

CHAPTER XXV

ELIZABETH SHOWS HER TEETH

Hard had been Beatrice's hours since that grey morning of separation. She must bear all the inner wretchedness of her lot; she must conceal her grief, must suffer the slings and arrows of Elizabeth's sharp tongue, and strive to keep Owen Davies at a distance. Indeed, as the days went on, this last task grew more and more portentous. The man was quite unmanageable; his passion, which was humiliating and hateful to Beatrice, became the talk of the place. Everybody knew of it, except her father, and even his eyes began to be opened.

One night--it was the same upon which Geoffrey and Honoria respectively had posted their letters to Beatrice--anybody looking into the little room at Bryngelly Castle, which served its owner for all purposes except that of sleeping, would have witnessed a very strange sight. Owen Davies was walking to and fro--walking rapidly with wild eyes and dishevelled hair. At the turn of each length of the apartment he would halt, and throwing his arms into the air ejaculate:

"Oh, God, hear me, and give me my desire! Oh, God, answer me!"

For two long hours thus he walked and thus cried aloud, till at length he sank panting and exhausted into a chair. Suddenly he raised his head, and appeared to listen intently.

"The Voice," he said aloud; "the Voice again. What does it say?"

To-morrow, to-morrow I must speak; and I shall win her."

He sprang up with a shout, and once more began his wild march. "Oh, Beatrice!" he said, "to-morrow you will promise to marry me; the Voice says so, and soon, soon, perhaps in one short month, you will be my own--mine only! Geoffrey Bingham shall not come between us then, for I will watch you day and night. You shall be my very, very own--my own beautiful Beatrice," and he stretched out his arms and clasped at the empty air--a crazy and unpleasant sight to see.

And so he walked and spoke till the dawn was grey in the east. This occurred on the Friday night. It was on the following morning that Beatrice, the unfortunate and innocent object of these amorous invocations, received the two letters. She had gone to the post-office on her way to the school, on the chance of there being a note from Geoffrey. Poor woman, his letters were the one bright thing in her life. From motives of prudence they were written in the usual semi-formal style, but she was quick to read between the lines, and, moreover, they came from his dear hand.

There was the letter sure enough, and another in a woman's writing. She recognised the hand as that of Lady Honoria, which she had often seen on envelopes directed to Geoffrey, and a thrill of fear shot through her.

She took the letters, and walking as quickly as she could to the school,

locked herself in her own little room, for it was not yet nine o'clock, and looked at them with a gathering terror. What was in them? Why did Lady Honoria write to her? Which should she read first? In a moment Beatrice had made up her mind. She would face the worst at once. With a set face she opened Lady Honoria's letter, unfolded it, and read. We already know its contents. As her mind grasped them her lips grew ashy white, and by the time that the horrible thing was done she was nigh to fainting.

Anonymous letters! oh, who could have done this cruel thing? Elizabeth, it must be Elizabeth, who saw everything, and thus stabbed her in the back. Was it possible that her own sister could treat her so? She knew that Elizabeth disliked her; she could never fathom the cause, still she knew the fact. But if this were her doing, then she must hate her, and most bitterly; and what had she done to earn such hate? And now Geoffrey was in danger on her account, danger of ruin, and how could she prevent it? This was her first idea. Most people might have turned to their own position and been content to leave their lover to fight his own battle. But Beatrice thought little of herself. He was in danger, and how could she protect him? Why here in the letter was the answer! "If you care for him sever all connection with him utterly, and for ever. Otherwise, he will live to curse and hate you." No, no! Geoffrey would never do that. But Lady Honoria was quite right; in his interest, for his sake, she must sever all connection with him--sever it utterly and for ever. But how--how?

She thrust the letter into her dress--a viper would have been a more welcome guest--and opened Geoffrey's.

It told the same tale, but offered a different solution. The tears started to her eyes as she read his offer to take her to him for good and all, and go away with her to begin life afresh. It seemed a wonderful thing to Beatrice that he should be willing to sacrifice so much upon such a worthless altar as her love--a wonderful and most generous thing. She pressed the senseless paper to her heart, then kissed it again and again. But she never thought of yielding to this great temptation, never for one second. He prayed her to come, but that she would not do while her will remained. What, she bring Geoffrey to ruin? No, she had rather starve in the streets or perish by slow torture. How could he ever think that she would consent to such a scheme? Indeed she never would; she had brought enough trouble on him already. But oh, she blessed him for that letter. How deeply must he love her when he could offer to do this for her sake!

