

CHAPTER XXX

AVE ATQUE VALE

That frightful journey--no nightmare was ever half so awful! But it came to an end at last--there was the Bryngelly Station. Geoffrey sprang from the train, and gave his ticket to the porter, glancing in his face as he did so. Surely if there had been a tragedy the man would know of it, and show signs of half-joyous emotion as is the fashion of such people when something awful and mysterious has happened to somebody else. But he showed no such symptoms, and a glimmer of hope found its way into Geoffrey's tormented breast.

He left the station and walked rapidly towards the Vicarage. Those who know what a pitch of horror suspense can reach may imagine his feelings as he did so. But it was soon to be put an end to now. As he drew near the Vicarage gate he met the fat Welsh servant girl Betty running towards him. Then hope left Geoffrey.

The girl recognised him, and in her confusion did not seem in the least astonished to see him walking there at a quarter to seven on a summer morning. Indeed, even she vaguely connected Geoffrey with Beatrice in her mind, for she at once said in her thick English:

"Oh, sir, do you know where Miss Beatrice is?"

"No," he answered, catching at a railing for support. "Why do you ask? I have not seen her for weeks."

Then the girl plunged into a long story. Mr. Granger and Miss Granger were away from home, and would not be back for another two hours. Miss Beatrice had gone out yesterday afternoon, and had not come back to tea. She, Betty, had not thought much of it, believing that she had stopped to spend the evening somewhere, and, being very tired, had gone to bed about eight, leaving the door unlocked. This morning, when she woke, it was to find that Miss Beatrice had not slept in the house that night, and she came out to see if she could find her.

"Where was she going when she went out?" Geoffrey asked.

She did not know, but she thought that Miss Beatrice was going out in the canoe. Leastways she had put on her tennis shoes, which she always wore when she went out boating.

Geoffrey understood it all now. "Come to the boat-house," he said.

They went down to the beach, where as yet none were about except a few working people. Near the boat-house Geoffrey met old Edward walking along with a key in his hand.

"Lord, sir!" he said. "You here, sir! and in that there queer hat, too.

What is it, sir?"

"Did Miss Beatrice go out in her canoe yesterday evening, Edward?"

Geoffrey asked hoarsely.

"No, sir; not as I know on. My boy locked up the boat-house last night, and I suppose he looked in it first. What! You don't mean to say----Stop; we'll soon know. Oh, Goad! the canoe's gone!"

There was a silence, an awful silence. Old Edward broke it.

"She's drowned, sir--that's what she is--drowned at last; and she the finest woman in Wales. I knewed she would be one day, poor dear! and she the beauty that she was; and all along of that damned unlucky little craft. Goad help her! She's drowned, I say----"

Betty burst out into loud weeping at his words.

"Stop that noise, girl," said Geoffrey, turning his pale face towards her. "Go back to the Vicarage, and if Mr. Granger comes home before I get back, tell him what we fear. Edward, send some men to search the shore towards Coed, and some more in a sailing boat. I will walk towards the Bell Rock--you can follow me."

He started and swiftly tramped along the sands, searching the sea with his eye. On he walked sullenly, desperately striving to hope against hope. On, past the Dog Rocks, round the long curve of beach till he came

to the Amphitheatre. The tide was high again; he could barely pass the projecting point. He was round it, and his heart stood still. For there, bottom upwards, and gently swaying to and fro as the spent waves rocked it, was Beatrice's canoe.

Sadly, hopelessly, heavily, Geoffrey waded knee deep into the water, and catching the bow of the canoe, dragged it ashore. There was, or appeared to be, nothing in it; of course he could not expect anything else. Its occupant had sunk and been carried out to sea by the ebb, whereas the canoe had drifted back to shore with the morning tide.

He reared it upon its end to let the water drain out of it, and from the hollow of the bow arch something came rolling down, something bright and heavy, followed by a brown object. Hastily he lowered the canoe again, and picked up the bright trinket. It was his own ring come back to him--the Roman ring he had given Beatrice, and which she told him in the letter she would wear in her hour of death. He touched it with his lips and placed it back upon his hand, this token from the beloved dead, vowing that it should never leave his hand in life, and that after death it should be buried on him. And so it will be, perhaps to be dug up again thousands of years hence, and once more to play a part in the romance of unborn ages.

Ave atque vale--that was the inscription rudely cut within its round. Greeting and farewell--her own last words to him. Oh, Beatrice, Beatrice! to you also ave atque vale. You could not have sent a fitter

message. Greeting and farewell! Did it not sum it all? Within the circle of this little ring was writ the epitome of human life: here were the beginning and the end of Love and Hate, of Hope and fear, of Joy and Sorrow.

