

## CHAPTER XIV

### DRIFTING

On the day following their religious discussion an accident happened which resulted in Geoffrey and Beatrice being more than ever thrown in the company of each other. During the previous week two cases of scarlatina had been reported among the school children, and now it was found that the complaint had spread so much that it was necessary to close the school. This meant, of course, that Beatrice had all her time upon her hands. And so had Geoffrey. It was his custom to bathe before breakfast, after which he had nothing to do for the rest of the day.

Beatrice with little Effie also bathed before breakfast from the ladies' bathing-place, a quarter of a mile off, and sometimes he would meet her as she returned, glowing with health and beauty like Venus new risen from the Cyprian sea, her half-dried hair hanging in heavy masses down her back. Then after breakfast they would take Effie down to the beach, and her "auntie," as the child learned to call Beatrice, would teach her lessons and poetry till she was tired, and ran away to paddle in the sea or look for prawns among the rocks.

Meanwhile the child's father and Beatrice would talk--not about religion, they spoke no more on that subject, nor about Owen Davies, but of everything else on earth. Beatrice was a merry woman when she was happy, and they never lacked subjects of conversation, for their minds were very much in tune. In book-learning Beatrice had the advantage of

Geoffrey, for she had not only read enormously, she also remembered what she read and could apply it. Her critical faculty, too, was very keen.

He, on the other hand, had more knowledge of the world, and in his rich days had travelled a good deal, and so it came to pass that each could always find something to tell the other. Never for one second were they dull, not even when they sat for an hour or so in silence, for it was the silence of complete companionship.

So the long morning would wear away all too quickly, and they would go in to dinner, to be greeted with a cold smile by Elizabeth and heartily enough by the old gentleman, who never thought of anything out of his own circle of affairs. After dinner it was the same story. Either they went walking to look for ferns and flowers, or perhaps Geoffrey took his gun and hid behind the rocks for curlew, sending Beatrice, who knew the coast by heart, a mile round or more to some headland in order to put them on the wing. Then she would come back, springing towards him from rock to rock, and crouch down beneath a neighbouring seaweed-covered boulder, and they would talk together in whispers, or perhaps they would not talk at all, for fear lest they should frighten the flying birds.

And Geoffrey would first search the heavens for curlew or duck, and, seeing none, would let his eyes fall upon the pure beauty of Beatrice's face, showing so clearly against the tender sky, and wonder what she was thinking about; till, suddenly feeling his gaze, she would turn with a smile as sweet as the first rosy blush of dawn upon the waters, and ask him what he was thinking about. And he would laugh and answer "You," whereon she would smile again and perhaps blush a little, feeling glad

at heart, she knew not why.

Then came tea-time and the quiet, when they sat at the open window, and Geoffrey smoked and listened to the soft surging of the sea and the harmonious whisper of the night air in the pines. In the corner Mr. Granger slept in his armchair, or perhaps he had gone to bed altogether, for he liked to go to bed at half-past eight, as the old Herefordshire farmer, his father, had done before him; and at the far end of the room sat Elizabeth, doing her accounts by the light of a solitary candle, or, if they failed her, reading some book of a devotional and inspired character. But over the edge of the book, or from the page of crabbed accounts, her eyes would glance continually towards the handsome pair in the window-place, and she would smile as she saw that it went well. Only they never saw the glances or noted the smile. When Geoffrey looked that way, which was not often, for Elizabeth--old Elizabeth, as he always called her to himself--did not attract him, all he saw was her sharp but capable-looking form bending over her work, and the light of the candle gleaming on her straw-coloured hair and falling in gleaming white patches on her hard knuckles.

And so the happy day would pass and bed-time come, and with it unbidden dreams.

Geoffrey thought no ill of all this, as of course he ought to have thought. He was not the ravening lion of fiction--so rarely, if ever, to be met with in real life--going about seeking whom he might devour. He

had absolutely no designs on Beatrice's affections, any more than she had on his, and he had forgotten that first fell prescience of evil to come. Once or twice, it is true, qualms of doubt did cross his mind in the earlier days of their intimacy. But he put them by as absurd. He was no believer in the tender helplessness of full-grown women, his experience having been that they are amply capable--and, for the most part, more than capable--of looking after themselves. It seemed to him a thing ridiculous that such a person as Beatrice, who was competent to form opinions and a judgment upon all the important questions of life, should be treated as a child, and that he should remove himself from Bryngelly lest her young affections should become entangled. He felt sure that they would never be entrapped in any direction whatsoever without her full consent.

