CHAPTER XII

THE WRITING ON THE SAND

Geoffrey found himself very comfortable at the Vicarage, and as for Effie, she positively revelled in it. Beatrice looked after her, taking her to bed at night and helping her to dress in the morning, and Beatrice was a great improvement upon Anne. When Geoffrey became aware of this he remonstrated, saying that he had never expected her to act as nurse to the child, but she replied that it was a pleasure to her to do so, which was the truth. In other ways, too, the place was all that he desired. He did not like Elizabeth, but then he did not see very much of her, and the old farmer clergyman was amusing in his way, with his endless talk of tithes and crops, and the iniquities of the rebellious Jones, on whom he was going to distrain.

For the first day or two Geoffrey had no more conversations with Beatrice. Most of the time she was away at the school, and on the Saturday afternoon, when she was free, he went out to the Red Rocks curlew shooting. At first he thought of asking her to come too, but then it occurred to him that she might wish to go out with Mr. Davies, to whom he still supposed she was engaged. It was no affair of his, yet he was glad when he came back to find that she had been out with Effie, and not with Mr. Davies.

On Sunday morning they all went to church, including Beatrice. It was

a bare little church, and the congregation was small. Mr. Granger went through the service with about as much liveliness as a horse driving a machine. He ground it out, prayers, psalms, litany, lessons, all in the same depressing way, till Geoffrey felt inclined to go to sleep, and then took to watching Beatrice's sweet face instead. He wondered what made her look so sad. Hers was always a sad face when in repose, that he knew, but to-day it was particularly so, and what was more, she looked worried as well as sad. Once or twice he saw her glance at Mr. Davies, who was sitting opposite, the solitary occupant of an enormous pew, and he thought that there was apprehension in her look. But Mr. Davies did not return the glance. To judge from his appearance nothing was troubling his mind.

Indeed, Geoffrey studying him in the same way that he instinctively studied everybody whom he met, thought that he had never before seen a man who looked quite so ox-like and absolutely comfortable. And yet he never was more completely at fault. The man seemed stolid and cold indeed, but it was the coldness of a volcano. His heart was a-fire. All the human forces in him, all the energies of his sturdy life, had concentrated themselves in a single passion for the woman who was so near and yet so far from him. He had never drawn upon the store, had never frittered his heart away. This woman, strange and unusual as it may seem, was absolutely the first whose glance or voice had ever stirred his blood. His passion for her had grown slowly; for years it had been growing, ever since the grey-eyed girl on the brink of womanhood had conducted him to his castle home. It was no fancy, no

light desire to pass with the year which brought it. Owen had little imagination, that soil from which loves spring with the rank swiftness of a tropic bloom to fade at the first chill breath of change. His passion was an unalterable fact. It was rooted like an oak on our stiff English soil, its fibres wrapped his heart and shot his being through, and if so strong a gale should rise that it must fall, then he too would be overthrown.

For years now he had thought of little else than Beatrice. To win her he would have given all his wealth, ay, thrice over, if that were possible. To win her, to know her his by right and his alone, ah, that would be heaven! His blood quivered and his mind grew dim when he thought of it. What would it be to see her standing by him as she stood now, and know that she was his wife! There is no form of passion more terrible than this. Its very earthiness makes it awful.

The service went on. At last Mr. Granger mounted the pulpit and began to read his sermon, of which the text was, "But the greatest of these is charity." Geoffrey noticed that he bungled over some of the words, then suddenly remembered Beatrice had told him that she had written the sermon, and was all attention. He was not disappointed. Notwithstanding Mr. Granger's infamous reading, and his habit of dropping his voice at the end of a sentence, instead of raising it, the beauty of the thoughts and diction was very evident. It was indeed a discourse that might equally well have been delivered in a Mahomedan or a Buddhist place of worship; there was nothing distinctively Christian about it, it merely

appealed to the good in human nature. But of this neither the preacher nor his audience seemed to be aware, indeed, few of the latter were listening at all. The sermon was short and ended with a passage of real power and beauty--or rather it did not end, for, closing the MS. sheets, Mr. Granger followed on with a few impromptu remarks of his own.

"And now, brethren," he said, "I have been preaching to you about charity, but I wish to add one remark, Charity begins at home. There is about a hundred pounds of tithe owing to me, and some of it has been owing for two years and more. If that tithe is not paid I shall have to put distraint on some of you, and I thought that I had better take this opportunity to tell you so."

Then he gave the Benediction.

The contrast between this business-like speech, and the beautiful periods which had gone before, was so ridiculous that Geoffrey very nearly burst out laughing, and Beatrice smiled. So did the rest of the congregation, excepting one or two who owed tithe, and Owen Davies, who was thinking of other things.

