

"BEATRICE."

A New and Fascinating Story.

BY H. RIDER HAGGARD.

"That's how we've been getting on at Bryngolli, Mr. Bingham," Mr. Granger said presently—"daring, pretty well starving. It's only you who have been making money. We've been sitting on the same old seat while you have become a great man. It had not been for Beatrice's salary (she's had a very good one) that we could have had your good clothes on what she keeps; I know that she had to go without a warm cloak this winter, and she got a cough from it, and she would have been in the workhouse, and that is where she will be, if she rubs the back of his withered hand across his eyes."

Geoffrey gasped. Beatrice with scarcely enough means to clothe herself—Beatrice shivering and becoming ill from the want of a cloak while he lived in luxury! It made him sick to think of it. For a moment he could say nothing.

"I have come here—I've come," went on the old man in a broken voice, broken not so much by shame at having to make the request as from fear that he might be refused, "to ask you if you could lend me a little money? I don't know where to turn, I don't indeed, or I would not do it, Mr. Bingham. I have spent my last pound to get her. If you could lend me a hundred pounds, I'd give you my note of hand for it, and try to pay it back little by little; we might take twenty pounds a year from Beatrice's salary."

"Don't, please—do not talk of such a thing," ejaculated the horrified Geoffrey. "Where the devil's my check book? Oh, I know, I left it in Bolton street. Here, this will do as well," and he took up a draft made out to his order, and handed it to Mr. Granger. It was in payment of the fees in the great case of Parsons and Dose and some other matters. Mr. Granger took the draft and, holding it close to his eyes, glanced at the amount; it was £200. "That's the double what I asked for," he said doubtfully. "Am I to return you £100?"

"No, no," answered Geoffrey. "I'd give you that you have some debts to pay. Thank heaven, I can get on very well and earn more money than I want. Not enough clothing—it is shocking to think of it," he added, more to himself than to his listener.

"The old man rose, his eyes full of tears. "God bless you," he said. "God bless you. I do not know how to thank you—I don't indeed." And he caught Geoffrey's hand between his trembling palms and pressed it.

"These do not say any more, Mr. Granger. It is really only a matter of mutual obligation. No, no; I don't want any note of hand. If I were to die it might be used against you. You can pay me whenever it is convenient."

"You are too good, Mr. Bingham," said the old clergyman. "Where could another man be found who would lend me £200 without security? (where indeed?)" By the way," he added, "I forgot my check book in your chair. Will you come back with me for a few days to Bryngolli? We shall all be so pleased if you can. Do come, Mr. Bingham, you look as though you want a change, you do indeed."

Geoffrey dropped his hand heavily on the desk, but half an hour before he had made up his mind not to go to Bryngolli. And now—

The vision of Beatrice rose before his eyes. Beatrice who had gone cold all the winter and never told him one word of her bitter poverty—longing for the sight of Beatrice came into his heart and like a hurricane swept the defenses of his reason to the level ground. Temptation overwhelmed him; he no longer struggled against it. He must see her, if it was only to say good-by.

"Thank you," he said quietly, lifting his bowed head. "Yes, I have nothing particular to do for the week or two. I think that I will come. When do you go back?"

"Well, I thought of taking the night mail, but I feel so tired, I really don't know; I think I shall go by the 6 o'clock train to-morrow."

"That will suit me very well," said Geoffrey. "And now what are you going to do to-night? You had better go to bed and sleep at my house. No dress clothes, Oh, never mind; these are some people coming, but they won't care; a clergyman is always dressed. Come along, and I will get that draft cashed. The bank is shut, but I can 'casualty' it."

CHAPTER XX.
BACK AT BRYNGOLLI.

Geoffrey and Mr. Granger reached Bolton street about 6 o'clock. The drawing room was still full of callers. Lady Honoria's young men mustered in great force in those days. They were very inoffensive young men, and Geoffrey had no particular objection to them. Only he found it difficult to remember all their names. When Geoffrey entered the drawing room there were no less than three of them, to say nothing of two stray ladies, all superbly dressed and metaphorically sitting at Honoria's very pretty feet. Other-wise their contributions to the general store of amusement did not amount to much, for her ladyship did most of the talking.

Geoffrey introduced Mr. Granger, whom Honoria could not at first remember. Nor did she receive the announcement that he was going to dine and stay the night with any particular enthusiasm. The young men smiled away at Geoffrey's advent like mistletoe before a rising sun. He greeted them nicely enough, but with him they had nothing in common. To tell the truth, they were a little afraid of him. This man, with his dark, handsome face, and with the stamp of intellect, his powerful looking form, all dressed according to their standard and his great and growing reputation, was a person with whom they had no sympathy, and who, they felt, had no sympathy with them. We talk so much of these in heaven and one hell for all of us, but here must be some mistake. An impossible gulf yawns between the different classes of mankind. What has such a man as Geoffrey to do with the feeble male and female butterflies of a London drawing room? There is only one link between them; they live on the same planet.

