CHAPTER XXII

A NIGHT OF STORM

That afternoon the whole Vicarage party walked up to the farm to inspect another litter of young pigs. It struck Geoffrey, remembering former editions, that the reproductive powers of Mr. Granger's old sow were something little short of marvellous, and he dreamily worked out a calculation of how long it would take her and her progeny to produce a pig to every square yard of the area of plucky little Wales. It seemed that the thing could be done in six years, which was absurd, so he gave up calculating.

He had no words alone with Beatrice that afternoon. Indeed, a certain coldness seemed to have sprung up between them. With the almost supernatural quickness of a loving woman's intuition, she had divined that something was passing in his mind, inimical to her most vital interests, so she shunned his company, and received his conventional advances with a politeness which was as cold as it was crushing. This did not please Geoffrey; it is one thing (in her own interests, of course) to make up your mind heroically to abandon a lady whom you do not wish to compromise, and quite another to be snubbed by that lady before the moment of final separation. Though he never put the idea into words or even defined it in his mind--for Geoffrey was far too anxious and unhappy to be flippant, at any rate in thought--he would at heart have wished her to remain the same, indeed to wax ever tenderer, till

the fatal time of parting arrived, and even to show appreciation of his virtuous conduct.

But to the utter destruction of most such hands as Geoffrey held, loving women never will play according to the book. Their conduct imperils everything, for it is obvious that it takes two to bring an affair of this nature to a dignified conclusion, even when the stakes are highest, and the matter is one of life and death. Beatrice after all was very much of a woman, and she did not behave much better than any other woman would have done. She was angry and suspicious, and she showed it, with the result that Geoffrey grew angry also. It was cruel of her, he thought, considering all things. He forgot that she could know nothing of what was in his mind, however much she might guess; also as yet he did not know the boundless depth and might of her passion for him, and all that it meant to her. Had he realised this he would have acted very differently.

They came home and took tea, then Mr. Granger and Elizabeth made ready to go to evening service. To Geoffrey's dismay Beatrice did the same. He had looked forward to a quiet walk with her--really this was not to be borne. Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, she was ready the first, and he got a word with her.

"I did not know that you were going to church," he said; "I thought that we might have had a walk together. Very likely I shall have to go away early to-morrow morning."

"Indeed," answered Beatrice coldly. "But of course you have your work to attend to. I told Elizabeth that I was coming to church, and I must go; it is too sultry to walk; there will be a storm soon."

At this moment Elizabeth came in.

"Well, Beatrice," she said, "are you coming to church? Father has gone on."

Beatrice pretended not to hear, and reflected a moment. He would go away and she would see him no more. Could she let slip this last hour? Oh, she could not do it!

In that moment of reflection her fate was sealed.

"No," she answered slowly, "I don't think that I am coming; it is too sultry to go to church. I daresay that Mr. Bingham will accompany you."

Geoffrey hastily disclaimed any such intention, and Elizabeth started alone. "Ah!" she said to herself, "I thought that you would not come, my dear."

"Well," said Geoffrey, when she had well gone, "shall we go out?"

"I think it is pleasanter here," answered Beatrice.

"Oh, Beatrice, don't be so unkind," he said feebly.

"As you like," she replied. "There is a fine sunset--but I think that we shall have a storm."

They went out, and turned up the lonely beach. The place was utterly deserted, and they walked a little way apart, almost without speaking. The sunset was magnificent; great flakes of golden cloud were driven continually from a home of splendour in the west towards the cold lined horizon of the land. The sea was still quiet, but it moaned like a thing in pain. The storm was gathering fast.

"What a lovely sunset," said Geoffrey at length.

"It is a fatal sort of loveliness," she answered; "it will be a bad night, and a wet morrow. The wind is rising; shall we turn?"

"No, Beatrice, never mind the wind. I want to speak to you, if you will allow me to do so."

"Yes," said Beatrice, "what about, Mr. Bingham."

To make good resolutions in a matter of this sort is comparatively easy, but the carrying of them out presents some difficulties. Geoffrey, conscience-stricken into priggishness, wished to tell her that she would do well to marry Owen Davies, and found the matter hard. Meanwhile Beatrice preserved silence.

"The fact is," he said at length, "I most sincerely hope you will forgive me, but I have been thinking a great deal about you and your future welfare."

"That is very kind of you," said Beatrice, with an ominous humility.

