

CHAPTER XXIV

LADY HONORIA TAKES THE FIELD

Geoffrey hurried to the Vicarage to fetch his baggage and say good-bye. He had no time for breakfast, and he was glad of it, for he could not have eaten a morsel to save his life. He found Elizabeth and her father in the sitting-room.

"Why, where have you been this wet morning, Mr. Bingham?" said Mr. Granger.

"I have been for a walk with Miss Beatrice; she is coming home by the village," he answered. "I don't mind rain, and I wanted to get as much fresh air as I could before I go back to the mill. Thank you--only a cup of tea--I will get something to eat as I go."

"How kind of him," reflected Mr. Granger; "no doubt he has been speaking to Beatrice again about Owen Davies."

"Oh, by the way," he added aloud, "did you happen to hear anybody moving in the house last night, Mr. Bingham, just when the storm was at its height? First of all a door slammed so violently that I got up to see what it was, and as I came down the passage I could almost have sworn that I saw something white go into the spare room. But my candle went out and by the time that I had found a light there was nothing to be

seen."

"A clear case of ghosts," said Geoffrey indifferently. It was indeed a "case of ghosts," and they would, he reflected, haunt him for many a day.

"How very odd," put in Elizabeth vivaciously, her keen eyes fixed intently on his face. "Do you know I thought that I twice saw the door of our room open and shut in the most mysterious fashion. I think that Beatrice must have something to do with it; she is so uncanny in her ways."

Geoffrey never moved a muscle, he was trained to keep his countenance. Only he wondered how much this woman knew. She must be silenced somehow.

"Excuse me for changing the subject," he said, "but my time is short, and I have none to spare to hunt the 'Vicarage Ghost.' By the way, there's a good title for somebody. Mr. Granger, I believe that I may speak of business matters before Miss Elizabeth?"

"Certainly, Mr. Bingham," said the clergyman; "Elizabeth is my right hand, and has the best business head in Bryngelly."

Geoffrey thought that this was very evident, and went on. "I only want to say this. If you get into any further difficulties with your rascally

tithe-payers, mind and let me know. I shall always be glad to help you while I can. And now I must be going."

He spoke thus for two reasons. First, naturally enough, he meant to make it his business to protect Beatrice from the pressure of poverty, and well knew that it would be useless to offer her direct assistance.

Secondly, he wished to show Elizabeth that it would not be to the advantage of her family to quarrel with him. If she had seen a ghost, perhaps this fact would make her reticent on the subject. He did not know that she was playing a much bigger game for her own hand, a game of which the stakes were thousands a year, and that she was moreover mad with jealousy and what, in such a woman, must pass for love.

Elizabeth made no comment on his offer, and before Mr. Granger's profuse thanks were nearly finished, Geoffrey was gone.

Three weeks passed at Bryngelly, and Elizabeth still held her hand. Beatrice, pale and spiritless, went about her duties as usual. Elizabeth never spoke to her in any sense that could awaken her suspicions, and the ghost story was, or appeared to be, pretty well forgotten. But at last an event occurred that caused Elizabeth to take the field. One day she met Owen Davies walking along the beach in the semi-insane way which he now affected. He stopped, and, without further ado, plunged into conversation.

"I can't bear it any longer," he said wildly, throwing up his arms. "I saw her yesterday, and she cut me short before I could speak a word. I have prayed for patience and it will not come, only a Voice seemed to say to me that I must wait ten days more, ten short days, and then Beatrice, my beautiful Beatrice, would be my wife at last."

"If you go on in this way, Mr. Davies," said Elizabeth sharply, her heart filled with jealous anger, "you will soon be off your head. Are you not ashamed of yourself for making such a fuss about a girl's pretty face? If you want to get married, marry somebody else."

"Marry somebody else," he said dreamily; "I don't know anybody else whom I could marry except you, and you are not Beatrice."

"No," answered Elizabeth angrily, "I should hope that I have more sense, and if you wanted to marry me you would have to set about it in a different way from this. I am not Beatrice, thank Heaven, but I am her sister, and I warn you that I know more about her than you do. As a friend I warn you to be careful. Supposing that Beatrice were not worthy of you, you would not wish to marry her, would you?"

Now Owen Davies was at heart somewhat afraid of Elizabeth, like most other people who had the privilege of her acquaintance. Also, apart from matters connected with his insane passion, he was very fairly shrewd. He suspected Elizabeth of something, he did not know of what.

"No, no, of course not," he said. "Of course I would not marry her if she was not fit to be my wife--but I must know that first, before I talk of marrying anybody else. Good afternoon, Miss Elizabeth. It will soon be settled now; it cannot go on much longer now. My prayers will be answered, I know they will."

