

CHAPTER XXI

THE THIRD APPEAL

Face to face they stood, while at the vision of her sweetness his heart grew still. Face to face, and the faint light fell upon her tender loveliness and died in her deep eyes, and the faint breeze fragrant with the breath of pines gently stirred her hair. Oh, it was worth living to see her thus!

"I beg your pardon," she said in a puzzled tone, stepping forward to pass the gate.

"Beatrice!"

She gave a little cry, and clutched the railing, else she would have fallen. One moment she stayed so, looking up towards his face that was hid in the deepening shadow--looking with wild eyes of hope and fear and love.

"Is it you," she said at length, "or another dream?"

"It is I, Beatrice!" he answered, amazed.

She recovered herself with an effort.

"Then why did you frighten me so?" she asked. "It was unkind--oh, I did not mean to say anything cross. What did I say? I forget. I am so glad that you have come!" and she put her hand to her forehead and looked at him again as one might gaze at a ghost from the grave.

"Did you not expect me?" Geoffrey asked.

"Expect you? no. No more than I expected----" and she stopped suddenly.

"It is very odd," he said; "I thought you knew that your father was going to ask me down. I returned from London with him."

"From London," she murmured. "I did not know; Elizabeth did not tell me anything about it. I suppose that she forgot."

"Here I am at any rate, and how are you?"

"Oh, well now, quite well. There, I am all right again. It is very wrong to frighten people in that way, Mr. Bingham," she added in her usual voice. "Let me pass through the gate and I will shake hands with you--if," she added, in a tone of gentle mockery, "one may shake hands with so great a man. But I told you how it would be, did I not, just before we were drowned together, you know? How is Effie?"

"Effie flourishes," he answered. "Do you know, you do not look very grand. Your father told me that you had a cold in the winter," and

Geoffrey shivered as he thought of the cause.

"Oh, thank you, I have nothing to complain of. I am strong and well. How long do you stay here?"

"Not long. Perhaps till Tuesday morning, perhaps till Monday."

Beatrice sighed. Happiness is short. She had not brought him here, she would not have lifted a finger to bring him here, but since he had come she wished that he was going to stay longer.

"It is supper time," she said; "let us go in."

So they went in and ate their supper. It was a happy meal. Mr. Granger was in almost boisterous spirits. It is wonderful what a difference the possession of that two hundred pounds made in his demeanour; he seemed another man. It was true that a hundred of it must go in paying debts, but a hundred would be left, which meant at least a year's respite for him. Elizabeth, too, relaxed her habitual grimness; the two hundred pounds had its influence on her also, and there were other genial influences at work in her dark secret heart. Beatrice knew nothing of the money and sat somewhat silent, but she too was happy with the wild unreal happiness that sometimes visits us in dreams.

As for Geoffrey, if Lady Honoria could have seen him she would have stared in astonishment. Of late he had been a very silent man, many

people indeed had found him a dull companion. But under the influence of Beatrice's presence he talked and talked brilliantly. Perhaps he was unconsciously striving to show at his very best before her, as a man naturally does in the presence of a woman whom he loves. So brilliantly did he talk that at last they all sat still and listened to him, and they might have been worse employed.

At length supper was done, and Elizabeth retired to her room. Presently, too, Mr. Granger was called out to christen a sick baby and went grumbling, and they were left alone. They sat in the window-place and looked out at the quiet night.

"Tell me about yourself," said Beatrice.

So he told her. He narrated all the steps by which he had reached his present position, and showed her how from it he might rise to the topmost heights of all. She did not look at him, and did not answer him, but once when he paused, thinking that he had talked enough about himself, she said, "Go on; tell me some more."

At last he had told her all.

"Yes," she said, "you have the power and the opportunity, and you will one day be among the foremost men of your generation."

"I doubt it," he said with a sigh. "I am not ambitious. I only work for

the sake of work, not for what it will bring. One day I daresay that I shall weary of it all and leave it. But while I do work, I like to be among the first in my degree."

"Oh, no," she answered, "you must not give it up; you must go on and on. Promise me," she continued, looking at him for the first time--"promise me that while you have health and strength you will persevere till you stand alone and quite pre-eminent. Then you can give it up."

"Why should I promise you this, Beatrice?"

"Because I ask it of you. Once I saved your life, Mr. Bingham, and it gives me some little right to direct its course. I wish that the man whom I saved to the world should be among the first men in the world, not in wealth, which is an accident, but in intellect and force. Promise me this and I shall be happy."

"I promise you," he said, "I promise that I will try to rise because you ask it, not because the prospect attracts me; but as he spoke his heart was wrung. It was bitter to hear her speak thus of a future in which she would have no share, which, as her words implied, would be a thing utterly apart from her, as much apart as though she were dead.

"Yes," he said again, "you gave me my life, and it makes me very unhappy to think that I can give you nothing in return. Oh, Beatrice, I will tell you what I have never told to any one. I am lonely and wretched.