This was disconcerting, but Geoffrey was determined, and he went on in a somewhat flippant tone born of the most intense nervousness and hatred of his task. Never had he loved her so well as now in this moment when he was about to counsel her to marry another man. And yet he persevered in his folly. For, as so often happens, the shrewd insight and knowledge of the world which distinguished Geoffrey as a lawyer, when dealing with the affairs of others, quite deserted him in this crisis of his own life and that of the woman who worshipped him.

"Since I have been here," he said, "I have had made to me no less than three appeals on your behalf and by separate people--by your father, who fancies that you are pining for Owen Davies; by Owen Davies, who is certainly pining for you; and by old Edward, intervening as a kind of domestic amicus curiæ."

"Indeed," said Beatrice, in a voice of ice.

"All these three urged the same thing--the desirability of your marrying Owen Davies."

Beatrice's face grew quite pale, her lips twitched and her grey eyes flashed angrily.

"Really," she said, "and have you any advice to give on the subject, Mr. Bingham?"

"Yes, Beatrice, I have. I have thought it over, and I think that--forgive me again--that if you can bring yourself to it, perhaps you had better marry him. He is not such a bad sort of man, and he is well off."

They had been walking rapidly, and now they were reaching the spot known as the "Amphitheatre," that same spot where Owen Davies had proposed to Beatrice some seven months before.

Beatrice passed round the projecting edge of rock, and walked some way towards the flat slab of stone in the centre before she answered. While she did so a great and bitter anger filled her heart. She saw, or thought she saw, it all. Geoffrey wished to be rid of her. He had discerned an element of danger in their intimacy, and was anxious to

make that intimacy impossible by pushing her into a hateful marriage. Suddenly she turned and faced him--turned like a thing at bay. The last red rays of the sunset struck upon her lovely face made more lovely still by its stamp of haughty anger: they lay upon her heaving breast. Full in the eyes she looked him with those wide angry eyes of hers--never before had he seen her so imperial a mien. Her dignity and the power of her presence literally awed him, for at times Beatrice's beauty was of that royal stamp which when it hides a heart, is a compelling force, conquering and born to conquer.

"Does it not strike you, Mr. Bingham," she said quietly, "that you are taking a very great liberty? Does it not strike you that no man who is not a relation has any right to speak to a woman as you have spoken to me?--that, in short, you have been guilty of what in most people would be an impertinence? What right have you to dictate to me as to whom I should or should not marry? Surely of all things in the world that is my own affair."

Geoffrey coloured to the eyes. As would have been the case with most men of his class, he felt her accusation of having taken a liberty, of having presumed upon an intimacy, more keenly than any which she could have brought against him.

"Forgive me," he said humbly. "I can only assure you that I had no such intention. I only spoke--ill-judgedly, I fear--because--because I felt driven to it."

Beatrice took no notice of his words, but went on in the same cold voice.

"What right have you to speak of my affairs with Mr. Davies, with an old boatman, or even with my father? Had I wished you to do so I should have asked you. By what authority do you constitute yourself an intermediary for the purpose of bringing about a marriage which you are so good as to consider would be to my pecuniary interest? Do you not know that such a matter is one which the woman concerned, the woman whose happiness and self-respect are at stake, alone can judge of? I have nothing more to say except this. I said just now that you had been guilty of what would in most people be an impertinence. Well, I will add something. In this case, Mr. Bingham, there are circumstances which make it--a cruel insult!"

She stopped speaking, then suddenly, without the slightest warning, burst into passionate weeping. As she did so, the first rush of the storm passed over them, winnowing the air as with a thousand eagles' wings, and was lost on the moaning depths beyond.

The light went out of the sky. Now Geoffrey could only see the faint outlines of her weeping face. One moment he hesitated and one only; then Nature prevailed against him, for the next she was in his arms.

Beatrice scarcely resisted him. Her energies seemed to fail her, or perhaps she had spent them in her bitter words. Her head fell upon his shoulder, and there she sobbed her fill. Presently she lifted it and their lips met in a first long kiss. It was finished; this was the end of it--and thus did Geoffrey prosper Owen Davies's suit.

"Oh, you are cruel, cruel!" he whispered in her ear. "You must have known I loved you, Beatrice, that I spoke against myself because I thought it to be my duty. You must have known that, to my sin and sorrow, I have always loved you, that you have never been an hour from my mind, that I have longed to see your face like a sick man for the light. Tell me, did you not know it, Beatrice?"

