CHAPTER IX

WHAT BEATRICE DREAMED

Geoffrey lay upon his back, watching the still patch of sunshine and listening to the ticking of the clock, as he passed all these and many other events in solemn review, till the series culminated in his vivid recollection of the scene of that very morning.

"I am sick of it," he said at last aloud, "sick and tired. She makes my life wretched. If it wasn't for Effie upon my word I'd . . . By Jove, it is three o'clock; I will go and see Miss Granger. She's a woman, not a female ghost at any rate, though she is a freethinker--which," he added as he slowly struggled off the couch, "is a very foolish thing to be."

Very shakily, for he was sadly knocked about, Geoffrey hobbled down the long narrow room and through the door, which was ajar. The opposite door was also set half open. He knocked softly, and getting no answer pushed it wide and looked in, thinking that he had, perhaps, made some mistake as to the room. On a sofa placed about two-thirds down its length, lay Beatrice asleep. She was wrapped in a kind of dressing-gown of some simple blue stuff, and all about her breast and shoulders streamed her lovely curling hair. Her sweet face was towards him, its pallor relieved only by the long shadow of the dark lashes and the bent bow of the lips. One white wrist and hand hung down almost to the floor, and beneath the spread curtain of the sunlit hair her bosom heaved softly in her sleep.

She looked so wondrously beautiful in her rest that he stopped almost awed, and gazed, and gazed again, feeling as though a present sense and power were stilling his heart to silence. It is dangerous to look upon such quiet loveliness, and very dangerous to feel that pressure at the heart. A truly wise man feeling it would have fled, knowing that seeds sown in such silences may live to bloom upon a bitter day, and shed their fruit into the waters of desolation. But Geoffrey was not wise--who would have been? He still stood and gazed till the sight stamped itself so deeply on the tablets of his heart that through all the years to come no heats of passion, no frosts of doubt, and no sense of loss could ever dull its memory.

The silent sun shone on, the silent woman slept, and in silence the watcher gazed. And as he looked a great fear, a prescience of evil that should come, entered into Geoffrey and took possession of him. A cloud without crossed the ray of sunlight and turned it. It wavered, for a second it rested on his breast, flashed back to hers, then went out; and as it flashed and died, he seemed to know that henceforth, for life till death, ay! and beyond, his fate and that sleeping woman's were one fate. It was but a momentary knowledge; the fear shook him, and was gone almost before he understood its foolishness. But it had been with him, and in after days he remembered it.

Just then Beatrice woke, opening her grey eyes. Their dreamy glance fell upon him, looking through him and beyond him, rather than at him. Then she raised herself a little and stretching out both her arms towards

him, spoke aloud.

"So have you have come back to me at last," she said. "I knew that you would come and I have waited."

He made no answer, he did not know what to say; indeed he began to think that he also must be dreaming. For a little while Beatrice still looked at him in the same absent manner, then suddenly started up, the red blood streaming to her brow.

"Why, Mr. Bingham," she said, "is it really you? What was it that I said? Oh, pray forgive me, whatever it was. I have been asleep dreaming such a curious dream, and talking in my sleep."

"Do not alarm yourself, Miss Granger," he answered, recovering himself with a jerk; "you did not say anything dreadful, only that you were glad to see me. What were you dreaming about?"

Beatrice looked at him doubtfully; perhaps his words did not ring quite true.

"I think that I had better tell you as I have said so much," she answered. "Besides, it was a very curious dream, and if I believed in dreams it would rather frighten me, only fortunately I do not. Sit down and I will tell it to you before I forget it. It is not very long."

He took the chair to which she pointed, and she began, speaking in the voice of one yet laden with the memories of sleep.

