

XIV. HOW MR. HOOPDRIVER REACHED MIDHURST

It was one of my uncle's profoundest remarks that human beings are the only unreasonable creatures. This observation was so far justified by Mr. Hoopdriver that, after spending the morning tortuously avoiding the other man in brown and the Young Lady in Grey, he spent a considerable part of the afternoon in thinking about the Young Lady in Grey, and contemplating in an optimistic spirit the possibilities of seeing her again. Memory and imagination played round her, so that his course was largely determined by the windings of the road he traversed. Of one general proposition he was absolutely convinced. "There's something Juicy wrong with 'em," said he--once even aloud. But what it was he could not imagine. He recapitulated the facts. "Miss Beaumont--brother and sister--and the stoppage to quarrel and weep--" it was perplexing material for a young man of small experience. There was no exertion he hated so much as inference, and after a time he gave up any attempt to get at the realities of the case, and let his imagination go free. Should he ever see her again? Suppose he did--with that other chap not about. The vision he found pleasantest was an encounter with her, an unexpected encounter at the annual Dancing Class 'Do' at the Putney Assembly Rooms. Somehow they would drift together, and he would dance with her again and again. It was a pleasant vision, for you must understand that Mr. Hoopdriver danced uncommonly well. Or again, in the shop, a sudden radiance in the doorway, and she is bowed towards the Manchester counter. And then to lean over that counter and murmur, seemingly apropos of the goods under discussion, "I have not forgotten

that morning on the Portsmouth road," and lower, "I never shall forget."

At Northchapel Mr. Hoopdriver consulted his map and took counsel and weighed his course of action. Petworth seemed a possible resting-place, or Pullborough; Midhurst seemed too near, and any place over the Downs beyond, too far, and so he meandered towards Petworth, posing himself perpetually and loitering, gathering wild flowers and wondering why they had no names--for he had never heard of any--dropping them furtively at the sight of a stranger, and generally 'mucking about.' There were purple vetches in the hedges, meadowsweet, honeysuckle, belated brambles--but the dog-roses had already gone; there were green and red blackberries, stellarias, and dandelions, and in another place white dead nettles, traveller's-joy, clinging bedstraw, grasses flowering, white champions, and ragged robins. One cornfield was glorious with poppies, bright scarlet and purple white, and the blue corn-flowers were beginning. In the lanes the trees met overhead, and the wisps of hay still hung to the straggling hedges. In one of the main roads he steered a perilous passage through a dozen surly dun oxen. Here and there were little cottages, and picturesque beer-houses with the vivid brewers' boards of blue and scarlet, and once a broad green and a church, and an expanse of some hundred houses or so. Then he came to a pebbly rivulet that emerged between clumps of sedge loosestrife and forget-me-nots under an arch of trees, and rippled across the road, and there he dismounted, longing to take off shoes and stockings--those stylish chequered stockings were now all dimmed with dust--and paddle his lean legs in the chuckling cheerful water. But instead he sat in

a manly attitude, smoking a cigarette, for fear lest the Young Lady in Grey should come glittering round the corner. For the flavour of the Young Lady in Grey was present through it all, mixing with the flowers and all the delight of it, a touch that made this second day quite different from the first, an undertone of expectation, anxiety, and something like regret that would not be ignored.

It was only late in the long evening that, quite abruptly, he began to repent, vividly and decidedly, having fled these two people. He was getting hungry, and that has a curious effect upon the emotional colouring of our minds. The man was a sinister brute, Hoopdriver saw in a flash of inspiration, and the girl--she was in some serious trouble. And he who might have helped her had taken his first impulse as decisive--and bolted. This new view of it depressed him dreadfully. What might not be happening to her now? He thought again of her tears. Surely it was merely his duty, seeing the trouble afoot, to keep his eye upon it.

He began riding fast to get quit of such selfreproaches. He found himself in a tortuous tangle of roads, and as the dusk was coming on, emerged, not at Petworth but at Easebourne, a mile from Midhurst. "I'm getting hungry," said Mr. Hoopdriver, inquiring of a gamekeeper in Easebourne village. "Midhurst a mile, and Petworth five!--Thenks, I'll take Midhurst."

He came into Midhurst by the bridge at the watermill, and up the North

Street, and a little shop flourishing cheerfully, the cheerful sign of a teapot, and exhibiting a brilliant array of tobaccos, sweets, and children's toys in the window, struck his fancy. A neat, bright-eyed little old lady made him welcome, and he was presently supping sumptuously on sausages and tea, with a visitors' book full of the most humorous and flattering remarks about the little old lady, in verse and prose, propped up against his teapot as he ate. Regular good some of the jokes were, and rhymes that read well--even with your mouth full of sausage. Mr. Hoopdriver formed a vague idea of drawing "something"--for his judgment on the little old lady was already formed. He pictured the little old lady discovering it afterwards--"My gracious! One of them Punch men," she would say. The room had a curtained recess and a chest of drawers, for presently it was to be his bedroom, and the day part of it was decorated with framed Oddfellows' certificates and giltbacked books and portraits, and kettle-holders, and all kinds of beautiful things made out of wool; very comfortable it was indeed. The window was lead framed and diamond paned, and through it one saw the corner of the vicarage and a pleasant hill crest, in dusky silhouette against the twilight sky. And after the sausages had ceased to be, he lit a Red Herring cigarette and went swaggering out into the twilight street. All shadowy blue between its dark brick houses, was the street, with a bright yellow window here and there and splashes of green and red where the chemist's illumination fell across the road.