CHAPTER XXVIII

I WILL WAIT FOR YOU

Beatrice drove back to Paddington, and as she drove, though her face did not change from its marble cast of woe the great tears rolled down it, one by one.

They reached the deserted-looking station, and she paid the man out of her few remaining shillings--seeing that she was a stranger, he insisted upon receiving half-a-crown. Then, disregarding the astonished stare of a night porter, she found her way to the waiting room, and sat down. First she took the letter from her breast, and added some lines to it in pencil, but she did not post it yet; she knew that if she did so it would reach its destination too soon. Then she laid her head back against the wall, and utterly outworn, dropped to sleep--her last sleep upon this earth, before the longest sleep of all.

And thus Beatrice waited and slept at Paddington, while her lover waited and watched at Euston.

At five she woke, and the heavy cloud of sorrow, past, present, and to come, rushed in upon her heart. Taking her bag, she made herself as tidy as she could. Then she stepped outside the station into the deserted street, and finding a space between the houses, watched the sun rise over the waking world. It was her last sunrise, Beatrice remembered.

She came back filled with such thoughts as might well strike the heart of a woman about to do the thing she had decreed. The refreshment bar was open now, and she went to it, and bought a cup of coffee and some bread and butter. Then she took her ticket, not to Bryngelly or to Coed, but to the station on this side of Bryngelly, and three miles from it. She would run less risk of being noticed there. The train was shunted up; she took her seat in it. Just as it was starting, an early newspaper boy came along, yawning. Beatrice bought a copy of the Standard, out of the one and threepence that was left of her money, and opened it at the sheet containing the leading articles. The first one began, "The most powerful, closely reasoned, and eloquent speech made last night by Mr. Bingham, the Member for Pillham, will, we feel certain, produce as great an effect on the country as it did in the House of Commons. We welcome it, not only on account of its value as a contribution to the polemics of the Irish Question, but as a positive proof of what has already been suspected, that the Unionist party has in Mr. Bingham a young statesman of a very high order indeed, and one whom remarkable and
rapid success at the Bar has not hampered, as is too often the case, in the larger and less technical field of politics."

And so on. Beatrice put the paper down with a smile of triumph. Geoffrey's success was splendid and unquestioned. Nothing could stop him now. During all the long journey she pleased her imagination by conjuring up picture after picture of that great future of his, in which

she would have no share. And yet he would not forget her; she was sure of this. Her shadow would go with him from year to year, even to the end, and at times he might think how proud she would have been could she be present to record his triumphs. Alas! she did not remember that when all is lost which can make life beautiful, when the sun has set, and the spirit gone out of the day, the poor garish lights of our little victories can but ill atone for the glories that have been. Happiness and content are frail plants which can only flourish under fair conditions if at all. Certainly they will not thrive beneath the gloom and shadow of a pall, and when the heart is dead no triumphs, however splendid, and no rewards, however great, can compensate for an utter and irredeemable loss. She never guessed, poor girl, that time upon time, in the decades to be, Geoffrey would gladly have laid his honours down in payment for one year of her dear and unforgotten presence. She was too unselfish; she did not think that a man could thus prize a woman's love, and took it for an axiom that to succeed in life was his one real object--a thing to which so divine a gift as she had given Geoffrey is as nothing. It was therefore this Juggernaut of her lover's career that Beatrice would cast down her life, little knowing that thereby she must turn the worldly and temporal success, which he already held so cheap, to bitterness and ashes.

At Chester Beatrice got out of the train and posted her letter to Geoffrey. She would not do so till then because it might have reached him too soon--before all was finished! Now it would be delivered to him in the House after everything had been accomplished in its order. She

looked at the letter; it was, she thought, the last token that could ever pass between them on this earth. Once she pressed it to her heart, once she touched it with her lips, and then put it from her beyond recall. It was done; there was no going back now. And even as she stood the postman came up, whistling, and opening the box carelessly swept its contents into his canvas bag. Could he have known what lay among them he would have whistled no more that day.