"I dreamed that I stood in space. Far to my right was a great globe of light, and to my left was another globe, and I knew that the globes were named Life and Death. From the globe on the right to the globe on the left, and back again, a golden shuttle, in which two flaming eyes were set, was shot continually, and I knew also that this was the shuttle of Destiny, weaving the web of Fate. Presently the shuttle flew, leaving behind it a long silver thread, and the eyes in the shuttle were such as your eyes. Again the shuttle sped through space, and this time its eyes were like my eyes, and the thread it left behind it was twisted from a woman's hair. Half way between the globes of Life and Death my thread was broken, but the shuttle flew on and vanished. For a moment the thread hung in air, then a wind rose and blew it, so that it floated away like a spider's web, till it struck upon your silver thread of life and began to twist round and round it. As it twisted it grew larger and heavier, till at last it was thick as a great tress of hair, and the silver line bent beneath the weight so that I saw it soon must break. Then while I wondered what would happen, a white hand holding a knife slid slowly down the silver line, and with the knife severed the wrappings of woman's hair, which fell and floated slowly away, like a little cloud touched with sunlight, till they were lost in darkness. But the thread of silver that was your line of life, sprang up quivering and making a sound like sighs, till at last it sighed itself to silence.

"Then I seemed to sleep, and when I woke I was floating upon such a misty sea as we saw last night. I had lost all sight of land, and I could not remember what the stars were like, nor how I had been taught to steer, nor understand where I must go. I called to the sea, and asked it of the stars, and the sea answered me thus:

"'Hope has rent her raiment, and the stars are set.'

"I called again, and asked of the land where I should go, and the land did not answer, but the sea answered me a second time:

"'Child of the mist, wander in the mist, and in darkness seek for light.'

"Then I wept because Hope had rent her starry garment and in darkness I must seek for light. And while I still wept, you rose out of the sea and sat before me in the boat. I had never seen you before, and still I felt that I had known you always. You did not speak, and I did not speak, but you looked into my heart and saw its trouble. Then I looked into your heart, and read what was written. And this was written:

"'Woman whom I knew before the Past began, and whom I shall know when the Future is ended, why do you weep?'

"And my heart answered, 'I weep because I am lost upon the waters of the earth, because Hope has rent her starry robes, and in everlasting

darkness I must seek for light that is not.' Then your heart said, 'I will show you light,' and bending forward you touched me on the breast.

"And suddenly an agony shook me like the agonies of birth and death, and the sky was full of great-winged angels who rolled up the mist as a cloth, and drew the veils from the eyes of Night, and there, her feet upon the globe, and her star-set head piercing the firmament of heaven, stood Hope breathing peace and beauty. She looked north and south and east and west, then she looked upwards through the arching vaults of heaven, and wherever she set her eyes, bright with holy tears, the darkness shrivelled and sorrow ceased, and from corruption arose the Incorruptible. I gazed and worshipped, and as I did so, again the sea spoke unquestioned:

"'In darkness thou hast found light, in Death seek for wisdom.'

"Then once more Hope rent her starry robes, and the angels drew down a veil over the eyes of Night, and the sea swallowed me, and I sank till I reached the deep foundations of mortal death. And there in the Halls of Death I sat for ages upon ages, till at last I saw you come, and on your lips was the word of wisdom that makes all things clear, but what it was I cannot remember. Then I stretched out my hand to greet you, and woke, and that is all my dream."

Beatrice ceased, her grey eyes set wide, as though they still strove to trace their spiritual vision upon the air of earth, her breast heaving, and her lips apart.

"Great heaven!" he said, "what an imagination you must have to dream such a dream as that."

"Imagination," she answered, returning to her natural manner. "I have none, Mr. Bingham. I used to have, but I lost it when I lost--everything else. Can you interpret my dream? Of course you cannot; it is nothing but nonsense--such stuff as dreams are made of, that is all."

"It may be nonsense, I daresay it is, but it is beautiful nonsense," he answered. "I wish ladies had more of such stuff to give the world."

"Ah, well, dreams may be wiser than wakings, and nonsense than learned talk, for all we know. But there's an end of it. I do not know why I repeated it to you. I am sorry that I did repeat it, but it seemed so real it shook me out of myself. This is what comes of breaking in upon the routine of life by being three parts drowned. One finds queer things at the bottom of the sea, you know. By the way I hope that you are recovering. I do not think that you will care to go canoeing again with me, Mr. Bingham."

There was an opening for a compliment here, but Geoffrey felt that it would be too much in earnest if spoken, so he resisted the temptation.

"What, Miss Granger," he said, "should a man say to a lady who but last night saved his life, at the risk, indeed almost at the cost, of her own?"

"It was nothing," she answered, colouring; "I clung to you, that was all, more by instinct than from any motive. I think I had a vague idea that you might float and support me."