When the five young men and the two stray ladies had melted away Geoffrey took Mr. Granger up to his room. Coming down stairs again he found Lady Honoria waiting for him in the study.

"Is that individual really going to dine and stay here?" she asked.

"Certainly, Honoria, and he has brought no dress clothes," he answered.

"Really, Geoffrey, it is too bad of you," said the lady, with some pardonable irritation. "Why do you bring people to dinner in this predicament? It is with quite upon the table. Just fancy asking an old Welsh clergyman to dine who has not the slightest pretensions to being a gentleman, when one has the prime minister and a bishop coming—and a clergyman without dress clothes, too. What has he come for?"

"He came to see me on business, and as to the people coming to dinner, if they don't like it they can grumble when they go home. By the way, Honoria, I am going down to Wales for a day or two to-morrow. I want a change."

"Indeed! Going to see the lovely Beatrice, I suppose. You had better be careful, Geoffrey. That girl will get you into a mess, and if she does there are plenty of people who are ready to make an example of you. You have enemies enough, I can tell you. I am not, however, the least of them, but you are too intimate with that girl, and you will be sorry for it one day."

"Nonsense," said Geoffrey, angrily, but, nevertheless, he felt that Lady Honoria's words were words of truth. It struck him, however, that he must feel this strongly, or he would not have spoken in this tone. Honoria did not often pose as a household philosopher. Still he would not drawback now. His heart was set on seeing Beatrice.

"Am I to understand," went on his wife, "that you still object to my staying with the Grangers? I think it is a little hard that if I do not make a fuss about your going to see your village paragon, you should refuse to allow me to visit my own brother."

Geoffrey felt that he was being bargained with. It was degrading, but in the extremity of his folly he yielded.

"I don't object to my staying with the Grangers," he said shortly, "but if you take Elsie, mind that she is properly looked after, that is all," and he abruptly left the room.

Lady Honoria looked after him, slowly nodding her handsome head. "Ah," she said to herself, "I have found out how to manage a woman. I think it is a little hard that if I do not make a fuss about your going to see your village paragon, you should refuse to allow me to visit my own brother."

Yes, probably it would be the same case over again. And yet, and yet—was Beatrice of that class? Had she not too much of a man's straightforwardness of aim to permit her to play such tricks? In the bottom of his soul he thought that she had, but he would not admit it. The fact of the matter was that she had a man's aim, and trying to drug his conscience. He knew in his longing to see her dear face once more that he had undertaken a dangerous thing. He was about to walk with her over an abyss on a bridge which might bear them or might break. So long as he walked there alone it would be well, but would it bear them both? Alas for the frailty of human nature, this was the truth; but he would not and did not acknowledge it. He was not going to make love to Beatrice; he was going to enjoy the pleasure of her society. In friendship there could be no harm.

It is not difficult to still the qualms of an uneasy mind, more especially when the thing in question at its worst is rather an offense against local custom than against national law. In many countries of the world, it is not only permitted, but is a different epoch of their history—it would have done no wrong that Geoffrey and Beatrice should love each other, and human nature in strong temptation is very apt to override artificial barriers erected to suit the convenience or promote the pleasure of the community at large. But, as we have heard, even though all things may be lawful, yet all things are not expedient. To commit or even to condone an act because the principle that stamps it as wrong will admit of argument on its merits is mere sophistry by the aid of which the majority of laws of all calendars vary to suit the generations, but each generation must obey its own, or confusion will ensue. A deed should be judged by its fruits; it may even be innocent in itself, yet, if its fruits are evil, it is a crime. Thus in some countries to mention the name of your mother-in-law entails the most unpleasant consequences that intimate relation. Nobody can say that to name the lady is a thing wicked in itself; yet the man who, knowing the penalties which will ensue, allows himself to pronounce her name, or that relative, to violate the custom and mention her by name is doubtless an offender. Thus, too, the result of an entanglement between a woman and a man already married generally means unhappiness and hurt to all concerned, more especially to the woman, who is injured thereby. It is useless to point to the example of the patriarchs, some foreign royal families and many respectable Turks; it is useless to plead that the love is a deep and holy love, for which a man or woman might well give up his or her life. The circumstances in the fact of loneliness need of sympathy and that the existing marriage is a hollow sham. The rule is clear. A man may do most things except cheat at cards or run away in action; a woman may be as good as a man, but she must not break them, and finally put herself up at auction and take no harm at all—neither of them may in any event do this.

