

CHAPTER XI

BEATRICE MAKES AN APPOINTMENT

Lady Honoria leaned back in the cab, and sighed a sigh of satisfaction.

"That is a capital idea," she said. "I was wondering what arrangements you could make for the next three weeks. It is ridiculous to pay three guineas a week for rooms just for you and Effie. The old gentleman only wants that for board and lodging together, for I asked him."

"I daresay it will do," said Geoffrey. "When are we to shift?"

"To-morrow, in time for dinner, or rather supper: these barbarians eat supper, you know. I go by the morning train, you see, so as to reach Garsington by tea-time. I daresay you will find it rather dull, but you like being dull. The old clergyman is a low stamp of man, and a bore, and as for the eldest daughter, Elizabeth, she's too awful--she reminds me of a rat. But Beatrice is handsome enough, though I think her horrid too. You'll have to console yourself with her, and I daresay you will suit each other."

"Why do you think her horrid, Honoria?"

"Oh, I don't know; she is clever and odd, and I hate odd women. Why can't they be like other people? Think of her being strong enough

to save your life like that too. She must have the muscle of an Amazon--it's downright unwomanly. But there is no doubt about her beauty. She is as nearly perfect as any girl I ever saw, though too independent looking. If only one had a daughter like that, how one might marry her. I would not look at anything under twenty thousand a year. She is too good for that lumbering Welsh squire she's engaged too--the man who lives in the Castle--though they say that he is fairly rich."

"Engaged," said Geoffrey, "how do you know that she is engaged?"

"Oh, I don't know it at all, but I suppose she is. If she isn't, she soon will be, for a girl in that position is not likely to throw such a chance away. At any rate, he's head over ears in love with her. I saw that last night. He was hanging about for hours in the rain, outside the door, with a face like a ghost, till he knew whether she was dead or alive, and he has been there twice to inquire this morning. Mr. Granger told me. But she is too good for him from a business point of view. She might marry anybody, if only she were put in the way of it."

Somehow, Geoffrey's lively interest in Beatrice sensibly declined on the receipt of this intelligence. Of course it was nothing to him; indeed he was glad to hear that she was in the way of such a comfortable settlement, but it is unfortunately a fact that one cannot be quite as much interested in a young and lovely lady who is the potential property of a "lumbering Welsh squire," as in one who belongs to herself.

The old Adam still survives in most men, however right-thinking they may be, and this is one of its methods of self-assertion.

"Well," he said, "I am glad to hear she is in such a good way; she deserves it. I think the Welsh squire is in luck; Miss Granger is a remarkable woman."

"Too remarkable by half," said Lady Honoria drily. "Here we are, and there is Effie, skipping about like a wild thing as usual. I think that child is demented."

On the following morning--it was Friday--Lady Honoria, accompanied by Anne, departed in the very best of tempers. For the next three weeks, at any rate, she would be free from the galling associations of straightened means--free to enjoy the luxury and refined comfort to which she had been accustomed, and for which her soul yearned with a fierce longing that would be incomprehensible to folk of a simpler mind. Everybody has his or her ideal Heaven, if only one could fathom it. Some would choose a sublimated intellectual leisure, made happy by the best literature of all the planets; some a model state (with themselves as presidents), in which (through their beneficent efforts) the latest radical notions could actually be persuaded to work to everybody's satisfaction; others a happy hunting ground, where the game enjoyed the fun as much as they did; and so on, ad infinitum.

Lady Honoria was even more modest. Give her a well appointed town and

country house, a few powdered footmen, plenty of carriages, and other needful things, including of course the entrée to the upper celestial ten, and she would ask no more from age to age. Let us hope that she will get it one day. It would hurt nobody, and she is sure to find plenty of people of her own way of thinking--that is, if this world supplies the raw material.

She embraced Effie with enthusiasm, and her husband with a chastened warmth, and went, a pious prayer on her lips that she might never again set eyes upon Bryngelly.

It will not be necessary for us to follow Lady Honoria in her travels. That afternoon Effie and her father had great fun. They packed up. Geoffrey, who was rapidly recovering from his stiffness, pushed the things into the portmanteaus and Effie jumped on them. Those which would not go in they bundled loose into the fly, till that vehicle looked like an old clothes ship. Then, as there was no room left for them inside, they walked down to the Vicarage by the beach, a distance of about three-quarters of a mile, stopping on their way to admire the beautiful castle, in one corner of which Owen Davies lived and moved.

"Oh, daddy," said the child, "I wish you would buy a house like that for you and me to live in. Why don't you, daddy?"

"Haven't got the money, dear," he answered.

"Will you ever have the money, daddy?"

"I don't know, dear, perhaps one day--when I am too old to enjoy it," he added to himself.

