

## IX. HOW MR. HOOPDRIVER WAS HAUNTED

As Mr. Hoopdriver rode swaggering along the Ripley road, it came to him, with an unwarrantable sense of comfort, that he had seen the last of the Young Lady in Grey. But the ill-concealed blavery of the machine, the present machinery of Fate, the deus ex machina, so to speak, was against him. The bicycle, torn from this attractive young woman, grew heavier and heavier, and continually more unsteady. It seemed a choice between stopping at Ripley or dying in the flower of his days. He went into the Unicorn, after propping his machine outside the door, and, as he cooled down and smoked his Red Herring cigarette while the cold meat was getting ready, he saw from the window the Young Lady in Grey and the other man in brown, entering Ripley.

They filled him with apprehension by looking at the house which sheltered him, but the sight of his bicycle, propped in a drunk and incapable attitude against the doorway, humping its rickety mud-guard and leering at them with its darkened lantern eye, drove them away--so it seemed to Mr. Hoopdriver--to the spacious swallow of the Golden Dragon. The young lady was riding very slowly, but the other man in brown had a bad puncture and was wheeling his machine. Mr. Hoopdriver noted his flaxen moustache, his aquiline nose, his rather bent shoulders, with a sudden, vivid dislike.

The maid at the Unicorn is naturally a pleasant girl, but she is jaded by the incessant incidence of cyclists, and Hoopdriver's mind, even as

he conversed with her in that cultivated voice of his--of the weather, of the distance from London, and of the excellence of the Ripley road--wandered to the incomparable freshness and brilliance of the Young Lady in Grey. As he sat at meat he kept turning his head to the window to see what signs there were of that person, but the face of the Golden Dragon displayed no appreciation of the delightful morsel it had swallowed. As an incidental consequence of this distraction, Mr. Hoopdriver was for a minute greatly inconvenienced by a mouthful of mustard. After he had called for his reckoning he went, his courage being high with meat and mustard, to the door, intending to stand, with his legs wide apart and his hands deep in his pockets, and stare boldly across the road. But just then the other man in brown appeared in the gateway of the Golden Dragon yard--it is one of those delightful inns that date from the coaching days--wheeling his punctured machine. He was taking it to Flambeau's, the repairer's. He looked up and saw Hoopdriver, stared for a minute, and then scowled darkly.

But Hoopdriver remained stoutly in the doorway until the other man in brown had disappeared into Flambeau's. Then he glanced momentarily at the Golden Dragon, puckered his mouth into a whistle of unconcern, and proceeded to wheel his machine into the road until a sufficient margin for mounting was secured.

Now, at that time, I say, Hoopdriver was rather desirous than not of seeing no more of the Young Lady in Grey. The other man in brown he guessed was her brother, albeit that person was of a pallid fairness,

differing essentially from her rich colouring; and, besides, he felt he had made a hopeless fool of himself. But the afternoon was against him, intolerably hot, especially on the top of his head, and the virtue had gone out of his legs to digest his cold meat, and altogether his ride to Guildford was exceedingly intermittent. At times he would walk, at times lounge by the wayside, and every public house, in spite of Briggs and a sentiment of economy, meant a lemonade and a dash of bitter. (For that is the experience of all those who go on wheels, that drinking begets thirst, even more than thirst begets drinking, until at last the man who yields becomes a hell unto himself, a hell in which the fire dieth not, and the thirst is not quenched.) Until a pennyworth of acrid green apples turned the current that threatened to carry him away. Ever and again a cycle, or a party of cyclists, would go by, with glittering wheels and softly running chains, and on each occasion, to save his self-respect, Mr. Hoopdriver descended and feigned some trouble with his saddle. Each time he descended with less trepidation.

