

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Next day was Sunday. Beatrice did not go to church. For one thing, she feared to see Owen Davies there. But she took her Sunday school class as usual, and long did the children remember how kind and patient she was with them that day, and how beautifully she told them the story of the Jewish girl of long ago, who went forth to die for the sake of her father's oath.

Nearly all the rest of the day and evening she spent in writing that which we shall read in time--only in the late afternoon she went out for a little while in her canoe. Another thing Beatrice did also: she called at the lodging of her assistant, the head school teacher, and told her it was possible that she would not be in her place on the Tuesday (Monday was, as it chanced, a holiday). If anybody inquired as to her absence, perhaps she would kindly tell them that Miss Granger had an appointment to keep, and had taken a morning's holiday in order to do so. She should, however, be back that afternoon. The teacher assented without suspicion, remarking that if Beatrice could not take a morning's holiday, she was sure she did not know who could.

Next morning they breakfasted very early, because Mr. Granger and Elizabeth had to catch the train. Beatrice sat through the meal in silence, her calm eyes looking straight before her, and the others,

gazing on them, and at the lovely inscrutable face, felt an indefinable fear creep into their hearts. What did this woman mean to do? That was the question they asked of themselves, though not of each other. That she meant to do something they were sure, for there was purpose written on every line of her cold face.

Suddenly, as they sat thinking, and making pretence to eat, a thought flashed like an arrow into Beatrice's heart, and pierced it. This was the last meal that they could ever take together, this was the last time that she could ever see her father's and her sister's faces. For her sister, well, it might pass--for there are some things which even a woman like Beatrice can never quite forgive--but she loved her father. She loved his very faults, even his simple avarice and self-seeking had become endeared to her by long and wondering contemplation. Besides, he was her father; he gave her the life she was about to cast away. And she should never see him more. Not on that account did she hesitate in her purpose, which was now set in her mind, like Bryngelly Castle on its rock, but at the thought tears rushed unbidden to her eyes.

Just then breakfast came to an end, and Elizabeth hurried from the room to fetch her bonnet.

"Father," said Beatrice, "if you can before you go, I should like to hear you say that you do not believe that I told you what was false--about that story."

"Eh, eh!" answered the old man nervously, "I thought that we had agreed to say nothing about the matter at present."

"Yes, but I should like to hear you say it, father. It cuts me that you should think that I would lie to you, for in my life I have never wilfully told you what was not true;" and she clasped her hands about his arms, and looked into his face.

He gazed at her doubtfully. Was it possible after all she was speaking the truth? No; it was not possible.

"I can't, Beatrice," he said--"not that I blame you overmuch for trying to defend yourself; a cornered rat will show fight."

"May you never regret those words," she said; "and now good-bye," and she kissed him on the forehead.

At this moment Elizabeth entered, saying that it was time to start, and he did not return the kiss.

"Good-bye, Elizabeth," said Beatrice, stretching out her hand. But Elizabeth affected not to see it, and in another moment they were gone. She followed them to the gate and watched them till they vanished down the road. Then she returned, her heart strained almost to bursting. But she wept no tear.

Thus did Beatrice bid a last farewell to her father and her sister.

"Elizabeth," said Mr. Granger, as they drew near to the station, "I am not easy in my thoughts about Beatrice. There was such a strange look in her eyes; it--in short, it frightens me. I have half a mind to give up Hereford, and go back," and he stopped upon the road, hesitating.

"As you like," said Elizabeth with a sneer, "but I should think that Beatrice is big enough and bad enough to look after herself."

"Before the God who made us," said the old man furiously, and striking the ground with his stick, "she may be bad, but she is not so bad as you who betrayed her. If Beatrice is a Magdalene, you are a woman Judas; and I believe that you hate her, and would be glad to see her dead."

Elizabeth made no answer. They were nearing the station, for her father had started on again, and there were people about. But she looked at him, and he never forgot the look. It was quite enough to chill him into silence, nor did he allude to the matter any more.

When they were gone, Beatrice set about her own preparations. Her wild purpose was to travel to London, and catch a glimpse of Geoffrey's face in the House of Commons, if possible, and then return. She put on her bonnet and best dress; the latter was very plainly made of simple grey

cloth, but on her it looked well enough, and in the breast of it she thrust the letter which she had written on the previous day. A small hand-bag, with some sandwiches and a brush and comb in it, and a cloak, made up the total of her baggage.

