

CHAPTER XIX

GEOFFREY HAS A VISITOR

And Beatrice--had she fared better during these long months? Alas, not at all. She had gone away from the Bryngelly Station on that autumn morning of farewell sick at heart, and sick at heart she had remained. Through all the long winter months sorrow and bitterness had been her portion, and now in the happiness of spring, sorrow and bitterness were with her still. She loved him, she longed for his presence, and it was denied to her. She could not console herself as can some women, nor did her deep passion wear away; on the contrary, it seemed to grow and gather with every passing week. Neither did she wish to lose it, she loved too well for that. It was better to be thus tormented by conscience and by hopelessness than to lose her cause of pain.

One consolation Beatrice had and one only: she knew that Geoffrey did not forget her. His letters told her this. These letters indeed were everything to her--a woman can get so much more comfort out of a letter than a man. Next to receiving them she loved to answer them. She was a good and even a brilliant letter writer, but often and often she would tear up what she had written and begin again. There was not much news in Bryngelly; it was difficult to make her letters amusing. Also the farcical nature of the whole proceeding seemed to paralyse her. It was ridiculous, having so much to say, to be able to say nothing. Not that Beatrice wished to indite love-letters--such an idea had never crossed

her mind, but rather to write as they had talked. Yet when she tried to do so the results were not satisfactory to her, the words looked strange on paper--she could not send them.

In Geoffrey's meteor-like advance to fame and fortune she took the keenest joy and interest, far more than he did indeed. Though, like that of most other intelligent creatures, her soul turned with loathing from the dreary fustian of politics, she would religiously search the parliamentary column from beginning to end on the chance of finding his name or the notice of a speech by him. The law reports also furnished her with a happy hunting-ground in which she often found her game.

But they were miserable months. To rise in the morning, to go through the round of daily duty--thinking of Geoffrey; to come home wearied, and finally to seek refuge in sleep and dreams of him--this was the sum of them. Then there were other troubles. To begin with, things had gone from bad to worse at the Vicarage. The tithes scarcely came in at all, and every day their poverty pinched them closer. Had it not been for Beatrice's salary it was difficult to see how the family could have continued to exist. She gave it almost all to her father now, only keeping back a very small sum for her necessary clothing and such sundries as stamps and writing paper. Even then, Elizabeth grumbled bitterly at her extravagance in continuing to buy a daily paper, asking what business she had to spend sixpence a week on such a needless luxury. But Beatrice would not make up her mind to dock the paper with its occasional mention of Geoffrey.

Again, Owen Davies was a perpetual anxiety to her. His infatuation for herself was becoming notorious; everybody saw it except her father. Mr. Granger's mind was so occupied with questions connected with tithe that fortunately for Beatrice little else could find an entry. Owen dogged her about; he would wait whole hours outside the school or by the Vicarage gate merely to speak a few words to her. Sometimes when at length she appeared he seemed to be struck dumb, he could say nothing, but would gaze at her with his dull eyes in a fashion that filled her with vague alarm. He never ventured to speak to her of his love indeed, but he looked it, which was almost as bad. Another thing was that he had grown jealous. The seed which Elizabeth had planted in his mind had brought forth abundantly, though of course Beatrice did not know that this was her sister's doing.

On the very morning that Geoffrey went away Mr. Davies had met her as she was walking back from the station and asked her if Mr. Bingham had gone. When she replied that this was so, she had distinctly heard him murmur, "Thank God! thank God!" Subsequently she discovered also that he bribed the old postman to keep count of the letters which she sent and received from Geoffrey.

These things filled Beatrice with alarm, but there was worse behind. Mr. Davies began to send her presents, first such things as prize pigeons and fowls, then jewellery. The pigeons and fowls she could not well

return without exciting remark, but the jewellery she sent back by one of the school children. First came a bracelet, then a locket with his photograph inside, and lastly, a case that, when she opened it, which her curiosity led her to do, nearly blinded her with light. It was a diamond necklace, and she had never seen such diamonds before, but from their size and lustre she knew that each stone must be worth hundreds of pounds. Beatrice put it in her pocket and carried it until she met him, which she did in the course of that afternoon.

"Mr. Davies," she said before he could speak, and handing him the package, "this has been sent to me by mistake. Will you kindly take it back?"

He took it, abashed.

"Mr. Davies," she went on, looking him full in the eyes, "I hope that there will be no more such mistakes. Please understand that I cannot accept presents from you."

"If Mr. Bingham had sent it, you would have accepted it," he muttered sulkily.

Beatrice turned and flashed such a look on him that he fell back and left her. But it was true, and she knew that it was true. If Geoffrey had given her a sixpence with a hole in it, she would have valued it more than all the diamonds on earth. Oh! what a position was hers.

