

CHAPTER XVI

THE FLAT NEAR THE EDGWARE ROAD

Geoffrey's journey to town was not altogether a cheerful one. To begin with, Effie wept copiously at parting with her beloved "auntie," as she called Beatrice, and would not be comforted. The prospect of rejoining her mother and the voluble Anne had no charms for Effie. They all three got on best apart. Geoffrey himself had also much to think about, and found little satisfaction in the thinking. He threw his mind back over the events of the past few weeks. He remembered how he had first seen Beatrice's face through the thick mist on the Red Rocks, and how her beauty had struck him as no beauty ever had before. Then he thought of the adventure of their shipwreck, and of the desperate courage with which she had saved his life, almost at the cost of her own. He thought, too, of that scene when on the following day he had entered the room where she was asleep, when the wandering ray of light had wavered from her breast to his own, when that strange presentiment of the ultimate intermingling of their lives had flashed upon him, and when she had awakened with an unearthly greeting on her lips. While Effie slowly sobbed herself to silence in the corner opposite to him, one by one, he recalled every phase and scene of their ever-growing intimacy, till the review culminated in his mysterious experience of the past night, and the memory of Beatrice's parting words.

Of all men Geoffrey was among those least inclined to any sort of

superstition; from boyhood he had been noted for common sense, and a somewhat disbelieving turn of mind. But he had intellect, and imagination which is simply intellect etherealised. Without these, with his peculiar mental constitution, he would, for instance, probably have been a religious sceptic; having them, he was nothing of the sort. So in this matter of his experience of the previous night, and generally of the strange and almost unnatural sympathy in which he found himself with this lady, common sense and the results of his observation and experience pointed to the whole thing being nonsense--the result of "propinquity, Sir, propinquity," and a pretty face--and nothing more.

But here his intellect and his imagination stepped in, telling him plainly that it was not nonsense, that he had not merely made a donkey of himself over an hysterical, or possibly a love-sick girl. They told him that because a thing is a mystery it is not necessarily a folly, though mysteries are for the most part dealt in by fools. They suggested that there may be many things and forces above us and around us, invisible as an electric current, intangible as light, yet existent and capable of manifestation under certain rare and favourable conditions.

And was it not possible that such conditions should unite in a woman like Beatrice, who combined in herself a beauty of body which was only outpassed by the beauty of her mind? It was no answer to say that most women could never inspire the unearthly passion with which he had been shaken some ten hours past, or that most men could never become aware of the inspiration. Has not humanity powers and perceptions denied to the

cattle of the fields, and may there not be men and women as far removed from their fellows in this respect as these are from the cattle?

But the weak point of mysterious occurrences is that they lead nowhere, and do not materially alter the facts of life. One cannot, for instance, plead a mystery in a court of law; so, dropping the imaginative side of the question as one beyond him, Geoffrey came to its practical aspect, only to find it equally thorny.

Odd as it may seem, Geoffrey did not to this moment know the exact position which he occupied in the mind of Beatrice, or that she occupied in his. He was not in love with her, at least not in a way in which he had ever experienced the influence of that, on the whole, inconvenient and disagreeable passion. At any rate he argued from the hypothesis that he was not in love with her. This he refused to admit now in the light of day, though he had admitted it fully in the watches of the night. It would not do to admit it. But he was forced to acknowledge that she had crept into his life and possessed it so completely that then and for months afterwards, except in deep sleep or in hours of severe mental strain, not a single half hour would pass without bringing its thought of Beatrice. Everything that was beautiful, or grand, or elevating, reminded him of her--and what higher compliment could a mistress have? If he listened to glorious music, the voice of Beatrice spoke to him through the notes; if he watched the clouds rolling in heavy pomp across a broken sky he thought of Beatrice; if some chance poem or novel moved him, why Beatrice was in his mind to share the pleasure. All of which

was very interesting, and in some ways delightful, but under our current system not otherwise than inconvenient to a married man.

