CHAPTER XVIII

THE RISING STAR

As might be expected, the memorable case of Parsons and Douse proved to be the turning point in Geoffrey's career, which was thenceforward one of brilliant and startling success. On the very next morning when he reached his chambers it was to find three heavy briefs awaiting him, and they proved to be but the heralds of an uninterrupted flow of lucrative business. Of course, he was not a Queen's Counsel, but now that his great natural powers of advocacy had become generally known, solicitors frequently employed him alone, or gave him another junior, so that he might bring those powers to bear upon juries. Now it was, too, that Geoffrey reaped the fruits of the arduous legal studies which he had followed without cessation from the time when he found himself thrown upon his own resources, and which had made a sound lawyer of him as well as a brilliant and effective advocate. Soon, even with his great capacity for work, he had as much business as he could attend to. When fortune gives good gifts, she generally does so with a lavish hand.

Thus it came to pass that, about three weeks after the trial of Parsons and Douse, Geoffrey's uncle the solicitor died, and to his surprise left him twenty thousand pounds, "believing," he said in his will, which was dated three days before the testator's death, "that this sum will assist him to rise to the head of his profession."

Now that it had dawned upon her that her husband really was a success, Honoria's manner towards him modified very considerably. She even became amiable, and once or twice almost affectionate. When Geoffrey told her of the twenty thousand pounds she was radiant.

"Why, we shall be able to go back to Bolton Street now," she said, "and as luck will have it, our old house is to let. I saw a bill in the window yesterday."

"Yes," he said, "you can go back as soon as you like."

"And can we keep a carriage?"

"No, not yet; I am doing well, but not well enough for that. Next year, if I live, you will be able to have a carriage. Don't begin to grumble, Honoria. I have got £150 to spare, and if you care to come round to a jeweller's you can spend it on what you like."

"Oh, you delightful person!" said his wife.

So they went to the jeweller's, and Lady Honoria bought ornaments to the value of £150, and carried them home and hung over them, as another class of woman might hang over her first-born child, admiring them with a tender ecstasy. Whenever he had a sum of money that he could afford to part with, Geoffrey would take her thus to a jeweller's or a dressmaker's, and stand by coldly while she bought things to its value.

Lady Honoria was delighted. It never entered into her mind that in a sense he was taking a revenge upon her, and that every fresh exhibition of her rejoicings over the good things thus provided added to his contempt for her.

Those were happy days for Lady Honoria! She rejoiced in this return of wealth like a school-boy at the coming of the holidays, or a half-frozen wanderer at the rising of the sun. She had been miserable during all this night of poverty, as miserable as her nature admitted of, now she was happy again, as she understood happiness. For bred, educated, civilized--what you will--out of the more human passions, Lady Honoria had replaced them by this idol-worship of wealth, or rather of what wealth brings. It gave her a positive physical satisfaction; her beauty, which had begun to fade, came back to her; she looked five years younger. And all the while Geoffrey watched her with an ever-growing scorn.

Once it broke out. The Bolton Street house had been furnished; he gave her fifteen hundred pounds to do it, and with what things they owned she managed very well on that. They moved into it, and Honoria had set herself up with a sufficient supply of grand dresses and jewellery, suitable to her recovered position. One day however, it occurred to her that Effie was a child of remarkable beauty, who, if properly dressed, would look very nice in the drawing-room at tea-time. So she ordered a lovely costume for her--this deponent is not able to describe it, but it consisted largely of velvet and lace. Geoffrey heard nothing of this

dress, but coming home rather early one afternoon--it was on a Saturday, he found the child being shown off to a room full of visitors, and dressed in a strange and wonderful attire with which, not unnaturally, she was vastly pleased. He said nothing at the time, but when at length the dropping fire of callers had ceased, he asked who put Effie into that dress.

"I did," said Lady Honoria, "and a pretty penny it has cost, I can tell you. But I can't have the child come down so poorly clothed, it does not look well."

"Then she can stay upstairs," said Geoffrey frowning.

"What do you mean?" asked his wife.

