

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DUCHESS'S BALL

Geoffrey reached Town a little before eleven o'clock that night--a haunted man--haunted for life by a vision of that face still lovely in death, floating alone upon the deep, and companioned only by the screaming mews--or perchance now sinking or sunk to an unfathomable grave. Well might such a vision haunt a man, the man whom alone of all men those cold lips had kissed, and for whose dear sake this dreadful thing was done.

He took a cab directing the driver to go to Bolton Street and to stop at his club as he passed. There might be letters for him there, he thought--something which would distract his mind a little. As it chanced there was a letter, marked "private," and a telegram; both had been delivered that evening, the porter said, the former about an hour ago by hand.

Idly he opened the telegram--it was from his lawyers: "Your cousin, the child George Bingham, is, as we have just heard, dead. Please call on us early to-morrow morning."

He started a little, for this meant a good deal to Geoffrey. It meant a baronetcy and eight thousand a year, more or less. How delighted Honoria would be, he thought with a sad smile; the loss of that large income had

always been a bitter pill to her, and one which she had made him swallow again and again. Well, there it was. Poor boy, he had always been ailing--an old man's child!

He put the telegram in his pocket and got into the hansom again. There was a lamp in it and by its light he read the letter. It was from the Prime Minister and ran thus:

"My dear Bingham,--I have not seen you since Monday to thank you for the magnificent speech you made on that night. Allow me to add my congratulations to those of everybody else. As you know, the Under Secretaryship of the Home Office is vacant. On behalf of my colleagues and myself I write to ask if you will consent to fill it for a time, for we do not in any way consider that the post is one commensurate with your abilities. It will, however, serve to give you practical experience of administration, and us the advantage of your great talents to an even larger extent than we now enjoy. For the future, it must of course take care of itself; but, as you know, Sir ----'s health is not all that could be desired, and the other day he told me that it was doubtful if he would be able to carry on the duties of the Attorney-Generalship for very much longer. In view of this contingency I venture to suggest that you would do well to apply for silk as soon as possible. I have spoken to the Lord Chancellor about it, and he says that there will be no difficulty, as although you have only been in active practice for so short a while, you have a good many years' standing as a barrister. Or if this prospect does not please doubtless some other opening to the

Cabinet can be found in time. The fact is, that we cannot in our own interest overlook you for long."

Geoffrey smiled again as he finished this letter. Who could have believed a year ago that he would have been to-day in a position to receive such an epistle from the Prime Minister of England? Ah, here was the luck of the Drowned One's shoe with a vengeance. And what was it all worth to him now?

He put the letter in his pocket with the telegram and looked out. They were turning into Bolton Street. How was little Effie, he wondered? The child seemed all that was left him to care for. If anything happened to her--bah, he would not think of it!

He was there now. "How is Miss Effie?" he asked of the servant who opened the door. At that moment his attention was attracted by the dim forms of two people, a man and a woman, who were standing not far from the area gate, the man with his arm round the woman's waist. Suddenly the woman appeared to catch sight of the cab and retired swiftly down the area. It crossed his mind that her figure was very like that of Anne, the French nurse.

"Miss Effie is doing nicely, sir, I'm told," answered the man.

Geoffrey breathed more freely. "Where is her ladyship?" he asked. "In Effie's room?"

"No, sir," answered the man, "her ladyship has gone to a ball. She left this note for you in case you should come in."

He took the note from the hall table and opened it.

"Dear Geoffrey," it ran, "Effie is so much better that I have made up my mind to go to the duchess's ball after all. She would be so disappointed if I did not come, and my dress is quite lovely. Had your mysterious business anything to do with Bryngelly?--

"Yours, Honoria."

"She would go on to a ball from her mother's funeral," said Geoffrey to himself, as he walked up to Effie's room; "well, it is her nature and there's an end of it."

He knocked at the door of Effie's room. There was no answer, so he walked in. The room was lit but empty--no, not quite! On the floor, clothed only in her white night-shirt, lay his little daughter, to all appearance dead.

With something like an oath he sprang to her and lifted her. The face was pale and the small hands were cold, but the breast was still hot and fevered, and the heart beat. A glance showed him what had happened. The child being left alone, and feeling thirsty, had got out of bed and gone

to the water bottle--there was the tumbler on the floor. Then weakness had overcome her and she had fainted--fainted upon the cold floor with the inflammation still on her.