As they went through the churchyard, Geoffrey noticed something. Beatrice was a few paces ahead holding Effie's hand. Presently Mr. Davies passed him, apparently without seeing him, and greeted Beatrice, who bowed slightly in acknowledgment. He walked a little way without speaking, then Geoffrey, just as they reached the church gate, heard him

say, "At four this afternoon, then." Again she bowed her head, and he turned and went. As for Geoffrey, he wondered what it all meant: was she engaged to him, or was she not?

Dinner was a somewhat silent meal. Mr. Granger was thinking about his tithe, also about a sick cow. Elizabeth's thoughts pursued some dark and devious course of their own, not an altogether agreeable one to judge from her face. Beatrice looked pale and worried; even Effie's sallies did not do more than make her smile. As for Geoffrey himself, he was engaged in wondering in an idle sort of way what was going to happen at four o'clock.

"You is all very dull," said Effie at last, with a charming disregard of grammar.

"People ought to be dull on Sunday, Effie," answered Beatrice, with an effort. "At least, I suppose so," she added.

Elizabeth, who was aggressively religious, frowned at this remark. She knew her sister did not mean it.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Beatrice?" she asked suddenly. She had seen Owen Davies go up and speak to her sister, and though she had not been near enough to catch the words, scented an assignation from afar.

Beatrice coloured slightly, a fact that escaped neither her sister nor Geoffrey.

"I am going to see Jane Llewellyn," she answered. Jane Llewellyn was the crazy little girl whose tale has been told. Up to that moment Beatrice had no idea of going to see her, but she knew that Elizabeth would not follow her there, because the child could not endure Elizabeth.

"Oh, I thought that perhaps you were going out walking."

"I may walk afterwards," answered Beatrice shortly.

"So there is an assignation," thought Elizabeth, and a cold gleam of intelligence passed across her face.

Shortly after dinner, Beatrice put on her bonnet and went out. Ten minutes passed, and Elizabeth did the same. Then Mr. Granger announced that he was going up to the farm (there was no service till six) to see about the sick cow, and asked Geoffrey if he would like to accompany him. He said that he might as well, if Effie could come, and, having lit his pipe, they started.

Meanwhile Beatrice went to see the crazy child. She was not violent to-day, and scarcely knew her. Before she had been in the house ten minutes, the situation developed itself.

The cottage stood about two-thirds of the way down a straggling street, which was quite empty, for Bryngelly slept after dinner on Sunday. At the top of this street appeared Elizabeth, a Bible in her hand, as though on district visiting intent. She looked down the street, and seeing nobody, went for a little walk, then, returning, once more looked down the street. This time she was rewarded. The door of the Llewellyns' cottage opened, and Beatrice appeared. Instantly Elizabeth withdrew to such a position that she could see without being seen, and, standing as though irresolute, awaited events. Beatrice turned and took the road that led to the beach.

Then Elizabeth's irresolution disappeared. She also turned and took the road to the cliff, walking very fast. Passing behind the Vicarage, she gained a point where the beach narrowed to a width of not more than fifty yards, and sat down. Presently she saw a man coming along the sand beneath her, walking quickly. It was Owen Davies. She waited and watched. Seven or eight minutes passed, and a woman in a white dress passed. It was Beatrice, walking slowly.

"Ah!" said Elizabeth, setting her teeth, "as I thought." Rising, she pursued her path along the cliff, keeping three or four hundred yards ahead, which she could easily do by taking short cuts. It was a long walk, and Elizabeth, who was not fond of walking, got very tired of it. But she was a woman with a purpose, and as such, hard to beat. So she kept on steadily for nearly an hour, till, at length, she came to the spot known as the Amphitheatre. This Amphitheatre, situated almost

opposite the Red Rocks, was a half-ring of cliff, the sides of which ran in a semicircle almost down to the water's edge, that is, at high tide. In the centre of the segment thus formed was a large flat stone, so placed that anybody in certain positions on the cliff above could command a view of it, though it was screened by the projecting walls of rock from observation from the beach. Elizabeth clambered a little way down the sloping side of the cliff and looked; on the stone, his back towards her, sat Owen Davies. Slipping from stratum to stratum of the broken cliff, Elizabeth drew slowly nearer, till at length she was within fifty paces of the seated man. Here, ensconcing herself behind a cleft rock, she also sat down; it was not safe to go closer; but in case she should by any chance be observed from above, she opened the Bible on her knee, as though she had sought this quiet spot to study its pages.