And it was wrong, too. She had no right to love the husband of another woman. But right or wrong the fact remained: she did love him.

And the worst of it was that, as she well knew, sooner or later all this about Mr. Davies must come to the ears of her father, and then what would happen? One thing was certain. In his present poverty-stricken condition he would move heaven and earth to bring about her marriage to this rich man. Her father never had been very scrupulous where money was concerned, and the pinch of want was not likely to make him more so.

Nor, we may be sure, did all this escape the jealous eye of Elizabeth. Things looked black for her, but she did not intend to throw up the cards on that account. Only it was time to lead trumps. In other words, Beatrice must be fatally compromised in the eyes of Owen Davies, if by any means this could be brought about. So far things had gone well for her schemes. Beatrice and Geoffrey loved each other, of that Elizabeth was certain. But the existence of this secret, underhand affection would avail her naught unless it could be ripened into acts. Everybody is free to indulge in secret predilections, but if once they are given way to, if once a woman's character is compromised, then the world avails itself of its opportunities and destroys her. What man, thought Elizabeth, would marry a compromised woman? If Beatrice could be compromised, Owen Davies would not take her to wife--therefore this must be brought about.

It sounds wicked and unnatural. "Impossible that sister should so treat

sister," the reader of this history may say, thinking of her own, and of her affectionate and respectable surroundings. But it is not impossible. If you, who doubt, will study the law reports, and no worse occupation can be wished to you, you will find that such things are possible.

Human nature can rise to strange heights, and it can also fall to depths beyond your fathoming. Because a thing is without parallel in your own small experience it in no way follows that it cannot be.

Elizabeth was a very remorseless person; she was more--she was a woman actuated by passion and by greed: the two strongest motives known to the human heart. But with her recklessness she united a considerable degree of intelligence, or rather of intellect. Had she been a savage she might have removed her sister from her path by a more expeditious way; being what she was, she merely strove to effect the same end by a method not punishable by law, in short, by murdering her reputation. Would she be responsible if her sister went wrong, and was thus utterly discredited in the eyes of this man who wished to marry her, and whom Elizabeth wished to marry? Of course not; that was Beatrice's affair. But she could give her every chance of falling into temptation, and this it was her fixed design to do.

Circumstances soon gave her an opportunity. The need of money became very pressing at the Vicarage. They had literally no longer the wherewithal to live. The tithe payers absolutely refused to fulfil their obligations. As it happened, Jones, the man who had murdered the auctioneer, was never brought to trial. He died shortly after his arrest

in a fit of delirium tremens and nervous prostration brought on by the sudden cessation of a supply of stimulants, and an example was lost, that, had he been duly hanged, might have been made of the results of defying the law. Mr. Granger was now too poor to institute any further proceedings, which, in the state of public feeling in Wales, might or might not succeed; he could only submit, and submission meant beggary. Indeed he was already a beggar. In this state of affairs he took counsel with Elizabeth, pointing out that they must either get money or starve. Now the only possible way to get money was by borrowing it, and Mr. Granger's suggestion was that he should apply to Owen Davies, who had plenty. Indeed he would have done so long ago, but that the squire had the reputation of being an exceedingly close-fisted man.

But this proposition did not at all suit Elizabeth's book. Her great object had been to conceal Mr. Davies's desires as regards Beatrice from her father, and her daily dread was that he might become acquainted with them from some outside source. She knew very well that if her father went up to the Castle to borrow money it would be lent, or rather given, freely enough; but she also knew that the lender would almost certainly take the opportunity, the very favourable opportunity, to unfold his wishes as regards the borrower's daughter. The one thing would naturally lead to the other--the promise of her father's support of Owen's suit would be the consideration for the money received. How gladly that support would be given was also obvious to her, and with her father pushing Beatrice on the one side and Owen Davies pushing her on the other, how could Elizabeth be sure that she would not yield? Beatrice

would be the very person to be carried away by an idea of duty. Their father would tell her that he had got the money on this undertaking, and it was quite possible that her pride might bring her to fulfil a bond thus given, however distasteful the deed might be to her personally. No, her father must at all hazards be prevented from seeking assistance from Owen Davies. And yet the money must be had from somewhere, or they would be ruined.

Ah, she had it--Geoffrey Bingham should lend the money! He could well afford it now, and she shrewdly guessed that he would not grudge the coat off his back if he thought that by giving it he might directly or indirectly help Beatrice. Her father must go up to town to see him, she would have no letter-writing; one never knows how a letter may be read. He must see Mr. Bingham, and if possible bring him down to Bryngelly. In a moment every detail of the plot became clear to Elizabeth's mind, and then she spoke.

