

CHAPTER XXVI

WHAT BEATRICE SWORE

Beatrice went to her room, but the atmosphere of the place seemed to stifle her. Her brain was reeling, she must go out into the air--away from her tormentors. She had not yet answered Geoffrey's letter, and it must be answered by this post, for there was none on Sunday. It was half-past four--the post went out at five; if she was going to write, she should do so at once, but she could not do so here. Besides, she must find time for thought. Ah, she had it; she would take her canoe and paddle across the bay to the little town of Coed and write her letter there. The post did not leave Coed till half-past six. She put on her hat and jacket, and taking a stamp, a sheet of paper, and an envelope with her, slipped quietly from the house down to old Edward's boat-house where the canoe was kept. Old Edward was not there himself, but his son was, a boy of fourteen, and by his help Beatrice was soon safely launched. The sea glittered like glass, and turning southwards, presently she was paddling round the shore of the island on which the Castle stood towards the open bay.

As she paddled her mind cleared, and she was able to consider the position. It was bad enough. She saw no light, darkness hemmed her in. But at least she had a week before her, and meanwhile what should she write to Geoffrey?

Then, as she thought, a great temptation assailed Beatrice, and for the first time her resolution wavered. Why should she not accept Geoffrey's offer and go away with him--far away from all this misery? Gladly would she give her life to spend one short year at his dear side. She had but to say the word, and he would take her to him, and in a month from now they would be together in some foreign land, counting the world well lost, as he had said. Doubtless in time Lady Honoria would get a divorce, and they might be married. A day might even come when all this would seem like a forgotten night of storm and fear; when, surrounded by the children of their love, they would wend peaceably, happily, through the evening of their days towards a bourne robbed of half its terrors by the fact that they would cross it hand-in-hand.

Oh, that would be well for her; but would it be well for him? When the first months of passion had passed by, would he not begin to think of all that he had thrown away for the sake of a woman's love? Would not the burst of shame and obloquy which would follow him to the remotest corners of the earth wear away his affection, till at last, as Lady Honoria said, he learned to curse and hate her. And if it did not--if he still loved her through it all--as, being what he was, he well might do--could she be the one to bring this ruin on him? Oh, it would have been more kind to let him drown on that night of the storm, when fate first brought them together to their undoing.

No, no; once and for all, once and for ever, she would not do it.

Cruel as was her strait, heavy as was her burden, not one feather's

weight of it should he carry, if by any means in her poor power she could hold it from his back. She would not even tell him of what had happened--at any rate, not now. It would distress him; he might take some desperate step; it was almost certain that he would do so. Her answer must be very short.

She was quite close to Coed now, and the water lay calm as a pond. So calm was it that she drew the sheet of paper and the envelope from her pocket, and leaning forward, rested them on the arched covering of the canoe, and pencilled those words which we have already read.

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

Thus she wrote. Then she paddled to the shore. A fisherman standing on the beach caught her canoe and pulled it up. Leaving it in his charge, she went into the quaint little town, directed and posted her letter, and bought some wool. It was an excuse for having been there should any one ask questions. After that she returned to her canoe. The fisherman was standing by it. She offered him sixpence for his trouble, but he would not take it.

"No, miss," he said, "thanking you kindly--but we don't often get a peep at such sweet looks. It's worth sixpence to see you, it is. But, miss, if I may make so bold as to say so, it isn't safe for you to cruise about in that craft, any ways not alone."

Beatrice thanked him and blushed a little. Vaguely it occurred to her that she must have more than a common share of beauty, when a rough man could be so impressed with it. That was what men loved women for, their beauty, as Owen Davies loved and desired her for this same cause and this only.

Perhaps it was the same with Geoffrey--no, she did not believe it. He loved her for other things besides her looks. Only if she had not been beautiful, perhaps he would not have begun to love her, so she was thankful for her eyes and hair, and form.

