

THE BRONCKHORST DIVORCE CASE - - By Rudyard Kipling

HERE was a man called Bronckhorst—a three-cornered, middle-aged man in the army—gray as a badger, and, some people said, with a touch of country blood in him. That, however, cannot be proved. Mrs. Bronckhorst was not exactly young, though fifteen years younger than her husband. She was a large, pale, quiet woman, with heavy eyelids over weak eyes, and hair that turned red or yellow as the lights fell on it.

Bronckhorst was not nice in any way. He had to respect for the petty public and private lies that make life a little less nasty than it is. His manner toward his wife was coarse. There are many things—including actual assault with the clinched fist—that a wife will endure; but seldom can a wife bear—as Mrs. Bronckhorst bore—with long course of brutal, hard chaff, making light of her weaknesses, her headaches, her small fits of gaiety, her dresses, her queer little attempts to make herself attractive to her husband when she knows that she is not what she has been, and—worst of all—the love that she spends on her children. That particular sort of heavy-handed jest was specially dear to Bronckhorst. I suppose that he had first slipped into it, meaning no harm, in the honeymoon, when folk find their ordinary stock of endearments run short, and so go to the other extreme to express their feelings. A similar impulse makes a man say: "Hutt, you old beast!" when a favorite horse nozzles his coat-front. Unluckily, when the reaction of marriage sets in, the form of speech remains, and, the tenderness having died out, hurts the wife more than she cares to say. But Mrs. Bronckhorst was devoted to her "Teddy," as she called him. Perhaps that was why he objected to her. Perhaps this is only a theory to account for his infamous behavior later on—he gave way to the queer, savage feeling that sometimes takes by the throat a husband twenty years married, when he sees across the table, the same, same face of his wedded wife, and knows that, as he has sat facing it, so must he continue to sit until the day of its death or his own. Most men and all women know the spasm. It only lasts for three breaths as a rule, must be a "throw-back" to times when men and women were rather worse than they are now, and is too unpleasant to be discussed.

Dinner at the Bronckhorts was an infliction few men cared to undergo. Bronckhorst took a pleasure in saying things that made his wife wince. When their little boy came in at dessert, Bronckhorst used to give him half a glass of wine, and, naturally enough, the poor little mite got first riotous, next miserable, and was removed screaming. Bronckhorst asked if that was the way Teddy usually behaved, and whether Mrs. Bronckhorst could not spare some of her time to teach the "little beggar decency." Mrs. Bronckhorst, who loved the boy more than her own life, tried not to cry—her spirit seemed to have been broken by her marriage. Lastly, Bronckhorst used to say: "There! That'll do. For God's sake try to behave like a rational woman. Go into the drawing room." Mrs. Bronckhorst would go, trying to carry it all off with a smile; and the guest of the evening would feel angry and uncomfortable.

After three years of this cheerful life—for Mrs. Bronckhorst had no woman friends to talk to—the station was startled by the news that Bronckhorst had instituted proceedings on the criminal count against a man called Biel, who certainly had been rather



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attentive to Mrs. Bronckhorst whenever she appeared in public. The utter want of reserve with which Bronckhorst treated his own dishonor helped us to know that the evidence against Biel would be entirely circumstantial and native. There were no letters; but Bronckhorst said openly that he would rack heaven and earth until he saw Biel superintending the manufacture of carpets in the Central Jail. Mrs. Bronckhorst kept entirely to her house, and let charitable folks say what they pleased. Opinions were divided. Some two-thirds of the station jumped at once to the conclusion that Biel was guilty; but a dozen men who knew and liked him held by him. Biel was furious and surprised. He denied the whole thing, and vowed that he would thrash Bronckhorst within an inch of his life. No jury, we knew, could convict a man on the criminal count on native evidence in a land where you can buy a murder charge, including the corpse, all complete for fifty-four rupees; but Biel did not care to scrape through by the benefit of a doubt. He wanted the whole thing cleared, but as he said one night: "He can prove anything with servants' evidence, and I've only my bare word." This was about a month before the case came on; and beyond agreeing with Biel, we could do little. All that we could be sure of was that the native evidence would be bad enough to blast Biel's character for the rest of his service; for when a native begins perjury he perjures himself thoroughly. He does not boggle over details.

Some genius, at the end of the table whereat the affair was being talked over, said: "Look here! I don't believe lawyers are any good. Get a man to wire to Strickland, and beg him to come down and pull us through."

Strickland was about a hundred and eighty miles up the line.

