CHAPTER XX

BACK AT BRYNGELLY

Geoffrey and Mr. Granger reached Bolton Street about six o'clock. The drawing-room was still full of callers. Lady Honoria's young men mustered in great force in those days. They were very inoffensive young men and Geoffrey had no particular objection to them. Only he found it difficult to remember all their names. When Geoffrey entered the drawing-room there were no fewer than five of them, to say nothing of two stray ladies, all superbly dressed and sitting metaphorically at Honoria's very pretty feet. Otherwise their contributions to the general store of amusement did not amount to much, for her ladyship did most of the talking.

Geoffrey introduced Mr. Granger, whom Honoria could not at first remember. Nor did she receive the announcement that he was going to dine and stay the night with any particular enthusiasm. The young men melted away at Geoffrey's advent like mists before a rising sun. He greeted them civilly enough, but with him they had nothing in common. To tell the truth they were a little afraid of him. This man with his dark handsome face sealed with the stamp of intellect, his powerful-looking form (ill dressed, according to their standard) and his great and growing reputation, was a person with whom they had no sympathy, and who, they felt, had no sympathy with them. We talk as though there is one heaven and one hell for all of us, but here must be some mistake. An

impassable gulf yawns between the different classes of mankind. What has such a man as Geoffrey to do with the feeble male and female butterflies of a London drawing-room? There is only one link between them: they live on the same planet.

When the fine young men and the two stray ladies had melted away, Geoffrey took Mr. Granger up to his room. Coming downstairs again he found Lady Honoria waiting for him in the study.

"Is that individual really going to dine and sleep here?" she asked.

"Certainly, Honoria, and he has brought no dress clothes," he answered.

"Really, Geoffrey, it is too bad of you," said the lady with some pardonable irritation. "Why do you bring people to dinner in this promiscuous way? It will quite upset the table. Just fancy asking an old Welsh clergyman to dine, who has not the slightest pretensions to being a gentleman, when one has the Prime Minister and a Bishop coming--and a clergyman without dress clothes too. What has he come for?"

"He came to see me on business, and as to the people coming to dinner, if they don't like it they can grumble when they go home. By the way, Honoria, I am going down to Wales for a day or two to-morrow. I want a change."

"Indeed! Going to see the lovely Beatrice, I suppose. You had better be

careful, Geoffrey. That girl will get you into a mess, and if she does there are plenty of people who are ready to make an example of you. You have enemies enough, I can tell you. I am not jealous, it is not in my line, but you are too intimate with that girl, and you will be sorry for it one day."

"Nonsense," said Geoffrey angrily, but nevertheless he felt that Lady Honoria's words were words of truth. It struck him, moreover, that she must feel this strongly, or she would not have spoken in that tone. Honoria did not pose as a household philosopher. Still he would not draw back now. His heart was set on seeing Beatrice.

"Am I to understand," went on his wife, "that you still object to my staying with the Garsingtons? I think it is a little hard if I do not make a fuss about your going to see your village paragon, that you should refuse to allow me to visit my own brother."

Geoffrey felt that he was being bargained with. It was degrading, but in the extremity of his folly he yielded.

"Go if you like," he said shortly, "but if you take Effie, mind she is properly looked after, that is all," and he abruptly left the room.

Lady Honoria looked after him, slowly nodding her handsome head. "Ah," she said to herself, "I have found out how to manage you now. You have your weak point like other people, Master Geoffrey--and it spells

Beatrice. Only you must not go too far. I am not jealous, but I am not going to have a scandal for fifty Beatrices. I will not allow you to lose your reputation and position. Just imagine a man like that pining for a village girl--she is nothing more! And they talk about his being so clever. Well, he always liked ladies' society; that is his failing, and now he has burnt his fingers. They all do sooner or later, especially these clever men. The women flatter them, that's it. Of course the girl is trying to get hold of him, and she might do worse, but so surely as my name is Honoria Bingham I will put a spoke in her wheel before she has done. Bah! and they laugh at the power of women when a man like Geoffrey, with all the world to lose, grows love-sick for a pretty face; it is a very pretty face by the way. I do believe that if I were out of the way he would marry her. But I am in the way, and mean to stay there. Well, it is time to dress for dinner. I only hope that old clown of a clergyman won't do something ridiculous. I shall have to apologise for him."

Dinner-time had come; it was a quarter past eight, and the room was filled with highly bred people all more or less distinguished. Mr. Granger had duly appeared, arrayed in his threadbare black coat, relieved, however, by a pair of Geoffrey's dress shoes. As might have been expected, the great folk did not seem surprised at his presence, or to take any particular notice of his attire, the fact being that such people never are surprised. A Zulu chief in full war dress would only excite a friendly interest in their breasts. On the contrary they recognised vaguely that the old gentleman was something out of the

common run, and as such worth cultivating. Indeed the Prime Minister, hearing casually that he was a clergyman from Wales, asked to be introduced to him, and at once fell into conversation about tithes, a subject of which Mr. Granger was thoroughly master.