"You are right there, Owen Davies," thought Elizabeth, as she looked after him with ineffable bitterness, not to say contempt. "Your prayers shall be answered in a way that will astonish you. You shall not marry Beatrice, and you shall marry me. The fish has been on the line long enough, now I must begin to pull in."

Curiously enough it never really occurred to Elizabeth that Beatrice herself might prove to be the true obstacle to the marriage she plotted to prevent. She knew that her sister was fond of Geoffrey Bingham, but, when it came to the point that she would absolutely allow her affection to interfere with so glorious a success in life, she never believed for one moment. Of course she thought it was possible that if Beatrice could get possession of Geoffrey she might prefer to do so, but failing him, judging from her own low and vulgar standard, Elizabeth was convinced that she would take Owen. It did not seem possible that what was so precious in her own eyes might be valueless and even hateful to those of her sister. As for that little midnight incident, well, it was one thing and marriage was another. People forget such events when they marry; sometimes even they marry in order to forget them.

Yes, she must strike, but how? Elizabeth had feelings like other people. She did not mind ruining her sister and rival, but she would very much prefer it should not be known that hers was the hand to cut her down. Of course, if the worst came to the worst, she must do it. Meanwhile, might not a substitute be found--somebody in whom the act would seem not one of vengeance, but of virtue? Ah! she had it: Lady Honoria! Who could be better for such a purpose than the cruelly injured wife? But then how should she communicate the facts to her ladyship without involving herself? Again she hit upon a device much favoured by such people--"un vieux truc mais toujours bon"--the pristine one of an anonymous letter, which has the startling merit of not committing anybody to anything. An anonymous letter, to all appearance written by a servant: it was the very thing! Most likely it would result in a searching inquiry by Lady Honoria, in which event Elizabeth, of course against her will, would be forced to say what she knew; almost certainly it would result in a quarrel between husband and wife, which might induce the former to show his hand, or even to take some open step as regards Beatrice. She was sorry for Geoffrey, against whom she had no ill feeling, but it could not be helped; he must be sacrificed.

That very evening she wrote her letter and sent it to be posted by an old servant living in London. It was a master-piece in its way, especially phonetically. This precious epistle, which was most exceedingly ill writ in a large coarse hand, ran thus:

"My Ladi,--My consence druvvs me to it, much again my will. I've tried hard, my ladi, not to speak, first acorse of miss B. as i heve knowed good and peur and also for the sakes of your evil usband that wulf in scheeps cloathin. But when i think on you my ladi a lorful legel wife gud and virtus and peur and of the things as i hev seen which is enuf to bring a blush to the face of a stater, I knows it is my holy dooty to rite your ladishipp as follers. Your ladishipp forgif me but on the nite of whittsunday last Miss B. Grainger wint after midnite inter the room of your bad usband--as I was to mi sham ther to se. Afterward more nor an hour, she cum out ain being carred in his harmes. And if your ladishipp dont believ me, let your ladishipp rite to miss elizabeth, as had this same misfortune to see as your tru frend,

"The Riter."

In due course this charming communication reached Lady Honoria, bearing a London post-mark. She read and re-read it, and soon mastered its meaning. Then, after a night's thought, she took the "Riter's" advice and wrote to Elizabeth, sending her a copy of the letter (her own), vehemently repudiating all belief in it, and asking for a reply that should dissipate this foul slander from her mind for ever.

The answer came by return. It was short and artful.

"Dear Lady Honoria Bingham," it ran, "you must forgive me if I decline to answer the questions in your letter. You will easily understand that

between a desire to preserve a sister's reputation and an incapacity (to be appreciated by every Christian) to speak other than the truth--it is possible for a person to be placed in the most cruel of positions--a position which I am sure will command even your sympathy, though under such circumstances I have little right to expect any from a wife believing herself to have been cruelly wronged. Let me add that nothing short of the compulsion of a court of law will suffice to unseal my lips as to the details of the circumstances (which are, I trust, misunderstood) alluded to in the malicious anonymous letter of which you inclose a copy."

That very evening, as the Fates would have it, Lady Honoria and her husband had a quarrel. As usual, it was about Effie, for on most other subjects they preserved an armed neutrality. Its details need not be entered into, but at last Geoffrey, who was in a sadly irritable condition of mind, fairly lost his temper.

"The fact is," he said, "that you are not fit to look after the child. You only think of yourself, Honoria."

She turned on him with a dangerous look upon her cold and handsome face.

"Be careful what you say, Geoffrey. It is you who are not fit to have charge of Effie. Be careful lest I take her away from you altogether, as I can if I like."

"What do you mean by that threat?" he asked.

"Do you want to know? Then I will tell you. I understand enough law to be aware that a wife can get a separation from an unfaithful husband, and what is more, can take away his children."