And now Beatrice was gone, and he must come back to his daily toil, sweetened by Honoria's bitter complaints of their poverty, and see her no more. The thought made Geoffrey's heart ache with a physical pain, but his reason told him that it was best so. After all, there were no bones broken; there had been no love scenes, no kiss, no words that cannot be recalled; whatever there was lay beneath the surface, and while appearances were kept up all was well. No doubt it was an hypocrisy, but then hypocrisy is one of the great pillars of civilization, and how does it matter what the heart says while the lips are silent? The Recording Angel can alone read hearts, and he must often find them singularly contradictory and untrustworthy writings.

Die of them, die of her dreams! No, Beatrice would not die of them, and certainly he should not. Probably in the end she would marry that pious earthly lump, Owen Davies. It was not pleasant to think of, it was even dreadful, but really if she were to ask him his opinion, "as a friend," he should tell her it was the best thing that she could do. Of course it would be hypocrisy again, the lips would give his heart the lie; but when the heart rises in rebellion against the intelligence it must be suppressed. Unfortunately, however, though a small member, it is very strong.

They reached London at last, and as had been arranged, Anne, the French bonne, met them at the station to take Effie home. Geoffrey noticed that she looked smarter and less to his taste than ever. However, she embraced Effie with an enthusiasm which the child scarcely responded to, and at the same time carried on an ocular flirtation with a ticket collector. Although early in the year for yellow fogs, London was plunged in a dense gloom. It had been misty that morning at Bryngelly, and become more and more so as the day advanced; but, though it was not yet four o'clock, London was dark as night. Luckily, however, it is not far from Paddington to the flat near the Edgware Road, where Geoffrey lived, so having personally instructed the cabman, he left Anne to convoy Effie and the luggage, and went on to the Temple by Underground Railway with an easy mind.

Shortly after Geoffrey reached his chambers in Pump Court the solicitor arrived as had been arranged, not his uncle--who was, he learned, very unwell--but a partner. To his delight he then found that Beatrice's ghost theory was perfectly accurate; the boy with the missing toe-joint had been discovered who saw the whole horrible tragedy through a crack in the blind; moreover the truth had been wrung from him and he would be produced at the trial--indeed a proof of his evidence was already forthcoming. Also some specimens of the ex-lawyer's clerk's handwriting had been obtained, and were declared by two experts to be identical with the writing on the will. One thing, however, disturbed him: neither the Attorney-General nor Mr. Candleton was yet in town, so no conference

was possible that evening. However, both were expected that night--the Attorney-General from Devonshire and Mr. Candleton from the Continent; so the case being first on the list, it was arranged that the conference should take place at ten o'clock on the following morning.

On arriving home Geoffrey was informed that Lady Honoria was dressing, and had left a message saying he must be quick and do likewise as a gentleman was coming to dinner. Accordingly he went to his own room--which was at the other end of the flat--and put on his dress clothes. Before going to the dining-room, however, he said good-night to Effie--who was in bed, but not asleep--and asked her what time she had reached home.

"At twenty minutes past five, daddy," Effie said promptly.

"Twenty minutes past five! Why, you don't mean to say that you were an hour coming that little way! Did you get blocked in the fog?"

"No, daddy, but----"

"But what, dear?"

"Anne did tell me not to say!"

"But I tell you to say, dear--never mind Anne!"

"Anne stopped and talked to the ticket-man for a long, long time."

"Oh, did she?" he said.

At that moment the parlourmaid came to say that Lady Honoria and the "gentleman" were waiting for dinner. Geoffrey asked her casually what time Miss Effie had reached home.

"About half-past five, sir. Anne said the cab was blocked in the fog."

"Very well. Tell her ladyship that I shall be down in a minute."

"Daddy," said the child, "I haven't said my prayers. Mother did not come, and Anne said it was all nonsense about prayers. Auntie did always hear me my prayers."

"Yes, dear, and so will I. There, kneel upon my lap and say them."

In the middle of the prayers--which Effie did not remember as well as she might have done--the parlourmaid arrived again.

