

IV. THE RIDING FORTH OF MR. HOOPDRIVER

Only those who toil six long days out of the seven, and all the year round, save for one brief glorious fortnight or ten days in the summer time, know the exquisite sensations of the First Holiday Morning. All the dreary, uninteresting routine drops from you suddenly, your chains fall about your feet. All at once you are Lord of yourself, Lord of every hour in the long, vacant day; you may go where you please, call none Sir or Madame, have a lappel free of pins, doff your black morning coat, and wear the colour of your heart, and be a Man. You grudge sleep, you grudge eating, and drinking even, their intrusion on those exquisite moments. There will be no more rising before breakfast in casual old clothing, to go dusting and getting ready in a cheerless, shutter-darkened, wrapped-up shop, no more imperious cries of, "Forward, Hoopdriver," no more hasty meals, and weary attendance on fitful old women, for ten blessed days. The first morning is by far the most glorious, for you hold your whole fortune in your hands. Thereafter, every night, comes a pang, a spectre, that will not be exorcised--the premonition of the return. The shadow of going back, of being put in the cage again for another twelve months, lies blacker and blacker across the sunlight. But on the first morning of the ten the holiday has no past, and ten days seems as good as infinity.

And it was fine, full of a promise of glorious days, a deep blue sky with dazzling piles of white cloud here and there, as though celestial haymakers had been piling the swathes of last night's clouds into cocks

for a coming cartage. There were thrushes in the Richmond Road, and a lark on Putney Heath. The freshness of dew was in the air; dew or the relics of an overnight shower glittered on the leaves and grass. Hoopdriver had breakfasted early by Mrs. Gunn's complaisance. He wheeled his machine up Putney Hill, and his heart sang within him. Halfway up, a dissipated-looking black cat rushed home across the road and vanished under a gate. All the big red-brick houses behind the variegated shrubs and trees had their blinds down still, and he would not have changed places with a soul in any one of them for a hundred pounds.

He had on his new brown cycling suit--a handsome Norfolk jacket thing for 30/(sp.)--and his legs--those martyr legs--were more than consoled by thick chequered stockings, "thin in the foot, thick in the leg," for all they had endured. A neat packet of American cloth behind the saddle contained his change of raiment, and the bell and the handle-bar and the hubs and lamp, albeit a trifle freckled by wear, glittered blindingly in the rising sunlight. And at the top of the hill, after only one unsuccessful attempt, which, somehow, terminated on the green, Hoopdriver mounted, and with a stately and cautious restraint in his pace, and a dignified curvature of path, began his great Cycling Tour along the Southern Coast.

There is only one phrase to describe his course at this stage, and that is--voluptuous curves. He did not ride fast, he did not ride straight, an exacting critic might say he did not ride well--but he rode generously, opulently, using the whole road and even nibbling at the

footpath. The excitement never flagged. So far he had never passed or been passed by anything, but as yet the day was young and the road was clear. He doubted his steering so much that, for the present, he had resolved to dismount at the approach of anything else upon wheels. The shadows of the trees lay very long and blue across the road, the morning sunlight was like amber fire.

At the cross-roads at the top of West Hill, where the cattle trough stands, he turned towards Kingston and set himself to scale the little bit of ascent. An early heath-keeper, in his velveteen jacket, marvelled at his efforts. And while he yet struggled, the head of a carter rose over the brow.

At the sight of him Mr. Hoopdriver, according to his previous determination, resolved to dismount. He tightened the brake, and the machine stopped dead. He was trying to think what he did with his right leg whilst getting off. He gripped the handles and released the brake, standing on the left pedal and waving his right foot in the air.

Then--these things take so long in the telling--he found the machine was falling over to the right. While he was deciding upon a plan of action, gravitation appears to have been busy. He was still irresolute when he found the machine on the ground, himself kneeling upon it, and a vague feeling in his mind that again Providence had dealt harshly with his shin. This happened when he was just level with the heathkeeper. The man in the approaching cart stood up to see the ruins better.

"THAT ain't the way to get off," said the heathkeeper.

Mr. Hoopdriver picked up the machine. The handle was twisted askew again. He said something under his breath. He would have to unscrew the beastly thing.

"THAT ain't the way to get off," repeated the heathkeeper, after a silence.

"I know that," said Mr. Hoopdriver, testily, determined to overlook the new specimen on his shin at any cost. He unbuckled the wallet behind the saddle, to get out a screw hammer.

"If you know it ain't the way to get off--whaddyer do it for?" said the heath-keeper, in a tone of friendly controversy.

Mr. Hoopdriver got out his screw hammer and went to the handle. He was annoyed. "That's my business, I suppose," he said, fumbling with the screw. The unusual exertion had made his hands shake frightfully.

The heath-keeper became meditative, and twisted his stick in his hands behind his back. "You've broken yer 'andle, ain't yer?" he said presently. Just then the screw hammer slipped off the nut. Mr. Hoopdriver used a nasty, low word.

"They're trying things, them bicycles," said the heath-keeper,

charitably. "Very trying." Mr. Hoopdriver gave the nut a vicious turn and suddenly stood up--he was holding the front wheel between his knees. "I wish," said he, with a catch in his voice, "I wish you'd leave off staring at me."

Then with the air of one who has delivered an ultimatum, he began replacing the screw hammer in the wallet.