"You must not go to Mr. Davies, father," she said; "he is a hard man, and would only refuse and put you in a false position; you must go to Mr. Bingham. Listen: he is rich now, and he is very fond of you and of Beatrice. He will lend you a hundred pounds at once. You must go to London by the early train to-morrow, and drive straight to his chambers and see him. It will cost two pounds to get there and back, but that cannot be helped; it is safer than writing, and I am sure that you will not go for nothing. And see here, father, bring Mr. Bingham back with

you for a few days if you can. It will be a little return for his kindness, and I know that he is not well. Beatrice had a letter from him in which he said that he was so overworked that he thought he must take a little rest soon. Bring him back for Whit-Sunday."

Mr. Granger hesitated, demurred, and finally yielded. The weak, querulous old farmer clergyman, worn out with many daily cares and quite unsupported by mental resources, was but a tool in Elizabeth's able hands. He did not indeed feel any humiliation at the idea of trying to borrow the cash, for his nature was not finely strung, and money troubles had made him callous to the verge of unscrupulousness; but he did not like the idea of a journey to London, where he had not been for more than twenty years, and the expenditure that it entailed. Still he acted as Elizabeth bade him, even to keeping the expedition secret from Beatrice. Beatrice, as her sister explained to him, was proud as Lucifer, and might raise objections if she knew that he was going to London to borrow money of Mr. Bingham. This indeed she would certainly have done.

On the following afternoon--it was the Friday before Whit-Sunday, and the last day of the Easter sittings--Geoffrey sat in his chambers, in the worst possible spirits, thoroughly stale and worn out with work. There was a consultation going on, and his client, a pig-headed Norfolk farmer, who was bent upon proceeding to trial with some extraordinary action for trespass against his own landlord, was present with his solicitor. Geoffrey in a few short, clear words had explained the

absurdity of the whole thing, and strongly advised him to settle, for the client had insisted on seeing him, refusing to be put off with a written opinion. But the farmer was not satisfied, and the solicitor was now endeavouring to let the pure light of law into the darkness of his injured soul.

Geoffrey threw himself back in his chair, pushed the dark hair from his brow, and pretended to listen. But in a minute his mind was far away. Heavens, how tired he was! Well, there would be rest for a few days--till Tuesday, when he had a matter that must be attended to--the House had risen and so had the courts. What should he do with himself? Honoria wished to go and stay with her brother, Lord Garsington, and, for a wonder, to take Effie with her. He did not like it, but he supposed that he should have to consent. One thing was, he would not go. He could not endure Garsington, Dunstan, and all their set. Should he run down to Bryngelly? The temptation was very great; that would be happiness indeed, but his common sense prevailed against it. No, it was better that he should not go there. He would leave Bryngelly alone. If Beatrice wished him to come she would have said so, and she had never even hinted at such a thing, and if she had he did not think that he would have gone. But he lacked the heart to go anywhere else. He would stop in town, rest, and read a novel, for Geoffrey, when he found time, was not above this frivolous occupation. Possibly, under certain circumstances, he might even have been capable of writing one. At that moment his clerk entered, and handed him a slip of paper with something written on it. He opened it idly and read:

"Revd. Mr. Granger to see you. Told him you were engaged, but he said he would wait."

Geoffrey started violently, so violently that both the solicitor and the obstinate farmer looked up.

"Tell the gentleman that I will see him in a minute," he said to the retreating clerk, and then, addressing the farmer, "Well, sir, I have said all that I have to say. I cannot advise you to continue this action. Indeed, if you wish to do so, you must really direct your solicitor to retain some other counsel, as I will not be a party to what can only mean a waste of money. Good afternoon," and he rose.

The farmer was convoyed out grumbling. In another moment Mr. Granger entered, dressed in a somewhat threadbare suit of black, and his thin white hair hanging, as usual, over his eyes. Geoffrey glanced at him with apprehension, and as he did so noticed that he had aged greatly during the last seven months. Had he come to tell him some ill news of Beatrice--that she was ill, or dead, or going to be married?

"How do you do, Mr. Granger?" he said, as he stretched out his hand, and controlling his voice as well as he could. "How are you? This is a most unexpected pleasure."

"How do you do, Mr. Bingham?" answered the old man, while he seated

himself nervously in a chair, placing his hat with a trembling hand upon the floor beside him. "Yes, thank you, I am pretty well, not very grand--worn out with trouble as the sparks fly upwards," he added, with a vague automatic recollection of the scriptural quotation.

"I hope that Miss Elizabeth and Be--that your daughters are well also," said Geoffrey, unable to restrain his anxiety.

"Yes, yes, thank you, Mr. Bingham. Elizabeth isn't very grand either, complains of a pain in her chest, a little bilious perhaps--she always is bilious in the spring."