"Please, sir, her ladyship----"

"Tell her ladyship I am coming, and that if she is in a hurry she can go to dinner! Go on, love."

Then he kissed her and put her to bed again.

"Daddy," said Effie, as he was going, "shall I see auntie Beatrice any more?"

"I hope so, dear."

"And shall you see her any more? You want to see her, don't you, daddy? She did love you very much!"

Geoffrey could bear it no longer. The truth is always sharper when it comes from the mouth of babes and sucklings. With a hurried good-night he fled.

In the little drawing-room he found Lady Honoria, very well dressed, and also her friend, whose name was Mr. Dunstan. Geoffrey knew him at once for an exceedingly wealthy man of small birth, and less breeding, but a burning and a shining light in the Garsington set. Mr. Dunstan was anxious to raise himself in society, and he thought that notwithstanding her poverty, Lady Honoria might be useful to him in this respect. Hence his presence there to-night.

"How do you do, Geoffrey?" said his wife, advancing to greet him with a kiss of peace. "You look very well. But what an immense time you have been dressing. Poor Mr. Dunstan is starving. Let me see. You know Mr. Dunstan, I think. Dinner, Mary."

Geoffrey apologised for being late, and shook hands politely with Mr. Dunstan--Saint Dunstan he was generally called on account of his rather clerical appearance and in sarcastic allusion to his somewhat shady reputation. Then they went in to dinner.

"Sorry there is no lady for you, Geoffrey; but you must have had plenty of ladies' society lately. By the way, how is Miss--Miss Granger? Would you believe it, Mr. Dunstan? that shocking husband of mine has been passing the last month in the company of one of the loveliest girls I ever saw, who knows Latin and law and everything else under the sun. She began by saving his life, they were upset together out of a canoe, you know. Isn't it romantic?"

Saint Dunstan made some appropriate--or, rather inappropriate--remark to the effect that he hoped Mr. Bingham had made the most of such unrivalled opportunities, adding, with a deep sigh, that no lovely young lady had ever saved his life that he might live for her, &c., &c.

Here Geoffrey broke in without much ceremony. To him it seemed a desecration to listen while this person was making his feeble jokes about Beatrice.

"Well, dear," he said, addressing his wife, "and what have you been doing with yourself all this time?"

"Mourning for you, Geoffrey, and enjoying myself exceedingly in the intervals. We have had a delightful time, have we not, Mr. Dunstan? Mr. Dunstan has also been staying at the Hall, you know."

"How could it be otherwise when you were there, Lady Honoria?" answered the Saint in that strain of compliment affected by such men, and which, to tell the truth, jarred on its object, who was after all a lady.

"You know, Geoffrey," she went on, "the Garsingtons have re-furnished the large hall and their drawing-room. It cost eighteen hundred pounds, but the result is lovely. The drawing-room is done in hand-painted white satin, walls and all, and the hall in old oak."

"Indeed!" he answered, reflecting the while that Lord Garsington might as well have paid some of his debts before he spent eighteen hundred pounds on his drawing-room furniture.

Then the Saint and Lady Honoria drifted into a long and animated conversation about their fellow guests, which Geoffrey scarcely tried to follow. Indeed, the dinner was a dull one for him, and he added little or nothing to the stock of talk.

When his wife left the room, however, he had to say something, so they spoke of shooting. The Saint had a redeeming feature--he was somewhat of a sportsman, though a poor one, and he described to Geoffrey a new pair of hammerless guns, which he had bought for a trifling sum of a hundred

and forty guineas, recommending the pattern to his notice.

"Yes," answered Geoffrey, "I daresay that they are very nice; but, you see, they are beyond me. A poor man cannot afford so much for a pair of guns."

"Oh, if that is all," answered his guest, "I will sell you these; they are a little long in the stock for me, and you can pay me when you like. Or, hang it all, I have plenty of guns. I'll be generous and give them to you. If I cannot afford to be generous, I don't know who can!"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Dunstan," answered Geoffrey coldly, "but I am not in the habit of accepting such presents from my--acquaintances. Will you have a glass of sherry?--no. Then shall we join Lady Honoria?"