Hark! the children were waiting; she must go and teach. The letter, Geoffrey's dear letter, could be answered in the afternoon. So she thrust it in her breast with the other, but closer to her heart, and went.

That afternoon as Mr. Granger, in a happy frame of mind--for were not

his debts paid, and had he not found a most convenient way of providing against future embarrassment?--was engaged peaceably in contemplating his stock over the gate of his little farm buildings, he was much astonished suddenly to discover Owen Davies at his elbow.

"How do you do, Mr. Davies?" he said; "how quietly you must have come."

"Yes," answered Owen absently. "The fact is, I have followed you because I want to speak to you alone--quite alone."

"Indeed, Mr. Davies--well, I am at your service. What is wrong? You don't look very well."

"Oh, I am quite well, thank you. I never was better; and there's nothing wrong, nothing at all. Everything is going to be bright now, I know that full surely."

"Indeed," said Mr. Granger, again looking at him with a puzzled air, "and what may you want to see me about? Not but what I am always at your service, as you know," he added apologetically.

"This," he answered, suddenly seizing the clergyman by the coat in a way that made him start.

"What--my coat, do you mean?"

"Don't be so foolish, Mr. Granger. No, about Beatrice."

"Oh. indeed, Mr. Davies. Nothing wrong at the school, I hope? I think that she does her duties to the satisfaction of the committee, though I admit that the arithmetic----"

"No! no, no! It is not about the school. I don't wish her to go to the school any more. I love her, Mr. Granger, I love her dearly, and I want to marry her."

The old man flushed with pleasure. Was it possible? Did he hear aright? Owen Davies, the richest man in that part of Wales, wanted to marry his daughter, who had nothing but her beauty. It must be too good to be true!

"I am indeed flattered," he said. "It is more than she could expect--not but what Beatrice is very good-looking and very clever," he added hastily, fearing lest he was detracting from his daughter's market value.

"Good-looking--clever; she is an angel," murmured Owen.

"Oh, yes, of course she is," said her father, "that is, if a woman--yes, of course--and what is more, I think she's very fond of you. I think she is pining for you. I've though so for a long time."

"Is she?" said Owen anxiously. "Then all I have to say is that she takes a very curious way of showing it. She won't say a word to me; she puts me off on every occasion. But it will be all right now--all right now."

"Oh, there, there, Mr. Davies, maids will be maids until they are wives. We know about all that," said Mr. Granger sententiously.

His would-be son-in-law looked as though he knew very little about it indeed, although the inference was sufficiently obvious.

"Mr. Granger," he said, seizing his hand, "I want to make Beatrice my wife--I do indeed."

"Well, I did not suppose otherwise, Mr. Davies."

"If you help me in this I will do whatever you like as to money matters and that sort of thing, you know. She shall have as fine a settlement as any woman in Wales. I know that goes a long way with a father, and I shall raise no difficulties."

"Very right and proper, I am sure," said Mr. Granger, adopting a loftier tone as he discovered the advantages of his position. "But of course on such matters I shall take the advice of a lawyer. I daresay that Mr. Bingham would advise me," he added, "as a friend of the family, you know. He is a very clever lawyer, and, besides, he wouldn't charge anything."

"Oh, no, not Mr. Bingham," answered Owen anxiously. "I will do anything you like, or if you wish to have a lawyer I'll pay the bill myself. But never mind about that now. Let us settle it with Beatrice first. Come along at once."

"Eh, but hadn't you better arrange that part of the business privately?"

"No, no. She always snubs me when I try to speak to her alone. You had better be there, and Miss Elizabeth too, if she likes. I won't speak to her again alone. I will speak to her in the face of God and man, as God directed me to do, and then it will be all right--I know it will."

Mr. Granger stared at him. He was a clergyman of a very practical sort, and did not quite see what the Power above had to do with Owen Davies's matrimonial intentions.

"Ah, well," he said, "I see what you mean; marriages are made in heaven; yes, of course. Well, if you want to get on with the matter, I daresay that we shall find Beatrice in."

So they walked back to the Vicarage, Mr. Granger exultant and yet perplexed, for it struck him that there was something a little odd about the proceeding, and Owen Davies in silence or muttering occasionally to himself.

In the sitting-room they found Elizabeth.

"Where is Beatrice?" asked her father.

"I don't know," she answered, and at that moment Beatrice, pale and troubled, walked into the room, like a lamb to the slaughter.

"Ah, Beatrice," said her father, "we were just asking for you."

She glanced round, and with the quick wit of a human animal, instantly perceived that some new danger threatened her.