The train, which did not stop at Bryngelly, left Coed at ten, and Coed was an hour and a half's walk. She must be starting. Of course, she would have to be absent for the night, and she was sorely puzzled how to account for her absence to Betty, the servant girl; the others being gone there was no need to do so to anybody else. But here fortune befriended her. While she was thinking the matter over, who should come in but Betty herself, crying. She had just heard, she said, that her little sister, who lived with their mother at a village about ten miles away, had been knocked down by a cart and badly hurt. Might she go home for the night? She could come back on the morrow, and Miss Beatrice could get somebody in to sleep if she was lonesome.

Beatrice sympathised, demurred, and consented, and Betty started at once. As soon as she was gone, Beatrice locked up the house, put the key in her pocket, and started on her five miles' tramp. Nobody saw her leave the house, and she passed by a path at the back of the village, so that nobody saw her on the road. Reaching Coed Station quite unobserved, and just before the train was due, she let down her veil, and took a third-class ticket to London. This she was obliged to do, for her stock of money was very small; it amounted, altogether, to thirty-six shillings, of which the fare to London and back would cost her

twenty-eight and fourpence.

In another minute she had entered an empty carriage, and the train had steamed away.

She reached Paddington about eight that night, and going to the refreshment room, dined on some tea and bread and butter. Then she washed her hands, brushed her hair, and started.

Beatrice had never been in London before, and as soon as she left the station the rush and roar of the huge city took hold of her, and confused her. Her idea was to walk to the Houses of Parliament at Westminster. She would, she thought, be sure to see Geoffrey there, because she had bought a daily paper in which she had read that he was to be one of the speakers in a great debate on the Irish Question, which was to be brought to a close that night. She had been told by a friendly porter to follow Praed Street till she reached the Edgware Road, then to walk on to the Marble Arch, and ask again. Beatrice followed the first part of this programme--that is, she walked as far as the Edgware Road. Then it was that confusion seized her and she stood hesitating. At this juncture, a coarse brute of a man came up and made some remark to her. It was impossible for a woman like Beatrice to walk alone in the streets of London at night, without running the risk of such attentions. She turned from him, and as she did so, heard him say something about her beauty to a fellow Arcadian. Close to where she was stood two hansom cabs. She went to the first and asked the driver for how much he would

take her to the House of Commons.

"Two bob, miss," he answered.

Beatrice shook her head, and turned to go again. She was afraid to spend so much on cabs, for she must get back to Bryngelly.

"I'll take yer for eighteenpence, miss," called out the other driver.

This offer she was about to accept when the first man interposed.

"You leave my fare alone, will yer? Tell yer what, miss, I'm a gentleman, I am, and I'll take yer for a bob."

She smiled and entered the cab. Then came a whirl of great gas-lit thoroughfares, and in a quarter of an hour they pulled up at the entrance to the House. Beatrice paid the cabman his shilling, thanked him, and entered, only once more to find herself confused with a vision of white statues, marble floors, high arching roofs, and hurrying people. An automatic policeman asked her what she wanted. Beatrice answered that she wished to get into the House.

"Pass this way, then, miss--pass this way," said the automatic officer in a voice of brass. She passed, and passed, and finally found herself in a lobby, among a crowd of people of all sorts--seedy political touts, Irish priests and hurrying press-men. At one side of the lobby were more policemen and messengers, who were continually taking cards into the

House, then returning and calling out names. Insensibly she drifted towards these policemen.

"Ladies' Gallery, miss?" said a voice; "your order, please, though I think it's full."

Here was a fresh complication. Beatrice had no order. She had no idea that one was necessary.

"I haven't got an order," she said faintly. "I did not know that I must have one. Can I not get in without?"

"Most certainly not, miss," answered the voice, while its owner, suspecting dynamite, surveyed her with a cold official eye. "Now make way, make way, please."

Beatrice's grey eyes filled with tears, as she turned to go in bitterness of heart. So all her labour was in vain, and that which would be done must be done without the mute farewell she sought. Well, when sorrow was so much, what mattered a little more? She turned to go, but not unobserved. A certain rather youthful Member of Parliament, with an eye for beauty in distress, had been standing close to her, talking to a constituent. The constituent had departed to wherever constituents go--and many representatives, if asked, would cheerfully point out a locality suitable to the genus, at least in their judgment--and the member had overheard the conversation and seen Beatrice's eyes fill with



tears. "What a lovely woman!" he had said to himself, and then did what he should have done, namely, lifted his hat and inquired if, as a member of the House, he could be of any service to her. Beatrice listened, and explained that she was particularly anxious to get into the Ladies' Gallery.

