

## V. THE SHAMEFUL EPISODE OF THE YOUNG LADY IN GREY

Now you must understand that Mr. Hoopdriver was not one of your fast young men. If he had been King Lemuel, he could not have profited more by his mother's instructions. He regarded the feminine sex as something to bow to and smirk at from a safe distance. Years of the intimate remoteness of a counter leave their mark upon a man. It was an adventure for him to take one of the Young Ladies of the establishment to church on a Sunday. Few modern young men could have merited less the epithet "Dorg." But I have thought at times that his machine may have had something of the blade in its metal. Decidedly it was a machine with a past. Mr. Hoopdriver had bought it second-hand from Hare's in Putney, and Hare said it had had several owners. Second-hand was scarcely the word for it, and Elare was mildly puzzled that he should be selling such an antiquity. He said it was perfectly sound, if a little old-fashioned, but he was absolutely silent about its moral character. It may even have begun its career with a poet, say, in his glorious youth. It may have been the bicycle of a Really Bad Man. No one who has ever ridden a cycle of any kind but will witness that the things are unaccountably prone to pick up bad habits--and keep them.

It is undeniable that it became convulsed with the most violent emotions directly the Young Lady in Grey appeared. It began an absolutely unprecedented Wobble--unprecedented so far as Hoopdriver's experience went. It "showed off"--the most decadent sinuosity. It left a track like one of Beardsley's feathers. He suddenly realised, too, that his cap was

loose on his head and his breath a mere remnant.

The Young Lady in Grey was also riding a bicycle. She was dressed in a beautiful bluish-gray, and the sun behind her drew her outline in gold and left the rest in shadow. Hoopdriver was dimly aware that she was young, rather slender, dark, and with a bright colour and bright eyes. Strange doubts possessed him as to the nature of her nether costume. He had heard of such things of course. French, perhaps. Her handles glittered; a jet of sunlight splashed off her bell blindingly. She was approaching the high road along an affluent from the villas of Surbiton. The roads converged slantingly. She was travelling at about the same pace as Mr. Hoopdriver. The appearances pointed to a meeting at the fork of the roads.

Hoopdriver was seized with a horrible conflict of doubts. By contrast with her he rode disgracefully. Had he not better get off at once and pretend something was wrong with his treadle? Yet even the end of getting off was an uncertainty. That last occasion on Putney Heath! On the other hand, what would happen if he kept on? To go very slow seemed the abnegation of his manhood. To crawl after a mere schoolgirl! Besides, she was not riding very fast. On the other hand, to thrust himself in front of her, consuming the road in his tendril-like advance, seemed an incivility--greed. He would leave her such a very little. His business training made him prone to bow and step aside. If only one could take one's hands off the handles, one might pass with a silent elevation of the hat, of course. But even that was a little suggestive

of a funeral.

Meanwhile the roads converged. She was looking at him. She was flushed, a little thin, and had very bright eyes. Her red lips fell apart. She may have been riding hard, but it looked uncommonly like a faint smile. And the things were--yes!--RATIONALS! Suddenly an impulse to bolt from the situation became clamorous. Mr. Hoopdriver pedalled convulsively, intending to pass her. He jerked against some tin thing on the road, and it flew up between front wheel and mud-guard. He twisted round towards her. Had the machine a devil?

At that supreme moment it came across him that he would have done wiser to dismount. He gave a frantic 'whoop' and tried to get round, then, as he seemed falling over, he pulled the handles straight again and to the left by an instinctive motion, and shot behind her hind wheel, missing her by a hair's breadth. The pavement kerb awaited him. He tried to recover, and found himself jumped up on the pavement and riding squarely at a neat wooden paling. He struck this with a terrific impact and shot forward off his saddle into a clumsy entanglement. Then he began to tumble over sideways, and completed the entire figure in a sitting position on the gravel, with his feet between the fork and the stay of the machine. The concussion on the gravel shook his entire being. He remained in that position, wishing that he had broken his neck, wishing even more heartily that he had never been born. The glory of life had departed. Bloomin' Dook, indeed! These unwomanly women!

There was a soft whirr, the click of a brake, two footfalls, and the Young Lady in Grey stood holding her machine. She had turned round and come back to him. The warm sunlight now was in her face. "Are you hurt?" she said. She had a pretty, clear, girlish voice. She was really very young--quite a girl, in fact. And rode so well! It was a bitter draught.

Mr. Hoopdriver stood up at once. "Not a bit," he said, a little ruefully. He became painfully aware that large patches of gravel scarcely improve the appearance of a Norfolk suit. "I'm very sorry indeed--"

"It's my fault," she said, interrupting and so saving him on the very verge of calling her 'Miss.' (He knew 'Miss' was wrong, but it was deep-seated habit with him.) "I tried to pass you on the wrong side." Her face and eyes seemed all alive. "It's my place to be sorry."

"But it was my steering--"

"I ought to have seen you were a Novice"--with a touch of superiority.

"But you rode so straight coming along there!"

She really was--dashed pretty. Mr. Hoopdriver's feelings passed the nadir. When he spoke again there was the faintest flavour of the aristocratic in his voice.

"It's my first ride, as a matter of fact. But that's no excuse for my

ah! blundering--"

"Your finger's bleeding," she said, abruptly.

