

XV. AN INTERLUDE

And now let us for a space leave Mr. Hoopdriver in the dusky Midhurst North Street, and return to the two folks beside the railway bridge between Milford and Haslemere. She was a girl of eighteen, dark, fine featured, with bright eyes, and a rich, swift colour under her warm-tinted skin. Her eyes were all the brighter for the tears that swam in them. The man was thirty three or four, fair, with a longish nose overhanging his sandy flaxen moustache, pale blue eyes, and a head that struck out above and behind. He stood with his feet wide apart, his hand on his hip, in an attitude that was equally suggestive of defiance and aggression. They had watched Hoopdriver out of sight. The unexpected interruption had stopped the flood of her tears. He tugged his abundant moustache and regarded her calmly. She stood with face averted, obstinately resolved not to speak first. "Your behaviour," he said at last, "makes you conspicuous."

She turned upon him, her eyes and cheeks glowing, her hands clenched. "You unspeakable CAD," she said, and choked, stamped her little foot, and stood panting.

"Unspeakable cad! My dear girl! Possible I AM an unspeakable cad. Who wouldn't be--for you?"

"'Dear girl!' How DARE you speak to me like that? YOU--"

"I would do anything--"

"OH!"

There was a moment's pause. She looked squarely into his face, her eyes alight with anger and contempt, and perhaps he flushed a little. He stroked his moustache, and by an effort maintained his cynical calm.

"Let us be reasonable," he said.

"Reasonable! That means all that is mean and cowardly and sensual in the world."

"You have always had it so--in your generalising way. But let us look at the facts of the case--if that pleases you better."

With an impatient gesture she motioned him to go on.

"Well," he said,--"you've eloped."

"I've left my home," she corrected, with dignity. "I left my home because it was unendurable. Because that woman--"

"Yes, yes. But the point is, you have eloped with me."

"You came with me. You pretended to be my friend. Promised to help me to

earn a living by writing. It was you who said, why shouldn't a man and woman be friends? And now you dare--you dare--"

"Really, Jessie, this pose of yours, this injured innocence--"

"I will go back. I forbid you--I forbid you to stand in the way--"

"One moment. I have always thought that my little pupil was at least clear-headed. You don't know everything yet, you know. Listen to me for a moment."

"Haven't I been listening? And you have only insulted me. You who dared only to talk of friendship, who scarcely dared hint at anything beyond."

"But you took the hints, nevertheless. You knew. You KNEW. And you did not mind. MIND! You liked it. It was the fun of the whole thing for you. That I loved you, and could not speak to you. You played with it--"

"You have said all that before. Do you think that justifies you?"

"That isn't all. I made up my mind--Well, to make the game more even. And so I suggested to you and joined with you in this expedition of yours, invented a sister at Midhurst--I tell you, I HAVEN'T a sister! For one object--"

"Well?"

"To compromise you."

She started. That was a new way of putting it. For half a minute neither spoke. Then she began half defiantly: "Much I am compromised. Of course--I have made a fool of myself--"

"My dear girl, you are still on the sunny side of eighteen, and you know very little of this world. Less than you think. But you will learn. Before you write all those novels we have talked about, you will have to learn. And that's one point--" He hesitated. "You started and blushed when the man at breakfast called you Ma'am. You thought it a funny mistake, but you did not say anything because he was young and nervous--and besides, the thought of being my wife offended your modesty. You didn't care to notice it. But--you see; I gave your name as MRS. Beaumont." He looked almost apologetic, in spite of his cynical pose. "MRS. Beaumont," he repeated, pulling his flaxen moustache and watching the effect.

She looked into his eyes speechless. "I am learning fast," she said slowly, at last.

He thought the time had come for an emotional attack. "Jessie," he said, with a sudden change of voice, "I know all this is mean, is villainous. But do you think that I have done all this scheming, all this subterfuge, for any other object--"

She did not seem to listen to his words. "I shall ride home," she said abruptly.

"To her?"

She winced.

"Just think," said he, "what she could say to you after this."

"Anyhow, I shall leave you now."

"Yes? And go--"

"Go somewhere to earn my living, to be a free woman, to live without conventionality--"

"My dear girl, do let us be cynical. You haven't money and you haven't credit. No one would take you in. It's one of two things: go back to your stepmother, or--trust to me."

"How CAN I?"

"Then you must go back to her." He paused momentarily, to let this consideration have its proper weight. "Jessie, I did not mean to say the things I did. Upon my honour, I lost my head when I spoke so. If you

will, forgive me. I am a man. I could not help myself. Forgive me, and I promise you--"

"How can I trust you?"

"Try me. I can assure you--"

She regarded him distrustfully.

"At any rate, ride on with me now. Surely we have been in the shadow of this horrible bridge long enough."

"Oh! let me think," she said, half turning from him and pressing her hand to her brow.

"THINK! Look here, Jessie. It is ten o'clock. Shall we call a truce until one?"

She hesitated, demanded a definition of the truce, and at last agreed.

They mounted, and rode on in silence, through the sunlight and the heather. Both were extremely uncomfortable and disappointed. She was pale, divided between fear and anger. She perceived she was in a scrape, and tried in vain to think of a way of escape. Only one tangible thing would keep in her mind, try as she would to ignore it. That was the quite irrelevant fact that his head was singularly like an albino

cocoanut. He, too, felt thwarted. He felt that this romantic business of seduction was, after all, unexpectedly tame. But this was only the beginning. At any rate, every day she spent with him was a day gained. Perhaps things looked worse than they were; that was some consolation.