Three or four minutes passed, and Beatrice appeared round the projecting angle of the Amphitheatre, and walked slowly across the level sand. Owen Davies rose and stretched out his hand to welcome her, but she did not take it, she only bowed, and then seated herself upon the large flat stone. Owen also seated himself on it, but some three or four feet away. Elizabeth thrust her white face forward till it was almost level with the lips of the cleft rock and strained her ears to listen. Alas! she could not hear a single word.

"You asked me to come here, Mr. Davies," said Beatrice, breaking the painful silence. "I have come."

"Yes," he answered; "I asked you to come because I wanted to speak to you."

"Yes?" said Beatrice, looking up from her occupation of digging little holes in the sand with the point of her parasol. Her face was calm enough, but her heart beat fast beneath her breast.

"I want to ask you," he said, speaking slowly and thickly, "if you will be my wife?"

Beatrice opened her lips to speak, then, seeing that he had only paused because his inward emotion checked his words, shut them again, and went on digging little holes. She wished to rely on the whole case, as a lawyer would say.

"I want to ask you," he repeated, "to be my wife. I have wished to do so for some years, but I have never been able to bring myself to it. It is a great step to take, and my happiness depends on it. Do not answer me yet," he went on, his words gathering force as he spoke. "Listen to what I have to tell you. I have been a lonely man all my life. At sea I was lonely, and since I have come into this fortune I have been lonelier still. I never loved anybody or anything till I began to love you. And then I loved you more and more and more; till now I have only one thought in all my life, and that thought is of you. While I am awake I think of you, and when I am asleep I dream of you. Listen, Beatrice, listen!--I have never loved any other woman, I have scarcely spoken to

one--only you, Beatrice. I can give you a great deal; and everything I have shall be yours, only I should be jealous of you--yes, very jealous!"

Here she glanced at his face. It was outwardly calm but white as death, and in the blue eyes, generally so placid, shone a fire that by contrast looked almost unholy.

"I think that you have said enough, Mr. Davies," Beatrice answered. "I am very much obliged to you. I am much honoured, for in some ways I am not your equal, but I do not love you, and I cannot marry you, and I think it best to tell you so plainly, once and for all," and unconsciously she went on digging the holes.

"Oh, do not say that," he answered, almost in a moan. "For God's sake don't say that! It will kill me to lose you. I think I should go mad. Marry me and you will learn to love me."

Beatrice glanced at him again, and a pang of pity pierced her heart. She did not know it was so bad a case as this. It struck her too that she was doing a foolish thing, from a worldly point of view. The man loved her and was very eligible. He only asked of her what most women are willing enough to give under circumstances so favourable to their well-being--herself. But she never liked him, he had always repelled her, and she was not a woman to marry a man whom she did not like. Also, during the last week this dislike and repulsion had hardened and

strengthened. Vaguely, as he pleaded with her, Beatrice wondered why, and as she did so her eye fell upon the pattern she was automatically pricking in the sand. It had taken the form of letters, and the letters were G E O F F R E--Great heaven! Could that be the answer? She flushed crimson with shame at the thought, and passed her foot across the tell-tale letters, as she believed, obliterating them.

Owen saw the softening of her eyes and saw the blush, and misinterpreted them. Thinking that she was relenting, by instinct, rather than from any teaching of experience, he attempted to take her hand. With a turn of the arm, so quick that even Elizabeth watching with all her eyes saw nothing of the movement, Beatrice twisted herself free.

"Don't touch me," she said sharply, "you have no right to touch me. I have answered you, Mr. Davies."

Owen withdrew his hand abashed, and for a moment sat still, his chin resting on his breast, a very picture of despair. Nothing indeed could break the stolid calm of his features, but the violence of his emotion was evident in the quick shivering of his limbs and his short deep breaths.

"Can you give me no hope?" he said at last in a slow heavy voice. "For God's sake think before you answer--you don't know what it means to me. It is nothing to you--you cannot feel. I feel, and your words cut like a knife. I know that I am heavy and stupid, but I feel as though you had

killed me. You are heartless, quite heartless."

Again Beatrice softened a little. She was touched and flattered. Where is the woman who would not have been?

"What can I say to you, Mr. Davies?" she answered in a kinder voice. "I cannot marry you. How I can I marry you when I do not love you?"

"Plenty of women marry men whom they do not love."

"Then they are bad women," answered Beatrice with energy.

"The world does not think so," he said again; "the world calls those women bad who love where they cannot marry, and the world is always right. Marriage sanctifies everything."