Not that Geoffrey, to do him justice, had any such intentions. Most men are incapable of plots of that kind. If they fail, it is when the voice of conscience is lost in the whirlwind of passion, and counsel is darkened by the tumultuous pleadings of the heart. Their sin is that they will, most of them, allow themselves to be put in positions favorable to the development of these disagreeable influences. If Geoffrey had done what he ought to have done, he never would have gone back to Bryngolli, and there would have been no story to tell, or no more than this:—

Lengthy Mr. Granger and his guest reached Bryngolli at a quarter of eight. They had not long been in the long parlor when a maid brought in a happy hour, and Elizabeth was greeting him. He shook hands with her, and, as he did so, noticed vaguely that she, too, was utterly unchanged. Her straw colored hair was pushed back from the temples in the same way, her mouth wore the same bland smile, her bright eyes shone with the same look; she even wore the same brown dress. But she appeared to be very pleased to see him, as, indeed, she was, for the game looked well for Elizabeth. Her father kissed her hurriedly and bustled from the room to look up his books and get ready for the evening.

Somehow Geoffrey's conversation with the maid failed him. Where was Beatrice? She ought to be back from school. It was holiday time, indeed. Could she be away!

He made an effort and remarked absently that things seemed very unchanged at Bryngolli.

"You are looking for Beatrice," said Elizabeth, answering his thought and not his words. "She has gone out walking, but I think that she will be back soon. Excuse me, but I must go and see about your room."

Geoffrey hung about a little, then he lit his pipe and strolled down to the beach, where, unexpressed idea of meeting Beatrice, he did not meet Beatrice, but he met old Edward, who knew him at once.

"Lord, sir," he said, "it's queer to see you here again, specially when I think as how I saw you last, and you a deal 'n' all your people with you, and you a deal 'n' all your people with you, and you a deal 'n' all your people with you."

"At length, sir—thank you kindly; it ain't many savings as comes my way—though I hate the sight on it, I do. I'd like to stave a hole in the bottom of that there cranky creature; it ain't safe, and that's the fact. There'll be another accident out of it of these fine days, and no coming to next time. But, Lord bless you, it's her way of pleasing herself. She's a queer 'n' is Miss Beatrice, and she gets queerer and queerer with what her boys do to her."

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should have said it to any living soul but you. What is the use of being great when there is nobody to work for? That might have been different, but the world is a hard place. If you—"

At this moment his hand touched hers; it was accidental, but in the tenderness of his eyes, and the warmth of his hand, and the way in which he drew her hand away and thrust it in her bosom.

"You have your wife to share your fortune," she said; "you have Elsie to inherit it, and you can leave your name to your country."

Then came a heavy pause.

"And you," he said, breaking it, "what future is there for you?"

She laughed softly. "Women have no future and they ask none. At least I do not care, though one may sigh for the life of them if they can ever so little help the lives of others. That is their happiness and their reward is rest."

Just then Mr. Granger came back from his christening, and Beatrice rose and went to bed.

"Looks a little pale, doesn't she, Mr. Bingham?" said her father. "I think she must be troubled in her mind. The fact is—well, there is no reason why I should not tell you, she thinks so much of you, and you might say a word to brighten her up—well, it's about David's father you know, that she likes him and is vexed because he does not come forward. Well, you see—of course I may be mistaken, but I have sometimes thought that he may. I have seen him look as if he was thinking of it, though of course I'm more than a little prejudiced against him. She's got herself, and her good looks to give him, and he is a rich man. Think of it, Mr. Bingham, and the old gentleman turned up his eyes piously, "just think what a thing it would be for her, and indeed for all of us, if it should please God to send a man like that in her way; she would be rich for life, and such a position! But it is possible; one never knows; he might take a fancy to her. At any rate, Mr. Bingham, I think you could cheer her up a little; there is no need for her to give up hope yet."

Geoffrey burst into a short, grim laugh. "I'll try my best," he said, "I'll see that David, indeed, the irony of the whole position was too much for his sense of humor."

"Yes," he said, "I dare say that it might be a good match for her, but I do not know how she would get on with Mr. Davies."

"Get on with Mr. Davies, of course. Women are soft, and can squeeze into most holes, especially if they are well liked. Besides, he may be a bit heavy, but I think she is pining for him, and it's a pity that she should waste her life like that. What are you going to do? Well, good-night—good night."

Geoffrey did go to bed, but not to sleep. For a long while he lay awake, thinking. He thought of the last night which he had spent in this little room, of its strange experiences, of all that had happened since, and of the meeting of today. Could he, after that meeting, be so cold to her? He thought of the feelings with which Beatrice regarded him. It was difficult to do so, and yet there still was room for error. Then he thought of what old Edward had said to him, and of what Mr. Granger had said with reference to Beatrice and Owen Davies. The views of both were cruelly and even selfishly expressed, but they coincided, and what was more, there was truth in them, and he knew it. The idea of Beatrice marrying Mr. Davies was, to put it mildly, repulsive to him; but had he any claim to stand between her and so desirable a settlement in life? Clearly he had not; his conscience told him that he had no right to do so.