At that moment Anne entered the room sweetly murmuring, "Ça va bien, chérie?"

"Help me to put the child into bed," said Geoffrey sternly. "Now ring the bell--ring it again.

"And now, woman--go. Leave this house at once, this very night. Do you hear me? No, don't stop to argue. Look here! If that child dies I will prosecute you for manslaughter; yes, I saw you in the street," and he took a step towards her. Then Anne fled, and her face was seen no more in Bolton Street or indeed in this country.

"James," said Geoffrey to the servant, "send the cook up here--she is a sensible woman; and do you take a hansom and drive to the doctor, and tell him to come here at once, and if you cannot find him go for another doctor. Then go to the Nurses' Home, near St. James' Station, and get a trained nurse--tell them one must be had from somewhere instantly."

"Yes, sir. And shall I call for her ladyship at the duchess's, sir?"

"No," he answered, frowning heavily, "do not disturb her ladyship. Go now."

"That settles it," said Geoffrey, as the man went. "Whatever happens, Honoria and I must part. I have done with her."

He had indeed, though not in the way he meant. It would have been well for Honoria if her husband's contempt had not prevented him from summoning her from her pleasure.

The cook came up, and between them they brought the child back to life.

She opened her eyes and smiled. "Is that you, daddy," she whispered, "or do I dream?"

"Yes, dear, it is I."

"Where has you been, daddy--to see Auntie Beatrice?"

"Yes, love," he said, with a gasp.

"Oh, daddy, my head do feel funny; but I don't mind now you is come back. You won't go away no more, will you, daddy?"

"No, dear, no more."

After that she began to wander a little, and finally dropped into a troubled sleep.

Within half an hour both the doctor and the nurse arrived. The former listened to Geoffrey's tale and examined the child.

"She may pull through it," he said, "she has got a capital constitution; but I'll tell you what it is--if she had lain another five minutes in that draught there would have been an end of her. You came in the nick of time. And now if I were you I should go to bed. You can do no good here, and you look dreadfully ill yourself."

But Geoffrey shook his head. He said he would go downstairs and smoke a pipe. He did not want to go to bed at present; he was too tired.

Meanwhile the ball went merrily. Lady Honoria never enjoyed herself more in her life. She revelled in the luxurious gaiety around her like a butterfly in the sunshine. How good it all was--the flash of diamonds, the odour of costly flowers, the homage of well-bred men, the envy of other women. Oh! it was a delightful world after all--that is when one did not have to exist in a flat near the Edgware Road. But Heaven be praised! thanks to Geoffrey's talents, there was an end of flats and misery. After all, he was not a bad sort of husband, though in many ways a perfect mystery to her. As for his little weakness for the Welsh girl, really, provided that there was no scandal, she did not care twopence about it.

"Yes, I am so glad you admire it. I think it is rather a nice dress, but then I always say that nobody in London can make a dress like Madame Jules. Oh, no, Geoffrey did not choose it; he thinks of other things."

"Well, I'm sure you ought to be proud of him, Lady Honoria," said the handsome Guardsman to whom she was talking; "they say at mess that he is one of the cleverest men in England. I only wish I had a fiftieth part of his brains."

"Oh, please do not become clever, Lord Atleigh; please don't, or I shall really give you up. Cleverness is all very well, but it isn't everything, you know. Yes, I will dance if you like, but you must go slowly; to be quite honest, I am afraid of tearing my lace in this crush. Why, I declare there is Garsington, my brother, you know," and she pointed to a small red-haired man who was elbowing his way towards them. "I wonder what he wants; it is not at all in his line to come to balls. You know him, don't you? he is always racing horses, like you."

But the Guardsman had vanished. For reasons of his own he did not wish to meet Garsington. Perhaps he too had been a member of a certain club.

"Oh, there you are, Honoria," said her brother, "I thought that I should be sure to find you somewhere in this beastly squash. Look here, I have something to tell you."

"Good news or bad?" said Lady Honoria, playing with her fan. "If it is bad, keep it, for I am enjoying myself very much, and I don't want my evening spoiled."

"Trust you for that, Honoria; but look here, it's jolly good, about as good as can be for that prig of a husband of yours. What do you think? that brat of a boy, the son of old Sir Robert Bingham and the cook or some one, you know, is----"

"Not dead, not dead?" said Honoria in deep agitation.