"I think that I can help you, then," he said. "As it happens a lady, for whom I got an order, has telegraphed to say that she cannot come. Will you follow me? Might I ask you to give me your name?"

"Mrs. Everston," answered Beatrice, taking the first that came into her head. The member looked a little disappointed. He had vaguely hoped that this lovely creature was unappropriated. Surely her marriage could not be satisfactory, or she would not look so sad.

Then came more stairs and passages, and formalities, till presently Beatrice found herself in a kind of bird-cage, crowded to suffocation with every sort of lady.

"I'm afraid--I am very much afraid----" began her new-found friend, surveying the mass with dismay.

But at that moment, a stout lady in front feeling faint with the heat, was forced to leave the Gallery, and almost before she knew where she was, Beatrice was installed in her place. Her friend had bowed and vanished, and she was left to all purposes alone, for she never

heeded those about her, though some of them looked at her hard enough, wondering at her form and beauty, and who she might be.

She cast her eye down over the crowded House, and saw a vision of hats, collars, and legs, and heard a tumult of sounds: the sharp voice of a speaker who was rapidly losing his temper, the plaudits of the Government benches, the interruptions from the Opposition--yes, even yells, and hoots, and noises, that reminded her remotely of the crowing of cocks. Possibly had she thought of it, Beatrice would not have been greatly impressed with the dignity of an assembly, at the doors of which so many of its members seemed to leave their manners, with their overcoats and sticks; it might even have suggested the idea of a bear garden to her mind. But she simply did not think about it. She searched the House keenly enough, but it was to find one face, and one only--Ah! there he was.

And now the House of Commons might vanish into the bottomless abyss, and take with it the House of Lords, and what remained of the British Constitution, and she would never miss them. For, at the best of times, Beatrice--in common with most of her sex--in all gratitude be it said, was not an ardent politician.

There Geoffrey sat, his arms folded--the hat pushed slightly from his forehead, so that she could see his face. There was her own beloved, whom she had come so far to see, and whom to-morrow she would dare so much to save. How sad he looked--he did not seem to be paying

much attention to what was going on. She knew well enough that he was thinking of her; she could feel it in her head as she had often felt it before. But she dared not let her mind go out to him in answer, for, if once she did so, she knew also that he would discover her. So she sat, and fed her eyes upon his face, taking her farewell of it, while round her, and beneath her, the hum of the House went on, as ever present and as unnoticed as the hum of bees upon a summer noon.

Presently the gentleman who had been so kind to her, sat down in the next seat to Geoffrey, and began to whisper to him, as he did so glancing once or twice towards the grating behind which she was. She guessed that he was telling him the story of the lady who was so unaccountably anxious to hear the debate, and how pretty she was. But it did not seem to interest Geoffrey much, and Beatrice was feminine enough to notice it, and to be glad of it. In her gentle jealousy, she did not like to think of Geoffrey as being interested in accounts of mysterious ladies, however pretty.

At length a speaker rose--she understood from the murmur of those around her that he was one of the leaders of the Opposition, and commenced a powerful and bitter speech. She noticed that Geoffrey roused himself at this point, and began to listen with attention.

"Look," said one of the ladies near her, "Mr. Bingham is taking notes. He is going to speak next--he speaks wonderfully, you know. They say that he is as good as anybody in the House, except Gladstone, and Lord

Randolph."

"Oh!" answered another lady. "Lady Honoria is not here, is she? I don't see her."

"No," replied the first; "she is a dear creature, and so handsome too--just the wife for a rising man--but I don't think that she takes much interest in politics. Are not her dinners charming?"

At this moment, a volley of applause from the Opposition benches drowned the murmured conversation.

This speaker spoke for about three-quarters of an hour, and then at last Geoffrey stood up. One or two other members rose at the same time, but ultimately they gave way.