Could folly and infatuation go further? This woman in the darkest hour of her bottomless and unhorizoned despair, with conscience gnawing at her heart, with present misery pressing on her breast, and shame to come hanging over her like a thunder cloud, could yet feel thankful that she had won this barren love, the spring of all her woe. Or was her folly deep wisdom in disguise?--is there something divine in a passion that can so override and defy the worst agonies of life?

She was at sea again now, and evening was falling on the waters softly as a dream. Well, the letter was posted. Would it be the last, she wondered? It seemed as though she must write no more letters. And what was to be done? She would not marry Owen Davies--never would she do it. She could not so shamelessly violate her feelings, for Beatrice was a woman to whom death would be preferable to dishonour, however legal.

No, for her own sake she would not be soiled with that disgrace. Did she do this, she would hold herself the vilest of the vile. And still less would she do it for Geoffrey's sake. Her instinct told her what he would feel at such a thing, though he might never say a word. Surely he would loathe and despise her. No, that idea was done with--utterly done with.

Then what remained to her? She would not fly with Geoffrey, since to do so would be to ruin him. She would not marry Owen, and not to do so would still be to ruin Geoffrey. She was no fool, she was innocent in act, but she knew that her innocence would indeed be hard to prove--even her own father did not believe in it, and her sister would openly accuse her to the world. What then should she do? Should she hide herself in some remote half-civilised place, or in London? It was impossible; she had no money, and no means of getting any. Besides, they would hunt her out, both Owen Davies and Geoffrey would track her to the furthest limits of the earth. And would not the former think that Geoffrey had spirited her away, and at once put his threats into execution? Obviously he would. There was no hope in that direction. Some other plan must be found or her lover would still be ruined.

So argued Beatrice, still thinking not of herself, but of Geoffrey, of that beloved one who was more to her than all the world, more, a thousand times, than her own safety or well-being. Perhaps she overrated the matter. Owen Davies, Lady Honoria, and even Elizabeth might have done all they threatened; the first of them, perhaps the first two of them, certainly would have done so. But still Geoffrey might have

escaped destruction. Public opinion, or the sounder part of it, is sensibly enough hard to move in such a matter, especially when the person said to have been wronged is heart and soul on the side of him who is said to have wronged her.

Moreover there might have been ways out of it, of which she knew nothing. But surrounded as she was by threatening powers--by Lady Honoria threatening actions in the Courts on one side, by Owen Davies threatening exposure on another, by Elizabeth ready and willing to give the most damning evidence on the third, to Beatrice the worst consequences seemed an absolutely necessary sequence. Then there was her

own conscience arrayed against her. This particular charge was a lie, but it was not a lie that she loved Geoffrey, and to her the two things seemed very much the same thing. Hers was not a mind to draw fine distinctions in such matters. *Se posuit ut culpabilem*: she "placed herself as guilty," as the old Court rolls put it in miserable Latin, and this sense of guilt disarmed her. She did not realise the enormous difference recognised by the whole civilised world between thought and act, between disposing mind and inculcating deed. Beatrice looked at the question more from the scriptural point of view, remembering that in the Bible such fine divisions are expressly stated to be distinctions without a difference.

Had she gone to Geoffrey and told him her whole story it is probable that he would have defied the conspiracy, faced it out, and possibly

come off victorious. But, with that deadly reticence of which women alone are capable, this she did not and would not do. Sweet loving woman that she was, she would not burden him with her sorrows, she would bear them alone--little reckoning that thereby she was laying up a far, far heavier load for him to carry through all his days.

So Beatrice accepted the statements of the plaintiff's attorney for gospel truth, and from that false standpoint she drew her auguries.