Beatrice laughed bitterly. "Do you think so?" she said. "I do not. I think that marriage without love is the most unholy of our institutions, and that is saying a good deal. Supposing I should say yes to you, supposing that I married you, not loving you, what would it be for? For your money and your position, and to be called a married woman, and what do you suppose I should think of myself in my heart then? No, no, I may be bad, but I have not fallen so low as that. Find another wife, Mr. Davies; the world is wide and there are plenty of women in it who will love you for your own sake, or who at any rate will not be so particular. Forget me, and leave me to go my own way--it is not your

way."

"Leave you to go your own way," he answered almost with passion--"that is, leave you to some other man. Oh! I cannot bear to think of it. I am jealous of every man who comes near you. Do you know how beautiful you are? You are too beautiful--every man must love you as I do. Oh, if you took anybody else I think that I should kill him."

"Do not speak like that, Mr. Davies, or I shall go."

He stopped at once. "Don't go," he said imploringly. "Listen. You said that you would not marry me because you did not love me. Supposing that you learned to love me, say in a year's time, Beatrice, would you marry me then?"

"I would marry any man whom I loved," she answered.

"Then if you learn to love me you will marry me?"

"Oh, this is ridiculous," she said. "It is not probable, it is hardly possible, that such a thing should happen. If it had been going to happen it would have happened before."

"It might come about," he answered; "your heart might soften towards me. Oh, say yes to this. It is a small request, it costs you nothing, and it gives me hope, without which I cannot live. Say that I may ask you once

more, and that then if you love me you will marry me."

Beatrice thought for a moment. Such a promise could do her no harm, and in the course of six months or a year he might get used to the idea of living without her. Also it would prevent a scene. It was weak of her, but she dreaded the idea of her having refused Owen Davies coming to her father's ears.

"If you wish it, Mr. Davies," she said, "so be it. Only I ask you to understand this, I am in no way tied to you. I give you no hope that my answer, should you renew this offer a year hence or at any other time, will differ from that I give you to-day. I do not think there is the slightest probability of such a thing. Also, it must be understood that you are not to speak to my father about this matter, or to trouble me in any way. Do you consent?"

"Yes," he answered, "I consent. You have me at your mercy."

"Very well. And now, Mr. Davies, good-bye. No, do not walk back with me. I had rather go by myself. But I want to say this: I am very sorry for what has happened. I have not wished it to happen. I have never encouraged it, and my hands are clean of it. But I am sorry, sorry beyond measure, and I repeat what I said before--seek out some other woman and marry her."

"That is the cruellest thing of all the cruel things which you have

said," he answered.

"I did not mean it to be cruel, Mr. Davies, but I suppose that the truth often is. And now good-bye," and Beatrice stretched out her hand.

He touched it, and she turned and went. But Owen did not go. He sat upon the rock, his head bowed in misery. He had staked all his hopes upon this woman. She was the one desirable thing to him, the one star in his somewhat leaden sky, and now that star was eclipsed. Her words were unequivocal, they gave but little hope. Beatrice was scarcely a woman to turn round in six months or a year. On the contrary, there was a fixity about her which frightened him. What could be the cause of it? How came it that she should be so ready to reject him, and all he had to offer her? After all, she was a girl in a small position. She could not be looking forward to a better match. Nor would the prospect move her one way or another. There must be a reason for it. Perhaps he had a rival, surely that must be the cause. Some enemy had done this thing. But who?

At this moment a woman's shadow fell athwart him.

"Oh, have you come back?" he cried, springing to his feet.

"If you mean Beatrice," answered a voice--it was Elizabeth's--"she went down to the beach ten minutes ago. I happened to be on the cliff, and I saw her."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Granger," he said faintly. "I did not see who it was."

Elizabeth sat down upon the rock where her sister had sat, and, seeing the little holes in the breach, began indolently to clear them of the sand which Beatrice had swept over them with her foot. This was no difficult matter, for the holes were deeply dug, and it was easy to trace their position. Presently they were nearly all clear--that is, the letters were legible.

"You have had a talk with Beatrice, Mr. Davies?"

"Yes," he answered apathetically.

Elizabeth paused. Then she took her bull by the horns.

"Are you going to marry Beatrice, Mr. Davies?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered slowly and without surprise. It seemed natural to him that his own central thought should be present in her mind. "I love her dearly, and want to marry her."

"She refused you, then?"

"Yes."

Elizabeth breathed more freely.

"But I can ask her again."

Elizabeth frowned. What could this mean? It was not an absolute refusal. Beatrice was playing some game of her own.

"Why did she put you off so, Mr. Davies? Do not think me inquisitive. I only ask because I may be able to help you."