"How should I know?" she answered very softly; "I could only guess, and if indeed you love me how could you wish me to marry another man? I thought that you had learned my weakness and took this way to reproach me. Oh, Geoffrey, what have we done? What is there between you and me--except our love?"

"It would have been better if we had been drowned together at the first," he said heavily.

"No, no," she answered, "for then we never should have loved one another. Better first to love, and then to die!"

"Do not speak so," he said; "let us sit here and be happy for a little

while to-night, and leave trouble till to-morrow."

And, where on a bygone day Beatrice had tarried with another wooer, side by side they sat upon the great stone and talked such talk as lovers use.

Above them moaned the rising gale, though sheltered as they were by cliffs its breath scarcely stirred their hair. In front of them the long waves boomed upon the beach, while far out to sea the crescent moon, draped in angry light, seemed to ride the waters like a boat.

And were they alone with their great bliss, or did they only dream? Nay, they were alone with love and lovers' joys, and all the truth was told, and all their doubts were done. Now there was an end of hopes and fears; now reason fell and Love usurped his throne, and at that royal coming Heaven threw wide her gates. Oh, Sweetest and most dear! Oh, Dearest and most sweet! Oh, to have lived to find this happy hour--oh, in this hour to die!

See heaviness is behind us, see now we are one. Blow, you winds, blow out your stormy heart; we know the secret of your strength, you rush to your desire. Fall, deep waters of the sea, fall in thunder at the feet of earth; we hear the music of your pleading.

Earth, and Seas, and Winds, sing your great chant of love! Heaven and Space and Time, echo back the melody! For Life has called to us the answer of his riddle! Heart to heart we sit, and lips to lips, and we are more wise than Solomon, and richer than barbarian kings, for Happiness is ours.

To this end were we born, Dearest and most sweet, and from all time predestinate! To this end, Sweetest and most dear, do we live and die, in death to find completer unity. For here is that secret of the world which wise men search and cannot find, and here too is the gate of Heaven.

Look into my eyes, and let me gaze on yours, and listen how these things shall be. The world is but a mockery, and a shadow is our flesh, for where once they were there shall be naught. Only Love is real; Love shall endure till all the suns are dead, and yet be young.

Kiss me, thou Conqueror, for Destiny is overcome, Sorrow is gone by; and the flame that we have hallowed upon this earthly altar shall still burn brightly, and yet more bright, when yonder stars have lost their fire.

But alas! words cannot give a fitting form to such a song as this. Let music try! But music also folds her wings. For in so supreme an hour

"A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,"

and through that opened door come sights and sounds such as cannot be written.

They tell us it is madness, that this unearthly glory is but the frenzy of a passion gross in its very essence. Let those think it who will, but to dreamers let them leave their dreams. Why then, at such a time, do visions come to children of the world like Beatrice and Geoffrey? Why do their doubts vanish, and what is that breath from heaven which they seem to feel upon their brow? The intoxication of earthly love born of the meeting of youth and beauty. So be it! Slave, bring more such wine and let us drink--to Immortality and to those dear eyes that mirror forth a spirit's face!

Such loves indeed are few. For they must be real and deep, and natures thus shaped are rare, nor do they often cross each other's line of life. Yes, there are few who can be borne so high, and none can breathe that ether long. Soon the wings which Love lent them in his hour of revelation will shrink and vanish, and the borrowers will fall back to the level of this world, happy if they escape uncrushed. Perchance even in their life-days, they may find these spirit wings again, overshadowing the altar of their vows in the hour of earthly marriage, if by some happy fate, marriage should be within their reach, or like the holy pinions of the goddess Nout, folded about a coffin, in the time of earthly death. But scant are the occasions, and few there are who

know them.

Thus soared Beatrice and Geoffrey while the wild night beat around them, making a fit accompaniment to their stormy loves. And thus they too fell from heaven to earth.

"We must be going, Geoffrey; it grows late," said Beatrice. "Oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey, what have we done? What can be the end of all this? It will bring trouble on you, I know that it must. The old saying will come true. I saved your life, and I shall bring ruin on you!"

It is characteristic of Beatrice that already she was thinking of the consequences to Geoffrey, not of those to herself.

"Beatrice," said Geoffrey, "we are in a desperate position. Do you wish to face it and come away with me, far away to the other side of the world?"