"Indeed," she said, sinking into a chair in an access of feebleness born of fear. "What is it, father?"

Mr. Granger looked at Owen Davies and then took a step towards the door. It struck him forcibly that this scene should be private to the two persons principally concerned.

"Don't go," said Owen Davies excitedly, "don't go, either of you; what I have to say had better be said before you both. I should like to say it before the whole world; to cry it from the mountain tops."

Elizabeth glared at him fiercely--glared first at him and then at the innocent Beatrice. Could he be going to propose to her, then? Ah, why had she hesitated? Why had she not told him the whole truth before?

But the heart of Beatrice, who sat momentarily expecting to be publicly denounced, grew ever fainter. The waters of desolation were closing in over her soul.

Mr. Granger sat down firmly and worked himself into the seat of his chair, as though to secure an additional fixedness of tenure. Elizabeth set her teeth, and leaned her elbow on the table, holding her hand so as to shade her face. Beatrice drooped upon her seat like a fading lily, or a prisoner in the dock. She was opposite to them, and Owen Davies, his face alight with wild enthusiasm, stood up and addressed them all like the counsel for the prosecution.

"Last autumn," he began, speaking to Mr. Granger, who might have been a judge uncertain as to the merits of the case, "I asked your daughter Beatrice to marry me."

Beatrice gave a sigh, and collected her scattered energies. The storm had burst at last, and she must face it.

"I asked her to marry me, and she told me to wait a year. I have waited as long as I could, but I could not wait the whole year. I have prayed a great deal, and I am bidden to speak."

Elizabeth made a gesture of impatience. She was a person of strong common sense, and this mixture of religion and eroticism disgusted her. She also knew that the storm had burst, and that she must face it.

"So I come to tell you that I love your daughter Beatrice, and want to make her my wife. I have never loved anybody else, but I have loved her for years; and I ask your consent."

"Very flattering, very flattering, I am sure, especially in these hard times," said Mr. Granger apologetically, shaking his thin hair down over his forehead, and then rumpling it up again. "But you see, Mr. Davies, you don't want to marry me" (here Beatrice smiled faintly)--"you want to marry my daughter, so you had better ask her direct--at least I suppose so."

Elizabeth made a movement as though to speak, then changed her mind and listened.

"Beatrice," said Owen Davies, "you hear. I ask you to marry me."

There was a pause. Beatrice, who had sat quite silent, was gathering up her strength to answer. Elizabeth, watching her from beneath her hand, thought that she read upon her face irresolution, softening into consent. What she really saw was but doubt as to the fittest and most certain manner of refusal. Like lightning it flashed into Elizabeth's mind that she must strike now, or hold her hand for ever. If once Beatrice spoke that fatal "yes," her revelations might be of no avail. And Beatrice would speak it; she was sure she would. It was a golden

road out of her troubles.

"Stop!" said Elizabeth in a shrill, hard voice. "Stop! I must speak; it is my duty as a Christian. I must tell the truth. I cannot allow an honest man to be deceived."

There was an awful pause. Beatrice broke it. Now she saw all the truth, and knew what was at hand. She placed her hand upon her heart to still its beating.

"Oh, Elizabeth," she said, "in our dead mother's name----" and she stopped.

"Yes," answered her sister, "in our dead mother's name, which you have dishonoured, I will do it. Listen, Owen Davies, and father: Beatrice, who sits there"--and she pointed at her with her thin hand--"Beatrice is a scarlet woman!"

"I really don't understand," gasped Mr. Granger, while Owen looked round wildly, and Beatrice sunk her head upon her breast.

"Then I will explain," said Elizabeth, still pointing at her sister.

"She is Geoffrey Bingham's mistress. On the night of Whit-Sunday last she rose from bed and went into his room at one in the morning. I saw her with my own eyes. Afterwards she was brought back to her bed in his arms--I saw it with my own eyes, and I heard him kiss her." (This was

a piece of embroidery on Elizabeth's part.) "She is his lover, and has been in love with him for months. I tell you this, Owen Davies, because, though I cannot bear to bring disgrace upon our name and to defile my lips with such a tale, neither can I bear that you should marry a girl, believing her to be good, when she is what Beatrice is."

"Then I wish to God that you had held your wicked tongue," said Mr. Granger fiercely.

"No, father. I have a duty to perform, and I will perform it at any cost, and however much it pains me. You know that what I say is true. You heard the noise on the night of Whit-Sunday, and got up to see what it was. You saw the white figure in the passage--it was Geoffrey Bingham with Beatrice in his arms. Ah! well may she hang her head. Let her deny if it she can. Let her deny that she loves him to her shame, and that she was alone in his room on that night."

