

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A WOMAN'S LAST WORD

Geoffrey came down to breakfast about eleven o'clock on the morning of that day the first hours of which he had spent at Euston Station. Not seeing Effie, he asked Lady Honoria where she was, and was informed that Anne, the French bonne, said the child was not well and that she had kept her in bed to breakfast.

"Do you mean to say that you have not been up to see what is the matter with her?" asked Geoffrey.

"No, not yet," answered his wife. "I have had the dressmaker here with my new dress for the duchess's ball to-morrow; it's lovely, but I think that there is a little too much of that creamy lace about it."

With an exclamation of impatience, Geoffrey rose and went upstairs. He found Effie tossing about in bed, her face flushed, her eyes wide open, and her little hands quite hot.

"Send for the doctor at once," he said.

The doctor came and examined the child, asking her if she had wet her feet lately.

"Yes, I did, two days ago. I wet my feet in a puddle in the street," she answered. "But Anne did say that they would soon get dry, if I held them to the fire, because my other boots was not clean. Oh, my head does ache, daddie."

"Ah," said the doctor, and then covering the child up, took Geoffrey aside and told him that his daughter had a mild attack of inflammation of the lungs. There was no cause for anxiety, only she must be looked after and guarded from chills.

Geoffrey asked if he should send for a trained nurse.

"Oh, no," said the doctor. "I do not think it is necessary, at any rate at present. I will tell the nurse what to do, and doubtless your wife will keep an eye on her."

So Anne was called up, and vowed that she would guard the cherished child like the apple of her eye. Indeed, no, the boots were not wet--there was a little, a very little mud on them, that was all.

"Well, don't talk so much, but see that you attend to her properly," said Geoffrey, feeling rather doubtful, for he did not trust Anne. However, he thought he would see himself that there was no neglect. When she heard what was the matter, Lady Honoria was much put out.

"Really," she said, "children are the most vexatious creatures in

the world. The idea of her getting inflammation of the lungs in this unprovoked fashion. The end of it will be that I shall not be able to go to the duchess's ball to-morrow night, and she was so kind about it, she made quite a point of my coming. Besides I have bought that lovely new dress on purpose. I should never have dreamed of going to so much expense for anything else."

"Don't trouble yourself," said Geoffrey. "The House does not sit to-morrow; I will look after her. Unless Effie dies in the interval, you will certainly be able to go to the ball."

"Dies--what nonsense! The doctor says that it is a very slight attack. Why should she die?"

"I am sure I hope that there is no fear of anything of the sort, Honoria. Only she must be properly looked after. I do not trust this woman Anne. I have half a mind to get in a trained nurse after all."

"Well, if you do, she will have to sleep out of the house, that's all. Amelia (Lady Garsington) is coming up to-night, and I must have somewhere to put her maid, and there is no room for another bed in Effie's room."

"Oh, very well, very well," said Geoffrey, "I daresay that it will be all right, but if Effie gets any worse, you will please understand that room must be made."

But Effie did not get worse. She remained much about the same. Geoffrey sat at home all day and employed himself in reading briefs; fortunately he had not to go to court. About six o'clock he went down to the House, and having dined very simply and quietly, took his seat and listened to some dreary talk, which was being carried on for the benefit of the reporters, about the adoption of the Welsh language in the law courts of Wales.

Suddenly he became aware of a most extraordinary sense of oppression. An indefinite dread took hold of him, his very soul was filled with terrible apprehensions and alarm. Something dreadful seemed to knock at the portals of his sense, a horror which he could not grasp. His mind was confused, but little by little it grew clearer, and he began to understand that a danger threatened Beatrice, that she was in great peril. He was sure of it. Her agonised dying cries reached him where he was, though in no form which he could understand; once more her thought beat on his thought--once more and for the last time her spirit spoke to his.

Then suddenly a cold wind seemed to breathe upon his face and lift his hair, and everything was gone. His mind was as it had been; again he heard the dreary orator and saw the members slipping away to dinner. The conditions that disturbed him had passed, things were as they had been. Nor was this strange! For the link was broken. Beatrice was dead. She had passed into the domains of impenetrable silence.

Geoffrey sat up with a gasp, and as he did so a letter was placed in his hand. It was addressed in Beatrice's handwriting and bore the Chester postmark. A chill fear seized him. What did it contain? He hurried with it into a private room and opened it. It was dated from Bryngelly on the previous Sunday and had several inclosures.