Beatrice continued her journey, and by three o'clock arrived safely at the little station next to Bryngelly. There was a fair at Coed that day, and many people of the peasant class got in here. Amidst the confusion she gave up her ticket to a small boy, who was looking the other way at the time, and escaped without being noticed by a soul. Indeed, things happened so that nobody in the neighbourhood of Bryngelly ever knew that Beatrice had been to London and back upon those dreadful days.

Beatrice walked along the cliff, and in an hour was at the door of the Vicarage, from which she seemed to have been away for years. She unlocked it and entered. In the letter-box was a post-card from her father stating that he and Elizabeth had changed their plans and would not be back till the train which arrived at half-past eight on the following morning. So much the better, she thought. Then she disarranged the clothes upon her bed to make it seem as though it had been slept it, lit the kitchen fire, and put the kettle on to boil, and as soon as it was ready she took some food. She wanted all her nerve, and that could not be kept up without food.

Shortly after this the girl Betty returned, and went about her duties in the house quite unconscious that Beatrice had been away from it for the whole night. Her sister was much better, she said, in answer to Beatrice's inquiries.

When she had eaten what she could--it was not much--Beatrice went to her room, undressed herself, bathed, and put on clean, fresh things. Then she unbound her lovely hair, and did it up in a coronet upon her head. It was a fashion that she did not often adopt, because it took too much time, but on this day, of all days, she had a strange fancy to look her best. Also her hair had been done like this on the afternoon when Geoffrey first met her. Next she put on the grey dress once more which she had worn on her journey to London, and taking the silver Roman ring that Geoffrey had given her from the string by which she wore it about her neck, placed it on the third finger of her left hand.

All this being done, Beatrice visited the kitchen and ordered the supper. She went further in her innocent cunning. Betty asked her what she would like for breakfast on the following morning, and she told her to cook some bacon, and to be careful how she cut it, as she did not like thick bacon. Then, after one long last look at the Vicarage, she started for the lodging of the head teacher of the school, and, having found her, inquired as to the day's work.

Further, Beatrice told her assistant that she had determined to alter

the course of certain lessons in the school. The Wednesday arithmetic class had hitherto been taken before the grammar class. On the morrow she had determined to change this; she would take the grammar class at ten and the arithmetic class at eleven, and gave her reasons for so doing. The teacher assented, and Beatrice shook hands with her and bade her good-night. She would have wished to say how much she felt indebted to her for her help in the school, but did not like to do so, fearing lest, in the light of pending events, the remark might be viewed with suspicion.

Poor Beatrice, these were the only lies she ever told!

She left the teacher's lodgings, and was about to go down to the beach and sit there till it was time, when she was met by the father of the crazed child, Jane Llewellyn.

"Oh, Miss Beatrice," he said, "I have been looking for you everywhere. We are in sad trouble, miss. Poor Jane is in a raving fit, and talking about hell and that, and the doctor says she's dying. Can you come, miss, and see if you can do anything to quiet her? It's a matter of life and death, the doctor says, miss."

Beatrice smiled sadly; matters of life and death were in the air. "I will come," she said, "but I shall not be able to stay long."

How could she better spend her last hour?

She accompanied the man to his cottage. The child, dressed only in a night-shirt, was raving furiously, and evidently in the last stage of exhaustion, nor could the doctor or her mother do anything to quiet her.

"Don't you see," she screamed, pointing to the wall, "there's the Devil waiting for me? And, oh, there's the mouth of hell where the minister said I should go! Oh, hold me, hold me, hold me!"

Beatrice walked up to her, took the thin little hands in hers, and looked her fixedly in the eyes.

"Jane," she said. "Jane, don't you know me?"

"Yes, Miss Granger," she said, "I know the lesson; I will say it presently."

Beatrice took her in her arms, and sat down on the bed. Quieter and quieter grew the child till suddenly an awful change passed over her face.

"She is dying," whispered the doctor.

