CHAPTER XIII

GEOFFREY LECTURES

Meanwhile Beatrice was walking homewards with an uneasy mind. The trouble was upon her. She had, it is true, succeeded in postponing it a little, but she knew very well that it was only a postponement. Owen Davies was not a man to be easily shaken off. She almost wished now that she had crushed the idea once and for all. But then he would have gone to her father, and there must have been a scene, and she was weak enough to shrink from that, especially while Mr. Bingham was in the house. She could well imagine the dismay, not to say the fury, of her money-loving old father if he were to hear that she had refused--actually refused--Owen Davies of Bryngelly Castle, and all his wealth.

Then there was Elizabeth to be reckoned with. Elizabeth would assuredly make her life a burden to her. Beatrice little guessed that nothing would suit her sister's book better. Oh, if only she could shake the dust of Bryngelly off her feet! But that, too, was impossible. She was quite without money. She might, it was true, succeed in getting another place as mistress to a school in some distant part of England, were it not for an insurmountable obstacle. Here she received a salary of seventy-five pounds a year; of this she kept fifteen pounds, out of which slender sum she contrived to dress herself; the rest she gave to her father. Now, as she well knew, he could not keep his head above water without this assistance, which, small as it was, made all the difference to their household between poverty and actual want. If she went away, supposing even that she found an equally well-paid post, she would require every farthing of the money to support herself, there would be nothing left to send home. It was a pitiable position; here was she, who had just refused a man worth thousands a year, quite unable to get out of the way of his importunity for the want of seventy-five pounds, paid quarterly. Well, the only thing to do was to face it out and take her chance. On one point she was, however, quite clear; she would not marry Owen Davies. She might be a fool for her pains, but she would not do it. She respected herself too much to marry a man she did not love; a man whom she positively disliked. "No, never!" she exclaimed aloud, stamping her foot upon the shingle.

"Never what?" said a voice, within two yards of her.

She started violently, and looked round. There, his back resting against a rock, a pipe in his mouth, an open letter on his knee, and his hat drawn down almost over his eyes, sat Geoffrey. He had left Effie to go home with Mr. Granger, and climbing down a sloping place in the cliff, had strolled along the beach. The letter on his knee was one from his wife. It was short, and there was nothing particular in it. Effie's name was not even mentioned. It was to see if he had not overlooked it that he was reading the note through again. No, it merely related to Lady Honoria's safe arrival, gave a list of the people staying at the Hall--a fast lot, Geoffrey noticed, a certain Mr. Dunstan, whom he particularly disliked, among them--and the number of brace of partridges which had been killed on the previous day. Then came an assurance that Honoria was enjoying herself immensely, and that the new French cook was "simply perfect;" the letter ending "with love."

"Never what, Miss Granger?" he said again, as he lazily folded up the sheet.

"Never mind, of course," she answered, recovering herself. "How you startled me, Mr. Bingham! I had no idea there was anybody on the beach."

"It is quite free, is it not?" he answered, getting up. "I thought you were going to trample me into the pebbles. It's almost alarming when one is thinking about a Sunday nap to see a young lady striding along, then suddenly stop, stamp her foot, and say, 'No, never!' Luckily I knew that you were about or I should really have been frightened."

"How did you know that I was about?" Beatrice asked a little defiantly. It was no business of his to observe her movements.

"In two ways. Look!" he said, pointing to a patch of white sand. "That, I think, is your footprint."

"Well, what of it?" said Beatrice, with a little laugh.

"Nothing in particular, except that it is your footprint," he answered. "Then I happened to meet old Edward, who was loafing along, and he informed me that you and Mr. Davies had gone up the beach; there is his footprint--Mr. Davies's, I mean--but you don't seem to have been very sociable, because here is yours right in the middle of it. Therefore you must have been walking in Indian file, and a little way back in parallel lines, with quite thirty yards between you."

"Why do you take the trouble to observe things so closely?" she asked in a half amused and half angry tone.

"I don't know--a habit of the legal mind, I suppose. One might make quite a romance out of those footprints on the sand, and the little subsequent events. But you have not heard all my thrilling tale. Old Edward also informed me that he saw your sister, Miss Elizabeth, going along the cliff almost level with you, from which he concluded that you had argued as to the shortest way to the Red Rocks and were putting the matter to the proof."

"Elizabeth," said Beatrice, turning a shade paler; "what can she have been doing, I wonder."

"Taking exercise, probably, like yourself. Well, I seat myself with my pipe in the shadow of that rock, when suddenly I see Mr. Davies coming along towards Bryngelly as though he were walking for a wager, his hat fixed upon the back of his head. Literally he walked over my legs and never saw me. Then you follow and ejaculate, 'No, never!'--and that is the end of my story. Have I your permission to walk with you, or shall I interfere with the development of the plot?"