With the exception of yourself, I do not think that there is anybody who really cares for--I mean who really sympathises with me in the world. I daresay that it is my own fault and it sounds a humiliating thing to say, and, in a fashion, a selfish thing. I never should have said it to any living soul but you. What is the use of being great when there is nobody to work for? Things might have been different, but the world is a hard place. If you--if you----"

At this moment his hand touched hers; it was accidental, but in the tenderness of his heart he yielded to the temptation and took it. Then there was a moment's pause, and very gently she drew her hand away and thrust it in her bosom.

"You have your wife to share your fortune," she said; "you have Effie to inherit it, and you can leave your name to your country."

Then came a heavy pause.

"And you," he said, breaking it, "what future is there for you?"

She laughed softly. "Women have no future and they ask none. At least I do not now, though once I did. It is enough for them if they can ever so little help the lives of others. That is their happiness, and their reward is--rest."

Just then Mr. Granger came back from his christening, and Beatrice rose and went to bed.

"Looks a little pale, doesn't she, Mr. Bingham?" said her father. "I think she must be troubled in her mind. The fact is--well, there is no reason why I should not tell you; she thinks so much of you, and you might say a word to brighten her up--well, it's about Mr. Davies. I fancy, you know, that she likes him and is vexed because he does not come forward. Well, you see--of course I may be mistaken, but I have sometimes thought that he may. I have seen him look as if he was thinking of it, though of course it is more than Beatrice has got any right to expect. She's only got herself and her good looks to give him, and he's a rich man. Think of it, Mr. Bingham," and the old gentleman turned up his eyes piously, "just think what a thing it would be for her, and indeed for all of us, if it should please God to send a chance like that in her way; she would be rich for life, and such a position! But it is possible; one never knows; he might take a fancy to her. At any rate, Mr. Bingham, I think you could cheer her up a little; there is no need for her to give up hope yet."

Geoffrey burst into a short grim laugh. The idea of Beatrice languishing for Owen Davies, indeed the irony of the whole position, was too much for his sense of humour.

"Yes," he said, "I daresay that it might be a good match for her, but I

do not know how she would get on with Mr. Davies."

"Get on! why, well enough, of course. Women are soft, and can squeeze into most holes, especially if they are well lined. Besides, he may be a bit heavy, but I think she is pining for him, and it's a pity that she should waste her life like that. What, are you going to bed? Well, good-night--good-night."

Geoffrey did go to bed, but not to sleep. For a long while he lay awake, thinking. He thought of the last night which he had spent in this little room, of its strange experiences, of all that had happened since, and of the meeting of to-day. Could he, after that meeting, any longer doubt what were the feelings with which Beatrice regarded him? It was difficult to so, and yet there was still room for error. Then he thought of what old Edward had said to him, and of what Mr. Granger had said with reference to Beatrice and Owen Davies. The views of both were crudely and even vulgarly expressed, but they coincided, and, what was more, there was truth in them, and he knew it. The idea of Beatrice marrying Mr. Davies, to put it mildly, was repulsive to him; but had he any claim to stand between her and so desirable a settlement in life? Clearly, he had not, his conscience told him so.

Could it be right, moreover, that this kind of tie which existed between them should be knitted more closely? What would it mean? Trouble, and nothing but trouble, more especially to Beatrice, who would fret her days away to no end. He had done wrong in coming here at all, he had

done wrong in taking her hand. He would make the only reparation in his power (as though in such a case as that of Beatrice reparation were now possible)! He would efface himself from her life and see her no more. Then she might learn to forget him, or, at the worst, to remember him with but a vague regret. Yes, cost what it might, he would force himself to do it before any actual mischief ensued. The only question was, should he not go further? Should he not tell her that she would do well to marry Mr. Davies?

Pondering over this most painful question, at last he went to sleep.

When men in Geoffrey's unhappy position turn penitent and see the error of their ways, the prudent resolves that ensue are apt to overshoot the mark and to partake of an aggressive nature. Not satisfied with leaving things alone, they must needs hasten to proclaim their new-found virtue to the partner of their fault, and advertise their infallible specific (to be taken by the partner) for restoring the status quo ante. Sometimes as a consequence of this pious zeal they find themselves misunderstood, or even succeed in precipitating the catastrophe which they laudably desire to prevent.

The morrow was Whit-Sunday, and a day that Geoffrey had occasion to remember for the rest of his life. They all met at breakfast and shortly afterwards went to church, the service being at half-past ten. By way

of putting into effect the good resolutions with which he was so busy paving an inferno of his own, Geoffrey did not sit by Beatrice, but took a seat at the end of the little church, close to the door, and tried to console himself by looking at her.