"Again I ask what you mean," said Geoffrey, turning cold with anger.

"I mean this, Geoffrey. That Welsh girl is your mistress. She passed the night of Whit-Sunday in your room, and was carried from it in your arms."

"It is a lie," he said; "she is nothing of the sort. I do not know who gave you this information, but it is a slanderous lie, and somebody shall suffer for it."

"Nobody will suffer for it, Geoffrey, because you will not dare to stir the matter up--for the girl's sake if not for your own. Can you deny that you were seen carrying her in your arms from your room on Whit-Sunday night? Can you deny that you are in love with her?"

"And supposing that I am in love with her, is it to be wondered at, seeing how you treat me and have treated me for years?" he answered furiously. "It is utterly false to say that she is my mistress."

"You have not answered my question," said Lady Honoria with a smile of

triumph. "Were you seen carrying that woman in your arms and from your room at the dead of night? Of course it meant nothing, nothing at all. Who would dare to asperse the character of this perfect, lovely, and intellectual schoolmistress? I am not jealous, Geoffrey----"

"I should think not, Honoria, seeing how things are."

"I am not jealous, I repeat, but please understand that I will not have this go on, in your own interests and mine. Why, what a fool you must be. Don't you know that a man who has risen, as you have, has a hundred enemies ready to spring on him like a pack of wolves and tear him to pieces? Why many even of those who fawn upon you and flatter you to your face, hate you bitterly in secret, because you have succeeded where they have failed. Don't you know also that there are papers here in London which would give hundreds of pounds for the chance of publishing such a scandal as this, especially against a powerful political opponent. Let it once come out that this obscure girl is your mistress----"

"Honoria, I tell you she is nothing of the sort. It is true I carried her from my room in a fainting fit, but she came there in her sleep."

Lady Honoria laughed. "Really, Geoffrey, I wonder that you think it worth while to tell me such nonsense. Keep it for the divorce court, if ever we get there, and see what a jury says to it. Look here; be sensible. I am not a moralist, and I am not going to play the outraged wife unless you force me to it. I do not mean to take any further notice

of this interesting little tale as against you. But if you go on with it, beware! I will not be made to look a fool. If you are going to be ruined you can be ruined by yourself. I warn you frankly, that at the first sign of it, I shall put myself in the right by commencing proceedings against you. Now, of course, I know this, that in the event of a smash, you would be glad enough to be rid of me in order that you might welcome your dear Beatrice in my place. But there are two things to remember: first, that you could not marry her, supposing you to be idiot enough to wish to do so, because I should only get a judicial separation, and you would still have to support me. Secondly, if I go, Effie goes with me, for I have a right to claim her at law; and that fact, my dear Geoffrey, makes me mistress of the situation, because I do not suppose that you would part with Effie even for the sake of Miss Beatrice. And now I will leave you to think it over."

And with a little nod she sailed out of the room, completely victorious. She was indeed, reflected Geoffrey, "mistress of the situation." Supposing that she brought a suit against him where would he be? She must have evidence, or she would not have known the story. The whole drama had clearly been witnessed by someone, probably either by Elizabeth or the servant girl, and that some one had betrayed it to Honoria and possibly to others. The thought made him sick. He was a man of the world, and a practical lawyer, and though, indeed, they were innocent, he knew that under the circumstances few would be found to believe it. At the very best there must be a terrible and shocking scandal, and Beatrice would lose her good name. He placed himself in the

position of counsel for the petitioner in a like case, and thought how he would crush and crumple such a defence in his address to the jury. A probable tale forsooth!

Undoubtedly, too, Honoria would be acting wisely from her point of view. Public sympathy would be with her throughout. He knew that, as it was, he was believed generally to owe much of his success to his handsome and high-born wife. Now it would be said that he had used her as a ladder and then thrown her over. With all this, however, he might cope; he could even bear with the vulgar attacks of a vulgar press, and the gibes and jeers of his political and personal enemies, but to lose Effie he could not bear. And if such a case were brought against him it was almost certain that he would lose her, for, if he was worsted, custody of the child would be given to the injured wife.

Then there was Beatrice to be considered. The same malicious tongue that had revealed this matter to Honoria would probably reveal it to the rest of the world, and even if he escaped the worst penalties of outraged morality, they would certainly be wreaked upon her. Beatrice's reputation would be blasted, her employment lost, and her life made a burden to her. Yes, decidedly, Honoria had the best of the position; decidedly, also, she spoke words of weight and common sense.