"My dearest Geoffrey," it began, "I have never before addressed you thus on paper, nor should I do so now, knowing to what risks such written words might put you, were it not that occasions may arise (as in this case) which seem to justify the risk. For when all things are ended between a man and a woman who are to each other what we have been, then it is well that the one who goes should speak plainly before speech becomes impossible, if only that the one who is left should not misunderstand that which has been done.

"Geoffrey, it is probable--it is almost certain--that before your eyes read these words I shall be where in the body they can never see me more. I write to you from the brink of the grave; when you read it, it will have closed over me.

"Geoffrey, I shall be dead.

"I received your dear letter (it is destroyed now) in which you expressed a wish that I should come away with you to some other country, and I answered it in eight brief words. I dared not trust myself to write more, nor had I any time. How could you think that I should ever accept such an offer for my own sake, when to do so would have been to ruin you? But first I will tell you all that has happened here." (Here followed a long and exact description of those events with which we are already acquainted, including the denunciation of Beatrice by her sister, the threats of Owen Davies as regards Geoffrey himself, and the measures which she had adopted to gain time.)

"Further," the letter continued, "I inclose you your wife's letter to me. And here I wish to state that I have not one word to say against Lady Honoria or her letter. I think that she was perfectly justified in writing as she did, for after all, dear Geoffrey, you are her husband, and in loving each other we have offended against her. She tells me truly that it is my duty to make all further communications between us impossible. There is only one way to do this, and I take it.

"And now I have spoken enough about myself, nor do I wish to enter into details that could only give you pain. There will be no scandal, dear, and if any word should be raised against you after I am gone, I have provided an answer in the second letter which I have inclosed. You can print it if necessary; it will be a sufficient reply to any talk. Nobody after reading it can believe that you were in any way connected with the accident which will happen. Dear, one word more--still about myself, you

see! Do not blame yourself in this matter, for you are not to blame; of my own free will I do it, because in the extremity of the circumstances I think it best that one should go and the other be saved, rather than that both should be involved in a common ruin.

"Dear, do you remember how in that strange vision of mine, I dreamed that you came and touched me on the breast and showed me light? So it has come to pass, for you have given me love--that is light; and now in death I shall seek for wisdom. And this being fulfilled, shall not the rest be fulfilled in its season? Shall I not sit in those cloudy halls till I see you come to seek me, the word of wisdom on your lips? And since I cannot have you to myself, and be all in all to you, why I am glad to go. For here on the world is neither rest nor happiness; as in my dream, too often does 'Hope seem to rend her starry robes.'

"I am glad to go from such a world, in which but one happy thing has found me--the blessing of your love. I am worn out with the weariness and struggle, and now that I have lost you I long for rest. I do not know if I sin in what I do; if so, may I be forgiven. If forgiveness is impossible, so be it! You will forgive me, Geoffrey, and you will always love me, however wicked I may be; even if, at the last, you go where I am not, you will remember and love the erring woman to whom, being so little, you still were all in all. We are not married, Geoffrey, according to the customs of the world, but two short days hence I shall celebrate a service that is greater and more solemn than any of the earth. For Death will be the Priest and that oath which I shall take

will be to all eternity. Who can prophesy of that whereof man has no sure knowledge? Yet I do believe that in a time to come we shall look again into each other's eyes, and kiss each other's lips, and be one for evermore. If this is so, it is worth while to have lived and died; if not, then, Geoffrey, farewell!

"If I may I will always be near you. Listen to the night wind and you shall hear my voice; look on the stars, you will see my eyes; and my love shall be as the air you breathe. And when at last the end comes, remember me, for if I live at all I shall be about you then. What have I more to say? So much, my dear, that words cannot convey it. Let it be untold; but whenever you hear or read that which is beautiful or tender, think 'this is what Beatrice would have said to me and could not!'

"You will be a great man, dear, the foremost or one of the foremost of your age. You have already promised me to persevere to this end: I will not ask you to promise afresh. Do not be content to accept the world as women must. Great men do not accept the world; they reform it--and you are of their number. And when you are great, Geoffrey, you will use your power, not for self-interest, but to large and worthy ends; you will always strive to help the poor, to break down oppression from those who have to bar it, and to advance the honour of your country. You will do all this from your own heart and not because I ask it of you, but remember that your fame will be my best monument--though none shall ever know the grave it covers.