"There is no plot, and as you said just now the beach is free," Beatrice answered petulantly.

They walked on a few yards and then he spoke in another tone--the meaning of the assignation he had overheard in the churchyard grew clear to him now.

"I believe that I have to congratulate you, Miss Granger," he said, "and I do so very heartily. It is not everybody who is so fortunate as to----"

Beatrice stopped, and half turning faced him.

"What do you mean, Mr. Bingham?" she said. "I do not understand your dark sayings."

"Mean! oh, nothing particular, except that I wished to congratulate you on your engagement."

"My engagement! what engagement?"

"It seems that there is some mistake," he said, and struggle as he might to suppress it his tone was one of relief. "I understood that you had become engaged to be married to Mr. Owen Davies. If I am wrong I am sure

I apologise."

"You are quite wrong, Mr. Bingham; I don't know who put such a notion into your head, but there is no truth in it."

"Then allow me to congratulate you on there being no truth in it. You see that is the beauty of nine affairs matrimonial out of ten--there are two or more sides of them. If they come off the amiable and disinterested observer can look at the bright side--as in this case, lots of money, romantic castle by the sea, gentleman of unexceptional antecedents, &c., &c, &c. If, on the other hand, they don't, cause can still be found for thankfulness--lady might do better after all, castle by the sea rather draughty and cold in spring, gentlemen most estimable but perhaps a little dull, and so on, you see."

There was a note of mockery about his talk which irritated Beatrice exceedingly. It was not like Mr. Bingham to speak so. It was not even the way that a gentleman out of his teens should speak to a lady on such a subject. He knew this as well as she did and was secretly ashamed of himself. But the truth must out: though Geoffrey did not admit it even to himself he was bitterly and profoundly jealous, and jealous people have no manners. Beatrice could not, however, be expected to know this, and naturally grew angry.

"I do not quite understand what you are talking about, Mr. Bingham," she said, putting on her most dignified air, and Beatrice could look rather alarming. "You have picked up a piece of unfounded gossip and now you take advantage of it to laugh at me, and to say rude things of Mr. Davies. It is not kind."

"Oh, no; it was the footsteps, Miss Granger, and the gossip, and the appointment you made in the churchyard, that I unwillingly overheard, not the gossip alone which led me into my mistake. Of course I have now to apologise."

Again Beatrice stamped her foot. She saw that he was still mocking her, and felt that he did not believe her.

"There," he went on, stung into unkindness by his biting but unacknowledged jealousy, for she was right--on reflection he did not quite believe what she said as to her not being engaged. "How unfortunate I am--I have said something to make you angry again. Why did you not walk with Mr. Davies? I should then have remained guiltless of offence, and you would have had a more agreeable companion. You want to quarrel with me; what shall we quarrel about? There are many things on which we are diametrically opposed; let us start one."

It was too much, for though his words were nothing the tone in which he spoke gave them a sting. Beatrice, already disturbed in mind by the scene through which she had passed, her breast already throbbing with a vague trouble of which she did not know the meaning, for once in her life lost control of herself and grew hysterical. Her grey eyes filled with tears, the corners of her sweet mouth dropped, and she looked very much as though she were going to burst out weeping.

"It is most unkind of you," she said, with a half sob. "If you knew how much I have to put up with, you would not speak to me like that. I know that you do not believe me; very well, I will tell you the truth. Yes, though I have no business to do it, and you have no right--none at all--to make me do it, I will tell you the truth, because I cannot bear that you should not believe me. Mr. Davies did want me to marry him and I refused him. I put him off for a while; I did this because I knew that if I did not he would go to my father. It was cowardly, but my father would make my life wretched----" and again she gave a half-choked sob.

Much has been said and written about the effect produced upon men by the sight of a lady in, or on the border line of tears, and there is no doubt that this effect is considerable. Man being in his right mind is deeply moved by such a spectacle, also he is frightened because he dreads a scene. Now most people would rather walk ten miles in their dress shoes than have to deal with a young lady in hysterics, however modified. Putting the peculiar circumstances of the case aside, Geoffrey was no exception to this rule. It was all very well to cross spears with Beatrice, who had quite an equal wit, and was very capable of retaliation, but to see her surrender at discretion was altogether another thing. Indeed he felt much ashamed of himself.

"Please don't--don't--be put out," he said. He did not like to use the word "cry." "I was only laughing at you, but I ought not to have spoken as I did. I did not wish to force your confidence, indeed I did not. I never thought of such a thing. I am so sorry."

His remorse was evidently genuine, and Beatrice felt somewhat appeased. Perhaps it did not altogether grieve her to learn that she could make him feel sorry.

"You did not force my confidence," she said defiantly, quite forgetting that a moment before she had reproached him for making her speak. "I told you because I did not choose that you should think I was not speaking the truth--and now let us change the subject." She imposed no reserve on him as to what she had revealed; she knew that there was no necessity to do so. The secret would be between them--another dangerous link.