He began slowly--and somewhat tamely, as it seemed to Beatrice, whose heart was in her mouth--but when he had been speaking for about five minutes, he warmed up. And then began one of the most remarkable oratorical displays of that Parliament. Geoffrey had spoken well before, and would speak well again, but perhaps he never spoke so well as he did upon that night. For nearly an hour and a half he held the House in chains, even the hoots and interruptions died away towards the end of his oration. His powerful presence seemed to tower in the place, like that of a giant among pigmies, and his dark, handsome face, lit with the fires of eloquence, shone like a lamp. He leaned forward with a slight

stoop of his broad shoulders, and addressed himself, nominally to the Speaker, but really to the Opposition. He took their facts one by one, and with convincing logic showed that they were no facts; amid a hiss of anger he pulverised their arguments and demonstrated their motives. Then suddenly he dropped them altogether, and addressing himself to the House at large, and the country beyond the House, he struck another note, and broke out into that storm of patriotic eloquence which confirmed his growing reputation, both in Parliament and in the constituencies.

Beatrice shut her eyes and listened to the deep, rich voice as it rose from height to height and power to power, till the whole place seemed full of it, and every contending sound was hushed.

Suddenly, after an invocation that would have been passionate had it not been so restrained and strong, he stopped. She opened her eyes and looked. Geoffrey was seated as before, with his hat on. He had been speaking for an hour and a half, and yet, to her, it seemed but a few minutes since he rose. Then broke out a volley of cheers, in the midst of which a leader of the Opposition rose to reply, not in the very best of tempers, for Geoffrey's speech had hit them hard.

He began, however, by complimenting the honourable member on his speech, "as fine a speech as he had listened to for many years, though, unfortunately, made from a mistaken standpoint and the wrong side of the House." Then he twitted the Government with not having secured the services of a man so infinitely abler than the majority of their

"items," and excited a good deal of amusement by stating, with some sarcastic humour, that, should it ever be his lot to occupy the front Treasury bench, he should certainly make a certain proposal to the honourable member. After this good-natured badinage, he drifted off into the consideration of the question under discussion, and Beatrice paid no further attention to him, but occupied herself in watching Geoffrey drop back into the same apparent state of cold indifference, from which the necessity of action had aroused him.

Presently the gentleman who had found her the seat came up and spoke to her, asking her how she was getting on. Very soon he began to speak of Geoffrey's speech, saying that it was one of the most brilliant of the session, if not the most brilliant.

"Then Mr. Bingham is a rising man, I suppose?" Beatrice said.

"Rising? I should think so," he answered. "They will get him into the Government on the first opportunity after this; he's too good to neglect. Very few men can come to the fore like Mr. Bingham. We call him the comet, and if only he does not make a mess of his chances by doing something foolish, there is no reason why he should not be Attorney-General in a few years."

"Why should he do anything foolish?" she asked.

"Oh, for no reason on earth, that I know of; only, as I daresay you have

noticed, men of this sort are very apt to do ridiculous things, throw up their career, get into a public scandal, run away with somebody or something. Not that there should be any fear of such a thing where Mr. Bingham is concerned, for he has a charming wife, and they say that she is a great help to him. Why, there is the division bell. Good-bye, Mrs. Everston, I will come back to see you out."

"Good-bye," Beatrice answered, "and in case I should miss you, I wish to say something--to thank you for your kindness in helping me to get in here to-night. You have done me a great service, a very great service, and I am most grateful to you."

"It is nothing--nothing," he answered. "It has been a pleasure to help you. If," he added with some confusion, "you would allow me to call some day, the pleasure will be all the greater. I will bring Mr. Bingham with me, if you would like to know him--that is, if I can."

Beatrice shook her head. "I cannot," she answered, smiling sadly. "I am going on a long journey to-morrow, and I shall not return here. Good-bye."

In another second he was gone, more piqued and interested about this fair unknown than he had been about any woman for years. Who could she be? and why was she so anxious to hear the debate? There was a mystery in it somewhere, and he determined to solve it if he could.

Meanwhile the division took place, and presently the members flocked back, and amidst ringing Ministerial cheers, and counter Opposition cheers, the victory of the Government was announced. Then came the usual formalities, and the members began to melt away. Beatrice saw the leader of the House and several members of the Government go up to Geoffrey, shake his hand, and congratulate him. Then, with one long look, she turned and went, leaving him in the moment of his triumph, that seemed to interest him so little, but which made Beatrice more proud at heart than if she had been declared empress of the world.

Oh, it was well to love a man like that, a man born to tower over his fellow men--and well to die for him! Could she let her miserable existence interfere with such a life as his should be? Never, never! There should be no "public scandal" on her account.