He had not long been married to Miss Youghal, but he scented in the telegram a chance of return to the old detective work that his soul lusted after, and next night he came in and heard our story. He finished his pipe and said oracularly: "We must get at the evidence. Orya bearer, Mussulman khit and methramayah, I suppose, are the pillars of the charge. I am on in this piece; but I'm afraid I'm getting rusty in my talk."

He rose and went into Biel's bedroom, where his trunk had been put, and shut the door. An hour later we heard him say: "I hadn't the heart to part with my old make-ups when I married. Will this do?"

There was a loathly faqir salaaming in the doorway.

"Now lend me fifty rupees," said Strickland, "and give me your words of honor that you won't tell my wife."

He got all that he asked for, and let's the house while the table drank his health. What he did only he himself knows. A faqir hung about Bronckhorst's compound for twelve days. Then a mehter appeared, and when Biel heard of him, he said that Strickland was an angel full-fledged. Whether the mehter made love to Janki, Mrs. Bronckhorst's ayah, is a question which concerns Strickland exclusively.

He came back at the end of three weeks, and said, quietly: "You spoke the truth, Biel. The whole business is put up from beginning to end. Jove! It almost astonishes me! That Bronckhorst beast isn't fit to live."

There was uproar and shouting, and Biel said: "How are you going to prove it? You can't say that you've been trespassing on Bronckhorst's compound in disguise!"

"No," said Strickland. "Tell your lawyer-fool, whoever he is, to get up something strong about 'inherent improbabilities' and

'discrepancies of evidence.' He won't have to speak, but it will make him happy. I'm going to run this business."

Biel held his tongue, and the other men waited to see what would happen. They trusted Strickland as men trust quiet men. When the case came off the court was crowded. Strickland hung about in the veranda of the court till he met the Mohammedan khimatgar. Then he murmured a faqir's blessing in his ear, and asked him how his second wife did. The man spun round, and as he looked into the eyes of Estreken Sahib his jaw dropped. You must remember that before Strickland was married he was, as I have told you already, a power among natives. Strickland whispered a rather coarse vernacular proverb to the effect that he was abreast of all that was going on, and went into the court armed with a trainer's gut whip.

The Mohammedan was the first witness, and Strickland beamed upon him from the back of the court. The man moistened his lips with his tongue and, in his abject fear of Estreken Sahib the faqir, went back on every detail of his evidence—said he was a poor man, and God was his witness that he had forgotten everything that Bronckhorst Sahib had told him to say. Between his terror of Strickland, the judge, and Bronckhorst he collapsed, weeping.

Then began the panic among the witnesses. Janki, the ayah, leering chastely behind her veil, turned gray, and the bearer left the court. He said that his mamma was dying and that it was not wholesome for any man to lie untrifly in the presence of Estreken Sahib.

Biel said politely to Bronckhorst: "Your witnesses don't seem to work. Haven't you any forged letters to produce?" But Bronckhorst was swaying to and fro in his chair, and there was a dead pause after Biel had been called to order.

Bronckhorst's counsel saw the look on his client's face, and without more ado pitched his papers on the little green baize table, and mumbled something about having been misinformed. The whole court applauded wildly, like soldiers at a theatre, and the judge began to say what he thought.

Biel came out of the place, and Strickland dropped a trainer's gut whip in the veranda. Ten minutes later Biel was cutting Bronckhorst into ribbons behind the old court cells, quietly and without scandal. What was left of Bronckhorst was sent home in a carriage; and his wife wept over it and nursed it into a man again.

Later on, after Biel had managed to hush up the counter-charge against Bronckhorst of fabricating false evidence, Mrs. Bronckhorst, with her faint, watery smile, said that there had been a mistake, but it wasn't her Teddy's fault altogether. She would wait till her Teddy came back to her. Perhaps he had grown tired of her, or she had tried his patience, and perhaps we wouldn't cut her any more, and perhaps the mothers would let their children play with "little Teddy" again. He was so lonely. Then the station invited Mrs. Bronckhorst everywhere, until Bronckhorst was fit to appear in public, when he went home and took his wife with him. According to the latest advices, her Teddy did "come back to her," and they are moderately happy. Though, of course, he can never forgive her the thrashing that she was the indirect means of getting for him.

What Biel wants to know is: "Why didn't I press home the charge against the Bronckhorst brute, and have him run in?"

What Mrs. Strickland wants to know is: "How did my husband bring such a lovely, lovely Waler from your station? I know all his money affairs; and I'm certain he didn't buy it."

What I want to know is: "How do women like Mrs. Bronckhorst come to marry men like Bronckhorst?"

And my conundrum is the most unanswerable of the three.

