

man in the Keep, the angry man in drab, the barmaid at the Unicorn, men with flying-machines, people playing billiards in the doorways, silly, headless figures, stupid cocks and hens encumbered with parcels and umbrellas and waterproofs, people carrying bedroom candles, and such-like ruffraff, kept getting in his way and annoying him, although he sounded his electric bell, and said, "Wonderful, wonderful!" at every corner....

XIII. HOW MR. HOOPDRIVER WENT TO HASLEMERE

There was some little delay in getting Mr. Hoopdriver's breakfast, so that after all he was not free to start out of Guildford until just upon the stroke of nine. He wheeled his machine from the High Street in some perplexity. He did not know whether this young lady, who had seized hold of his imagination so strongly, and her unfriendly and possibly menacing brother, were ahead of him or even now breakfasting somewhere in Guildford. In the former case he might loiter as he chose; in the latter he must hurry, and possibly take refuge in branch roads.

It occurred to him as being in some obscure way strategic, that he would leave Guildford not by the obvious Portsmouth road, but by the road running through Shalford. Along this pleasant shady way he felt sufficiently secure to resume his exercises in riding with one hand off the handles, and in staring over his shoulder. He came over once

or twice, but fell on his foot each time, and perceived that he was improving. Before he got to Bramley a specious byway snapped him up, ran with him for half a mile or more, and dropped him as a terrier drops a walkingstick, upon the Portsmouth again, a couple of miles from Godalming. He entered Godalming on his feet, for the road through that delightful town is beyond dispute the vilest in the world, a mere tumult of road metal, a way of peaks and precipices, and, after a successful experiment with cider at the Woolpack, he pushed on to Milford.

All this time he was acutely aware of the existence of the Young Lady in Grey and her companion in brown, as a child in the dark is of Bogies. Sometimes he could hear their pneumatics stealing upon him from behind, and looking round saw a long stretch of vacant road. Once he saw far ahead of him a glittering wheel, but it proved to be a workingman riding to destruction on a very tall ordinary. And he felt a curious, vague uneasiness about that Young Lady in Grey, for which he was altogether unable to account. Now that he was awake he had forgotten that accentuated Miss Beaumont that had been quite clear in his dream. But the curious dream conviction, that the girl was not really the man's sister, would not let itself be forgotten. Why, for instance, should a man want to be alone with his sister on the top of a tower? At Milford his bicycle made, so to speak, an ass of itself. A finger-post suddenly jumped out at him, vainly indicating an abrupt turn to the right, and Mr. Hoopdriver would have slowed up and read the inscription, but no!--the bicycle would not let him. The road dropped a little into Milford, and the thing shied, put down its head and bolted, and Mr.

Hoopdriver only thought of the brake when the fingerpost was passed. Then to have recovered the point of intersection would have meant dismounting. For as yet there was no road wide enough for Mr. Hoopdriver to turn in. So he went on his way--or to be precise, he did exactly the opposite thing. The road to the right was the Portsmouth road, and this he was on went to Haslemere and Midhurst. By that error it came about that he once more came upon his fellow travellers of yesterday, coming on them suddenly, without the slightest preliminary announcement and when they least expected it, under the Southwestern Railway arch. "It's horrible," said a girlish voice; "it's brutal--cowardly--" And stopped.

His expression, as he shot out from the archway at them, may have been something between a grin of recognition and a scowl of annoyance at himself for the unintentional intrusion. But disconcerted as he was, he was yet able to appreciate something of the peculiarity of their mutual attitudes. The bicycles were lying by the roadside, and the two riders stood face to face. The other man in brown's attitude, as it flashed upon Hoopdriver, was a deliberate pose; he twirled his moustache and smiled faintly, and he was conscientiously looking amused. And the girl stood rigid, her arms straight by her side, her handkerchief clenched in her hand, and her face was flushed, with the faintest touch of red upon her eyelids. She seemed to Mr. Hoopdriver's sense to be indignant. But that was the impression of a second. A mask of surprised recognition fell across this revelation of emotion as she turned her head towards him, and the pose of the other man in brown vanished too in a momentary astonishment. And then he had passed them, and was riding on towards

Haslemere to make what he could of the swift picture that had photographed itself on his brain.