He did not reach Guildford until nearly four o'clock, and then he was so much exhausted that he decided to put up there for the night, at the Yellow Hammer Coffee Tavern. And after he had cooled a space and refreshed himself with tea and bread and butter and jam,--the tea he drank noisily out of the saucer,--he went out to loiter away the rest of the afternoon. Guildford is an altogether charming old town, famous, so he learnt from a Guide Book, as the scene of Master Tupper's great historical novel of Stephen Langton, and it has a delightful castle, all set about with geraniums and brass plates commemorating the gentlemen

who put them up, and its Guildhall is a Tudor building, very pleasant to see, and in the afternoon the shops are busy and the people going to and fro make the pavements look bright and prosperous. It was nice to peep in the windows and see the heads of the men and girls in the drapers' shops, busy as busy, serving away. The High Street runs down at an angle of seventy degrees to the horizon (so it seemed to Mr. Hoopdriver, whose feeling for gradients was unnaturally exalted), and it brought his heart into his mouth to see a cyclist ride down it, like a fly crawling down a window pane. The man hadn't even a brake. He visited the castle early in the evening and paid his twopence to ascend the Keep.

At the top, from the cage, he looked down over the clustering red roofs of the town and the tower of the church, and then going to the southern side sat down and lit a Red Herring cigarette, and stared away south over the old bramble-bearing, fern-beset ruin, at the waves of blue upland that rose, one behind another, across the Weald, to the lazy altitudes of Hindhead and Butser. His pale grey eyes were full of complacency and pleasurable anticipation. Tomorrow he would go riding across that wide valley.

He did not notice any one else had come up the Keep after him until he heard a soft voice behind him saying: "Well, MISS BEAUMONT, here's the view." Something in the accent pointed to a jest in the name.

"It's a dear old town, brother George," answered another voice that sounded familiar enough, and turning his head, Mr. Hoopdriver saw the

other man in brown and the Young Lady in Grey, with their backs towards him. She turned her smiling profile towards Hoopdriver. "Only, you know, brothers don't call their sisters--"

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Hoopdriver. "Damn!" said the other man in brown, quite audibly, starting as he followed her glance.

Mr. Hoopdriver, with a fine air of indifference, resumed the Weald. "Beautiful old town, isn't it?" said the other man in brown, after a quite perceptible pause.

"Isn't it?" said the Young Lady in Grey.

Another pause began.

"Can't get alone anywhere," said the other man in brown, looking round.

Then Mr. Hoopdriver perceived clearly that he was in the way, and decided to retreat. It was just his luck of course that he should stumble at the head of the steps and vanish with indignity. This was the third time that he'd seen HIM, and the fourth time her. And of course he was too big a fat-head to raise his cap to HER! He thought of that at the foot of the Keep. Apparently they aimed at the South Coast just as he did, He'd get up betimes the next day and hurry off to avoid her--them, that is. It never occurred to Mr. Hoopdriver that Miss Beaumont and her brother might do exactly the same thing, and that

evening, at least, the peculiarity of a brother calling his sister "Miss Beaumont" did not recur to him. He was much too preoccupied with an analysis of his own share of these encounters. He found it hard to be altogether satisfied about the figure he had cut, revise his memories as he would.

Once more quite unintentionally he stumbled upon these two people. It was about seven o'clock. He stopped outside a linen draper's and peered over the goods in the window at the assistants in torment. He could have spent a whole day happily at that. He told himself that he was trying to see how they dressed out the brass lines over their counters, in a purely professional spirit, but down at the very bottom of his heart he knew better. The customers were a secondary consideration, and it was only after the lapse of perhaps a minute that he perceived that among them was--the Young Lady in Grey! He turned away from the window at once, and saw the other man in brown standing at the edge of the pavement and regarding him with a very curious expression of face.

There came into Mr. Hoopdriver's head the curious problem whether he was to be regarded as a nuisance haunting these people, or whether they were to be regarded as a nuisance haunting him. He abandoned the solution at last in despair, quite unable to decide upon the course he should take at the next encounter, whether he should scowl savagely at the couple or assume an attitude eloquent of apology and propitiation.