"I mean that I will not have her decked out in those fine clothes. They are quite unsuitable to her age. There is plenty of time for her to take to vanity."

"I really don't understand you, Geoffrey. Why should not the child be handsomely dressed?"

"Why not! Great heaven, Honoria, do you suppose that I want to see Effie grow up like you, to lead a life of empty pleasure-seeking idleness, and make a god of luxury. I had rather see her"--he was going to add, "dead first," but checked himself and said--"have to work for her living.

Dress yourself up as much as you like, but leave the child alone."

Lady Honoria was furious, but she was also a little frightened. She had never heard her husband speak quite like this before, and there was something underneath his words that she did not quite understand. Still less did she understand when on the Monday Geoffrey suddenly told her that he had fifty pounds for her to spend as she liked; then accompanied her to a mantle shop, and stood patiently by, smiling coldly while she invested it in lace and embroideries. Honoria thought that he was making reparation for his sharp words, and so he was, but to himself, and in another sense. Every time he gave her money in this fashion, Geoffrey felt like a man who has paid off a debt of honour. She had taunted him again and again with her poverty--the poverty she said that he had brought her; for every taunt he would heap upon her all those things in which her soul delighted. He would glut her with wealth as, in her hour of victory, Queen Tomyris glutted dead Cyrus with the blood of men.

It was an odd way of taking a revenge, and one that suited Lady Honoria admirably; but though its victim felt no sting, it gave Geoffrey much secret relief. Also he was curious; he wished to see if there was any bottom to such a woman's desire for luxury, if it would not bring satiety with it. But Lady Honoria was a very bad subject for such an experiment. She never showed the least sign of being satiated, either with fine things, with pleasures, or with social delights. They were her natural element, and he might as soon have expected a fish to weary of the water, or an eagle of the rushing air.

The winter wore away and the spring came. One day, it was in April, Geoffrey, who was a moderate Liberal by persuasion, casually announced at dinner that he was going to stand for Parliament in the Unionist interest. The representation of one of the few Metropolitan divisions which had then returned a Home Ruler had fallen vacant. As it chanced he knew the head Unionist whip very well. They had been friends since they were lads at school together, and this gentleman, having heard Geoffrey make a brilliant speech in court, was suddenly struck with the idea that he was the very man to lead a forlorn hope.

The upshot of it was that Geoffrey was asked if he would stand, and replied that he must have two days to think it over. What he really wanted the two days for was to enable him to write to Beatrice and receive an answer from her. He had an almost superstitious faith in her judgment, and did not like to act without it. After carefully weighing the pros and cons, his own view was that he should do well to stand. Probably he would be defeated, and it might cost him five hundred pounds. On the other hand it would certainly make his name known as a politician, and he was now in a fair way to earn so large an income that he could well afford to risk the money. The only great objection which he saw, was that if he happened to get in, it must mean that he would have to work all day and all night too. Well, he was strong and the more work he did the better--it kept him from thinking.

In due course Beatrice's answer came. Her view coincided with his own; she recommended him to take the opportunity, and pointed out that with his growing legal reputation there was no office in the State to which he might not aspire, when he had once proved himself a capable member of Parliament. Geoffrey read the letter through; then immediately sat down and wrote to his friend the whip, accepting the suggestion of the Government.

The next fortnight was a hard one for him, but Geoffrey was as good a man on the platform as in court, and he had, moreover, the very valuable knack of suiting himself to his audience. As his canvass went on it was generally recognised that the seat which had been considered hopeless was now doubtful. A great amount of public interest was concentrated on the election, both upon the Unionist and the Separatist side, each claiming that the result of the poll would show to their advantage. The Home Rule party strained every nerve against him, being most anxious to show that the free and independent electors of this single division, and therefore of the country at large, held the Government policy in particular horror. Letters were obtained from great authorities and freely printed. Irish members, fresh from gaol, were brought down to detail their grievances. It was even suggested that one of them should appear on the platform in prison garb--in short, every electioneering engine known to political science was brought to bear to forward the fortunes of either side.