She drew her veil over her face, and inquired the way from the House. Presently she was outside. By one of the gateways, and in the shadow of its pillars, she stopped, watching the members of the House stream past her. Many of them were talking together, and once or twice she caught the sound of Geoffrey's name, coupled with such words as "splendid speech," and other terms of admiration.

"Move on, move on," said a policeman to her. Lifting her veil, Beatrice turned and looked at him, and muttering something he moved on himself, leaving her in peace. Presently she saw Geoffrey and the gentleman who had been so kind to her walking along together. They came through the



gateway; the lapel of his coat brushed her arm, and he never saw her. Closer she crouched against the pillar, hiding herself in its shadow. Within six feet of her Geoffrey stopped and lit a cigar. The light of the match flared upon his face, that dark, strong face she loved so well. How tired he looked. A great longing took possession of her to step forward and speak to him, but she restrained herself almost by force.

Her friend was speaking to him, and about her.

"Such a lovely woman," he was saying, "with the clearest and most beautiful grey eyes that I ever saw. But she has gone like a dream. I can't find her anywhere. It is a most mysterious business."

"You are falling in love, Tom," answered Geoffrey absently, as he threw away the match and walked on. "Don't do that; it is an unhappy thing to do," and he sighed.

He was going! Oh, heaven! she would never, never see him more! A cold horror seized upon Beatrice, her blood seemed to stagnate. She trembled so much that she could scarcely stand. Leaning forward, she looked after him, with such a face of woe that even the policeman, who had repented him of his forbearance, and was returning to send her away, stood astonished. The two men had gone about ten yards, when something induced Beatrice's friend to look back. His eye fell upon the white, agony-stricken face, now in the full glare of the gas lamp.

Beatrice saw him turn, and understood her danger. "Oh, good-bye, Geoffrey!" she murmured, for a second allowing her heart to go forth towards him. Then realising what she had done, she dropped her veil, and went swiftly. The gentleman called "Tom"--she never learnt his name--stood for a moment dumbfounded, and at that instant Geoffrey staggered, as though he had been struck by a shot, turned quite white, and halted.

"Why," said his companion, "there is that lady again; we must have passed quite close to her. She was looking after us, I saw her face in the gaslight--and I never want to see such another."

Geoffrey seized him by the arm. "Where is she?" he asked, "and what was she like?"

"She was there a second ago," he said, pointing to the pillar, "but I've lost her now--I fancy she went towards the railway station, but I could not see. Stop, is that she?" and he pointed to a tall person walking towards the Abbey.

Quickly they moved to intercept her, but the result was not satisfactory, and they retreated hastily from the object of their attentions.

Meanwhile Beatrice found herself opposite the entrance to the

Westminster Bridge Station. A hansom was standing there; she got into it and told the man to drive to Paddington.

Before the pair had retraced their steps she was gone. "She has vanished again," said "Tom," and went on to give a description of her to Geoffrey. Of her dress he had unfortunately taken little note. It might be one of Beatrice's, or it might not. It seemed almost inconceivable to Geoffrey that she should be masquerading about London, under the name of Mrs. Everston. And yet--and yet--he could have sworn--but it was folly!

Suddenly he bade his friend good-night, and took a hansom. "The mystery thickens," said the astonished "Tom," as he watched him drive away. "I would give a hundred pounds to find out what it all means. Oh! that woman's face--it haunts me. It looked like the face of an angel bidding farewell to Heaven."

But he never did find out any more about it, though the despairing eyes of Beatrice, as she bade her mute farewell, still sometimes haunt his sleep.

Geoffrey reflected rapidly. The thing was ridiculous, and yet it was possible. Beyond that brief line in answer to his letter, he had heard nothing from Beatrice. Indeed he was waiting to hear from her before taking any further step. But even supposing she were in London, where was he to look for her? He knew that she had no money, he could not stay there long. It occurred to him there was a train leaving Euston for

Wales about four in the morning. It was just possible that she might be in town, and returning by this train. He told the cabman to drive to Euston Station, and on arrival, closely questioned a sleepy porter, but without satisfactory results.

Then he searched the station; there were no traces of Beatrice. He did more; he sat down, weary as he was, and waited for an hour and a half, till it was time for the train to start. There were but three passengers, and none of them in the least resembled Beatrice.

"It is very strange," Geoffrey said to himself, as he walked away. "I could have sworn that I felt her presence just for one second. It must have been nonsense. This is what comes of occult influences, and that kind of thing. The occult is a nuisance."

If he had only gone to Paddington!