What was to be done? Was there no way out of it? All that night as Geoffrey sat in the House, his arms folded on his breast, and to appearance intently listening to the long harangues of the Opposition,

this question haunted him. He argued the situation out this way and that way, till at the last he came to a conclusion. Either he must wait for the scandal to leak out, let Beatrice be ruined, and direct his efforts to the softening of Honoria, and generally to self-preservation, or he must take the bull by the horns, must abandon his great career and his country and seek refuge in another land, say America, taking Beatrice and Effie with him. Once the child was out of the jurisdiction, of course no court could force her from him.

Of the two courses, even in so far as he himself was concerned, what between the urgency of the matter and the unceasing pressure of his passion, Geoffrey inclined to the latter. The relations between himself and Honoria had for years been so strained, so totally different from those which should exist between man and wife, that they greatly mitigated in his mind the apparent iniquity of such a step. Nor would he feel much compunction at removing the child from her mother, for there was no love lost between the two, and as time went on he guessed shrewdly there would be less and less. For the rest, he had some seventeen thousand pounds in hand; he would take half and leave Honoria half. He knew that he could always earn a living wherever he went, and probably much more than a living, and of whatever he earned a strict moiety should be paid to Honoria. But first and above everything, there was Beatrice to be considered. She must be saved, even if he ruined himself to save her.

Lady Honoria, it is scarcely necessary to say, had little idea that she

was driving her husband to such dangerous and determined councils. She wanted to frighten Geoffrey, not to lose him and all he meant to her; this was the last thing that she would wish to do. She did not greatly care about the Beatrice incident, but her shrewd common sense told her that it might well be used as an engine to ruin them all. Therefore she spoke as she did speak, though in reality matters would have to be bad indeed before she sought the aid of a court of law, where many things concerning herself might come to the light of day which she would prefer to leave in darkness.

Nor did she stop here; she determined to attack Geoffrey's position in another way, namely, through Beatrice herself. For a long time Honoria hesitated as to the method of this attack. She had some knowledge of the world and of character, and from what she knew of Beatrice she came to the sound conclusion that she was not a woman to be threatened, but rather one to be appealed to. So after much thought she wrote to her thus:--

"A story, which I still hesitate to believe, has come to me by means of anonymous letters, as to your conduct with my husband. I do not wish to repeat it now, further than to say that, if true, it establishes circumstances which leave no doubt as to the existence of relations so intimate between you as to amount to guilt. It may not be true or it may, in which latter event I wish to say this: With your morality I have nothing to do; it is your affair. Nor do I wish to plead to you as an injured wife or to reproach you, for there are things too wicked for

mere reproach. But I will say this: if the story is true, I must presume that you have some affection for the partner of your shame. I put myself out of the question, and in the name of that affection, however guilty it may be, I ask you to push matters no further. To do so will be to bring its object to utter ruin. If you care for him, sever all connection with him utterly and for ever. Otherwise he will live to curse and hate you. Should you neglect this advice, and should the facts that I have heard become public property, I warn you, as I have already warned him, that in self-preservation and for the sake of self-respect, I shall be forced to appeal to the law for my remedy. Remember that his career is at stake, and that in losing it and me he will lose also his child. Remember that if this comes about it will be through you. Do not answer this, it will do no good, for I shall naturally put no faith in your protestations, but if you are in any way or measure guilty of this offence, appealing to you as one woman to another, and for the sake of the man who is dear to both, I say do your best to redeem the evil, by making all further communication between yourself and him an impossibility. H.B."

It was a clever letter; Lady Honoria could not have devised one more powerful to work on a woman like Beatrice. The same post that took it to her took another from Geoffrey himself. It was long, though guarded, and need not be quoted in its entirety, but it put the whole position before her in somewhat veiled language, and ended by saying, "Marriage I cannot give you, only life-long love. In other circumstances to offer this would be an insult, but if things should be as a I fear, it is worth

your consideration. I do not say to you come, I say come if you wish. No, Beatrice, I will not put this cruel burden of decision upon you. I say come! I do not command you to come, because I promised to leave you uninfluenced. But I pray you to do so. Let us put an end to this wretchedness, and count the world well lost as our price of love. Come, dearest Beatrice--to leave me no more till death. I put my life in your hands; if you take it up, whatever trouble you may have to face, you will never lose my affection or esteem. Do not think of me, think of yourself. You have given me your love as you once gave me my life. I owe something in return; I cannot see you shamed and make no offer of reparation. Indeed, so far as I am concerned, I shall think all I lose as nothing compared to what I gain in gaining you. Will you come? If so, we will leave this country and begin afresh elsewhere. After all, it matters little, and will matter less when everything is said and done. My life has for years been but as an unwholesome dream. The one real thing, the one happy thing that I have found in it has been our love. Do not let us throw it away, Beatrice."

By return of post he received this answer written in pencil.

"No, dear Geoffrey. Things must take their course.--B."

That was all.