Beatrice, hail! Beatrice, farewell! till perchance a Spirit rushing earthward shall cry "Greeting," in another tongue, and Death, descending to his own place, shaking from his wings the dew of tears, shall answer "Farewell to me and Night, ye Children of Eternal Day!"

And what was this other relic? He lifted it--it was Beatrice's tennis shoe, washed from her foot--Geoffrey knew it, for once he had tied it.

Then Geoffrey broke down--it was too much. He threw himself upon the great rock and sobbed--that rock where he had sat with her and Heaven had opened to their sight. But men are not given to such exhibitions of emotion, and fortunately for him the paroxysm did not last. He could not have borne it for long.

He rose and went again to the edge of the sea. At this moment old Edward and his son arrived. Geoffrey pointed to the boat, then held up the little shoe.

"Ah," said the old man, "as I thought. Goad help her! She's gone; she'll never come ashore no more, she won't. She's twenty miles away by now, she is, breast up, with the gulls a-screaming over her. It's that there

damned canoe, that's what it is. I wish to God I had broke it up long ago. I'd rather have built her a boat for nothing, I would. Damn the unlucky craft!" screamed the old man at the top of his voice, and turning his head to hide the tears that were streaming down his rugged face. "And her that I nursed and pulled out of the waters once all but dead. Damn it, I say! There, take that, you Sea Witch, you!" and he picked up a great boulder and crashed it through the bottom of the canoe with all his strength. "You shan't never drown no more. But it has brought you good luck, it has, sir; you'll be a fortunite man all your life now. It has brought you the Drowned One's shoe."

"Don't break it any more," said Geoffrey. "She used to value it. You had better bring it along between you--it may be wanted. I am going to the Vicarage."

He walked back. Mr. Granger and Elizabeth had not yet arrived, but they were expected every minute. He went into the sitting-room. It was full of memories and tokens of Beatrice. There lay a novel which he had given her, and there was yesterday's paper that she had brought from town, the Standard, with his speech in it.

Geoffrey covered his eyes with his hand, and thought. None knew that she had committed suicide except himself. If he revealed it things might be said of her; he did not care what was said of him, but he was jealous of her dead name. It might be said, for instance, that the whole tale was true, and that Beatrice died because she could no longer face life

without being put to an open shame. Yes, he had better hold his tongue as to how and why she died. She was dead--nothing could bring her back. But how then should he account for his presence there? Easily enough. He would say frankly that he came because Beatrice had written to him of the charges made against her and the threats against himself--came to find her dead. And on that point he would still have a word with Owen Davies and Elizabeth.

Scarcely had he made up his mind when Elizabeth and her father entered. Clearly from their faces they had as yet heard nothing.

Geoffrey rose, and Elizabeth caught sight of him standing with glowing eyes and a face like that of Death himself. She recoiled in alarm.

"What brings you here, Mr. Bingham?" she said, in her hard voice.

"Cannot you guess, Miss Granger?" he said sternly. "A few days back you made certain charges against your sister and myself in the presence of your father and Mr. Owen Davies. These charges have been communicated to me, and I have come to answer them and to demand satisfaction for them."

Mr. Granger fidgeted nervously and looked as though he would like to escape, but Elizabeth, with characteristic courage, shut the door and faced the storm.

"Yes, I did make those charges, Mr. Bingham," she said, "and they are true charges. But stop, we had better send for Beatrice first."

"You may send, but you will not find her."

"What do you mean?--what do you mean?" asked her father apprehensively.

"It means that he has hidden her away, I suppose," said Elizabeth with a sneer.

"I mean, Mr. Granger, that your daughter Beatrice is dead."

For once startled out of her self-command, Elizabeth gave a little cry, while her father staggered back against the wall.

"Dead! dead! What do you mean? How did she die?" he asked.

"That is known to God and her alone," answered Geoffrey. "She went out last evening in her canoe. When I arrived here this morning she was missed for the first time. I walked along the beach and found the canoe and this inside of it," and he placed the sodden shoe upon the table.

There was a silence. In the midst of it, Owen Davies burst into the room with wild eyes and dishevelled hair.

"Is it true?" he cried, "tell me--it cannot be true that Beatrice is

drowned. She cannot have been taken from me just when I was going to marry her. Say that it is not true!"

A great fury filled Geoffrey's heart. He walked down the room and shut the door, a red light swimming before his eyes. Then he turned and gripped Owen Davies's shoulder like a vice.

"You accursed blackguard--you unmanly cur!" he said; "you and that wicked woman," and he shook his hand at Elizabeth, "conspired together to bring a slur upon Beatrice. You did more: you threatened to attack me, to try and ruin me if she would not give herself up to you. You loathsome hypocrite, you tortured her and frightened her; now I am here to frighten you. You said that you would make the country ring with your tales. I tell you this--are you listening to me? If you dare to mention her name in such a sense, or if that woman dares, I will break every bone in your wretched body--by Heaven I will kill you!" and he cast Davies from him, and as he did so, struck him heavily across the face with the back of his hand.