BIMI - - - - -

THE orang-outang in the big iron cage lashed to the sheep-pen began the discussion. The night was stifling hot, and as Hans Breitmann and I passed him, dragging our bedding to the fore-peak of the steamer, he roused himself and chattered obscenely. He had been caught somewhere in the Malayan Archipelago, and was going to England to be exhibited at a shilling a head. For four days he had struggled, yelled, and wrenched at the heavy iron bars of his prison without ceasing, and had nearly slain a Lascar cautious enough to come within reach of the great hairy paw.

"It would be well for you, mine friend, if you was a liddle sea-sick," said Hans Breitmann, pausing by the cage. "You haf too much Ego in your Cosmos."

The orang-outang's arm slid out negligently from between the bars. No one would have believed that it would make a sudden snake-like rush at the German's breast. The thin silk of the sleeping-suit tore out: Hans stepped back unconcernedly, to pluck a banana from a bunch hanging close to one of the boats.

"Too much Ego," said he, peeling the fruit and offering it to the caged devil, who was rending the silk to tatters.

Then we laid out our bedding in the bows, among the sleeping-Lascars, to catch any breeze that the pace of the ship might give us. The sea was like smoky oil, except where it turned to fire under our forefoot and whirled back into the dark in smears of dull flame. There was a thunder-storm some miles away: we could see the glimmer of the lightning. The ship's cow, distressed by the heat and the smell of the ape-beast in the cage, lowed unhappily from time to time in exactly the same key as the lookout man at the bows answered the hourly call from the bridge. The trampling tune of the engines was very distinct, and the jarring of the ash-lift, as it was tipped into the sea, hurt the procession of hushed noise. Hans lay down by my side and lighted a good-night cigar. This was naturally the beginning of conversation. He owned a voice as soothing as the wash of the sea, and stores of experiences as vast as the sea itself; for his business in life was to wander up and down the world, collecting orchids and wild beasts and ethnological specimens for German and American dealers. I watched the glowing end of his cigar wax and wane in the gloom, as the sentences rose and fell, till I was nearly asleep. The orang-outang, troubled by some dream of the forests of his freedom, began to yell like a soul in purgatory, and to wrench madly at the bars of the cage.

"If he was out now dere would not be much of us left here—I shall tame him when he stops himself."

There was a pause in the outcry, and from Hans' mouth came an imitation of a snake's hiss, so perfect that I almost sprang to my feet. The sustained murderous sound ran along the deck, and the wrenching at the bars ceased. The orang-outang was quaking in an ecstasy of pure terror.

"Dot stop him," said Hans. "I learned dot trick in Mungoong Tanjung when I was collecting liddle monkeys for some peoples in Berlin. Efer one in der world in afraid of der monkey—except der snake. So I bay snake against monkey, and he keep quite

still. Dere was too much Ego in his Cosmos. Dot is der soul-custom of monkeys. Are you asleep, or will you listen, and I will tell a dale dot you shall not belie?"

"There's no tale in the wide world that I can't believe," I said.

"If you have learned po-lief: you haf learned somethings. Now I shall try your belie. Good! When I was collecting dose liddle monkeys—it was '79 or '80, and I was in der islands of der Archipelago—over dere in der dark"—he pointed southward to New Guinea generally—"Mein Gott! I would sooner collect life

red devils than liddle monkeys. When dey do not bite off your thumbs dey are always dying from nostalgia—home-sick—for dey haf der imperfect soul, which is midway arrested in development—and too much Ego. I was dere for nearly a year, and dere I found a man dot was called Bertran. He was a Frenchman, and he was a goot man—naturalist to the bone. Dey said he was an escaped convict, but he was a naturalist, and dot was enough for me.

He would call all der life beasts from der forest, and dey would come. I said he was St. Francis of Assisi in a new drahnsmigration produced, and he laughed and said he haf dot beast throw himself back in his chair and laugh when Bertran haf made fun of me. He was not a beast; he was a man, and he talked to Bertran, and Bertran comprehended, for I have seen dem. Und he was always polite to me except when I talk too long to Bertran and say nodings at all to him. Den he would pull me away—dis great, dark devil, mit his enormous paws—shust as if I was a child. He was not a beast, he was a man. Dis I saw before I know him three months, and Bertran he haf saw the same; and Bimi, der orang-outang, haf understood us both, mit his cigar between his big-dog teeth und der blue gum.

"I was dere a year, dere und at dere oder islands sometimes for monkeys and sometimes for butterflies und orchids. One time Bertran says to me dot he will be married, because he haf found a girl dot was goot, and he inquire if this marrying idea was right. I would not say, because it was not me dot was going to be married. Den he go off courting der girl—she was a half-caste French girl—very pretty. Only I say: 'Haf you thought of Bimi?' If he pulls me away when I talk to you, what will he do to your wife? He will pull her in pieces. If I was you, Bertran, I would gif my wife for wedding present der stuff figure of Bimi.' By dot time I had learned somethings about der monkey peoples. 'Shoot



"Und Bimi came skipping along der beach."