Beatrice recovered her composure and they walked slowly on.

"Tell me, Mr. Bingham," she said presently, "how can a woman earn her living--I mean a girl like myself without any special qualifications? Some of them get on."

"Well," he answered, "that depends upon the girl. What sort of a living do you mean? You are earning a living now, of a kind."

"Yes, but sometimes, if only I could manage it, I think that I should like to get away from here, and take another line, something bigger. I do not suppose that I ever shall, but I like to think of it sometimes."

"I only know of two things which a woman can turn to," he said, "the stage and literature. Of course," he added hastily, "the first is out of the question in your case."

"And so is the other, I am afraid," she answered shaking her head, "that is if by literature you mean imaginative writing, and I suppose that is the only way to get into notice. As I told you I lost my imagination--well, to be frank, when I lost my faith. At one time I used to have plenty, as I used to have plenty of faith, but the one went with the other, I do not understand why."

"Don't you? I think I do. A mind without religious sentiment is like a star without atmosphere, brighter than other stars but not so soft to see. Religion, poetry, music, imagination, and even some of the more exalted forms of passion, flourish in the same soil, and are, I sometimes think, different manifestations of the same thing. Do you know it is ridiculous to hear you talk of having lost your faith, because I don't believe it. At the worst it has gone to sleep, and will wake up again one day. Possibly you may not accept some particular form of faith, but I tell you frankly that to reject all religion simply because you cannot understand it, is nothing but a form of atrocious spiritual vanity. Your mind is too big for you, Miss Granger: it has run away with you, but you know it is tied by a string--it cannot go far. And now perhaps you will be angry again."

"No, indeed, why should I be angry? I daresay that you are quite right, and I only hope that I may be able to believe again. I will tell you how I lost belief. I had a little brother whom I loved more than anything else in the world, indeed after my mother died he was the only thing I really had to love, for I think that my father cares more for Elizabeth than he does for me, she is so much the better at business matters, and Elizabeth and I never quite got on. I daresay that the fault is mine, but the fact remains--we are sisters but we are not intimate. Well, my brother fell ill of a fever, and for a long time he lay between life and death, and I prayed for him as I never prayed for anybody or anything before--yes, I prayed that I might die instead of him. Then he passed through the crisis and got better, and I thanked God, thinking that my prayers had been answered; oh, how happy I was for those ten days! And then this happened:--My brother got a chill, a relapse followed, and in three days he was dead. The last words that he spoke to me were, 'Oh, don't let me die, Bee!'--he used to call me Bee--'Please don't let me die, dear Bee!' But he died, died in my arms, and when it was over I rose from his side feeling as though my heart was dead also. I prayed no more after that. It seemed to me as though my prayers had been mocked at, as though he had been given back to me for a little while in order that the blow might be more crushing when it fell."

"Don't you think that you were a little foolish in taking such a view?" said Geoffrey. "Have you not been amused, sometimes, to read about the early Christians?--how the lead would not boil the martyr, or the lion would not eat him, or the rain from a blue sky put out the fire, and how the pagan king at once was converted and accepted a great many difficult doctrines without further delay. The Athanasian Creed was not necessarily true because the fire would not light or the sword would not cut, nor, excuse me, were all your old beliefs wrong because your prayer was unanswered. It is an ancient story, that we cannot tell whether the answering of our petitions will be good or ill for us. Of course I do not know anything about such things, but it seems to me rash to suppose that Providence is going to alter the working of its eternal laws merely to suit the passing wishes of individuals--wishes, too, that in many cases would bring unforeseen sorrows if fulfilled. Besides I daresay that the poor child is happier dead than he would have been had he lived. It is not an altogether pleasant world for most of us."

"Yes, Mr. Bingham, I know, and I daresay that I should have got over the shock in time, only after that I began to read. I read the histories of the religions and compared them, and I read the works of those writers who have risen up to attack them. I found, or I thought that I found, the same springs of superstition in them all--superstitions arising from elementary natural causes, and handed on with variations from race to race, and time to time. In some I found the same story, only with a slightly altered face, and I learned, moreover, that each faith denied the other, and claimed truth for itself alone.

"After that, too, I went to the college and there I fell in with a lady, one of the mistresses, who was the cleverest woman that I ever knew, and in her way a good woman, but one who believed that religion was the curse of the world, and who spent all her spare time in attacking it in some form or other. Poor thing, she is dead now. And so, you see, what between these causes and the continual spectacle of human misery which to my mind negatives the idea of a merciful and watching Power, at last it came to pass that the only altar left in my temple is an altar to the 'Unknown God.'"