Then he ceased to think about the matter at all. Indeed, the mere idea of such a thing involved a supposition that would only have been acceptable to a conceited man--namely, that there was a possibility of this young lady's falling in love with him. What right had he to suppose anything of the sort? It was an impertinence. That there was another sort of possibility--namely, of his becoming more attached to her than was altogether desirable--did, however, occur to him once or twice. But he shrugged his shoulders and put it by. After all, it was his look out, and he did not much care. It would do her no harm at the worst. But very soon all these shadowy forebodings of dawning trouble vanished quite. They were lost in the broad, sweet lights of friendship. By-and-by, when friendship's day was done, they might arise again, called by other names

and wearing a sterner face.

It was ridiculous--of course it was ridiculous; he was not going to fall in love like a boy at his time of life; all he felt was gratitude and interest--all she felt was amusement in his society. As for the intimacy--felt rather than expressed--the intimacy that could already almost enable the one to divine the other's thought, that could shape her mood to his and his to hers, that could cause the same thing of beauty to be a common joy, and discover unity of mind in opinions the most opposite--why, it was only natural between people who had together passed a peril terrible to think of. So they took the goods the gods provided, and drifted softly on--whither they did not stop to inquire.

One day, however, a little incident happened that ought to have opened the eyes of both. They had arranged, or rather there was a tacit understanding, that they should go out together in the afternoon. Geoffrey was to take his gun and Beatrice a book, but it chanced that, just before dinner, as she walked back from the village, where she had gone to buy some thread to mend Effie's clothes, Beatrice came face to face with Mr. Davies. It was their first meeting without witnesses since the Sunday of which the events have been described, and, naturally, therefore, rather an awkward one. Owen stopped short so that she could not pass him with a bow, and then turned and walked beside her. After a remark or two about the weather, the springs of conversation ran dry.

"You remember that you are coming up to the Castle this afternoon?" he

said, at length.

"To the Castle!" she answered. "No, I have heard nothing of it."

"Did not your sister tell you she made an engagement for herself and you a week or more ago? You are to bring the little girl; she wants to see the view from the top of the tower."

Then Beatrice remembered. Elizabeth had told her, and she had thought it best to accept the situation. The whole thing had gone out of her mind.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! I do remember now, but I have made another plan--how stupid of me!"

"You had forgotten," he said in his heavy voice; "it is easy for you to forget what I have been looking forward to for a whole week. What is your plan--to go out walking with Mr. Bingham, I suppose?"

"Yes," answered Beatrice, "to go out with Mr. Bingham."

"Ah! you go out with Mr. Bingham every day now."

"And what if I do?" said Beatrice quickly; "surely, Mr. Davies, I have a right to go out with whom I like?"

"Yes, of course; but the engagement to come to the Castle was made

first; are you not going to keep it?"

"Of course I am going to keep it; I always keep my engagements when I have any."

"Very well, then; I shall expect you at three o'clock."

Beatrice went on home in a curiously irritated condition of mind. She did not, naturally, want to go to the Castle, and she did want to go out with Geoffrey. However, there was no help for it.

When she came in to dinner she found that Geoffrey was not there. He had, it seemed, gone to lunch with Dr. Chambers, whom he had met on the beach. Before he returned they were all three starting for the Castle, Beatrice leaving a message to this effect with Betty.

About a quarter of an hour afterwards, Geoffrey came back to fetch his gun and Beatrice, but Beatrice was gone, and all that he could extract from Betty was that she had gone to see Mr. Davies.

He was perfectly furious, though all the while he knew how unreasonable was his anger. He had been looking forward to the expedition, and this sudden change of plan was too much for his temper. Off he started, however, to pass a thoroughly miserable afternoon. He seemed to miss Beatrice more each step and gradually to grow more and more angry at what he called her "rudeness." Of course it never occurred to him that

what he was really angry at was her going to see Mr. Davies, or that, in truth, her society had become so delightful to him that to be deprived of it even for an afternoon was to be wretched. To top everything, he only got three good shots that afternoon, and he missed them all, which made him crosser than ever.

As for Beatrice, she enjoyed herself just as little at the Castle as Geoffrey did on the beach. Owen Davies took them through the great unused rooms and showed them the pictures, but she had seen them before, and though some of them were very fine, did not care to look at them again--at any rate, not that afternoon. But Elizabeth gazed at them with eager eyes and mentally appraised their value, wondering if they would ever be hers.