"And Miss Beatrice?"

"Oh, I think she's well--very quiet, you know, and a little pale, perhaps; but she is always quiet--a strange woman Beatrice, Mr. Bingham, a very strange woman, quite beyond me! I do not understand her, and don't try to. Not like other women at all, takes no pleasure in things seemingly; curious, with her good looks--very curious. But nobody understands Beatrice."

Geoffrey breathed a sigh of relief. "And how are tithes being paid, Mr. Granger? not very grandly, I fear. I saw that scoundrel Jones died in prison."

Mr. Granger woke up at once. Before he had been talking almost at

random; the subject of his daughters did not greatly interest him. What did interest him was this money question. Nor was it very wonderful; the poor narrow-minded old man had thought about money till he could scarcely find room for anything else, indeed nothing else really touched him closely. He broke into a long story of his wrongs, and, drawing a paper from his breast pocket, with shaking finger pointed out to Geoffrey how that his clerical income for the last six months had been at the rate of only forty pounds a year, upon which sum even a Welsh clergyman could not consider himself passing rich. Geoffrey listened and sympathised; then came a pause.

"That's how we've been getting on at Bryngelly, Mr. Bingham," Mr. Granger said presently, "starving, pretty well starving. It's only you who have been making money; we've been sitting on the same dock-leaf while you have become a great man. If it had not been for Beatrice's salary--she's behaved very well about the salary, has Beatrice--I am sure I don't understand how the poor girl clothes herself on what she keeps; I know that she had to go without a warm cloak this winter, because she got a cough from it--we should have been in the workhouse, and that's where we shall be yet," and he rubbed the back of his withered hand across his eyes.

Geoffrey gasped. Beatrice with scarcely enough means to clothe herself--Beatrice shivering and becoming ill from the want of a cloak while he lived in luxury! It made him sick to think of it. For a moment he could say nothing.

"I have come here--I've come," went on the old man in a broken voice, broken not so much by shame at having to make the request as from fear lest it should be refused, "to ask you if you could lend me a little money. I don't know where to turn, I don't indeed, or I would not do it, Mr. Bingham. I have spent my last pound to get here. If you could lend me a hundred pounds I'd give you note of hand for it and try to pay it back little by little; we might take twenty pounds a year from Beatrice's salary----"

"Don't, please--do not talk of such a thing!" ejaculated the horrified Geoffrey. "Where the devil is my cheque-book? Oh, I know, I left it in Bolton Street. Here, this will do as well," and he took up a draft note made out to his order, and, rapidly signing his name on the back of it, handed it to Mr. Granger. It was in payment of the fees in the great case of Parsons and Douse and some other matters. Mr. Granger took the draft, and, holding it close to his eyes, glanced at the amount; it was £200.

"But this is double what I asked for," he said doubtfully. "Am I to return you £100?"

"No, no," answered Geoffrey, "I daresay that you have some debts to pay. Thank Heaven, I can get on very well and earn more money than I want. Not enough clothing--it is shocking to think of!" he added, more to himself than to his listener.

The old man rose, his eyes full of tears. "God bless you," he said, "God bless you. I do not know how to thank you--I don't indeed," and he caught Geoffrey's hand between his trembling palms and pressed it.

"Please do not say any more, Mr. Granger; it really is only a matter of mutual obligation. No, no, I don't want any note of hand. If I were to die it might be used against you. You can pay me whenever it is convenient."

"You are too good, Mr. Bingham," said the old clergyman. "Where could another man be found who would lend me £200 without security?" (where indeed!) "By the way," he added, "I forgot; my mind is in such a whirl. Will you come back with me for a few days to Bryngelly? We shall all be so pleased if you can. Do come, Mr. Bingham; you look as though you want a change, you do indeed."

Geoffrey dropped his hand heavily on the desk. But half an hour before he had made up his mind not to go to Bryngelly. And now----The vision of Beatrice rose before his eyes. Beatrice who had gone cold all winter and never told him one word of their biting poverty--the longing for the sight of Beatrice came into his heart, and like a hurricane swept the defences of his reason to the level ground. Temptation overwhelmed him; he no longer struggled against it. He must see her, if it was only to say good-bye.

"Thank you," he said quietly, lifting his bowed head. "Yes, I have nothing particular to do for the next day or two. I think that I will come. When do you go back?"

"Well, I thought of taking the night mail, but I feel so tired. I really don't know. I think I shall go by the nine o'clock train to-morrow."

"That will suit me very well," said Geoffrey; "and now what are you going to do to-night? You had better come and dine and sleep at my house. No dress clothes? Oh, never mind; there are some people coming but they won't care; a clergyman is always dressed. Come along and I will get that draft cashed. The bank is shut, but I can manage it."