He saw his knuckle was barked. "I didn't feel it," he said, feeling manly.

"You don't at first. Have you any sticking-plaster? If not--" She balanced her machine against herself. She had a little side pocket, and she whipped out a small packet of sticking-plaster with a pair of scissors in a sheath at the side, and cut off a generous portion. He had a wild impulse to ask her to stick it on for him. Controlled. "Thank you," he said.

"Machine all right?" she asked, looking past him at the prostrate vehicle, her hands on her handle-bar. For the first time Hoopdriver did not feel proud of his machine.

He turned and began to pick up the fallen fabric. He looked over his shoulder, and she was gone, turned his head over the other shoulder down the road, and she was riding off. "ORF!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Well, I'm blown!--Talk about Slap Up!" (His aristocratic refinement rarely adorned his speech in his private soliloquies.) His mind was whirling. One fact was clear. A most delightful and novel human being had flashed across his horizon and was going out of his life again. The Holiday madness was in his blood. She looked round!

At that he rushed his machine into the road, and began a hasty ascent. Unsuccessful. Try again. Confound it, will he NEVER be able to get up on the thing again? She will be round the corner in a minute. Once more. Ah! Pedal! Wobble! No! Right this time! He gripped the handles and put his head down. He would overtake her.

The situation was primordial. The Man beneath prevailed for a moment over the civilised superstructure, the Draper. He pushed at the pedals with archaic violence. So Palaeolithic man may have ridden his simple bicycle of chipped flint in pursuit of his exogamous affinity. She vanished round the corner. His effort was Titanic. What should he say when he overtook her? That scarcely disturbed him at first. How fine she had looked, flushed with the exertion of riding, breathing a little fast, but elastic and active! Talk about your ladylike, homekeeping girls with complexions like cold veal! But what should he say to her? That was a bother. And he could not lift his cap without risking a repetition of his previous ignominy. She was a real Young Lady. No mistake about that! None of your blooming shop girls. (There is no greater contempt in the world than that of shop men for shop girls, unless it be that of shop girls for shop men.) Phew! This was work. A certain numbness came and went at his knees.

"May I ask to whom I am indebted?" he panted to himself, trying it over. That might do. Lucky he had a card case! A hundred a shilling--while you wait. He was getting winded. The road was certainly a bit uphill.

He turned the corner and saw a long stretch of road, and a grey dress vanishing. He set his teeth. Had he gained on her at all? "Monkey on a gridiron!" yelled a small boy. Hoopdriver redoubled his efforts. His breath became audible, his steering unsteady, his pedalling positively ferocious. A drop of perspiration ran into his eye, irritant as acid. The road really was uphill beyond dispute. All his physiology began to cry out at him. A last tremendous effort brought him to the corner and showed yet another extent of shady roadway, empty save for a baker's van. His front wheel suddenly shrieked aloud. "Oh Lord!" said Hoopdriver, relaxing.

Anyhow she was not in sight. He got off unsteadily, and for a moment his legs felt like wisps of cotton. He balanced his machine against the grassy edge of the path and sat down panting. His hands were gnarled with swollen veins and shaking palpably, his breath came viscid.

"I'm hardly in training yet," he remarked. His legs had gone leaden. "I don't feel as though I'd had a mouthful of breakfast." Presently he slapped his side pocket and produced therefrom a brand-new cigarette case and a packet of Vansittart's Red Herring cigarettes. He filled the case. Then his eye fell with a sudden approval on the ornamental chequering of his new stockings. The expression in his eyes faded slowly to abstract meditation.

"She WAS a stunning girl," he said. "I wonder if I shall ever set eyes on her again. And she knew how to ride, too! Wonder what she thought of

me."

The phrase 'bloomin' Dook' floated into his mind with a certain flavour of comfort.

He lit a cigarette, and sat smoking and meditating. He did not even look up when vehicles passed. It was perhaps ten minutes before he roused himself. "What rot it is! What's the good of thinking such things," he said. "I'm only a blessed draper's assistant." (To be exact, he did not say blessed. The service of a shop may polish a man's exterior ways, but the 'prentices' dormitory is an indifferent school for either manners or morals.) He stood up and began wheeling his machine towards Esher. It was going to be a beautiful day, and the hedges and trees and the open country were all glorious to his town-tired eyes. But it was a little different from the elation of his start.

"Look at the gentleman wizzer bicitle," said a nursemaid on the path to a personage in a perambulator. That healed him a little. "Gentleman wizzer bicitle, '--'bloomin' Dook'--I can't look so very seedy," he said to himself.

"I WONDER--I should just like to know--"

There was something very comforting in the track of HER pneumatic running straight and steady along the road before him. It must be hers. No other pneumatic had been along the road that morning. It was just



possible, of course, that he might see her once more--coming back. Should he try and say something smart? He speculated what manner of girl she might be. Probably she was one of these here New Women. He had a persuasion the cult had been maligned. Anyhow she was a Lady. And rich people, too! Her machine couldn't have cost much under twenty pounds. His mind came round and dwelt some time on her visible self. Rational dress didn't look a bit unwomanly. However, he disdained to be one of your fortune-hunters. Then his thoughts drove off at a tangent. He would certainly have to get something to eat at the next public house.