

## XVII. THE ENCOUNTER AT MIDHURST

We left Mr. Hoopdriver at the door of the little tea, toy, and tobacco shop. You must not think that a strain is put on coincidence when I tell you that next door to Mrs. Wardor's--that was the name of the bright-eyed, little old lady with whom Mr. Hoopdriver had stopped--is the Angel Hotel, and in the Angel Hotel, on the night that Mr. Hoopdriver reached Midhurst, were 'Mr.' and 'Miss' Beaumont, our Bechamel and Jessie Milton. Indeed, it was a highly probable thing; for if one goes through Guildford, the choice of southward roads is limited; you may go by Petersfield to Portsmouth, or by Midhurst to Chichester, in addition to which highways there is nothing for it but minor roadways to Petworth or Pulborough, and cross-cuts Brightonward. And coming to Midhurst from the north, the Angel's entrance lies yawning to engulf your highly respectable cyclists, while Mrs. Wardor's genial teapot is equally attractive to those who weigh their means in little scales. But to people unfamiliar with the Sussex roads--and such were the three persons of this story--the convergence did not appear to be so inevitable.

Bechamel, tightening his chain in the Angel yard after dinner, was the first to be aware of their reunion. He saw Hoopdriver walk slowly across the gateway, his head enhaloed in cigarette smoke, and pass out of sight up the street. Incontinently a mass of cloudy uneasiness, that had been partly dispelled during the day, reappeared and concentrated rapidly

into definite suspicion. He put his screw hammer into his pocket and walked through the archway into the street, to settle the business forthwith, for he prided himself on his decision. Hoopdriver was merely promenading, and they met face to face.

At the sight of his adversary, something between disgust and laughter seized Mr. Hoopdriver and for a moment destroyed his animosity. "Ere we are again!" he said, laughing insincerely in a sudden outbreak at the perversity of chance.

The other man in brown stopped short in Mr. Hoopdriver's way, staring. Then his face assumed an expression of dangerous civility. "Is it any information to you," he said, with immense politeness, "when I remark that you are following us?"

Mr. Hoopdriver, for some occult reason, resisted his characteristic impulse to apologise. He wanted to annoy the other man in brown, and a sentence that had come into his head in a previous rehearsal cropped up appropriately. "Since when," said Mr. Hoopdriver, catching his breath, yet bringing the question out valiantly, nevertheless,--"since when 'ave you purchased the county of Sussex?"

"May I point out," said the other man in brown, "that I object--we object not only to your proximity to us. To be frank--you appear to be following us--with an object."

"You can always," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "turn round if you don't like it, and go back the way you came."

"Oh-o!" said the other man in brown. "THAT'S it! I thought as much."

"Did you?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, quite at sea, but rising pluckily to the unknown occasion. What was the man driving at?

"I see," said the other man. "I see. I half suspected--" His manner changed abruptly to a quality suspiciously friendly. "Yes--a word with you. You will, I hope, give me ten minutes."

Wonderful things were dawning on Mr. Hoopdriver. What did the other man take him for? Here at last was reality! He hesitated. Then he thought of an admirable phrase. "You 'ave some communication--"

"We'll call it a communication," said the other man.

"I can spare you the ten minutes," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with dignity.

"This way, then," said the other man in brown, and they walked slowly down the North Street towards the Grammar School. There was, perhaps, thirty seconds' silence. The other man stroked his moustache nervously. Mr. Hoopdriver's dramatic instincts were now fully awake. He did not quite understand in what role he was cast, but it was evidently something dark and mysterious. Doctor Conan Doyle, Victor Hugo, and

Alexander Dumas were well within Mr. Hoopdriver's range of reading, and he had not read them for nothing.

"I will be perfectly frank with you," said the other man in brown.

"Frankness is always the best course," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Well, then--who the devil set you on this business?"

"Set me ON this business?"

"Don't pretend to be stupid. Who's your employer? Who engaged you for this job?"

"Well," said Mr. Hoopdriver, confused. "No--I can't say."

"Quite sure?" The other man in brown glanced meaningly down at his hand, and Mr. Hoopdriver, following him mechanically, saw a yellow milled edge glittering in the twilight. Now your shop assistant is just above the tip-receiving class, and only just above it--so that he is acutely sensitive on the point.

Mr. Hoopdriver flushed hotly, and his eyes were angry as he met those of the other man in brown. "Stow it!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, stopping and facing the tempter.

"What!" said the other man in brown, surprised. "Eigh?" And so saying he stowed it in his breeches pocket.

"D'yer think I'm to be bribed?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, whose imagination was rapidly expanding the situation. "By Gosh! I'd follow you now--"

"My dear sir," said the other man in brown, "I beg your pardon. I misunderstood you. I really beg your pardon. Let us walk on. In your profession--"

"What have you got to say against my profession?"

"Well, really, you know. There are detectives of an inferior description--watchers. The whole class. Private Inquiry--I did not realise--I really trust you will overlook what was, after all--you must admit--a natural indiscretion. Men of honour are not so common in the world--in any profession."

It was lucky for Mr. Hoopdriver that in Midhurst they do not light the lamps in the summer time, or the one they were passing had betrayed him. As it was, he had to snatch suddenly at his moustache and tug fiercely at it, to conceal the furious tumult of exultation, the passion of laughter, that came boiling up. Detective! Even in the shadow Bechamel saw that a laugh was stifled, but he put it down to the fact that the phrase "men of honour" amused his interlocutor. "He'll come round yet," said Bechamel to himself. "He's simply holding out for a fiver." He

coughed.

"I don't see that it hurts you to tell me who your employer is."

"Don't you? I do."

"Prompt," said Bechamel, appreciatively. "Now here's the thing I want to put to you--the kernel of the whole business. You need not answer if you don't want to. There's no harm done in my telling you what I want to know. Are you employed to watch me--or Miss Milton?"

"I'm not the leaky sort," said Mr. Hoopdriver, keeping the secret he did not know with immense enjoyment. Miss Milton! That was her name. Perhaps he'd tell some more. "It's no good pumping. Is that all you're after?" said Mr. Hoopdriver.

Bechamel respected himself for his diplomatic gifts. He tried to catch a remark by throwing out a confidence. "I take it there are two people concerned in watching this affair."

"Who's the other?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, calmly, but controlling with enormous internal tension his self-appreciation. "Who's the other?" was really brilliant, he thought.

"There's my wife and HER stepmother."

"And you want to know which it is?"

"Yes," said Bechamel.

"Well--arst 'em!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, his exultation getting the better of him, and with a pretty consciousness of repartee. "Arst 'em both."

Bechamel turned impatiently. Then he made a last effort. "I'd give a five-pound note to know just the precise state of affairs," he said.

"I told you to stow that," said Mr. Hoopdriver, in a threatening tone. And added with perfect truth and a magnificent mystery, "You don't quite understand who you're dealing with. But you will!" He spoke with such conviction that he half believed that that defective office of his in London--Baker Street, in fact--really existed.

With that the interview terminated. Bechamel went back to the Angel, perturbed. "Hang detectives!" It wasn't the kind of thing he had anticipated at all. Hoopdriver, with round eyes and a wondering smile, walked down to where the mill waters glittered in the moonlight, and after meditating over the parapet of the bridge for a space, with occasional murmurs of, "Private Inquiry" and the like, returned, with mystery even in his paces, towards the town.