This speech quite crushed the vulgar but not ill-meaning Saint, and Geoffrey was sorry for it a moment after he had made it. But he was weary and out of temper. Why did his wife bring such people to the house? Very shortly afterwards their guest took his leave, reflecting that Bingham was a conceited ass, and altogether too much for him. "And I don't believe that he has got a thousand a year," he reflected to himself, "and the title is his wife's. I suppose that is what he married her for. She's a much better sort than he is, any way, though I don't quite make her out either--one can't go very far with her. But she is the daughter of a peer and worth cultivating, but not when Bingham is at home--not if I know it."

"What have you said to Mr. Dunstan to make him go away so soon, Geoffrey?" asked his wife.

"Said to him? oh, I don't know. He offered to give me a pair of guns, and I told him that I did not accept presents from my acquaintances. Really, Honoria, I don't want to interfere with your way of life, but I do not understand how you can associate with such people as this Mr. Dunstan."

"Associate with him!" answered Lady Honoria. "Do you suppose I want to associate with him? Do you suppose that I don't know what the man is? But beggars cannot be choosers; he may be a cad, but he has thirty thousand a year, and we simply cannot afford to throw away an acquaintance with thirty thousand a year. It is too bad of you, Geoffrey," she went on with rising temper, "when you know all that I must put up with in our miserable poverty-stricken life, to take every opportunity of making yourself disagreeable to the people I think it wise to ask to come and see us. Here I return from comfort to this wretched place, and the first thing that you do is make a fuss. Mr. Dunstan has got boxes at several of the best theaters, and he offered to let me have one whenever I liked--and now of course there is an end of it. It is too bad, I say!"

"It is really curious, Honoria," said her husband, "to see what obligations you are ready to put yourself under in search of pleasure.

It is not dignified of you to accept boxes at theatres from this gentleman."

"Nonsense. There is no obligation about it. If he gave us a box, of course he would make a point of looking in during the evening, and then telling his friends that it was Lady Honoria Bingham he was speaking to--that is the exchange. I want to go to the theatre; he wants to get into good society--there you have the thing in a nutshell. It is done every day. The fact of the matter is, Geoffrey," she went on, looking very much as though she were about to burst into a flood of angry tears, "as I said just now, beggars cannot be choosers--I cannot live like the wife of a banker's clerk. I must have some amusement, and some comfort, before I become an old woman. If you don't like it, why did you entrap me into this wretched marriage, before I was old enough to know better, or why do you not make enough money to keep me in a way suitable to my position?"

"We have argued that question before, Honoria," said Geoffrey, keeping his temper with difficulty, "and now there is another thing I wish to say to you. Do you know that detestable woman Anne stopped for more than half an hour at Paddington Station this evening, flirting with a ticket collector, instead of bringing Effie home at once, as I told her to do. I am very angry about it. She is not to be relied on; we shall have some accident with the child before we have done. Cannot you discharge her and get another nurse?"

"No, I cannot. She is the one comfort I have. Where am I going to find another woman who can make dresses like Anne--she saves me a hundred a year--I don't care if she flirted with fifty ticket collectors. I suppose you got this story from Effie; the child ought to be whipped for tale-bearing, and I daresay that it is not true."

"Effie will certainly not be whipped," answered Geoffrey sternly. "I warn you that it will go very badly with anybody who lays a finger on her."

"Oh, very well, ruin the child. Go your own way, Geoffrey! At any rate I am not going to stop here to listen to any more abuse. Good-night," and she went.

Geoffrey sat down, and lit a cigarette. "A pleasant home-coming," he thought to himself. "Honorina shall have money as much as she can spend--if I kill myself to get it, she shall have it. What a life, what a life! I wonder if Beatrice would treat her husband like this--if she had one."

He laughed aloud at the absurdity of the idea, and then with a gesture of impatience threw his cigarette into the fire and went to his room to try and get some sleep, for he was thoroughly wearied.