"Miss Granger, the occasion is too serious for polite fibs. I know how you saved my life. I do not know how to thank you for it."

"Then don't thank me at all, Mr. Bingham. Why should you thank me? I only did what I was bound to do. I would far rather die than desert a companion in distress, of any sort; we all must die, but it would be dreadful to die ashamed. You know what they say, that if you save a person from drowning you will do them an injury afterwards. That is how they put it here; in some parts the saying is the other way about, but I am not likely ever to do you an injury, so it does not make me unhappy. It was an awful experience: you were senseless, so you cannot know how strange it felt lying upon the slippery rock, and seeing those great white waves rush upon us through the gloom, with nothing but the night above, and the sea around, and death between the two. I have been lonely for many years, but I do not think that I ever quite understood what loneliness really meant before. You see," she added by way of an afterthought, "I thought that you were dead, and there is not much

company in a corpse."

"Well," he said, "one thing is, it would have been lonelier if we had gone."

"Do you think so?" she answered, looking at him inquiringly. "I don't quite see how you make that out. If you believe in what we have been taught, as I think you do, wherever it was you found yourself there would be plenty of company, and if, like me, you do not believe in anything, why, then, you would have slept, and sleep asks for nothing."

"Did you believe in nothing when you lay upon the rock waiting to be drowned, Miss Granger?"

"Nothing!" she answered; "only weak people find revelation in the extremities of fear. If revelation comes at all, surely it must be born in the heart and not in the senses. I believed in nothing, and I dreaded nothing, except the agony of death. Why should I be afraid? Supposing that I am mistaken, and there is something beyond, is it my fault that I cannot believe? What have I done that I should be afraid? I have never harmed anybody that I know of, and if I could believe I would. I wish I had died," she went on, passionately; "it would be all over now. I am tired of the world, tired of work and helplessness, and all the little worries which wear one out. I am not wanted here, I have nothing to live for, and I wish that I had died!"

"Some day you will think differently, Miss Granger. There are many things that a woman like yourself can live for--at the least, there is your work."

She laughed drearily. "My work! If you only knew what it is like you would not talk to me about it. Every day I roll my stone up the hill, and every night it seems to roll down again. But you have never taught in a village school. How can you know? I work all day, and in the evening perhaps I have to mend the tablecloths, or--what do you think?--write my father's sermons. It sounds curious, does it not, that I should write sermons? But I do. I wrote the one he is going to preach next Sunday. It makes very little difference to him what it is so long as he can read it, and, of course, I never say anything which can offend anybody, and I do not think that they listen much. Very few people go to church in Bryngelly."

"Don't you ever get any time to yourself, then?"

"Oh, yes, sometimes I do, and then I go out in my canoe, or read, and am almost happy. After all, Mr. Bingham, it is very wrong and ungrateful of me to speak like this. I have more advantages than nine-tenths of the world, and I ought to make the best of them. I don't know why I have been speaking as I have, and to you, whom I never saw till yesterday. I never did it before to any living soul, I assure you. It is just like the story of the man who came here last year with the divining rod. There is a cottage down on the cliff--it belongs to Mr. Davies, who

lives in the Castle. Well, they have no drinking water near, and the new tenant made a great fuss about it. So Mr. Davies hired men, and they dug and dug and spent no end of money, but could not come to water. At last the tenant fetched an old man from some parish a long way off, who said that he could find springs with a divining rod. He was a curious old man with a crutch, and he came with his rod, and hobbled about till at last the rod twitched just at the tenant's back door--at least the diviner said it did. At any rate, they dug there, and in ten minutes struck a spring of water, which bubbled up so strongly that it rushed into the house and flooded it. And what do you think? After all, the water was brackish. You are the man with the divining rod, Mr. Bingham, and you have made me talk a great deal too much, and, after all, you see it is not nice talk. You must think me a very disagreeable and wicked young woman, and I daresay I am. But somehow it is a relief to open one's mind. I do hope, Mr. Bingham, that you will see--in short, that you will not misunderstand me."