Presently they went down to dinner, Mr. Granger escorting the wife of the Bishop, a fat and somewhat apoplectic lady, blessed with an excellent appetite. On his other side was the Prime Minister, and between the two he got on very well, especially after a few glasses of wine. Indeed, both the apoplectic wife of the Bishop and the head of Her Majesty's Government were subsequently heard to declare that Mr. Granger was a very entertaining person. To the former he related with much detail how his daughter had saved their host's life, and to the latter he discoursed upon the subject of tithes, favouring him with his ideas of what legislation was necessary to meet the question. Somewhat to his own surprise, he found that his views were received with attention and even with respect. In the main, too, they received the support of the Bishop, who likewise felt keenly on the subject of tithes. Never before had Mr. Granger had such a good dinner nor mingled with company so distinguished. He remembered both till his dying day.

Next morning Geoffrey and Mr. Granger started before Lady Honoria was up. Into the details of their long journey to Wales (in a crowded third-class carriage) we need not enter. Geoffrey had plenty to think of, but his fears had vanished, as fears sometimes do when we draw near to the object of them, and had been replaced by a curious expectancy. He

saw now, or thought he saw, that he had been making a mountain out of a molehill. Probably it meant nothing at all. There was no real danger. Beatrice liked him, no doubt; possibly she had even experienced a fit of tenderness towards him. Such things come and such things go. Time is a wonderful healer of moral distempers, and few young ladies endure the chains of an undesirable attachment for a period of seven whole months. It made him almost blush to think that this might be so, and that the gratuitous extension of his misfortune to Beatrice might be nothing more than the working of his own unconscious vanity--a vanity which, did she know of it, would move her to angry laughter.

He remembered how once, when he was quite a young fellow, he had been somewhat smitten with a certain lady, who certainly, if he might judge from her words and acts, reciprocated the sentiment. And he remembered also, how when he met that lady some months afterwards she treated him with a cold indifference, indeed almost with an insolence, that quite bewildered him, making him wonder how the same person could show in such different lights, till at length, mortified and ashamed by his mistake, he had gone away in a rage and seen her face no more. Of course he had set it down to female infidelity; he had served her turn, she had made a fool of him, and that was all she wanted. Now he might enjoy his humiliation. It did not occur to him that it might be simple "cussedness," to borrow an energetic American term, or that she had not really changed, but was angry with him for some reason which she did not choose to show. It is difficult to weigh the motives of women in the

scales of male experience, and many other men besides Geoffrey have been forced to give up the attempt and to console themselves with the reflection that the inexplicable is generally not worth understanding.

Yes, probably it would be the same case over again. And yet, and yet--was Beatrice of that class? Had she not too much of a man's straightforwardness of aim to permit her to play such tricks? In the bottom of his soul he thought that she had, but he would not admit it to himself. The fact of the matter was that, half unknowingly, he was trying to drug his conscience. He knew that in his longing to see her dear face once more he had undertaken a dangerous thing. He was about to walk with her over an abyss on a bridge which might bear them, or--might break. So long as he walked there alone it would be well, but would it bear them both? Alas for the frailty of human nature, this was the truth; but he would not and did not acknowledge it. He was not going to make love to Beatrice, he was going to enjoy the pleasure of her society. In friendship there could be no harm.

It is not difficult thus to still the qualms of an uneasy mind, more especially when the thing in question at its worst is rather an offence against local custom than against natural law. In many countries of the world--in nearly all countries, indeed, at different epochs of their history--it would have been no wrong that Geoffrey and Beatrice should love each other, and human nature in strong temptation is very apt to override artificial barriers erected to suit the convenience or promote the prosperity of particular sections of mankind. But, as we have heard,

even though all things may be lawful, yet all things are not expedient. To commit or even to condone an act because the principle that stamps it as wrong will admit of argument on its merits is mere sophistry, by the aid of which we might prove ourselves entitled to defy the majority of laws of all calibres. Laws vary to suit the generations, but each generation must obey its own, or confusion will ensue. A deed should be judged by its fruits; it may even be innocent in itself, yet if its fruits are evil the doer in a sense is guilty.

Thus in some countries to mention the name of your mother-in-law entails the most unpleasant consequences on that intimate relation. Nobody can say that to name the lady is a thing wicked in itself; yet the man who, knowing the penalties which will ensue, allows himself, even in a fit of passion against that relative, to violate the custom and mention her by name is doubtless an offender. Thus, too, the result of an entanglement between a woman and a man already married generally means unhappiness and hurt to all concerned, more especially to the women, whose prospects are perhaps irretrievably injured thereby. It is useless to point to the example of the patriarchs, some foreign royal families, and many respectable Turks; it is useless to plead that the love is deep and holy love, for which a man or woman might well live and die, or to show extenuating circumstances in the fact of loneliness, need of sympathy, and that the existing marriage is a hollow sham. The rule is clear. A man may do most things except cheat at cards or run away in action; a woman may break half-a-dozen hearts, or try to break them, and finally put herself up at auction and take no harm at all--but neither of them

may in any event do this.