"What is this picture?" she asked, pointing to a beautiful portrait of a Dutch Burgomaster by Rembrandt.

"That," answered Davies heavily, for he knew nothing of painting and cared less, "that is a Velasquez, valued for probate at £3,000--no," referring to the catalogue and reading, "I beg your pardon, the next is the Velasquez; that is a Rembrandt in the master's best style, showing all his wonderful mastery over light and shade. It was valued for probate at £4,000 guineas."

"Four thousand guineas!" said Elizabeth, "fancy having a thing worth



four thousand guineas hanging on a wall!"

And so they went on, Elizabeth asking questions and Owen answering them by the help of the catalogue, till, to Beatrice's relief, they came at length to the end of the pictures. Then they took some tea in the little sitting room of the master of all this magnificence. Owen, to her great annoyance, sat opposite to Beatrice, staring at her with all his eyes while she drank her tea, with Effie sitting in her lap, and Elizabeth, observing it, bit her lip in jealousy. She had thought it well to bring her sister here; it would not do to let Mr. Davies think she was keeping Beatrice out of his way, but his mute idol worship was trying to her feelings. After tea they went to the top of the tower, and Effie rejoiced exceedingly in the view, which was very beautiful. Here Owen got a word with Elizabeth.

"Your sister seems to be put out about something," he said.

"I daresay," she answered carelessly; "Beatrice has an uncertain temper. I think she wanted to go out shooting with Mr. Bingham this afternoon."

Had Owen been a less religious person he might have sworn; as it was, he only said, "Mr. Bingham--it is always Mr. Bingham from morning to night! When is he going away?"

"In another week, I believe. Beatrice will be sorry, I think; she makes a great companion of him. And now I think that we must be getting home,"

and she went, leaving this poisoned shaft to rankle in his breast.

After they had returned to the vicarage and Beatrice had heard Effie her prayers and tucked her up in her small white bed, she went down to the gate to be quiet for a little while before supper. Geoffrey had not yet come in.

It was a lovely autumn evening; the sea seemed to sleep, and the little clouds, from which the sunset fires had paled, lay like wreaths of smoke upon the infinite blue sky. Why had not Mr. Bingham come back, she wondered; he would scarcely have time to dress. Supposing that an accident had happened to him. Nonsense! what accident could happen? He was so big and strong he seemed to defy accidents; and yet had it not been for her there would be little enough left of his strength to-day. Ah! she was glad that she had lived to be able to save him from death. There he came, looming like a giant in the evening mist.

There was a small hand-gate beside the large one on which she leant. Geoffrey stalked straight up to it as though he did not see her; he saw her well enough, but he was cross with her.

She allowed him to pass through the gate, which he shut slowly, perhaps to give her an opportunity of speaking, if she wished to do so; then thinking that he did not see her she spoke in her soft, musical voice.

"Did you have good sport, Mr. Bingham?"

"No," he answered shortly; "I saw very little, and I missed all I saw."

"I am so sorry, except for the birds. I hate the birds to be killed. Did you not see me in this white dress? I saw you fifty yards away."

"Yes, Miss Granger," he answered, "I saw you."

"And you were going by without speaking to me; it was very rude of you--what is the matter?"

"Not so rude as it was of you to arrange to walk out with me and then to go and see Mr. Davies instead."

"I could not help it, Mr. Bingham; it was an old engagement, which I had forgotten."

"Quite so, ladies generally have an excuse for doing what they want to do."

"It is not an excuse, Mr. Bingham," Beatrice answered, with dignity; "there is no need for me to make excuses to you about my movements."

"Of course not, Miss Granger; but it would be more polite to tell me when you change your mind--next time, you know. However, I have no doubt

that the Castle has attractions for you."

She flashed one look at him and turned to go, and as she did so his heart relented; he grew ashamed.

"Miss Granger, don't go; forgive me. I do not know what has become of my manners, I spoke as I should not. The fact is, I was put out at your not coming. To tell you the honest truth, I missed you dreadfully."

"You missed me. That is very nice of you; one likes to be missed. But, if you missed me for one afternoon, how will you get on a week hence when you go away and miss me altogether?"

Beatrice spoke in a bantering tone, and laughed as she spoke, but the laugh ended in something like a sigh. He looked at her for a moment, looked till she dropped her eyes.

"Heaven only knows!" he answered sadly.

"Let us go in," said Beatrice, in a constrained voice; "how chill the air has turned."