Then Beatrice rose and spoke. She was pale as death and more beautiful in her shame and her despair than ever she had been before; her glorious eyes shone, and there were deep black lines beneath them.

"My heart is my own," she said, "and I will make no answer to you about it. Think what you will. For the rest, it is not true. I am not what Elizabeth tells you that I am. I am not Geoffrey Bingham's mistress. It is true that I was in his room that night, and it is true that he carried me back to my own. But it was in my sleep that I went there, not

of my own free will. I awoke there, and fainted when I woke, and then at once he bore me back."

Elizabeth laughed shrill and loud--it sounded like the cackle of a fiend.

"In her sleep," she said; "oh, she went there in her sleep!"

"Yes, Elizabeth, in my sleep. You do not believe me, but it is true. You do not wish to believe me. You wish to bring the sister whom you should love, who has never offended against you by act or word, to utter disgrace and ruin. In your cowardly spite you have written anonymous letters to Lady Honoria Bingham, to prevail upon her to strike the blow that should destroy her husband and myself, and when you fear that this has failed, you come forward and openly accuse us. You do this in the name of Christian duty; in the name of love and charity, you believe the worst, and seek to ruin us. Shame on you, Elizabeth! shame on you! and may the same measure that you have meted out to me never be paid back to you. We are no longer sisters. Whatever happens, I have done with you. Go your ways."

Elizabeth shrank and quailed beneath her sister's scorn. Even her venomous hatred could not bear up against the flash of those royal eyes, and the majesty of that outraged innocence. She gasped and bit her lip till the blood started, but she said nothing.

Then Beatrice turned to her father, and spoke in another and a pleading voice, stretching out her arms towards him.

"Oh, father," she said, "at least tell me that you believe me. Though you may think that I might love to all extremes, surely, having known me so many years, you cannot think that I would lie even for my love's sake."

The old man looked wildly round, and shook his head.

"In his room and in his arms," he said. "I saw it, it seems. You, too, who have never been known to walk in your sleep from a child; and you will not say that you do not love him--the scoundrel. It is wicked of Elizabeth--jealousy bitter as the grave. It is wicked of her to tell the tale; but as it is told, how can I say that I do not believe it?"

Then Beatrice, her cup being full, once more dropped her head, and turned to go.

"Stop," said Owen Davies in a hoarse voice, and speaking for the first time. "Hear what I have to say."

She lifted her eyes. "With you, Mr. Davies, I have nothing to do; I am not answerable to you. Go and help your accomplice," and she pointed to Elizabeth, "to cry this scandal over the whole world."

"Stop," he said again. "I will speak. I believe that it is true. I believe that you are Geoffrey Bingham's mistress, curse him! but I do not care. I am still willing to marry you."

Elizabeth gasped. Was this to be the end of her scheming? Would the blind passion of this madman prevail over her revelations, and Beatrice still become his rich and honoured wife, while she was left poor and disgraced? Oh, it was monstrous! Oh, she had never dreamed of this!

"Noble, noble!" murmured Mr. Granger; "noble! God bless you!"

So the position was not altogether beyond recovery. His erring daughter might still be splendidly married; he might still look forward to peace and wealth in his old age.

Only Beatrice smiled faintly.

"I thank you," she said. "I am much honoured, but I could never have married you because I do not love you. You must understand me very little if you think that I should be the more ready to do so on account of the danger in which I stand," and she ceased.

"Listen, Beatrice," Owen went on, an evil light shining on his heavy face, while Elizabeth sat astounded, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"I want you, and I mean to marry you; you are more to me than all the world. I can give you everything, and you had better yield to me, and

you shall hear no more of this. But if you won't, then this is what I will do. I will be revenged upon you--terribly revenged."

Beatrice shook her head and smiled again, as though to bid him do his worst.

"And look, Beatrice," he went on, waxing almost eloquent in his jealous despair, "I have another argument to urge on you. I will not only be revenged on you, I will be revenged upon your lover--on this Geoffrey Bingham."

"Oh!" said Beatrice sharply, like one in pain. He had found the way to move her now, and with the cunning of semi-madness he drove the point home.