The heath-keeper never moved. Possibly he raised his eyebrows, and certainly he stared harder than he did before. "You're pretty unsociable," he said slowly, as Mr. Hoopdriver seized the handles and stood ready to mount as soon as the cart had passed.

The indignation gathered slowly but surely. "Why don't you ride on a private road of your own if no one ain't to speak to you?" asked the heath-keeper, perceiving more and more clearly the bearing of the matter. "Can't no one make a passin' remark to you, Touchy? Ain't I good enough to speak to you? Been struck wooden all of a sudden?"

Mr. Hoopdriver stared into the Immensity of the Future. He was rigid with emotion. It was like abusing the Lions in Trafalgar Square. But the heathkeeper felt his honour was at stake.

"Don't you make no remarks to 'IM," said the keeper as the carter came up broadside to them. "'E's a bloomin' dook, 'e is. 'E don't converse with no one under a earl. 'E's off to Windsor, 'e is; that's why 'e's

stickin' his be'ind out so haughty. Pride! Why, 'e's got so much of it,
'e has to carry some of it in that there bundle there, for fear 'e'd
bust if 'e didn't ease hisself a bit--'E--"

But Mr. Hoopdriver heard no more. He was hopping vigorously along the
road, in a spasmodic attempt to remount. He missed the treadle once and
swore viciously, to the keeper's immense delight. "Nar! Nar!" said the
heath-keeper.

In another moment Mr. Hoopdriver was up, and after one terrific lurch
of the machine, the heathkeeper dropped out of earshot. Mr. Hoopdriver
would have liked to look back at his enemy, but he usually twisted round
and upset if he tried that. He had to imagine the indignant heath-keeper
telling the carter all about it. He tried to infuse as much disdain
as possible into his retreating aspect.

He drove on his sinuous way down the dip by the new mere and up the
little rise to the crest of the hill that drops into Kingston Vale;
and so remarkable is the psychology of cycling, that he rode all the
straighter and easier because the emotions the heathkeeper had aroused
relieved his mind of the constant expectation of collapse that had
previously unnerved him. To ride a bicycle properly is very like a love
affair--chiefly it is a matter of faith. Believe you do it, and the
thing is done; doubt, and, for the life of you, you cannot.

Now you may perhaps imagine that as he rode on, his feelings towards the

heath-keeper were either vindictive or remorseful,--vindictive for the aggravation or remorseful for his own injudicious display of ill temper. As a matter of fact, they were nothing of the sort. A sudden, a wonderful gratitude, possessed him. The Glory of the Holidays had resumed its sway with a sudden accession of splendour. At the crest of the hill he put his feet upon the footrests, and now riding moderately straight, went, with a palpitating brake, down that excellent descent. A new delight was in his eyes, quite over and above the pleasure of rushing through the keen, sweet, morning air. He reached out his thumb and twanged his bell out of sheer happiness.

"He's a bloomin' Dook--he is!" said Mr. Hoopdriver to himself, in a soft undertone, as he went soaring down the hill, and again, "He's a bloomin' Dook!" He opened his mouth in a silent laugh. It was having a decent cut did it. His social superiority had been so evident that even a man like that noticed it. No more Manchester Department for ten days! Out of Manchester, a Man. The draper Hoopdriver, the Hand, had vanished from existence. Instead was a gentleman, a man of pleasure, with a five-pound note, two sovereigns, and some silver at various convenient points of his person. At any rate as good as a Dook, if not precisely in the peerage. Involuntarily at the thought of his funds Hoopdriver's right hand left the handle and sought his breast pocket, to be immediately recalled by a violent swoop of the machine towards the cemetery. Whirroo! Just missed that half-brick! Mischievous brutes there were in the world to put such a thing in the road. Some blooming 'Arry or other! Ought to prosecute a few of these rougs, and the rest would

know better. That must be the buckle of the wallet was rattling on the mud-guard. How cheerfully the wheels buzzed!

The cemetery was very silent and peaceful, but the Vale was waking, and windows rattled and squeaked up, and a white dog came out of one of the houses and yelped at him. He got off, rather breathless, at the foot of Kingston Hill, and pushed up. Halfway up, an early milk chariot rattled by him; two dirty men with bundles came hurrying down. Hoopdriver felt sure they were burglars, carrying home the swag.

It was up Kingston Hill that he first noticed a peculiar feeling, a slight tightness at his knees; but he noticed, too, at the top that he rode straighter than he did before. The pleasure of riding straight blotted out these first intimations of fatigue. A man on horseback appeared; Hoopdriver, in a tumult of soul at his own temerity, passed him. Then down the hill into Kingston, with the screw hammer, behind in the wallet, rattling against the oil can. He passed, without misadventure, a fruiterer's van and a sluggish cartload of bricks. And in Kingston Hoopdriver, with the most exquisite sensations, saw the shutters half removed from a draper's shop, and two yawning youths, in dusty old black jackets and with dirty white comforters about their necks, clearing up the planks and boxes and wrappers in the window, preparatory to dressing it out. Even so had Hoopdriver been on the previous day. But now, was he not a bloomin' Dook, palpably in the sight of common men? Then round the corner to the right--bell banged furiously--and so along the road to Surbiton.

Whoop for Freedom and Adventure! Every now and then a house with an expression of sleepy surprise would open its eye as he passed, and to the right of him for a mile or so the weltering Thames flashed and glittered. Talk of your joie de vivre. Albeit with a certain cramping sensation about the knees and calves slowly forcing itself upon his attention.