It was a curious sullen-natured day, and although there was not very much sun the air was as hot as though they were in midsummer. Had they been in a volcanic region, Geoffrey would have thought that such weather preceded a shock of earthquake. As it was he knew that the English climate was simply indulging itself at the expense of the population. But as up to the present, the season had been cold, this knowledge did not console him. Indeed he felt so choked in the stuffy little church that just before the sermon (which he happened to be aware was not written by Beatrice) he took an opportunity to slip out unobserved. Not knowing where to go, he strolled down to the beach, on which there was nobody to be seen, for, as has been observed, Bryngelly slept on Sundays. Presently, however, a man approached walking rapidly, and to all appearance aimlessly, in whom he recognised Owen Davies. He was talking to himself while he walked, and swinging his arms. Geoffrey stepped aside to let him pass, and as he did so was surprised and even shocked to see the change in the man. His plump healthy-looking face had grown thin, and wore a half sullen, half pitiful expression; there were dark circles round his blue eyes, once so placid, and his hair would have been the better for cutting. Geoffrey wondered if he had had an illness. At that moment Owen chanced to look round and saw him.

"How do you do, Mr. Bingham?" he said. "I heard that you were here. They told me at the station last night. You see this is a small place and one likes to know who comes and goes," he added as though in excuse.

He walked on and Geoffrey walked with him.

"You do not look well, Mr. Davies," he said. "Have you been laid up?"

"No, no," he answered, "I am quite right; it is only my mind that is ill."

"Indeed," said Geoffrey, thinking that he certainly did look strange.

"Perhaps you live too much alone and it depresses you."

"Yes, I live alone, because I can't help myself. What is a man to do, Mr. Bingham, when the woman he loves will not marry him, won't look at him, treats him like dirt?"

"Marry somebody else," suggested Geoffrey.

"Oh, it is easy for you to say that--you have never loved anybody, and you don't understand. I cannot marry anybody else, I want her only."

"Her? Whom?"

"Who! why, Beatrice--whom else could a man want to marry, if once he had

seen her. But she will not have me; she hates me."

"Really," said Geoffrey.

"Yes, really, and do you know why? Shall I tell you why? I will tell you," and he grasped him by the arm and whispered hoarsely in his ear:

"Because she loves you, Mr. Bingham."

"I tell you what it is, Mr. Davies," said Geoffrey shaking his arm free,

"I am not going to stand this kind of thing. You must be off your head."

"Don't be angry with me," he answered. "It is true. I have watched her and I know that it is true. Why does she write to you every week, why does she always start and listen when anybody mentions your name? Oh, Mr. Bingham," Owen went on piteously, "be merciful--you have your wife and lots of women to make love to if you wish--leave me Beatrice. If you don't I think that I shall go crazed. I have always loved her, ever since she was a child, and now my love travels faster and grows stronger every day, and carries me away with it like a rock rolling down a hill. You can only bring Beatrice to shame, but I can give her everything, as much money as she wants, all that she wants, and I will make her a good husband; I will never leave her side."

"I have no doubt that would be delightful for her," answered Geoffrey;

"but does it not strike you that all this is just a little undignified?"

These remarks, interesting as they are, should be made to Miss Granger,

not to me, Mr. Davies."

"I know," he said, "but I don't care; it is my only chance, and what do I mind about being undignified? Oh, Mr. Bingham, I have never loved any other woman, I have been lonely all my days. Do not stand in my path now. If you only knew what I have suffered, how I have prayed God night after night to give me Beatrice, you would help me. Say that you will help me! You are one of those men who can do anything; she will listen to you. If you tell her to marry me she will do so, and I shall bless you my whole life."

Geoffrey looked upon this abject suppliant with the most unmitigated scorn. There is always something contemptible in the sight of one man pleading to another for assistance in his love affairs--that is a business which he should do for himself. How much greater, then, is the humiliation involved when the amorous person asks the aid of one whom he believes to be his rival--his successful rival--in the lady's affection?

"Do you know, Mr. Davies," Geoffrey said, "I think that I have had enough of this. I am not in a position to force Miss Granger to accept advances which appear to be unwelcome according to your account. But if I get an opportunity I will do this: I will tell her what you say. You really must manage the rest for yourself. Good morning to you, Mr. Davies."

He turned sharply and went while Owen watched him go.

"I don't believe him," he groaned to himself. "He will try to make her his lover. Oh, God help me--I cannot bear to think of it. But if he does, and I find him out, let him be careful. I will ruin him, yes, I will ruin him! I have the money and I can do it. Ah, he thinks me a fool, they all think me a fool, but I haven't been quiet all these years for nothing. I can make a noise if necessary. And if he is a villain, God will help me to destroy him. I have prayed to God, and God will help me."

Then he went back to the Castle. Owen Davies was a type of the class of religious men who believe that they can enlist the Almighty on the side of their desires, provided only that those desires receive the sanction of human law or custom.

Thus within twenty-four hours Geoffrey received no less than three appeals to help the woman whom he loved to the arms of a distasteful husband. No wonder then that he grew almost superstitious about the matter.