"No, no," she answered vehemently, "it would be your ruin to abandon the career that is before you. What part of the world could you go to where you would not be known? Besides there is your wife to think of. Ah, God, your wife--what would she say of me? You belong to her, you have no right to desert her. And there is Effie too. No, Geoffrey, no, I have been wicked enough to learn to love you--oh, as you were never loved

before, if it is wicked to do what one cannot help--but I am not bad enough for this. Walk quicker, Geoffrey; we shall be late, and they will suspect something."

Poor Beatrice, the pangs of conscience were finding her out!

"We are in a dreadful position," he said again. "Oh, dearest, I have been to blame. I should never have come back here. It is my fault; and though I never thought of this, I did my best to please you."

"And I thank you for it," she answered. "Do not deceive yourself, Geoffrey. Whatever happens, promise me never for one moment to believe that I reproached or blamed you. Why should I blame you because you won my heart? Let me sooner blame the sea on which we floated, the beach where we walked, the house in which we lived, and the Destiny that brought us together. I am proud and glad to love you, dear, but I am not so selfish as to wish to ruin you: Geoffrey--I had rather die."

"Don't talk so," he said, "I cannot bear it. What are we to do? Am I to go away and see you no more? How can we live so, Beatrice?"

"Yes, Geoffrey," she answered heavily, taking him by the hand and gazing up into his face, "you are to go away and see me no more, not for years and years. This is what we have brought upon ourselves, it is the price that we must pay for this hour which has gone. You are to go away to-morrow, that we may be put out of temptation, and you must come back

no more. Sometimes I shall write to you, and sometimes perhaps you will write to me, till the thing becomes a burden, then you can stop.
And whether you forget me or not--and, Geoffrey, I do not think you will--you will know that I shall never forget you, whom I saved from the sea--to love me."

There was something so sweet and infinitely tender about her words, instinct as they were with natural womanly passion, that Geoffrey bent at heart beneath their weight as a fir bends beneath the gentle, gathering snow. What was he to do, how could he leave her? And yet she was right. He must go, and go quickly, lest his strength might fail him, and hand in hand they should pass a bourne from which there is no return.

"Heaven help us, Beatrice," he said. "I will go to-morrow morning and, if I can, I will keep away."

"You must keep away. I will not see you any more. I will not bring trouble on you, Geoffrey."

"You talk of bringing trouble on me," he said; "you say nothing of yourself, and yet a man, even a man with eyes on him like myself, is better fitted to weather such a storm. If it ruined me, how much more would it ruin you?"

They were at the gate of the Vicarage now, and the wind rushed so

strongly through the firs that she needed to put her lips quite close to his ear to make her words heard.

"Stop, one minute," she said, "perhaps you do not quite understand. When a woman does what I have done, it is because she loves with all her life and heart and soul, because all these are a part of her love. For myself, I no longer care anything--I have no self away from you; I have ceased to be of myself or in my own keeping. I am of you and in yours. For myself and my own fate or name I think no more; with my eyes open and of my own free will I have given everything to you, and am glad and happy to give it. But for you I still do care, and if I took any step, or allowed you to take any that could bring sorrow on you, I should never forgive myself. That is why we must part, Geoffrey. And now let us go in; there is nothing more to say, except this: if you wish to bid me good-bye, a last good-bye, dear Geoffrey, I will meet you to-morrow morning on the beach."

"I shall leave at half-past eight," he said hoarsely.

"Then we will meet at seven," Beatrice said, and led the way into the house.

Elizabeth and Mr. Granger were already seated at supper. They supped at nine on Sunday nights; it was just half-past.

"Dear me," said the old gentleman, "we began to think that you two must

have been out canoeing and got yourselves drowned in good earnest this time. What have you been doing?"

"We have had a long walk," answered Geoffrey; "I did not know that it was so late."

"One wants to be pleased with one's company to walk far on such a night as this," put in Elizabeth maliciously.

"And so we were--at least I was," Geoffrey answered with perfect truth, "and the night is not so bad as you might think, at least under the lee of the cliffs. It will be worse by and by!"

Then they sat down and made a desperate show of eating supper. Elizabeth, the keen-eyed, noticed that Geoffrey's hand was shaking. Now what, she wondered, would make the hand of a strong man shake like a leaf? Deep emotion might do it, and Elizabeth thought that she detected other signs of emotion in them both, besides that of Geoffrey's shaking hand. The plot was working well, but could it be brought to a climax? Oh, if he would only throw prudence to the winds and run away with Beatrice, so that she might be rid of her, and free to fight for her own hand.

