

VIII.

Beyond Cobham came a delightful incident, delightful, that is, in its beginning if a trifle indeterminate in the retrospect. It was perhaps half-way between Cobham and Ripley. Mr. Hoopdriver dropped down a little hill, where, unfenced from the road, fine mossy trees and bracken lay on either side; and looking up he saw an open country before him, covered with heather and set with pines, and a yellow road running across it, and half a mile away perhaps, a little grey figure by the wayside waving something white. "Never!" said Mr. Hoopdriver with his hands tightening on the handles.

He resumed the treadles, staring away before him, jolted over a stone, wobbled, recovered, and began riding faster at once, with his eyes ahead. "It can't be," said Hoopdriver.

He rode his straightest, and kept his pedals spinning, albeit a limp numbness had resumed possession of his legs. "It CAN'T be," he repeated, feeling every moment more assured that it WAS. "Lord! I don't know even now," said Mr. Hoopdriver (legs awhirling), and then, "Blow my legs!"

But he kept on and drew nearer and nearer, breathing hard and gathering flies like a flypaper. In the valley he was hidden. Then the road began to rise, and the resistance of the pedals grew. As he crested the hill he saw her, not a hundred yards away from him. "It's her!" he said. "It's her--right enough. It's the suit's done it,"--which was truer

even than Mr. Hoopdriver thought. But now she was not waving her handkerchief, she was not even looking at him. She was wheeling her machine slowly along the road towards him, and admiring the pretty wooded hills towards Weybridge. She might have been unaware of his existence for all the recognition he got.

For a moment horrible doubts troubled Mr. Hoopdriver. Had that handkerchief been a dream? Besides which he was deliquescent and scarlet, and felt so. It must be her coquetry--the handkerchief was indisputable. Should he ride up to her and get off, or get off and ride up to her? It was as well she didn't look, because he would certainly capsize if he lifted his cap. Perhaps that was her consideration. Even as he hesitated he was upon her. She must have heard his breathing. He gripped the brake. Steady! His right leg waved in the air, and he came down heavily and staggering, but erect. She turned her eyes upon him with admirable surprise.

Mr. Hoopdriver tried to smile pleasantly, hold up his machine, raise his cap, and bow gracefully. Indeed, he felt that he did as much. He was a man singularly devoid of the minutiae of self-consciousness, and he was quite unaware of a tail of damp hair lying across his forehead, and just clearing his eyes, and of the general disorder of his coiffure. There was an interrogative pause.

"What can I have the pleasure--" began Mr. Hoopdriver, insinuatingly.

"I mean" (remembering his emancipation and abruptly assuming his most

aristocratic intonation), "can I be of any assistance to you?"

The Young Lady in Grey bit her lower lip and said very prettily, "None, thank you." She glanced away from him and made as if she would proceed.

"Oh!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, taken aback and suddenly crestfallen again. It was so unexpected. He tried to grasp the situation. Was she coquetting? Or had he--?

"Excuse me, one minute," he said, as she began to wheel her machine again.

"Yes?" she said, stopping and staring a little, with the colour in her cheeks deepening.

"I should not have alighted if I had not--imagined that you--er, waved something white--" He paused.

She looked at him doubtfully. He HAD seen it! She decided that he was not an unredeemed rough taking advantage of a mistake, but an innocent soul meaning well while seeking happiness. "I DID wave my handkerchief," she said. "I'm very sorry. I am expecting--a friend, a gentleman,"--she seemed to flush pink for a minute. "He is riding a bicycle and dressed in--in brown; and at a distance, you know--"

"Oh, quite!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, bearing up in manly fashion against

his bitter disappointment. "Certainly."

"I'm awfully sorry, you know. Troubling you to dismount, and all that."

"No trouble. 'Ssure you," said Mr. Hoopdriver, mechanically and bowing over his saddle as if it was a counter. Somehow he could not find it in his heart to tell her that the man was beyond there with a punctured pneumatic. He looked back along the road and tried to think of something else to say. But the gulf in the conversation widened rapidly and hopelessly. "There's nothing further," began Mr. Hoopdriver desperately, recurring to his stock of cliches.

"Nothing, thank you," she said decisively. And immediately, "This IS the Ripley road?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Ripley is about two miles from here. According to the mile-stones."

"Thank you," she said warmly. "Thank you so much. I felt sure there was no mistake. And I really am awfully sorry--"

"Don't mention it," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Don't mention it." He hesitated and gripped his handles to mount. "It's me," he said, "ought to be sorry." Should he say it? Was it an impertinence? Anyhow!--"Not being the other gentleman, you know."

He tried a quietly insinuating smile that he knew for a grin even as he smiled it; felt she disapproved--that she despised him, was overcome with shame at her expression, turned his back upon her, and began (very clumsily) to mount. He did so with a horrible swerve, and went pedalling off, riding very badly, as he was only too painfully aware. Nevertheless, thank Heaven for the mounting! He could not see her because it was so dangerous for him to look round, but he could imagine her indignant and pitiless. He felt an unspeakable idiot. One had to be so careful what one said to Young Ladies, and he'd gone and treated her just as though she was only a Larky Girl. It was unforgivable. He always WAS a fool. You could tell from her manner she didn't think him a gentleman. One glance, and she seemed to look clear through him and all his presence. What rot it was venturing to speak to a girl like that! With her education she was bound to see through him at once.

How nicely she spoke too! nice clear-cut words! She made him feel what slush his own accent was. And that last silly remark. What was it? 'Not being the other gentleman, you know!' No point in it. And 'GENTLEMAN!' What COULD she be thinking of him?

But really the Young Lady in Grey had dismissed Hoopdriver from her thoughts almost before he had vanished round the corner. She had thought no ill of him. His manifest awe and admiration of her had given her not an atom of offence. But for her just now there were weightier things to think about, things that would affect all the rest of her life. She continued slowly walking her machine Londonward. Presently she stopped.

"Oh! Why DOESN'T he come?" she said, and stamped her foot petulantly. Then, as if in answer, coming down the hill among the trees, appeared the other man in brown, dismounted and wheeling his machine.