The man took no notice either of his words or of the deadly insult of the blow.

"Is it true?" he screamed, "is it true that she is dead?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey, following him, and bending his tall square frame over him, for Davies had fallen against the wall, "yes, it is true--she

is dead--and beyond your reach for ever. Pray to God that you may not one day be called her murderers, all of you--you shameless cowards."

Owen Davies gave one shrill cry and sank in a huddled heap upon the ground.

"There is no God," he moaned; "God promised her to me, to be my own--you have killed her; you--you seduced her first and then you killed her. I believe you killed her. Oh, I shall go mad!"

"Mad or sane," said Geoffrey, "say those words once more and I will stamp the life out of you where you are. You say that God promised her to you--promised that woman to a hound like you. Ah, be careful!"

Owen Davies made no answer. Crouched there upon the ground he rocked himself to and fro, and moaned in the madness of his baulked desire.

"This man," said Geoffrey, turning towards and pointing to Elizabeth, who was glaring at him like a wild cat from the corner of the room, "said that there is no God. I say that there is a God, and that one day, soon or late, vengeance will find you out--you murderess, you writer of anonymous letters; you who, to advance your own wicked ends whatever they may be, were not ashamed to try to drag your innocent sister's name into the dirt. I never believed in a hell till now, but there must be a hell for such as you, Elizabeth Granger. Go your ways; live out your time; but live every hour of it in terror of the vengeance that shall

come so surely as you shall die.

"Now for you, sir," he went on, addressing the trembling father. "I do not blame you so much, because I believe that this viper poisoned your mind. You might have thought that the tale was true. It is not true; it was a lie. Beatrice, who now is dead, came into my room in her sleep, and was carried from it as she came. And you, her father, allowed this villain and your daughter to use her distress against her; you allowed him to make a lever of it, with which to force her into a marriage that she loathed. Yes, cover up your face--you may well do so. Do your worst, one and all of you, but remember that this time you have to deal with a man who can and will strike back, not a poor friendless girl."

"Before Heaven, it was not my fault, Mr. Bingham," gasped the old man. "I am innocent of it. That Judas-woman Elizabeth betrayed her sister because she wanted to marry him herself," and he pointed to the Heap upon the floor. "She thought that it would prejudice him against Beatrice, and he--he believed that she was attached to you, and tried to work upon her attachment."

"So," said Geoffrey, "now we have it all. And you, sir, stood by and saw this done. You stood by thinking that you would make a profit of her agony. Now I will tell you what I meant to hide from you. I did love her. I do love her--as she loved me. I believe that between you, you drove her to her grave. Her blood be on your heads for ever and for ever!"

"Oh, take me home," groaned the Heap upon the floor--"take me home, Elizabeth! I daren't go alone. Beatrice will haunt me. My brain goes round and round. Take me away, Elizabeth, and stop with me. You are not afraid of her, you are afraid of nothing."

Elizabeth sidled up to him, keeping her fierce eyes on Geoffrey all the time. She was utterly cowed and terrified, but she could still look fierce. She took the Heap by the hand and drew him thence still moaning and quite crazed. She led him away to his castle and his wealth. Six months afterwards she came forth with him to marry him, half-witted as he was. A year and eight months afterwards she came out again to bury him, and found herself the richest widow in Wales.

They went forth, leaving Geoffrey and Mr. Granger alone. The old man rested his head upon the table and wept bitterly.

"Be merciful," he said, "do not say such words to me. I loved her, indeed I did, but Elizabeth was too much for me, and I am so poor. Oh, if you loved her also, be merciful! I do not reproach you because you loved her, although you had no right to love her. If you had not loved her, and made her love you, all this would never have happened. Why do you say such dreadful things to me, Mr. Bingham?"

"I loved her, sir," answered Geoffrey, humbly enough now that his fury had passed, "because being what she was all who looked on her must love her. There is no woman left like her in the world. But who am I that I should blame you? God forgive us all! I only live henceforth in the hope that I may one day rejoin her where she has gone."

There was a pause.

"Mr. Granger," said Geoffrey presently, "never trouble yourself about money. You were her father; anything you want and what I have is yours. Let us shake hands and say good-bye, and let us never meet again. As I said, God forgive us all!"

"Thank you--thank you," said the old man, looking up through the white hair that fell about his eyes. "It is a strange world and we are all miserable sinners. I hope there is a better somewhere. I'm well-nigh tired of this, especially now that Beatrice has gone. Poor girl, she was a good daughter and a fine woman. Good-bye. Good-bye!"

Then Geoffrey went.