"Hold me close, hold me close!" said the child, whose senses returned before the last eclipse. "Oh, Miss Granger, I shan't go to hell, shall I? I am afraid of hell."

"No, love, no; you will go to heaven."

Jane lay still awhile. Then seeing the pale lips move, Beatrice put her ear to the child's mouth.

"Will you come with me?" she murmured; "I am afraid to go alone."

And Beatrice, her great grey eyes fixed steadily on the closing eyes beneath, whispered back so that no other soul could hear except the dying child:

"Yes, I will come presently." But Jane heard and understood.

"Promise," said the child.

"Yes, I promise," answered Beatrice in the same inaudible whisper. "Sleep, dear, sleep; I will join you very soon."

And the child looked up, shivered, smiled--and slept.

Beatrice gave it back to the weeping parents and went her way. "What a splendid creature," said the doctor to himself as he looked after her. "She has eyes like Fate, and the face of Motherhood Incarnate. A great woman, if ever I saw one, but different from other women."

Meanwhile Beatrice made her way to old Edward's boat-shed. As she expected, there was nobody there, and nobody on the beach. Old Edward and his son were at tea, with the rest of Bryngelly. They would come back after dark and lock up the boat-house.

She looked at the sea. There were no waves, but the breeze freshened every minute, and there was a long slow swell upon the water. The rollers would be running beyond the shelter of Rumball Point, five miles away.

The tide was high; it mounted to within ten yards of the end of the boat-house. She opened the door, and dragged out her canoe, closing the door again after her. The craft was light, and she was strong for a woman. Close to the boat-house one of the timber breakwaters, which are common at sea-side places, ran down into the water. She dragged the canoe to its side, and then pushed it down the beach till its bow was afloat. Next, mounting on the breakwater, she caught hold of the little chain in the bow, and walking along the timber baulks, pulled with all her force till the canoe was quite afloat. On she went, dragging it after her, till the waves washing over the breakwater wetted her shoes.

Then she brought the canoe quite close, and, watching her opportunity, stepped into it, nearly falling into the water as she did so. But she recovered her balance, and sat down. In another minute she was paddling out to sea with all her strength.

For twenty minutes or more she paddled unceasingly. Then she rested awhile, only keeping the canoe head on to the sea, which, without being rough, was running more and more freshly. There, some miles away, was the dark mass of Rumball Point. She must be off it before the night closed in. There would be sea enough there; no such craft as hers could live in it for five minutes, and the tide was on the turn. Anything sinking in those waters would be carried far away, and never come back to the shore of Wales.

She turned her head and looked at Bryngelly, and the long familiar stretch of cliff. How fair it seemed, bathed in the quiet lights of summer afternoon. Oh! was there any afternoon where the child had gone, and where she was following fast?--or was it all night, black, eternal night, unbroken by the dram of dear remembered things?

There were the Dog Rocks, where she had stood on that misty autumn day, and seen the vision of her coffined mother's face. Surely it was a presage of her fate. There beyond was the Bell Rock, where in that same hour Geoffrey and she had met, and behind it was the Amphitheatre, where they had told their love. Hark! what was that sound pealing faintly at intervals across the deep? It was the great ship's bell that, stirred from time to time by the wash of the high tide, solemnly tolled her passing soul.

She paddled on; the sound of that death-knell shook her nerves, and made her feel faint and weak. Oh, it would have been easier had she been as

she was a year ago, before she learned to love, and hand in hand had seen faith and hope re-arise from the depths of her stirred soul. Then being but a heathen, she could have met her end with all a heathen's strength, knowing what she lost, and believing, too, that she would find but sleep. And now it was otherwise, for in her heart she did not believe that she was about utterly to perish. What, could the body live on in a thousand forms, changed indeed but indestructible and immortal, while the spiritual part, with all its hopes and loves and fears, melted into nothingness? It could not be; surely on some new shore she should once again greet her love. And if it was not, how would they meet her in that under world, coming self-murdered, her life-blood on her hands? Would her mother turn away from her? and the little brother, whom she had loved, would he reject her? And what Voice of Doom might strike her into everlasting hopelessness?