Oh, she was weary! How lovely was the falling night, see how it brooded on the seas! and how clear were the waters--there a fish passed by her paddle--and there the first star sprang into the sky! If only Geoffrey were here to see it with her. Geoffrey! she had lost him; she was alone in the world now--alone with the sea and the stars. Well, they were better than men--better than all men except one. Theirs was a divine companionship, and it soothed her. Ah, how hateful had been Elizabeth's face, more hateful even than the half-crazed cunning of Owen Davies, when she stretched her hand towards her and called her "a scarlet woman." It was so like Elizabeth, this mixing up of Bible terms with her accusation. And after all perhaps it was true.--What was it, "Though thy sins be as scarlet, yet shall they be white as snow." But that was only if one repented. She did not repent, not in the least. Conscience, it is true, reproached her with a breach of temporal and human law, but her heart cried that such love as she had given was immortal and divine, and

therefore set beyond the little bounds of time and man. At any rate, she loved Geoffrey and was proud and glad to love him. The circumstances were unfortunate, but she did not make the world or its social arrangements any more than she had made herself, and she could not help that. The fact remained, right or wrong--she loved him, loved him!

How clear were the waters! What was that wild dream which she had dreamt about herself sitting at the bottom of the sea, and waiting for him--till at last he came. Sitting at the bottom of the sea--why did it strike her so strangely--what unfamiliar thought did it waken in her mind? Well, and why not? It would be pleasant there, better at any rate than on the earth. But things cannot be ended so; one is burdened with the flesh, and one must wear it till it fails. Why must she wear it? Was not the sea large enough to hide her bones? Look now, she had but to slip over the edge of the canoe, slip without a struggle into those mighty arms, and in a few short minutes it would all be done and gone!

She gasped as the thought struck home. Here was the answer to her questionings, the same answer that is given to every human troubling, to all earthly hopes and fears and strivings. One stroke of that black knife and everything would be lost or found. Would it be so great a thing to give her life for Geoffrey?--why she had well nigh done as much when she had known him but an hour, and now that he was all in all, oh, would it be so great a thing? If she died--died secretly, swiftly, surely--Geoffrey would be saved; they would not trouble him then, there would be no one to trouble about: Owen Davies could not marry her then,

Geoffrey could not ruin himself over her, Elizabeth could pursue her no further. It would be well to do this thing for Geoffrey, and he would always love her, and beyond that black curtain there might be something better.

They said that it was sin. Yes, it might be sin to act thus for oneself alone. But to do it for another--how of that! Was not the Saviour whom they preached a Man of Sacrifice? Would it be a sin in her to die for Geoffrey, to sacrifice herself that Geoffrey might go free?

Oh, it would be no great merit. Her life was not so easy that she should fear this pure embrace. It would be better, far better, than to marry Owen Davies, than to desecrate their love and teach Geoffrey to despise her. And how else could she ward this trouble from him except by her death, or by a marriage that in her eyes was more dreadful than any death?

She could not do it yet. She could not die until she had once more seen his face, even though he did not see hers. No, not to-night would she seek this swift solution. She had words to say--or words to write--before the end. Already they rushed in upon her mind!

But if no better plan presented itself she would do it, she was sure that she would. It was a sin--well, let it be a sin; what did she care

if she sinned for Geoffrey? He would not think the worse of her for it. And she had hope, yes, Geoffrey had taught her to hope. If there was a Hell, why it was here. And yet not all a Hell, for in it she had found her love!

It grew dark; she could hear the whisper of the waves upon Bryngelly beach. It grew dark; the night was closing round. She paddled to within a few fathoms of the shore, and called in her clear voice.

"Ay, ay, miss," answered old Edward from the beach. "Come in on the next wave."

She came in accordingly and her canoe was caught and dragged high and dry.

"What, Miss Beatrice," said the old man shaking his head and grumbling, "at it again! Out all alone in that thing," and he gave the canoe a contemptuous kick, "and in the dark, too. You want a husband to look after you, you do. You'll never rest till you're drowned."

"No, Edward," she answered with a little laugh. "I don't suppose that I shall. There is no peace for the wicked above seas, you know. Now do not scold. The canoe is as safe as church in this weather and in the bay."

"Oh, yes, it's safe enough in the calm and the bay," he answered, "but supposing it should come on to blow and supposing you should drift beyond the shelter of Rumball Point there, and get the rollers down on you--why you would be drowned in five minutes. It's wicked, miss, that's what it is."