"Yes, you may start--I will. I tell you that I will never rest till I have ruined him, and I am rich and can do it. I have a hundred thousand pounds, that I will spend on doing it. I have nothing to fear, except an action for libel. Oh, I am not a fool, though you think I am, I know. Well, I can pay for a dozen actions. There are papers in London that will be glad to publish all this--yes, the whole story--with plans and pictures too. Just think, Beatrice, what it will be when all England--yes, and all the world--is gloating over your shame, and half-a-dozen prints are using the thing for party purposes, clamouring for the disgrace of the man who ruined you, and whom you will ruin. He has a fine career; it shall be utterly destroyed. By God! I will hunt

him to his grave, unless you promise to marry me, Beatrice. Do that, and not a word of this shall be said. Now answer."

Mr. Granger sank back in his chair; this savage play of human passions was altogether beyond his experience--it overwhelmed him. As for Elizabeth, she bit her thin fingers, and glared from one to the other. "He reckons without me," she thought. "He reckons without me--I will marry him yet."

But Beatrice leant for a moment against the wall and shut her eyes to think. Oh, she saw it all--the great posters with her name and Geoffrey's on them, the shameless pictures of her in his arms, the sickening details, the letters of the outraged matrons, the "Mothers of ten," and the moral-minded colonels--all, all! She heard the prurient scream of every male Elizabeth in England; the allusions in the House--the jeers, the bitter attacks of enemies and rivals. Then Lady Honoria would begin her suit, and it would all be dragged up afresh, and Geoffrey's fault would be on every lip, till he was ruined. For herself she did not care; but could she bring this on one whose only crime was that she had learned to love him? No, no; but neither could she marry this hateful man. And yet what escape was there? She flung herself upon her woman's wit, and it did not fail her. In a few seconds she had thought it all out and made up her mind.

"How can I answer you at a moment's notice, Mr. Davies?" she said. "I must have time to think it over. To threaten such revenge upon me is not

manly, but I know that you love me, and therefore I excuse it. Still, I must have time. I am confused."

"What, another year? No, no," he said. "You must answer."

"I do not ask a year or a month. I only ask for one week. If you will not give me that, then I will defy you, and you may do your worst. I cannot answer now."

This was a bold stroke, but it told. Mr. Davies hesitated.

"Give the girl a week," said her father to him. "She is not herself."

"Very well; one week, no more," said he.

"I have another stipulation to make," said Beatrice, "You are all to swear to me that for that week no word of this will pass your mouths; that for that week I shall not be annoyed or interfered with, or spoken to on the subject, not by one of you. If at the end of it I still refuse to accept your terms, you can do your worst, but till then you must hold your hand."

Owen Davies hesitated; he was suspicious.

"Remember," Beatrice went on, raising her voice, "I am a desperate woman. I may turn at bay, and do something which you do not expect, and

that will be very little to the advantage of any of you. Do you swear?"

"Yes," said Owen Davies.

Then Beatrice looked at Elizabeth, and Elizabeth looked at her. She saw that the matter had taken a new form. She saw what her jealous folly had hitherto hidden from her--that Beatrice did not mean to marry Owen Davies, that she was merely gaining time to execute some purpose of her own. What this might be Elizabeth cared little so that it did not utterly extinguish chances that at the moment seemed faint enough. She did not want to push matters against her sister, or her lover Geoffrey, beyond the boundary of her own interests. Beatrice should have her week, and be free from all interference so far as she was concerned. She realised now that it was too late how great had been her error. Oh, if only she had sought Beatrice's confidence at first! But it had seemed to her impossible that she would really throw away such an opportunity in life.

"Certainly I promise, Beatrice," she said mildly. "I do not swear, for 'swear not at all,' you know. I only did what I thought my duty in warning Mr. Davies. If he chooses to go on with the matter, it is no affair of mine. I had no wish to hurt you, or Mr. Bingham. I acted solely from my religious convictions."

"Oh, stop talking religion, Elizabeth, and practise it a little more!" said her father, for once in his life stirred out of his feeble

selfishness. "We have all undertaken to keep our mouths sealed for this week."

Then Beatrice left the room, and after her went Owen Davies without another word.

"Elizabeth," said her father, rising, "you are a wicked woman! What did you do this for?"

"Do you want to know, father?" she said coolly; "then I will tell you. Because I mean to marry Owen Davies myself. We must all look after ourselves in this world, you know; and that is a maxim which you never forget, for one. I mean to marry him; and though I seem to have failed, marry him I will, yet! And now you know all about it; and if you are not a fool, you will hold your tongue and let me be!" and she went also, leaving him alone.

Mr. Granger held up his hands in astonishment. He was a selfish, money-seeking old man, but he felt that he did not deserve to have such a daughter as this.