"Farewell, farewell, farewell! Oh, Geoffrey, my darling, to whom I have never been a wife, to whom I am more than any wife--do not forget me in the long years which are to come. Remember me when others forsake you. Do not forget me when others flatter you and try to win your love, for none can be to you what I have been--none can ever love you more than that lost Beatrice who writes these heavy words to-night, and who will pass away blessing you with her last breath, to await you, if she may, in the land to which your feet also draw daily on."

Then came a tear-stained postscript in pencil dated from Paddington Station on that very morning.

"I journeyed to London to see you, Geoffrey. I could not die without looking on your face once more. I was in the gallery of the House and heard your great speech. Your friend found me a place. Afterwards I touched your coat as you passed by the pillar of the gateway. Then I ran away because I saw your friend turn and look at me. I shall kiss this letter--just here before I close it--kiss it there too--it is our last cold embrace. Before the end I shall put on the ring you gave me--on my hand, I mean. I have always worn it upon my breast. When I touched you as you passed through the gateway I thought that I should have broken down and called to you--but I found strength not to do so. My heart is breaking and my eyes are blind with tears; I can write no more; I have no more to say. Now once again good-bye. Ave atque vale--oh, my love!--B."

The second letter was a dummy. That is to say it purported to be such an epistle as any young lady might have written to a gentleman friend.

It began, "Dear Mr. Bingham," and ended, "Yours sincerely, Beatrice Granger," was filled with chit-chat, and expressed hopes that he would be able to come down to Bryngelly again later in the summer, when they would go canoeing.

It was obvious, thought Beatrice, that if Geoffrey was accused by Owen Davies or anybody else of being concerned with her mysterious end, the production of such a frank epistle written two days previously would demonstrate the absurdity of the idea. Poor Beatrice, she was full of precautions!

Let him who may imagine the effect produced upon Geoffrey by this heartrending and astounding epistle! Could Beatrice have seen his face when he had finished reading it she would never have committed suicide. In a minute it became like that of an old man. As the whole truth sank into his mind, such an agony of horror, of remorse, of unavailing woe and hopelessness swept across his soul, that for a moment he thought his vital forces must give way beneath it, and that he should die, as indeed in this dark hour he would have rejoiced to do. Oh, how pitiful it was--how pitiful and how awful! To think of this love, so passionately pure, wasted on his own unworthiness. To think of this divine woman

going down to lonely death for him--a strong man; to picture her crouching behind that gateway pillar and touching him as he passed, while he, the thrice accursed fool, knew nothing till too late; to know that he had gone to Euston and not to Paddington; to remember the matchless strength and beauty of the love which he had lost, and that face which he should never see again! Surely his heart would break. No man could bear it!

And of those cowards who hounded her to death, if indeed she was already dead! Oh, he would kill Owen Davies--yes, and Elizabeth too, were it not that she was a woman; and as for Honoria he had done with her. Scandal, what did he care for scandal? If he had his will there should be a scandal indeed, for he would beat this Owen Davies, this reptile, who did not hesitate to use a woman's terrors to prosper the fulfilling of his lust--yes, and then drag him to the Continent and kill him there. Only vengeance was left to him!

Stop, he must not give way--perhaps she was not dead--perhaps that horrible presage of evil which had struck him like a storm was but a dream. Could he telegraph? No, it was too late; the office at Bryngelly would be closed--it was past eight now. But he could go. There was a train leaving a little after nine--he should be there by half-past six to-morrow. And Effie was ill--well, surely they could look after her for twenty-four hours; she was in no danger, and he must go--he could not bear this torturing suspense. Great God! how had she done the deed!

Geoffrey snatched a sheet of paper and tried to write. He could not, his hand shook so. With a groan he rose, and going to the refreshment room swallowed two glasses of brandy one after another. The spirit took effect on him; he could write now. Rapidly he scribbled on a sheet of paper:

"I have been called away upon important business and shall probably not be back till Thursday morning. See that Effie is properly attended to. If I am not back you must not go to the duchess's ball.--Geoffrey Bingham."

Then he addressed the letter to Lady Honoria and dispatched a commissionaire with it. This done, he called a cab and bade the cabman drive to Euston as fast as his horse could go.