Beatrice laughed again and went.

"She's a funny one she is," said the old man scratching his head as he looked after her, "of all the woman folk as ever I knowed she is the rummest. I sometimes thinks she wants to get drowned. Dash me if I haven't half a mind to stave a hole in the bottom of that there damned canoe, and finish it."

Beatrice reached home a little before supper time. Her first act was to call Betty the servant and with her assistance to shift her bed and things into the spare room. With Elizabeth she would have nothing more to do. They had slept together since they were children, now she had done with her. Then she went in to supper, and sat through it like a statue, speaking no word. Her father and Elizabeth kept up a strained conversation, but they did not speak to her, nor she to them. Elizabeth did not even ask where she had been, nor take any notice of her change of room.

One thing, however, Beatrice learnt. Her father was going on the Monday to Hereford by an early train to attend a meeting of clergymen collected

to discuss the title question. He was to return by the last train on the Tuesday night, that is, about midnight. Beatrice now discovered that Elizabeth proposed to accompany him. Evidently she wished to see as little as possible of her sister during this week of truce--possibly she was a little afraid of her. Even Elizabeth might have a conscience.

So she should be left alone from Monday morning till Tuesday night. One can do a good deal in forty hours.

After supper Beatrice rose and left the room, without a word, and they were glad when she went. She frightened them with her set face and great calm eyes. But neither spoke to the other on the subject. They had entered into a conspiracy of silence.

Beatrice locked her door and then sat at the window lost in thought. When once the idea of suicide has entered the mind it is apt to grow with startling rapidity. She reviewed the whole position; she went over all the arguments and searched the moral horizon for some feasible avenue of escape. But she could find none that would save Geoffrey, except this. Yes, she would do it, as many another wretched woman had done before her, not from cowardice indeed, for had she alone been concerned she would have faced the thing out, fighting to the bitter end--but for this reason only, it would cut off the dangers which threatened Geoffrey at their very root and source. Of course there must be no scandal; it must never be known that she had killed herself, or she might defeat her own object, for the story would be raked up. But

she well knew how to avoid such a possibility; in her extremity Beatrice grew cunning as a fox. Yes, and there might be an inquest at which awkward questions would be asked. But, as she well knew also, before an inquest can be held there must be something to hold it on, and that something would not be there.

And so in the utter silence of the night and in the loneliness of her chamber did Beatrice dedicate herself to sacrifice upon the altar of her immeasurable love. She would face the last agonies of death when the bloom of her youthful strength and beauty was but opening as a rose in June. She would do more, she would brave the threatened vengeance of the most High, coming before Him a self murderess, and with but one plea for pity--that she loved so well: *quia multum amavit*. Yes, she would do all this, would leave the warm world in the dawning summer of her days, and alone go out into the dark--alone would face those visions which might come--those Shapes of terror, and those Things of fear, that perchance may wait for sinful human kind. Alone she would go--oh, hand in hand with him it had been easy, but this must not be. The door of utter darkness would swing to behind her, and who could say if in time to come it should open to Geoffrey's following feet, or if he might ever find the path that she had trod. It must be done, it should be done! Beatrice rose from her seat with bright eyes and quick-coming breath, and swore before God, if God there were, that she would do it, trusting to Him for pardon and for pity, or failing these--for sleep.

Yes, but first she must once more look upon Geoffrey's dear face--and then farewell!

Pity her! poor mistaken woman, making of her will a Providence, rushing to doom. Pity her, but do not blame her overmuch, or if you do, then blame Judith and Jephtha's daughter and Charlotte Corday, and all the glorious women who from time to time have risen on this sordid world of self, and given themselves as an offering upon the altars of their love, their religion, their honour or their country!

It was finished. Now let her rest while she could, seeing what was to come. With a sigh for all that was, and all that might have been, Beatrice lay down and soon slept sweetly as a child.