But, be the sin what it might, yet would she sin it for the sake of Geoffrey; ay, even if she must reap a harvest of eternal woe. She bent her head and prayed. "Oh, Power, that art above, from whom I come, to whom I go, have mercy on me! Oh, Spirit, if indeed thy name is Love, weigh my love in thy balance, and let it lift the scale of sin. Oh, God of Sacrifice, be not wroth at my deed of sacrifice and give me pardon, give me life and peace, that in a time to come I may win the sight of him for whom I die."

A somewhat heathenish prayer indeed, and far too full of human passion for one about to leave the human shores. But, then--well, it was

Beatrice who prayed--Beatrice, who could realise no heaven beyond the limits of her passion, who still thought more of her love than of saving her own soul alive. Perhaps it found a home--perhaps, like her who prayed it, it was lost upon the pitiless deep.

Then Beatrice prayed no more. Short was her time. See, there sank the sun in glory; and there the great rollers swept along past the sullen headland, where the undertow met wind and tide. She would think no more of self; it was, it seemed to her, so small, this mendicant calling on the Unseen, not for others, but for self: aid for self, well-being for self, salvation for self--this doing of good that good might come to self. She had made her prayer, and if she prayed again it should be for Geoffrey, that he might prosper and be happy--that he might forgive the trouble her love had brought into his life. That he might forget her she could not pray. She had prayed her prayer and said her say, and it was done with. Let her be judged as it seemed good to Those who judge! Now she would fix her thoughts upon her love, and by its strength would she triumph over the bitterness of death. Her eyes flashed and her breast heaved: further out to sea, further yet--she would meet those rollers a knot or more from the point of the headland, that no record might remain.

Was it her wrong if she loved him? She could not help it, and she was proud to love him. Even now, she would not undo the past. What were the lines that Geoffrey had read to her. They haunted her mind with a strange persistence--they took time to the beat of her falling paddle,

and would not leave her:

"Of once sown seed, who knoweth what the crop is?
Alas, my love, Love's eyes are very blind!
What would they have us do? Sunflowers and poppies
Stoop to the wind----"[*]

[*] Oliver Madox Brown.

Yes, yes, Love's eyes are very blind, but in their blindness there was more light than in all other earthly things. Oh, she could not live for him, and with him--it was denied to her--but she still could die for him, her darling, her darling!

"Geoffrey, hear me--I die for you; accept my sacrifice, and forget me not." So!--she is in the rollers--how solemn they are with their hoary heads of foam, as one by one they move down upon her.

The first! it towers high, but the canoe rides it like a cork. Look! the day is dying on the distant land, but still his glory shines across the sea. Presently all will be finished. Here the breeze is strong; it tears the bonnet from her head, it unwinds the coronet of braided locks, and her bright hair streams out behind her. Feel how the spray stings, striking like a whip. No, not this wave, she rides that also; she

will die as she has lived--fighting to the last; and once more, never faltering, she sets her face towards the rollers and consigns her soul to doom.

Ah! that struck her full. Oh, see! Geoffrey's ring has slipped from her wet hand, falling into the bottom of the boat. Can she regain it? she would die with that ring upon her finger--it is her marriage-ring, wedding her through death to Geoffrey, upon the altar of the sea. She stoops! oh, what a shock of water at her breast! What was it--what was it?--Of once sown seed, who knoweth what the crop is? She must soon learn now!

"Geoffrey! hear me, Geoffrey!--I die, I die for you! I will wait for you at the foundations of the sea, on the topmost heights of heaven, in the lowest deeps of hell--wherever I am I will always wait for you!"

It sinks--it has sunk--she is alone with God, and the cruel waters. The sun goes out! Look on that great white wave seething through the deepening gloom; hear it rushing towards her, big with fate.

"Geoffrey, my darling--I will wait----"

Farewell to Beatrice! The light went out of the sky and darkness gathered on the weltering sea. Farewell to Beatrice, and all her love

and all her sin.