"I know; you are very kind. Help me and I shall always be grateful to you. I do not know--I almost think that there must be somebody else, only I don't know who it can be."

"Ah!" said Elizabeth, who had been gazing intently at the little holes in the beach which she had now cleared of the sand. "Of course that is possible. She is a curious girl, Beatrice is. What are those letters, Mr. Davies?"

He looked at them idly. "Something your sister was writing while I talked to her. I remember seeing her do it."

"G E O F F R E--why, it must be meant for Geoffrey. Yes, of course it is possible that there is somebody else, Mr. Davies. Geoffrey!--how curious!"

"Why is it curious, Miss Granger? Who is Geoffrey?"

Elizabeth laughed a disagreeable little laugh that somehow attracted Owen's attention more than her words.

"How should I know? It must be some friend of Beatrice's, and one of whom she is thinking a great deal, or she would not write his name unconsciously. The only Geoffrey that I know is Mr. Geoffrey Bingham, the barrister, who is staying at the Vicarage, and whose life Beatrice saved." She paused to watch her companion's face, and saw a new idea creep across its stolidity. "But of course," she went on, "it cannot be Mr. Bingham that she was thinking of, because you see he is married."

"Married?" he said, "yes, but he's a man for all that, and a very handsome one."

"Yes, I should call him handsome--a fine man," Elizabeth answered critically; "but, as Beatrice said the other day, the great charm about him is his talk and power of mind. He is a very remarkable man, and the world will hear of him before he has done. But, however, all this is neither here nor there. Beatrice is a curious woman, and has strange ideas, but I am sure that she would never carry on with a married man."

"But he might carry on with her, Miss Elizabeth."

She laughed. "Do you really think that a man like Mr. Bingham would try

to flirt with girls without encouragement? Men like that are as proud as women, and prouder; the lady must always be a step ahead. But what is the good of talking about such a thing? It is all nonsense. Beatrice must have been thinking of some other Geoffrey--or it was an accident of something. Why, Mr. Davies, if you for one moment really believed that dear Beatrice could be guilty of such a shameless thing as to carry on a flirtation with a married man, would you have asked her to marry you? Would you still think of asking such a woman as she must be to become your wife?"

"I don't know; I suppose not," he said doubtfully.

"You suppose not. I know you better than you know yourself. You would rather never marry at all than take such a woman as she would be proved to be. But it is no good talking such stuff. If you have a rival you may be sure it is some unmarried man."

Owen reflected in his heart that on the whole he would rather it was a married one, since a married man, at any rate, could not legally take possession of Beatrice. But Elizabeth's rigid morality alarmed him, and he did not say so.

"Do you know I feel a little upset, Miss Elizabeth," he answered. "I think I will be going. By the way, I promised to say nothing of this to your father. I hope that you will not do so, either."

"Most certainly not," said Elizabeth, and indeed it would be the last thing she would wish to do. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Davies. Do not be downhearted; it will all come right in the end. You will always have me to help you, remember."

"Thank you, thank you," he said earnestly, and went.

Elizabeth watched him round the wall of rock with a cold and ugly smile set upon her face.

"You fool," she thought, "you fool! To tell me that you 'love her dearly and want to marry her;' you want to get that sweet face of hers, do you? You never shall; I'd spoil it first! Dear Beatrice, she is not capable of carrying on a love affair with a married man--oh, certainly not! Why, she's in love with him already, and he is more than half in love with her. If she hadn't been, would she have put Owen off? Not she. Give them time, and we shall see. They will ruin each other--they must ruin each other; it won't be child's play when two people like that fall in love. They will not stop at sighs, there is too much human nature about them. It was a good idea to get him into the house. And to see her go on with that child Effie, just as though she was its mother--it makes me laugh. Ah, Beatrice, with all your wits you are a silly woman! And one day, my dear girl, I shall have the pleasure of exposing you to Owen; the idol will be unveiled, and there will be an end of your chances with him, for he can't marry you after that. Then my turn will come. It is a question of time--only a question of time!"

So brooded Elizabeth in her heart, madded with malicious envy and passionate jealousy. She loved this man, Owen Davies, as much as she could love anybody; at the least, she dearly loved the wealth and station of which he was the visible centre, and she hated the sister whom he desired. If she could only discredit that sister and show her to be guilty of woman's worst crime, misplaced, unlegalised affection, surely, she thought, Owen would reject her.

She was wrong. She did not know how entirely he desired to make Beatrice his wife, or realise how forgiving a man can be who has such an end to gain. It is of the women who already weary them and of their infidelity that men are so ready to make examples, not of those who do not belong to them, and whom they long for night and day. To these they can be very merciful.