

XVIII.

That glee which finds expression in raised eyebrows and long, low whistling noises was upon Mr. Hoopdriver. For a space he forgot the tears of the Young Lady in Grey. Here was a new game!--and a real one. Mr. Hoopdriver as a Private Inquiry Agent, a Sherlock Holmes in fact, keeping these two people 'under observation.' He walked slowly back from the bridge until he was opposite the Angel, and stood for ten minutes, perhaps, contemplating that establishment and enjoying all the strange sensations of being this wonderful, this mysterious and terrible thing. Everything fell into place in his scheme. He had, of course, by a kind of instinct, assumed the disguise of a cyclist, picked up the first old creak he came across as a means of pursuit. 'No expense was to be spared.'

Then he tried to understand what it was in particular that he was observing. "My wife"--"HER stepmother!" Then he remembered her swimming eyes. Abruptly came a wave of anger that surprised him, washed away the detective superstructure, and left him plain Mr. Hoopdriver. This man in brown, with his confident manner, and his proffered half sovereign (damn him!) was up to no good, else why should he object to being watched? He was married! She was not his sister. He began to understand. A horrible suspicion of the state of affairs came into Mr. Hoopdriver's head. Surely it had not come to THAT. He was a detective!--he would find

out. How was it to be done? He began to submit sketches on approval to himself. It required an effort before he could walk into the Angel bar.

"A lemonade and bitter, please," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

He cleared his throat. "Are Mr. and Mrs. Bowlong stopping here?"

"What, a gentleman and a young lady--on bicycles?"

"Fairly young--a married couple."

"No," said the barmaid, a talkative person of ample dimensions. "There's no married couples stopping here. But there's a Mr. and Miss BEAUMONT." She spelt it for precision. "Sure you've got the name right, young man?"

"Quite," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Beaumont there is, but no one of the name of--What was the name you gave?"

"Bowlong," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"No, there ain't no Bowlong," said the barmaid, taking up a glasscloth and a drying tumbler and beginning to polish the latter. "First off, I thought you might be asking for Beaumont--the names being similar. Were you expecting them on bicycles?"

"Yes--they said they MIGHT be in Midhurst tonight."

"P'raps they'll come presently. Beaumont's here, but no Bowlong. Sure that Beaumont ain't the name?"

"Certain," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"It's curious the names being so alike. I thought p'raps--"

And so they conversed at some length, Mr. Hoopdriver delighted to find his horrible suspicion disposed of. The barmaid having listened awhile at the staircase volunteered some particulars of the young couple upstairs. Her modesty was much impressed by the young lady's costume, so she intimated, and Mr. Hoopdriver whispered the badinage natural to the occasion, at which she was coquettishly shocked. "There'll be no knowing which is which, in a year or two," said the barmaid. "And her manner too! She got off her machine and give it 'im to stick up against the kerb, and in she marched. 'I and my brother,' says she, 'want to stop here to-night. My brother doesn't mind what kind of room 'e 'as, but I want a room with a good view, if there's one to be got,' says she. He comes hurrying in after and looks at her. 'I've settled the rooms,' she says, and 'e says 'damn!' just like that. I can fancy my brother letting me boss the show like that."

"I dessay you do," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "if the truth was known."

The barmaid looked down, smiled and shook her head, put down the tumbler, polished, and took up another that had been draining, and shook the drops of water into her little zinc sink.

"She'll be a nice little lot to marry," said the barmaid. "She'll be wearing the--well, b-dashes, as the sayin' is. I can't think what girls is comin' to."

This depreciation of the Young Lady in Grey was hardly to Hoopdriver's taste.

"Fashion," said he, taking up his change. "Fashion is all the go with you ladies--and always was. You'll be wearing 'em yourself before a couple of years is out."

"Nice they'd look on my figger," said the barmaid, with a titter. "No--I ain't one of your fashionable sort. Gracious no! I shouldn't feel as if I'd anything on me, not more than if I'd forgot--Well, there! I'm talking." She put down the glass abruptly. "I dessay I'm old fashioned," she said, and walked humming down the bar.

"Not you," said Mr. Hoopdriver. He waited until he caught her eye, then with his native courtesy smiled, raised his cap, and wished her good evening.