"It would take a great many pennies to buy a house like that, wouldn't it, daddy?" said Effie sagely.

"Yes, dear, more than you could count," he answered, and the conversation dropped.

Presently they came to a boat-shed, placed opposite the village and close to high-water mark. Here a man, it was old Edward, was engaged in mending a canoe. Geoffrey glanced at it and saw that it was the identical canoe out of which he had so nearly been drowned.

"Look, Effie," said he, "that is the boat out of which I was upset." Effie opened her wide eyes, and stared at the frail craft.

"It is a horrid boat," she said; "I don't want to look at it."

"You're quite right, little miss," said old Edward, touching his cap.

"It ain't safe, and somebody will be drowned out of it one of these days. I wish it had gone to the bottom, I do; but Miss Beatrice, she is that foolhardy there ain't no doing nothing with her."

"I fancy that she has learnt a lesson," said Geoffrey.

"May be, may be," grumbled the old man, "but women folk are hard to teach; they never learn nothing till it's too late, they don't, and then when they've been and done it they're sorry, but what's the good o' that?"

Meanwhile another conversation was in progress not more than a quarter of a mile away. On the brow of the cliff stood the village of Bryngelly, and at the back of the village was a school, a plain white-washed building, roofed with stone, which, though amply sufficient and suitable to the wants of the place, was little short of an abomination in the eyes of Her Majesty's school inspectors, who from time to time descended upon Bryngelly for purposes of examination and fault-finding. They yearned to see a stately red-brick edifice, with all the latest improvements, erected at the expense of the rate-payers, but as yet they yearned in vain. The school was supported by voluntary contributions, and thanks to Beatrice's energy and good teaching, the dreaded Board, with its fads and extravagance, had not yet clutched it.

Beatrice had returned to her duties that afternoon, for a night's rest brought back its vigour to her strong young frame. She had been greeted with enthusiasm by the children, who loved her, as well they might, for she was very gentle and sweet with them, though few dared to disobey her. Besides, her beauty impressed them, though they did not know it. Beauty of a certain sort has perhaps more effect on children than on any

other class, heedless and selfish as they often seem to be. They feel its power; it is an outward expression of the thoughts and dreams that bud in their unknowing hearts, and is somehow mixed up with their ideas of God and Heaven. Thus there was in Bryngelly a little girl of ten, a very clever and highly excitable child, Jane Llewellyn by name, born of parents of strict Calvinistic views. As it chanced, some months before the opening of this story, a tub thumper, of high renown and considerable rude oratorical force, visited the place, and treated his hearers to a lively discourse on the horrors of Hell.

In the very front row, her eyes wide with fear, sat this poor little child between her parents, who listened to the Minister with much satisfaction, and a little way back sat Beatrice, who had come out of curiosity.

Presently the preacher, having dealt sufficiently in terrifying generalities, went on to practical illustrations, for, after the manner of his class, he was delivering an extemporary oration. "Look at that child," he said, pointing to the little girl; "she looks innocent, does she not? but if she does not find salvation, my brethren, I tell you that she is damned. If she dies to-night, not having found salvation, she will go to Hell. Her delicate little body will be tormented for ever and ever----"

Here the unfortunate child fell forward with a shriek.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sir," said Beatrice aloud.

She had been listening to all this ill-judged rant with growing indignation, and now, in her excitement, entirely forgot that she was in a place of worship. Then she ran forward to the child, who had swooned. Poor little unfortunate, she never recovered the shock. When she came to herself, it was found that her finely strung mind had given way, and she lapsed into a condition of imbecility. But her imbecility was not always passive. Occasionally fits of passionate terror would seize upon her. She would cry out that the fiends were coming to drag her down to torment, and dash herself against the wall, in fear hideous to behold. Then it was found that there was but one way to calm her: it was to send for Beatrice. Beatrice would come and take the poor thin hands in hers and gaze with her calm deep eyes upon the wasted horror-stricken face till the child grew quiet again and, shivering, sobbed herself to sleep upon her breast.

And so it was with all the children; her power over them was almost absolute. They loved her, and she loved them all.

And now the schooling was almost done for the day. It was Beatrice's custom to make the children sing some simple song before they broke up. She stood in front of them and gave the time while they sung, and a pretty sight it was to see her do it. On this particular afternoon, just as the first verse was finished, the door of the room opened, and Owen Davies entered, bearing some books under his arm. Beatrice glanced round

and saw him, then, with a quick stamp of her foot, went on giving the time.

The children sung lustily, and in front of them stood Beatrice, dressed in simple white, her graceful form swaying as she marked the music's time. Nearer and nearer drew Owen Davies, till at length he stood quite close, his lips slightly apart, his eyes fixed upon her like the eyes of one who dreams, and his slow heavy face faintly lit with the glow of strong emotion.

