

XXIII.

The ostler (being a fool) rushed violently down the road vociferating after them. Then he returned panting to the Vicuna Hotel, and finding a group of men outside the entrance, who wanted to know what was UP, stopped to give them the cream of the adventure. That gave the fugitives five minutes. Then pushing breathlessly into the bar, he had to make it clear to the barmaid what the matter was, and the 'gov'nor' being out, they spent some more precious time wondering 'what--EVER' was to be done! in which the two customers returning from outside joined with animation. There were also moral remarks and other irrelevant contributions. There were conflicting ideas of telling the police and pursuing the flying couple on a horse. That made ten minutes. Then Stephen, the waiter, who had shown Hoopdriver up, came down and lit wonderful lights and started quite a fresh discussion by the simple question "WHICH?" That turned ten minutes into a quarter of an hour. And in the midst of this discussion, making a sudden and awestricken silence, appeared Bechamel in the hall beyond the bar, walked with a resolute air to the foot of the staircase, and passed out of sight. You conceive the backward pitch of that exceptionally shaped cranium? Incredulous eyes stared into one another's in the bar, as his paces, muffled by the stair carpet, went up to the landing, turned, reached the passage and walked into the dining-room overhead.

"It wasn't that one at all, miss," said the ostler, "I'd SWEAR"

"Well, that's Mr. Beaumont," said the barmaid, "--anyhow."

Their conversation hung comatose in the air, switched up by Bechamel. They listened together. His feet stopped. Turned. Went out of the diningroom. Down the passage to the bedroom. Stopped again.

"Poor chap!" said the barmaid. "She's a wicked woman!"

"Sssh!" said Stephen.

After a pause Bechamel went back to the dining-room. They heard a chair creak under him. Interlude of conversational eyebrows.

"I'm going up," said Stephen, "to break the melancholy news to him."

Bechamel looked up from a week-old newspaper as, without knocking, Stephen entered. Bechamel's face suggested a different expectation. "Beg pardon, sir," said Stephen, with a diplomatic cough.

"Well?" said Bechamel, wondering suddenly if Jessie had kept some of her threats. If so, he was in for an explanation. But he had it ready. She was a monomaniac. "Leave me alone with her," he would say; "I know how to calm her."

"Mrs. Beaumont," said Stephen.

"WELL?"

"Has gone."

He rose with a fine surprise. "Gone!" he said with a half laugh.

"Gone, sir. On her bicycle."

"On her bicycle! Why?"

"She went, sir, with Another Gentleman."

This time Bechamel was really startled. "An--other Gentlemen! WHO?"

"Another gentleman in brown, sir. Went into the yard, sir, got out the two bicycles, sir, and went off, sir--about twenty minutes ago."

Bechamel stood with his eyes round and his knuckle on his hips. Stephen, watching him with immense enjoyment, speculated whether this abandoned husband would weep or curse, or rush off at once in furious pursuit. But as yet he seemed merely stunned.

"Brown clothes?" he said. "And fairish?"

"A little like yourself, sir--in the dark. The ostler, sir, Jim Duke--"

Bechamel laughed awry. Then, with infinite fervour, he said--But let us put in blank cartridge--he said, "-----!"

"I might have thought!"

He flung himself into the armchair.

"Damn her," said Bechamel, for all the world like a common man. "I'll chuck this infernal business! They've gone, eigh?"

"Yessir."

"Well, let 'em GO," said Bechamel, making a memorable saying. "Let 'em GO. Who cares? And I wish him luck. And bring me some Bourbon as fast as you can, there's a good chap. I'll take that, and then I'll have another look round Bognor before I turn in."

Stephen was too surprised to say anything but "Bourbon, sir?"

"Go on," said Bechamel. "Damn you!"

Stephen's sympathies changed at once. "Yessir," he murmured, fumbling for the door handle, and left the room, marvelling. Bechamel, having in this way satisfied his sense of appearances, and comported himself as a

Pagan should, so soon as the waiter's footsteps had passed, vented the cream of his feelings in a stream of blasphemous indecency. Whether his wife or HER stepmother had sent the detective, SHE had evidently gone off with him, and that little business was over. And he was here, stranded and sold, an ass, and as it were, the son of many generations of asses. And his only ray of hope was that it seemed more probable, after all, that the girl had escaped through her stepmother. In which case the business might be hushed up yet, and the evil hour of explanation with his wife indefinitely postponed. Then abruptly the image of that lithe figure in grey knickerbockers went frisking across his mind again, and he reverted to his blasphemies. He started up in a gusty frenzy with a vague idea of pursuit, and incontinently sat down again with a concussion that stirred the bar below to its depths. He banged the arms of the chair with his fist, and swore again. "Of all the accursed fools that were ever spawned," he was chanting, "I, Bechamel--" when with an abrupt tap and prompt opening of the door, Stephen entered with the Bourbon.