier expenses on him that he could well support. And thus, little by little,

poor Geoffrey's dream of matrimonial bliss faded into thin air. But, fortunately for himself, he possessed a certain share of logic and sweet reasonableness. In time he learnt to see that the fault was not altogether with his wife, who was by no means a bad sort of woman in her degree. But her degree differed from his degree. She had married for freedom and wealth and to gain a larger scope wherein to exercise those tastes which inherited disposition and education had given to her, as she believed that he had married her because she was the daughter of a peer.

Lady Honoria, like many another woman of her stamp, was the overbred, or sometimes the underbred, product of a too civilized age and class. Those primitive passions and virtues on which her husband had relied to make the happiness of their married life simply did not exist for her. The passions had been bred and educated out of her; for many generations they have been found inconvenient and disquieting attributes in woman. As for the old virtues, such as love of children and the ordinary round of domestic duty, they simply bored her. On the whole, though sharp of tongue, she rarely lost her temper, for her vices, like her virtues, were of a somewhat negative order; but the fury which seized her when she learned for certain that she was to become a mother was a thing that her unfortunate husband never forgot and never wished to see again. At length the child was born, a fact for which Geoffrey, at least, was very thankful.

"Take it away. I do not want to see it!" said Lady Honoria to the

scandalised nurse when the little creature was brought to her, wrapped in its long robes.

"Give it to me, nurse--I do," said her husband.

From that moment Geoffrey gave all the pent-up affection of his bruised soul to this little daughter, and as the years went on they grew very dear to each other. But an active-minded, strong-hearted, able-bodied man cannot take a babe as the sole companion of his existence. Probably Geoffrey would have found this out in time, and might have drifted into some mode of life more or less undesirable, had not an accident occurred to prevent it. In his dotage, Geoffrey's old uncle Sir Robert Bingham fell a victim to the wiles of an adventuress and married her. Then he promptly died, and eight months afterwards a posthumous son was born.

To Geoffrey this meant ruin. His allowance stopped and his expectations vanished at one fell swoop. He pulled himself together, however, as a brave-hearted man does under such a shock, and going to his wife he explained to her that he must now work for his living, begging her to break down the barrier that was between them and give him her sympathy and help. She met him with tears and reproaches. The one thing that touched her keenly, the one thing which she feared and hated was poverty, and all that poverty means to women of her rank and nature. But there was no help for it; the charming house in Bolton Steet had to be

given up, and purgatory must be faced, in a flat, near the Edgware Road. Lady Honoria was miserable, indeed had it not been that fortunately for herself she possessed plenty of relations more or less grand, whom she might continually visit for weeks and even for months at a stretch, she could scarcely have endured her altered life.

But strangely enough Geoffrey soon found that he was happier than he had been since his marriage. To begin with, he set to work like a man, and work is a great source of happiness to all vigorous-minded folk. It is not, in truth, a particularly cheerful occupation to pass endless days in hanging about law-courts amongst a crowd of unbriefed Juniors, and many nights in reading up the law one has forgotten and threading the many intricacies of the Judicature Act. But it happened that his father, a younger brother of Sir Robert's, had been a solicitor, and though he was dead, and all direct interest with the firm was severed, yet another uncle remained in it, and the partners did not forget Geoffrey in his difficulties.

They sent him what work they could without offending their standing counsel, and he did it well. Then by degrees he built up quite a large general practice of the kind known as deviling. Now there are few things more unsatisfactory than doing another man's work for nothing, but every case fought means knowledge gained, and what is more it is advertisement. So it came to pass that within less than two years from the date of his money misfortunes, Geoffrey Bingham's dark handsome face and square strong form became very well known in the Courts.



"What is that man's name?" said one well-known Q.C. to another still more well known, as they sat waiting for their chops in the Bar Grill Room, and saw Geoffrey, his wig pushed back from his forehead, striding through the doorway on the last day of the sitting which preceded the commencement of this history.

"Bingham," answered the other. "He's only begun to practise lately, but he'll be at the top of the tree before he has done. He married very well, you know, old Garsington's daughter, a charming woman, and handsome too."

"He looks like it," grunted the first, and as a matter of fact such was the general opinion.

For, as Beatrice had said, Geoffrey Bingham was a man who had success written on his forehead. It would have been almost impossible for him to fail in whatever he undertook.