"Rum," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "It's DASHED rum!"

"They were having a row."

"Smirking--" What he called the other man in brown need not trouble us.

"Annoying her!" That any human being should do that!

"WHY?"

The impulse to interfere leapt suddenly into Mr. Hoopdriver's mind. He grasped his brake, descended, and stood looking hesitatingly back. They still stood by the railway bridge, and it seemed to Mr. Hoopdriver's fancy that she was stamping her foot. He hesitated, then turned his bicycle round, mounted, and rode back towards them, gripping his courage firmly lest it should slip away and leave him ridiculous. "I'll offer 'im a screw 'ammer," said Mr. Hoopdriver. Then, with a wave of fierce emotion, he saw that the girl was crying. In another moment they heard him and turned in surprise. Certainly she had been crying; her eyes were swimming in tears, and the other man in brown looked exceedingly disconcerted. Mr. Hoopdriver descended and stood over his machine.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" he said, looking the other man in brown

squarely in the face. "No accident?"

"Nothing," said the other man in brown shortly. "Nothing at all, thanks."

"But," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with a great effort, "the young lady is crying. I thought perhaps--"

The Young Lady in Grey started, gave Hoopdriver one swift glance, and covered one eye with her handkerchief. "It's this speck," she said.

"This speck of dust in my eye."

"This lady," said the other man in brown, explaining, "has a gnat in her eye."

There was a pause. The young lady busied herself with her eye. "I believe it's out," she said. The other man in brown made movements indicating commiserating curiosity concerning the alleged fly. Mr. Hoopdriver--the word is his own--stood flabber-gastered. He had all the intuition of the simple-minded. He knew there was no fly. But the ground was suddenly cut from his feet. There is a limit to knighterrantry--dragons and false knights are all very well, but flies! Fictitious flies! Whatever the trouble was, it was evidently not his affair. He felt he had made a fool of himself again. He would have mumbled some sort of apology; but the other man in brown gave him no time, turned on him abruptly, even fiercely. "I hope," he said, "that

your curiosity is satisfied?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Then we won't detain you."

And, ignominiously, Mr. Hoopdriver turned his machine about, struggled upon it, and resumed the road southward. And when he learnt that he was not on the Portsmouth road, it was impossible to turn and go back, for that would be to face his shame again, and so he had to ride on by Brook Street up the hill to Haslemere. And away to the right the Portsmouth road mocked at him and made off to its fastnesses amid the sunlit green and purple masses of Hindhead, where Mr. Grant Allen writes his Hill Top Novels day by day.

The sun shone, and the wide blue hill views and pleasant valleys one saw on either hand from the sandscarred roadway, even the sides of the road itself set about with grey heather scrub and prickly masses of gorse, and pine trees with their year's growth still bright green, against the darkened needles of the previous years, were fresh and delightful to Mr. Hoopdriver's eyes. But the brightness of the day and the day-old sense of freedom fought an uphill fight against his intolerable vexation at that abominable encounter, and had still to win it when he reached Haslemere. A great brown shadow, a monstrous hatred of the other man in brown, possessed him. He had conceived the brilliant idea of abandoning Portsmouth, or at least giving up the straight way to his

fellow-wayfarers, and of striking out boldly to the left, eastward. He did not dare to stop at any of the inviting public-houses in the main street of Haslemere, but turned up a side way and found a little beer-shop, the Good Hope, wherein to refresh himself. And there he ate and gossiped condescendingly with an aged labourer, assuming the while for his own private enjoyment the attributes of a Lost Heir, and afterwards mounted and rode on towards Northchapel, a place which a number of finger-posts conspired to boom, but which some insidious turning prevented him from attaining.