As time went on Lady Honoria, who had been somewhat indifferent at first, grew quite excited about the result. For one thing she found that the contest attached an importance to herself in the eyes of the truly great, which was not without its charm. On the day of the poll she drove about all day in an open carriage under a bright blue parasol, having Effie (who had become very bored) by her side, and two noble lords on the front seat. As a consequence the result was universally declared by a certain section of the press to be entirely due to the efforts of an unprincipled but titled and lovely woman. It was even said that, like another lady of rank in a past generation, she kissed a butcher in order to win his vote. But those who made the remark did not know Lady Honoria; she was incapable of kissing a butcher, or indeed anybody else. Her inclinations did not lie in that direction.

In the end Geoffrey was returned by a magnificent majority of ten votes, reduced on a scrutiny to seven. He took his seat in the House on the following night amidst loud Unionist cheering. In the course of the evening's debate a prominent member of the Government made allusion to his return as a proof of the triumph of Unionist principles. Thereon a very leading member of the Separatist opposition retorted that it was nothing of the sort, "that it was a matter of common notoriety that the honourable member's return was owing to the unusual and most uncommon
ability displayed by him in the course of his canvass, aided as it was, by artfully applied and aristocratic feminine influence." This was a delicate allusion to Honoria and her blue parasol.

As Geoffrey and his wife were driving back to Bolton Street, after the declaration of the poll, a little incident occurred. Geoffrey told the coachman to stop at the first telegraph office and, getting out of the carriage, wired to Beatrice, "In by ten votes."

"Who have you been telegraphing to, Geoffrey?" asked Lady Honoria.

"I telegraphed to Miss Granger," he answered.

"Ah! So you still keep up a correspondence with that pupil teacher girl."

"Yes, I do. I wish that I had a few more such correspondents."

"Indeed. You are easy to please. I thought her one of the most disagreeable young women whom I ever met."

"Then it does not say much for your taste, Honoria."

His wife made no further remark, but she had her thoughts. Honoria possessed good points: among others she was not a jealous person; she was too cold and too indifferent to be jealous. But she did not like the idea of another woman obtaining an influence over her husband, who, as she now began to recognise, was one of the most brilliant men of his day, and who might well become one of the most wealthy and powerful.

Clearly he existed for her benefit, not for that of any other woman. She was no fool, and she saw that a considerable intimacy must exist between the two. Otherwise Geoffrey would not have thought of telegraphing to Beatrice at such a moment.

Within a week of his election Geoffrey made a speech. It was not a long speech, nor was it upon any very important issue; but it was exceedingly good of its kind, good enough to be reported verbatim indeed, and those listening to it recognised that they had to deal with a new man who would one day be a very big man. There is no place where an able person finds his level quicker than in the House of Commons, composed as it is for the most part, of more or less wealthy or frantic mediocrities. But Geoffrey was not a mediocrity, he was an exceedingly able and powerful man, and this fact the House quickly recognised.

For the next few months Geoffrey worked as men rarely work. All day he was at his chambers or in court, and at night he sat in the House, getting up his briefs when he could. But he always did get them up; no solicitors had to complain that the interests of their client were neglected by him; also he still found time to write to Beatrice. For the rest he went out but little, and except in the way of business associated with very few. Indeed he grew more and more silent and reserved, till at last he won the reputation of being cold and hard. Not that he was really so. He threw himself head and soul into his work with a fixed determination to reach the top of the tree. He knew that he should not care very much about it when he got there, but he enjoyed the

struggle.

Geoffrey was not a truly ambitious man; he was no mere self-seeker. He knew the folly of ambition too well, and its end was always clearly before his eyes. He often thought to himself that if he could have chosen his lot, he would have asked for a cottage with a good garden, five hundred a year, and somebody to care for. But perhaps he would soon have wearied of his cottage. He worked to stifle thought, and to some extent he succeeded. But he was at bottom an affectionate-natured man, and he could not stifle the longing for sympathy which was his secret weakness, though his pride would never allow him to show it. What did he care for his triumphs when he had nobody with whom to share them? All he could share were their fruits, and these he gave away freely enough. It was but little that Geoffrey spent upon his own gratification. A certain share of his gains he put by, the rest went in expenses. The house in Bolton Street was a very gay place in those days, but its master took but little part in its gaieties.