"Miss Granger," he answered, "there is between us that which will always entitle us to mutual respect and confidence--the link of life and death. Had it not been for you, I should not sit here to listen to your confidence to-day. You may tell me that a mere natural impulse prompted you to do what you did. I know better. It was your will that triumphed over your natural impulse towards self-preservation. Well, I will say no more about it, except this: If ever a man was bound to a woman by ties of gratitude and respect, I am bound to you. You need not fear that I shall take advantage of or misinterpret your confidence." Here he rose

and stood before her, his dark handsome face bowed in proud humility. "Miss Granger, I look upon it as an honour done to me by one whom henceforth I must reverence among all women. The life you gave back to me, and the intelligence which directs it, are in duty bound to you, and I shall not forget the debt."

Beatrice listened to his words, spoken in that deep and earnest voice, which in after years became so familiar to Her Majesty's judges and to Parliament--listened with a new sense of pleasure rising in her heart. She was this man's equal; what he could dare, she could dare; where he could climb, she could follow--ay, and if need be, show the path, and she felt that he acknowledged it. In his sight she was something more than a handsome girl to be admired and deferred to for her beauty's sake. He had placed her on another level--one, perhaps, that few women would have wished to occupy. But Beatrice was thankful to him. It was the first taste of supremacy that she had ever known.

It is something to stir the proud heart of such a woman as Beatrice, in that moment when for the first time she feels herself a conqueror, victorious, not through the vulgar advantage of her sex, not by the submission of man's coarser sense, but rather by the overbalancing weight of mind.

"Do you know," she said, suddenly looking up, "you make me very proud," and she stretched out her hand to him.

He took it, and, bending, touched it with his lips. There was no possibility of misinterpreting the action, and though she coloured a little--for, till then, no man had even kissed the tip of her finger--she did not misinterpret it. It was an act of homage, and that was all.

And so they sealed the compact of their perfect friendship for ever and a day.

Then came a moment's silence. It was Geoffrey who broke it.

"Miss Granger," he said, "will you allow me to preach you a lecture, a very short one?"

"Go on," she said.

"Very well. Do not blame me if you don't like it, and do not set me down as a prig, though I am going to tell you your faults as I read them in your own words. You are proud and ambitious, and the cramped lines in which you are forced to live seem to strangle you. You have suffered, and have not learned the lesson of suffering--humility. You have set yourself up against Fate, and Fate sweeps you along like spray upon the gale, yet you go unwilling. In your impatience you have flown to learning for refuge, and it has completed your overthrow, for it has induced you to reject as non-existent all that you cannot understand. Because your finite mind cannot search infinity, because no answer has

come to all your prayers, because you see misery and cannot read its purpose, because you suffer and have not found rest, you have said there is naught but chance, and become an atheist, as many have done before you. Is it not true?"

"Go on," she answered, bowing her head to her breast so that the long rippling hair almost hid her face.

"It seems a little odd," Geoffrey said with a short laugh, "that I, with all my imperfections heaped upon me, should presume to preach to you--but you will know best how near or how far I am from the truth. So I want to say something. I have lived for thirty-five years, and seen a good deal and tried to learn from it, and I know this. In the long run, unless we of our own act put away the opportunity, the world gives us our due, which generally is not much. So much for things temporal. If you are fit to rule, in time you will rule; if you do not, then be content and acknowledge your own incapacity. And as for things spiritual, I am sure of this--though of course one does not like to talk much of these matters--if you only seek for them long enough in some shape you will find them, though the shape may not be that which is generally recognised by any particular religion. But to build a wall deliberately between oneself and the unseen, and then complain that the way is barred, is simply childish."

"And what if one's wall is built, Mr. Bingham?"

"Most of us have done something in that line at different times," he answered, "and found a way round it."

"And if it stretches from horizon to horizon, and is higher than the clouds, what then?"

"Then you must find wings and fly over it."

"And where can any earthly woman find those spiritual wings?" she asked, and then sank her head still deeper on her breast to cover her confusion. For she remembered that she had heard of wanderers in the dusky groves of human passion, yes, even Mænad wanderers, who had suddenly come face to face with their own soul; and that the cruel paths of earthly love may yet lead the feet which tread them to the ivory gates of heaven.

And remembering these beautiful myths, though she had no experience of love, and knew little of its ways, Beatrice grew suddenly silent. Nor did Geoffrey give her an answer, though he need scarcely have feared to do so.

For were they not discussing a purely abstract question?