Not that Geoffrey, to do him justice, had any such intentions. Most men are incapable of plots of that nature. If they fall, it is when the voice of conscience is lost in the whirlwind of passion, and counsel is darkened by the tumultuous pleadings of the heart. Their sin is that they will, most of them, allow themselves to be put in positions favourable to the development of these disagreeable influences. It is not safe to light cigarettes in a powder factory. If Geoffrey had done what he ought to have done, he would never have gone to Bryngelly, and there would have been no story to tell, or no more than there usually is.

At length Mr. Granger and his guest reached Bryngelly; there was nobody to meet them, for nobody knew that they were coming, so they walked up to the Vicarage. It was strange to Geoffrey once more to pass by the little church through those well-remembered, wind-torn pines and see that low long house. It seemed wonderful that all should still be just as it was, that there should be no change at all, when he himself had seen so much. There was Beatrice's home; where was Beatrice?

He passed into the house like a man in a dream. In another moment he was in the long parlour where he had spent so many happy hours, and Elizabeth was greeting him. He shook hands with her, and as he did so,

noticed vaguely that she too was utterly unchanged. Her straw-coloured hair was pushed back from the temples in the same way, the mouth wore the same hard smile, her light eyes shone with the same cold look; she even wore the same brown dress. But she appeared to be very pleased to see him, as indeed she was, for the game looked well for Elizabeth. Her father kissed her hurriedly, and bustled from the room to lock up his borrowed cash, leaving them together.

Somehow Geoffrey's conversational powers failed him. Where was Beatrice? she ought to be back from school. It was holiday time indeed. Could she be away?

He made an effort, and remarked absently that things seemed very unchanged at Bryngelly.

"You are looking for Beatrice," said Elizabeth, answering his thought and not his words. "She has gone out walking, but I think she will be back soon. Excuse me, but I must go and see about your room."

Geoffrey hung about a little, then he lit his pipe and strolled down to the beach, with a vague unexpressed idea of meeting Beatrice. He did not meet Beatrice, but he met old Edward, who knew him at once.

"Lord, sir," he said, "it's queer to see you here again, specially when I thinks as how I saw you first, and you a dead 'un to all purposes, with your mouth open, and Miss Beatrice a-hanging on to your hair fit

to pull your scalp off. You never was nearer old Davy than you was that night, sir, nor won't be. And now you've been spared to become a Parliament man, I hears, and much good may you do there--it will take all your time, sir--and I think, sir, that I should like to drink your health."

Geoffrey put his hand in his pocket and gave the old man a sovereign. He could afford to do so now.

"Does Miss Beatrice go out canoeing now?" he asked while Edward mumbled his astonished thanks.

"At times, sir--thanking you kindly; it ain't many suvrings as comes my way--though I hate the sight on it, I do. I'd like to stave a hole in the bottom of that there cranky concern; it ain't safe, and that's the fact. There'll be another accent out of it one of these fine days and no coming to next time. But, Lord bless you, it's her way of pleasuring herself. She's a queer un is Miss Beatrice, and she gets queerer and queerer, what with their being so tight screwed up at the Vicarage, no tithes and that, and one thing and another. Not but what I'm thinking, sir," he added in a portentous whisper, "as the squire has got summut to do with it. He's a courting of her, he is; he's as hard after her as a dog fish after a stray herring, and why she can't just say yes and marry him I'm sure I don't know."

"Perhaps she doesn't like him," said Geoffrey coldly.

"May be, sir, may be; maids all have their fancies, in whatsoever walk o' life it has pleased God to stick 'em, but it's a wonderful pity, it is. He ain't no great shakes, he ain't, but he's a sound man--no girl can't want a sounder--lived quiet all his days you see, sir, and what's more he's got the money, and money's tight up at the Vicarage, sir. Gals must give up their fancies sometimes, sir. Lord! a brace of brats and she'd forget all about 'em. I'm seventy years old and I've seen their ways, sir, though in a humble calling. You should say a word to her, sir; she'd thank you kindly five years after. You'd do her a good turn, sir, you would, and not a bad un as the saying goes, and give it the lie--no, beg your pardon, that is the other way round--she's bound to do you the bad turn having saved your life, though I don't see how she could do that unless, begging your pardon, she made you fall in love with her, being married, which though strange wouldn't be wunnerful seeing what she is and seeing how I has been in love with her myself since she was seven, old missus and all, who died eight years gone and well rid of the rheumatics."

Beatrice was one of the few subjects that could unlock old Edward's breast, and Geoffrey retired before his confusing but suggestive eloquence. Hurriedly bidding the old man good-night he returned to the house, and leaning on the gate watched the twilight dying on the bosom of the west.

Suddenly, a bunch of wild roses in her girdle, Beatrice emerged from the

gathering gloom and stood before him face to face.