Geoffrey, like most men who have had to think on these matters, did not care to talk about them much, especially to women. For one thing, he was conscious of a tendency to speech less reverent than his thought. But he had not entered Beatrice's church of Darkness, indeed he had turned his back on it for ever, though, like most people, he had at different periods of his past life tarried an hour in its porch. So he ventured on an objection.

"I am no theologian," he said, "and I am not fond of discussion on such matters. But there are just one or two things I should like to say. It is no argument, to my mind at least, to point to the existence of evil and unhappiness among men as a proof of the absence of a superior Mercy; for what are men that such things should not be with them? Man, too, must own some master. If he has doubts let him look up at the marshalling of the starry heaven, and they will vanish."

"No," said Beatrice, "I fear not. Kant said so, but before that Molière had put the argument in the mouth of a fool. The starry heavens no more prove anything than does the running of the raindrops down the window-pane. It is not a question of size and quantity."

"I might accept the illustration," answered Geoffrey; "one example of law is as good as another for my purpose. I see in it all the working of a living Will, but of course that is only my way of looking at it, not yours."

"No; I am afraid," said Beatrice, "all this reasoning drawn from material things does not touch me. That is how the Pagans made their religions, and it is how Paley strives to prove his. They argued from the Out to the In, from the material to the spiritual. It cannot be; if Christianity is true it must stand upon spiritual feet and speak with a spiritual voice, to be heard, not in the thunderstorm, but only in the hearts of men. The existence of Creative Force does not demonstrate the existence of a Redeemer; if anything, it tends to negative it, for the power that creates is also the power which destroys. What does touch me, however, is the thought of the multitude of the Dead. That is what we care for, not for an Eternal Force, ever creating and destroying. Think of them all--all the souls of unheard-of races, almost animal, who passed away so long ago. Can ours endure more than theirs, and do you think that the spirit of an Ethiopian who died in the time of Moses is anywhere now?"

"There was room for them all on earth," answered Geoffrey. "The universe is wide. It does not dismay me. There are mysteries in our nature, the nature we think we know--shall there be none in that which we know not? Worlds die, to live again when, after millions of ages, the conditions become once more favourable to life, and why should not a man? We are creatures of the world, we reflect its every light and shadow, we rejoice in its rejoicing, its every feature has a tiny parallel in us. Why should not our fate be as its fate, and its fate is so far as we know eternal. It may change from gas to chaos, from chaos to active life, from active life to seeming death. Then it may once more pass into its elements, and from those elements back again to concrete being, and so on for ever, always changing, but always the same. So much for nature's allegory. It is not a perfect analogy, for Man is a thing apart from all things else; it may be only a hint or a type, but it is something.

"Now to come to the question of our religion. I confess I draw quite a different conclusion from your facts. You say that you trace the same superstitions in all religions, and that the same spiritual myths are in some shape present in almost all. Well, does not this suggest that the same great truth underlies them all, taking from time to time the shape which is best suited to the spiritual development of those professing each. Every great new religion is better than the last. You cannot compare Osirianism with Buddhism, or Buddhism with Christianity, or Mahomedanism with the Arabian idol worship. Take the old illustration--take a cut crystal and hold it in the sun, and you will see many different coloured rays come from its facets. They look different, but they are all born of the same great light; they are all the same light. May it not be so with religion? Let your altar be to the 'Unknown God,' if you like--for who can give an unaltering likeness to the Power above us?--but do not knock your altar down.

"Depend upon it, Miss Granger, all indications to the contrary notwithstanding, there is a watching Providence without the will of which we cannot live, and if we deliberately reject that Providence, setting up our intelligence in its place, sorrow will come of it, even here; for it is wiser than we. I wish that you would try and look at the question from another point of view--from a higher point of view. I think you will find that it will bear a great deal of examination, and that you will come to the conclusion that the dictum of the wise-acre who says there is nothing because he can see nothing, is not necessarily a true one. There, that is all I have to say, and I wish that I could say it better."

"Thank you," said Beatrice, "I will. Why here we are at home; I must go and put Effie to bed."

And here it may be stated that Geoffrey's advice was not altogether thrown away. Beatrice did try looking at the question again, and if Faith did not altogether come back to her at least Hope did, and "the greatest of these, which is Charity," had never deserted her. Hope came slowly back, not by argument probably, but rather by example. In the sea of Doubt she saw another buoyed up, if it were but on broken pieces of the ship. This encouraged her. Geoffrey believed, and she--believed in Geoffrey. Indeed, is not this the secret of woman's philosophy--even, to some extent, of that of such a woman as Beatrice? "Let the faith or unfaith of This, That, or the other Rabbi answer for me," she says--it is her last argument. She believes in This, or That, or some other philosopher: that is her creed. And Geoffrey was the person in whom Beatrice began to believe, all the more wholly because she had never believed in any one before. Whatever else she was to lose, this at least she won when she saved his life.