Could it be right, moreover, that this kind of tie which existed between them should be knitted more closely? What would it mean? Trouble, and nothing but trouble, more days to forget him, or, at the worst, to remember him with but a vague regret. Yes; cost what it might, he would force himself to do it before any actual mischief ensued. The only question was, should he not go further? Should he not tell her that she would do well to marry Mr. Davies?

They had been talking the most painful question, at last he went to sleep.

CHAPTER XXII.
A NIGHT OF STORM.

The next afternoon the whole vicarage party walked up to the man to inspect the most important of the young pigs. It struck Geoffrey, remembering former editions, that the reproductive powers of Mr. Granger's old sow were something little short of marvellous, and he dreamily worked out a calculation of how long it would take her and her progeny to produce a pig to every square yard of the area of plenty little Wales. It seemed that the thing could be done in six years, which was absurd, so he gave up calculating.

He had no words alone with Beatrice that afternoon. Indeed, a certain coldness seemed to have sprung up between them. With the almost supernatural quickness of a loving woman's intuition, she had divined that something was passing in his mind, inimical to her most vital interests, so she shunned his company, and received his conventional advances with a politeness which was as cold as it was crushing. This did not go as Geoffrey; it is one thing to make your mind harshly to abandon in her own interests, of course a lady whom you do not wish to compromise, and quite another to be snubbed by that lady before the moment of final separation. Though he never put the idea into words or even thought of it, he was angry for Geoffrey was far too anxious and unhappy to be flippant, any rate in thought—he would at heart have wished her to remain the same, indeed to have ever tenderer, till the fatal time of parting arrived, and even to show appreciation of his virtuous conduct.

But to the utter destruction of most such habits as Geoffrey held, loving women never will put according to the book. Their conduct imparts everything, for it is obvious that it takes two to bring an affair of this nature to a dignified conclusion, even when the stakes are highest, and the matter is one of life and death. Beatrice was after all very much of a woman, and she did not behave much better than any other woman would have done. She was angry and suspicious, and she showed it, with the result that Geoffrey grew angry also. It was cruel of her, he thought, considering that she was a woman, and that she could know nothing of what was in his mind, however much she might guess; also as yet he did not know the boundless depth and might of her passion for him, and all that it meant to her. Had he realized this he would have acted differently.

They came home at last, tea; then Mr. Granger and Elizabeth were ready to go to evening service. To Geoffrey's dismay Beatrice did the same. He had looked forward

to a quiet walk with her—really this was not to be borne. Fortunately, or rather unfortunately, she was ready the first and he got a word with her.

"I did not know that you were going to church," he said. "I thought that we might have had a quiet walk together. Very likely I shall have to go away early to-morrow morning."

"Indeed," answered Beatrice coldly. "But, of course, you have your work to attend to. I told Elizabeth that I was coming to church, and I must go; it is too sultry to walk; there is going to be a storm."

"At this moment Elizabeth came in.

"Well, Beatrice," said she, "are you coming to church? Father has gone on."

Beatrice pretended not to hear and reflected a moment. He would go away and she would see him no more. Could she let slip this last hour? Oh, she could not do it!

In that moment of reflection her fate was sealed.

"No," she answered slowly. "I don't think that I am coming; it is too sultry to go to church. I dare say that Mr. Bingham will go with you."

Geoffrey hastily disclaimed any such intention and Elizabeth started off alone. "Ah!" she said to herself, "I thought that you would not come, my dear."

"Well," said Geoffrey, when she had well gone, "shall we go out?"

"I think it is pleasant here," answered Beatrice.

"Oh, Beatrice, don't be so unkind," he said, feebly.

"As you like," she replied. "There is a fine sunset—I think that we shall have a storm."

because I thought it to be my duty. You must have known that, to my sin and sorrow, I have always loved you, that you have never been an hour far from my mind, that I have longed to see your face like a sick man for the light. Tell me, did you not know it, Beatrice?"

"How should I know?" she answered very softly. "I could only guess, and if, indeed, you love me, how could you wish me to marry another man? I thought that you had learned my weakness and took this way to approach me. Oh, Geoffrey, what have we done! What is there between you and me—except our love?"

"I would have been better if I had been drowned together at the first," he said heavily.

"No, no," she answered. "For then we never should have loved each other. Better first to love and then to die."

"Do not speak so," he said. "Let us sit here and be happy for a little while to-night, and leave trouble till to-morrow."

And, where on a bygone day Beatrice had tarried with another wooer, side by side they sat upon the great stones and talked such talk as lovers use.

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