

XXI. AT BOGNOR

That seductive gentleman, Bechamel, had been working up to a crisis. He had started upon this elopement in a vein of fine romance, immensely proud of his wickedness, and really as much in love as an artificial oversoul can be, with Jessie. But either she was the profoundest of coquettes or she had not the slightest element of Passion (with a large P) in her composition. It warred with all his ideas of himself and the feminine mind to think that under their flattering circumstances she really could be so vitally deficient. He found her persistent coolness, her more or less evident contempt for himself, exasperating in the highest degree. He put it to himself that she was enough to provoke a saint, and tried to think that was piquant and enjoyable, but the blisters on his vanity asserted themselves. The fact is, he was, under this standing irritation, getting down to the natural man in himself for once, and the natural man in himself, in spite of Oxford and the junior Reviewers' Club, was a Palaeolithic creature of simple tastes and violent methods. "I'll be level with you yet," ran like a plough through the soil of his thoughts.

Then there was this infernal detective. Bechamel had told his wife he was going to Davos to see Carter. To that he had fancied she was reconciled, but how she would take this exploit was entirely problematical. She was a woman of peculiar moral views, and she measured marital infidelity largely by its proximity to herself. Out of her sight, and more particularly out of the sight of the other women of her

set, vice of the recognised description was, perhaps, permissible to those contemptible weaklings, men, but this was Evil on the High Roads. She was bound to make a fuss, and these fusses invariably took the final form of a tightness of money for Bechamel. Albeit, and he felt it was heroic of him to resolve so, it was worth doing if it was to be done. His imagination worked on a kind of matronly Valkyrie, and the noise of pursuit and vengeance was in the air. The idyll still had the front of the stage. That accursed detective, it seemed, had been thrown off the scent, and that, at any rate, gave a night's respite. But things must be brought to an issue forthwith.

By eight o'clock in the evening, in a little dining-room in the Vicuna Hotel, Bognor, the crisis had come, and Jessie, flushed and angry in the face and with her heart sinking, faced him again for her last struggle with him. He had tricked her this time, effectually, and luck had been on his side. She was booked as Mrs. Beaumont. Save for her refusal to enter their room, and her eccentricity of eating with unwashed hands, she had so far kept up the appearances of things before the waiter. But the dinner was grim enough. Now in turn she appealed to his better nature and made extravagant statements of her plans to fool him.

He was white and vicious by this time, and his anger quivered through his pose of brilliant wickedness.

"I will go to the station," she said. "I will go back--"

"The last train for anywhere leaves at 7.42."

"I will appeal to the police--"

"You don't know them."

"I will tell these hotel people."

"They will turn you out of doors. You're in such a thoroughly false position now. They don't understand unconventionality, down here."

She stamped her foot. "If I wander about the streets all night--" she said.

"You who have never been out alone after dusk? Do you know what the streets of a charming little holiday resort are like--"

"I don't care," she said. "I can go to the clergyman here."

"He's a charming man. Unmarried. And men are really more alike than you think. And anyhow--"

"Well?"

"How CAN you explain the last two nights to anyone now? The mischief is done, Jessie."

"You CUR," she said, and suddenly put her hand to her breast. He thought she meant to faint, but she stood, with the colour gone from her face.

"No," he said. "I love you."

"Love!" said she.

"Yes--love."

"There are ways yet," she said, after a pause.

"Not for you. You are too full of life and hope yet for, what is it?--not the dark arch nor the black flowing river. Don't you think of it. You'll only shirk it when the moment comes, and turn it all into comedy."

She turned round abruptly from him and stood looking out across the parade at the shining sea over which the afterglow of day fled before the rising moon. He maintained his attitude. The blinds were still up, for she had told the waiter not to draw them. There was silence for some moments.

At last he spoke in as persuasive a voice as he could summon. "Take it sensibly, Jessie. Why should we, who have so much in common, quarrel into melodrama? I swear I love you. You are all that is bright and

desirable to me. I am stronger than you, older; man to your woman. To find YOU too--conventional!"

She looked at him over her shoulder, and he noticed with a twinge of delight how her little chin came out beneath the curve of her cheek.

"MAN!" she said. "Man to MY woman! Do MEN lie? Would a MAN use his five and thirty years' experience to outwit a girl of seventeen? Man to my woman indeed! That surely is the last insult!"

"Your repartee is admirable, Jessie. I should say they do, though--all that and more also when their hearts were set on such a girl as yourself. For God's sake drop this shrewishness! Why should you be so--difficult to me? Here am I with MY reputation, MY career, at your feet. Look here, Jessie--on my honour, I will marry you--"

"God forbid," she said, so promptly that she never learnt he had a wife, even then. It occurred to him then for the first time, in the flash of her retort, that she did not know he was married.

"'Tis only a pre-nuptial settlement," he said, following that hint.

He paused.

"You must be sensible. The thing's your own doing. Come out on the beach now the beach here is splendid, and the moon will soon be high."

"I WON'T" she said, stamping her foot.

"Well, well--"

"Oh! leave me alone. Let me think--"

"Think," he said, "if you want to. It's your cry always. But you can't save yourself by thinking, my dear girl. You can't save yourself in any way now. If saving it is--this parsimony--"

"Oh, go--go."

"Very well. I will go. I will go and smoke a cigar. And think of you, dear.... But do you think I should do all this if I did not care?"

"Go," she whispered, without glancing round. She continued to stare out of the window. He stood looking at her for a moment, with a strange light in his eyes. He made a step towards her. "I HAVE you," he said. "You are mine. Netted--caught. But mine." He would have gone up to her and laid his hand upon her, but he did not dare to do that yet. "I have you in my hand," he said, "in my power. Do you hear--POWER!"

She remained impassive. He stared at her for half a minute, and then, with a superb gesture that was lost upon her, went to the door. Surely the instinctive abasement of her sex before Strength was upon his side.

He told himself that his battle was won. She heard the handle move and the catch click as the door closed behind him.