The song ended, the children at a word from their mistress filed past her, headed by the pupil teachers, and then with a shout, seizing their caps, ran forth this way and that, welcoming the free air. When they were all gone, and not till then, Beatrice turned suddenly round.

"How do you do, Mr. Davies?" she said.

He started visibly. "I did not know that you had seen me," he answered.

"Oh, yes, I saw you, Mr. Davies, only I could not stop the song to say how do you do. By the way, I have to thank you for coming to inquire after me."

"Not at all, Miss Beatrice, not at all; it was a most dreadful accident. I cannot tell you how thankful I am--I can't, indeed."

"It is very good of you to take so much interest in me," said Beatrice.

"Not at all, Miss Beatrice, not at all. Who--who could help taking interest in you? I have brought you some books--the Life of Darwin--it is in two volumes. I think that I have heard you say that Darwin interests you?"

"Yes, thank you very much. Have you read it?"

"No, but I have cut it. Darwin doesn't interest me, you know. I think that he was a rather misguided person. May I carry the books home for you?"

"Thank you, but I am not going straight home; I am going to old Edward's shed to see my canoe."

As a matter of fact this was true, but the idea was only that moment born in her mind. Beatrice had been going home, as she wanted to see that all things were duly prepared for Geoffrey and his little daughter. But to reach the Vicarage she must pass along the cliff, where there were few people, and this she did not wish to do. To be frank, she feared lest Mr. Davies should take the opportunity to make that offer of his hand and heart which hung over her like a nightmare. Now the way to Edward's shed lay through the village and down the cliff, and she knew that he would never propose in the village.

It was very foolish of her, no doubt, thus to seek to postpone the evil day, but the strongest-minded women have their weak points, and this was one of Beatrice's. She hated the idea of this scene. She knew that when it did come there would be a scene. Not that her resolution to refuse the man had ever faltered. But it would be painful, and in the end it must reach the ears of her father and Elizabeth that she had actually rejected Mr. Owen Davies, and then what would her life be worth? She had never suspected it, it had never entered into her mind to suspect, that, though her father might be vexed enough, nothing on this earth would more delight the heart of Elizabeth.

Presently, having fetched her hat, Beatrice, accompanied by her admirer, bearing the Life of Darwin under his arm, started to walk down to the beach. They went in silence, Beatrice just a little ahead. She ventured some remark about the weather, but Owen Davies made no reply; he was thinking, he wanted to say something, but he did not know how to say it. They were at the head of the cliff now, and if he wished to speak he must do so quickly.

"Miss Beatrice," he said in a somewhat constrained voice.

"Yes, Mr. Davies--oh, look at that seagull; it nearly knocked my hat off."

But he was not to be put off with the seagull. "Miss Beatrice," he said again, "are you going out walking next Sunday afternoon?"

"How can I tell, Mr. Davies? It may rain."

"But if it does not rain--please tell me. You generally do walk on the beach on Sunday. Miss Beatrice, I want to speak to you. I hope you will allow me, I do indeed."

Then suddenly she came to a decision. This kind of thing was unendurable; it would be better to get it over. Turning round so suddenly that Owen started, she said:

"If you wish to speak to me, Mr. Davies, I shall be in the Amphitheatre opposite the Red Rocks, at four o'clock on Sunday afternoon, but I had much rather that you did not come. I can say no more."

"I shall come," he answered doggedly, and they went down the steps to the boat-shed.

"Oh, look, daddy," said Effie, "here comes the lady who was drowned with you and a gentleman," and to Beatrice's great relief the child ran forward and met them.

"Ah!" thought Geoffrey to himself, "that is the man Honoria said she was engaged to. Well, I don't think very much of her taste."

In another minute they had arrived. Geoffrey shook hands with Beatrice,

and was introduced to Owen Davies, who murmured something in reply, and promptly took his departure.

They examined the canoe together, and then walked slowly up to the Vicarage, Beatrice holding Effie by the hand. Opposite the reef they halted for a minute.

"There is the Table Rock on which we were thrown, Mr. Bingham," said Beatrice, "and here is where they carried us ashore. The sea does not look as though it would drown any one to-night, does it? See!"--and she threw a stone into it--"the ripples run as evenly as they do on a pond."

She spoke idly and Geoffrey answered her idly, for they were not thinking of their words. Rather were they thinking of the strange chance that had brought them together in an hour of deadly peril and now left them together in an hour of peace. Perhaps, too, they were wondering to what end this had come about. For, agnostics, atheists or believers, are we not, most of us, fatalists at heart?