"Dead as ditch-water," replied his lordship. "I heard it at the club. There was a lawyer fellow there dining with somebody there, and they got talking about Bingham, when the lawyer said, 'Oh, he's Sir Geoffrey Bingham now. Old Sir Robert's heir is dead. I saw the telegram myself.'"

"Oh, this is almost too good to be true," said Honoria. "Why, it means eight thousand a year to us."

"I told you it was pretty good," said her brother. "You ought to stand me a commission out of the swag. At any rate, let's go and drink to the news. Come on, it is time for supper and I am awfully done. I must screw myself up."

Lady Honoria took his arm. As they walked down the wide flower-hung

stair they met a very great Person indeed, coming up.

"Ah, Lady Honoria," said the great Person, "I have something to say that will please you, I think," and he bent towards her, and spoke very low, then, with a little bow, passed on.

"What is the old boy talking about?" asked her brother.

"Why, what do you think? We are in luck's way to-night. He says that they are offering Geoffrey the Under Secretaryship of the Home Office."

"He'll be a bigger prig than ever now," growled Lord Garsington. "Yes, it is luck though; let us hope it won't turn."

They sat down to supper, and Lord Garsington, who had already been dining, helped himself pretty freely to champagne. Before them was a silver candelabra and on each of the candles was fixed a little painted paper shade. One of them got wrong, and a footman tried to reach over Lord Garsington's head to put it straight.

"I'll do it," said he.

"No, no; let the man," said Lady Honoria. "Look! it is going to catch fire!"

"Nonsense," he answered, rising solemnly and reaching his arm towards

the shade. As he touched it, it caught fire; indeed, by touching it he caused it to catch fire. He seized hold of it, and made an effort to put it out, but it burnt his fingers.

"Curse the thing!" he said aloud, and threw it from him. It fell flaming in his sister's dress among the thickest of the filmy laces; they caught, and instantly two wreathing snakes of fire shot up her. She sprang from her seat and rushed screaming down the room, an awful mass of flame!

In ten more minutes Lady Honoria had left this world and its pleasures to those who still lived to taste them.

An hour passed. Geoffrey still sat brooding heavily over his pipe in the study in Bolton Street and waiting for Honoria, when a knock came to his door. The servants had all gone to bed, all except the sick nurse. He rose and opened it himself. A little red-haired, pale-faced man staggered in.

"Why, Garsington, is it you? What do you want at this hour?"

"Screw yourself up, Bingham, I've something to tell you," he answered in

a thick voice.

"What is it? another disaster, I suppose. Is somebody else dead?"

"Yes; somebody is. Honoria's dead. Burnt to death at the ball."

"Great God! Honoria burnt to death. I had better go----"

"I advise you not, Bingham. I wouldn't go to the hospital if I were you. Screw yourself up, and if you can, give me something to drink--I'm about done--I must screw myself up."

And here we may leave this most fortunate and gifted man. Farewell to Geoffrey Bingham.

ENVOL

Thus, then, did these human atoms work out their destinies, these little grains of animated dust, blown hither and thither by a breath which came they knew not whence.

If there be any malicious Principle among the Powers around us that

deigns to find amusement in the futile vagaries of man, well might it laugh, and laugh again, at the great results of all this scheming, of all these desires, loves and hates; and if there be any pitiful Principle, well might it sigh over the infinite pathos of human helplessness. Owen Davies lost in his own passion; Geoffrey crowned with prosperity and haunted by undying sorrow; Honoria perishing wretchedly in her hour of satisfied ambition; Beatrice sacrificing herself in love and blindness, and thereby casting out her joy.

Oh, if she had been content to humbly trust in the Providence above her; if she had but left that deed undared for one short week!

But Geoffrey still lived, and the child recovered, after hanging for a while between life and death, and was left to comfort him. May she survive to be a happy wife and mother, living under conditions more favourable to her well-being than those which trampled out the life of that mistaken woman, the ill-starred, great-souled Beatrice, and broke her father's heart.

Say--what are we? We are but arrows winged with fears and shot from darkness into darkness; we are blind leaders of the blind, aimless beaters of this wintry air; lost travellers by many stony paths ending in one end. Tell us, you, who have outworn the common tragedy and passed the narrow way, what lies beyond its gate? You are dumb, or we cannot

hear you speak.

But Beatrice knows to-day!