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him?" says Bertran. "He is your beast," I said; "if he was mine he would be shot now."

"Den I felt at der back of my neck der fingers of Bimi Mein Gott! I tell you dot he talked through close fingers. It was der deaf-and-dumb alphabet all gomplete. He slide his hairy arm round my neck and he tilt up my chin und look into my face, shust to see if I understood his talk so well as he understood mine."

"See now der!" says Bertran, "und you would shoot him while he is cuddling you? Dot is der Teuton ingrate!"

"But I knew dot I had made Bimi a life's enemy, because his fingers haf talk murder through the back of my neck. Next dime I see Bimi dere was a pistol in my belt, und he touch it once, and I open der breech to show him it was loaded. He says to Bertran: 'For any sakes, kill Bimi. He is mad mit der jealousy.'

"Bertran has said: 'He is not mad at all. He haf obey and love my wife, und if she speaks he will get her slippers,' und he looked at his wife across der room. She was a very pretty girl.

"Den I said to him: 'Dost thou pretend to know monkeys und dis beast dot is lashing himself mad upon der sands, because you do not talk to him? Shoot him when he comes to der house, for he haf der light in his eyes dot mean killing—und killing.' Bimi come to der house, but dere was no light in his eyes. It was all put away, cunning—so cunning—und he fetch der girl her slippers, and Bertran turn to me und say: 'Dost thou know him in nine months more dan I haf known him in twelve years? Shall a child stab his fader? I have fed him, und he was my child. Do not speak this nonsense to my wife or to me any more.'

"Dot next day Bertran came to my house to help me make some wood cases for der specimens, und he tell me dot he haf left his wife a liddle while mit Bimi in der garden. Den I finish my cases quick, und I say: 'Let us go to your house und get a trink.' Helaughund say: 'Come along, dry mans.'

"His wife was not in der garden, und Bimi did not come

when Bertran called. Und his wife did not come when he called, und he knocked at her bedroom door und dot was shut tight—locked. Den he look at me und his face was white. I broke down the door mit my shoulder, und der thatch on der roof was torn into a great hole, und der sun came in upon der floor. Haf you ever seen paper in der wastebasket, or cards at whist on der table scattered? Dere was no wife dot could be seen. I tell you dere was noddings in dot room dot might be a woman. Dere was stuff on der floor, und dot was all. I looked at dese things und I was very sick; but Bertran looked a liddle longer at what was upon the floor und der walls, und der hole in der thatch. Den he began to laugh, soft and low, und I knew und thank Gott dot he was mad. He never cried, he never prayed. He stood still in der doorway und laugh to himself. Den he said: 'She haf locked herself in die room, and he haf torn up der thatch. Fi done! Dot is so. We will mend der thatch und wait for Bimi. He will surely come.'

"I tell you we waited ten days in dot house, after der room was made into a room again, and once or twice we saw Bimi comin' a liddle way from der woods. He was afraid because he haf done wrong. Bertran called him when he was come to look on the tenth day, und Bimi come skipping along der beach und making noises, mit a long piece of black hair in his hands. Den Bertran laugh and say, 'Fi done! shust as if it was a glass broken upon der table; und Bimi come nearer, und Bertran was honey-sweet in his voice and laughed to himself. For three days he made love to Bimi, because Bimi would not let himself be touched. Den Bimi come to dinner at der same table mit us, und der hair on his hands was all black und thick mit—mit what had dried on his hands. Bertran gave him sangaree till Bimi was drunk and stupid, und den"

Hans paused to puff at his cigar.

"And then?" said I.

"Und den Bertran kill him with his hands, und I go for a walk upon der beach. It was Bertran's own pizness. When I come back der ape he was dead, und Bertran he was dying above him; but still he laughed a liddle low, and he was quite content. Now you know der formula of der strength of der orang-outang—it is more as seven to one in relation to man. But Bertran, he haf killed Bimi mit soch dings as Gott gif him. Dot was der mericle."

The infernal clamor in the cage recommenced. "Aha! Dot friend of ours haf still too much Ego in his Cosmos. Be quiet, thou!"

Hans hissed long and venomously. We could hear the great beast quaking in his cage.

"But why in the world didn't you help Bertran instead of letting him be killed?" I asked.

"My friend," said Hans, composedly stretching himself to slumber, "it was not nice even to mineself dot I should lif after I had seen dot room mit der hole in der thatch. Und Bertran, he was her husband. Goot-night, und sleep well."