And what was the fact? The longer he remained separated from Beatrice the more intensely did he long for her society. It was of no use; try as he would, he could not put that sweet face from his mind; it drew him as a magnet draws a needle. Success did not bring him happiness, except in the sense that it relieved him from money cares.

People of coarse temperament only can find real satisfaction in worldly triumphs, and eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow they die! Men like

Geoffrey soon learn that this also is vanity. On the contrary, as his mind grew more and more wearied with the strain of work, melancholy took an ever stronger hold of it. Had he gone to a doctor, he might have been told that his liver was out of order, which was very likely true. But this would not mend matters. "What a world," he might have cried, "what a world to live in when all the man's happiness depends upon his liver!" He contracted an accursed habit of looking on the black side of things; trouble always caught his eye.

It was no wonderful case. Men of large mind are very rarely happy men. It is your little animal-minded individual who can be happy. Thus women, who reflect less, are as a class much happier and more contented than men. But the large-minded man sees too far, and guesses too much of what he cannot see. He looks forward, and notes the dusty end of his laborious days; he looks around and shudders at the unceasing misery of a coarse struggling world; the sight of the pitiful beggar babe craving bread on tottering feet, pierces his heart. He cannot console himself with a reflection that the child had no business to be born, or that if he denuded himself of his last pound he would not materially help the class which bred it.

And above the garish lights of earthly joys and the dim reek of earthly wretchedness, he sees the solemn firmament that veils his race's destiny. For such a man, in such a mood, even religion has terrors as well as hopes, and while the gloom gathers about his mind these are with him more and more. What lies beyond that arching mystery to whose

horizon he daily draws more close--whose doors may even now be opening for him? A hundred hands point out a hundred roads to knowledge--they are lost half way. Only the cold spiritual firmament, unlit by any guiding stars, unbrightened by the flood of human day, and unshadowed by the veils of human night, still bends above his head in awful changelessness, and still his weary feet draw closer to the portals of the West.

It is very sad and wrong, but it is not altogether his fault; it is rather a fault of the age, of over-education, of over-striving to be wise. Cultivate the searching spirit and it will grow and rend you. The spirit would soar, it would see, but the flesh weighs it down, and in all flesh there is little light. Yet, at times, brooding on some unnatural height of Thought, its eyes seem to be opened, and it catches gleams of terrifying days to come, or perchance, discerns the hopeless gates of an immeasurable night.

Oh, for that simpler faith which ever recedes farther from the ken of the cultivated, questioning mind! There alone can peace be found, and for the foolish who discard it, setting up man's wisdom at a sign, soon the human lot will be one long fear. Grown scientific and weary with the weight of knowledge, they will reject their ancient Gods, and no smug-faced Positivism will bring them consolation. Science, here and there illumining the gloom of destiny with its poor electric lights, cries out that they are guiding stars. But they are no stars, and they will flare away. Let us pray for darkness, more darkness, lest, to our

bewildered sight, they do but serve to show that which shall murder Hope.

So think Geoffrey and his kin, and in their unexpressed dismay, turn, seeking refuge from their physical and spiritual loneliness, but for the most part finding none. Nature, still strong in them, points to the dear fellowship of woman, and they make the venture to find a mate, not a companion. But as it chanced in Geoffrey's case he did find such a companion in Beatrice, after he had, by marriage, built up an impassable wall between them.

And yet he longed for her society with an intensity that alarmed him. He had her letters indeed, but what are letters! One touch of a beloved hand is worth a thousand letters. In the midst of his great success Geoffrey was wretched at heart, yet it seemed to him that if he once more could have Beatrice at his side, though only as a friend, he would find rest and happiness.

When a man's heart is thus set upon an object, his reason is soon convinced of its innocence, even of its desirability, and a kindly fate will generally contrive to give him the opportunity of ruin which he so ardently desires.