Shortly after supper both Elizabeth and Beatrice went to bed, leaving their father with Geoffrey.

"Well," said Mr. Granger, "did you get a word with Beatrice? It was very kind of you to go that long tramp on purpose. Gracious, how it blows! we shall have the house down presently. Lightning, too, I declare."

"Yes," answered Geoffrey, "I did."

"Ah, I hope you told her that there was no need for her to give up hope of him yet, of Mr. Davies, I mean?"

"Yes, I told her that--that is if the greater includes the less," he added to himself.

"And how did she take it?"

"Very badly," said Geoffrey; "she seemed to think that I had no right to interfere."

"Indeed, that is strange. But it doesn't mean anything. She's grateful enough to you at heart, depend upon it she is, only she did not like to say so. Dear me, how it blows; we shall have a night of it, a regular gale, I declare. So you are going away to-morrow morning. Well, the best of friends must part. I hope that you will often come and see us. Good-bye."

Once more a sense of the irony of the position overcame Geoffrey, and he smiled grimly as he lit his candle and went to bed. At the back of the

house was a long passage, which terminated at one end in the room where he slept, and at the other in that occupied by Elizabeth and Beatrice. This passage was lit by two windows, and built out of it were two more rooms--that of Mr. Granger, and another which had been Effie's. The windows of the passage, like most of the others in the Vicarage, were innocent of shutters, and Geoffrey stood for a moment at one of them, watching the lightning illumine the broad breast of the mountain behind. Then looking towards the door of Beatrice's room, he gazed at it with the peculiar reverence that sometimes afflicts people who are very much in love, and, with a sigh, turned and sought his own.

He could not sleep, it was impossible. For nearly two hours he lay turning from side to side, and thinking till his brain seemed like to burst. To-morrow he must leave her, leave her for ever, and go back to his coarse unprofitable struggle with the world, where there would be no Beatrice to make him happy through it all. And she, what of her?

The storm had lulled a little, now it came back in strength, heralded by the lightning. He rose, threw on a dressing-gown, and sat by a window watching it. Its tumult and fury seemed to ease his heart of some little of its pain; in that dark hour a quiet night would have maddened him.

In eight hours--eight short hours--this matter would be ended so far as concerned their actual intercourse. It would be a secret locked for ever in their two breasts, a secret eating at their hearts, cruel as the worm that dieth not. Geoffrey looked up and threw out his heart's thought

towards his sleeping love. Then once more, as in a bygone night, there broke upon his brain and being that mysterious spiritual sense. Stronger and more strong it grew, beating on him in heavy unnatural waves, till his reason seemed to reel and sink, and he remembered naught but Beatrice, knew naught save that her very life was with him now.

He stretched out his arms towards the place where she should be.

"Beatrice," he whispered to the empty air, "Beatrice! Oh, my love! my sweet! my soul! Hear me, Beatrice!"

There came a pause, and ever the unearthly sympathy grew and gathered in his heart, till it seemed to him as though separation had lost its power and across dividing space they were mingled in one being.

A great gust shook the house and passed away along the roaring depths.

Oh! what was this? Silently the door opened, and a white draped form passed its threshold. He rose, gasping; a terrible fear, a terrible joy, took possession of him. The lightning flared out wildly in the eastern sky. There in the fierce light she stood before him--she, Beatrice, a sight of beauty and of dread. She stood with white arms outstretched, with white uncovered feet, her bosom heaving softly beneath her night-dress, her streaming hair unbound, her lips apart, her face upturned, and a stamp of terrifying calm.

"In the wide, blind eyes uplift Thro' the darkness and the drift."

Great Heaven, she was asleep!

Hush! she spoke.

"You called me, Geoffrey," she said, in a still, unnatural voice. "You called me, my beloved, and I--have--come."

He rose aghast, trembling like an aspen with doubt and fear, trembling at the sight of the conquering glory of the woman whom he worshipped.

See! She drew on towards him, and she was asleep. Oh, what could he do?

Suddenly the draught of the great gale rushing through the house caught the opened door and crashed it to.

She awoke with a wild stare of terror.

"Oh, God, where am I?" she cried.

"Hush, for your life's sake!" he answered, his faculties returning. "Hush! or you are lost."

But there was no need to caution here to silence, for Beatrice's senses

failed her at the shock, and she sank swooning in his arms.