

## XX. THE PURSUIT

And now to tell of Mr. Hoopdriver, rising with the sun, vigilant, active, wonderful, the practicable half of the lead-framed window stuck open, ears alert, an eye flickering incessantly in the corner panes, in oblique glances at the Angel front. Mrs. Wardor wanted him to have his breakfast downstairs in her kitchen, but that would have meant abandoning the watch, and he held out strongly. The bicycle, cap-a-pie, occupied, under protest, a strategic position in the shop. He was expectant by six in the morning. By nine horrible fears oppressed him that his quest had escaped him, and he had to reconnoitre the Angel yard in order to satisfy himself. There he found the ostler (How are the mighty fallen in these decadent days!) brushing down the bicycles of the chase, and he returned relieved to Mrs. Wardor's premises. And about ten they emerged, and rode quietly up the North Street. He watched them until they turned the corner of the post office, and then out into the road and up after them in fine style! They went by the engine-house where the old stocks and the whipping posts are, and on to the Chichester road, and he followed gallantly. So this great chase began.

They did not look round, and he kept them just within sight, getting down if he chanced to draw closely upon them round a corner. By riding vigorously he kept quite conveniently near them, for they made but little hurry. He grew hot indeed, and his knees were a little stiff to begin with, but that was all. There was little danger of losing them,

for a thin chalky dust lay upon the road, and the track of her tire was milled like a shilling, and his was a chequered ribbon along the way. So they rode by Cobden's monument and through the prettiest of villages, until at last the downs rose steeply ahead. There they stopped awhile at the only inn in the place, and Mr. Hoopdriver took up a position which commanded the inn door, and mopped his face and thirsted and smoked a Red Herring cigarette. They remained in the inn for some time. A number of chubby innocents returning home from school, stopped and formed a line in front of him, and watched him quietly but firmly for the space of ten minutes or so. "Go away," said he, and they only seemed quietly interested. He asked them all their names then, and they answered indistinct murmurs. He gave it up at last and became passive on his gate, and so at length they tired of him.

The couple under observation occupied the inn so long that Mr. Hoopdriver at the thought of their possible employment hungered as well as thirsted. Clearly, they were lunching. It was a cloudless day, and the sun at the meridian beat down upon the top of Mr. Hoopdriver's head, a shower bath of sunshine, a huge jet of hot light. It made his head swim. At last they emerged, and the other man in brown looked back and saw him. They rode on to the foot of the down, and dismounting began to push tediously up that long nearly vertical ascent of blinding white road, Mr. Hoopdriver hesitated. It might take them twenty minutes to mount that. Beyond was empty downland perhaps for miles. He decided to return to the inn and snatch a hasty meal.

At the inn they gave him biscuits and cheese and a misleading pewter measure of sturdy ale, pleasant under the palate, cool in the throat, but leaden in the legs, of a hot afternoon. He felt a man of substance as he emerged in the blinding sunshine, but even by the foot of the down the sun was insisting again that his skull was too small for his brains. The hill had gone steeper, the chalky road blazed like a magnesium light, and his front wheel began an apparently incurable squeaking. He felt as a man from Mars would feel if he were suddenly transferred to this planet, about three times as heavy as he was wont to feel. The two little black figures had vanished over the forehead of the hill. "The tracks'll be all right," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

That was a comforting reflection. It not only justified a slow progress up the hill, but at the crest a sprawl on the turf beside the road, to contemplate the Weald from the south. In a matter of two days he had crossed that spacious valley, with its frozen surge of green hills, its little villages and townships here and there, its copses and cornfields, its ponds and streams like jewelery of diamonds and silver glittering in the sun. The North Downs were hidden, far away beyond the Wealden Heights. Down below was the little village of Cocking, and half-way up the hill, a mile perhaps to the right, hung a flock of sheep grazing together. Overhead an anxious peewit circled against the blue, and every now and then emitted its feeble cry. Up here the heat was tempered by a pleasant breeze. Mr. Hoopdriver was possessed by unreasonable contentment; he lit himself a cigarette and lounged more comfortably. Surely the Sussex ale is made of the waters of Lethe, of poppies and

pleasant dreams. Drowsiness coiled insidiously about him.

He awoke with a guilty start, to find himself sprawling prone on the turf with his cap over one eye. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and realised that he had slept. His head was still a trifle heavy. And the chase? He jumped to his feet and stooped to pick up his overturned machine. He whipped out his watch and saw that it was past two o'clock. "Lord love us, fancy that!--But the tracks'll be all right," said Mr. Hoopdriver, wheeling his machine back to the chalky road. "I must scorch till I overtake them."

He mounted and rode as rapidly as the heat and a lingering lassitude permitted. Now and then he had to dismount to examine the surface where the road forked. He enjoyed that rather. "Trackin'," he said aloud, and decided in the privacy of his own mind that he had a wonderful instinct for 'spoor.' So he came past Goodwood station and Lavant, and approached Chichester towards four o'clock. And then came a terrible thing. In places the road became hard, in places were the crowded indentations of a recent flock of sheep, and at last in the throat of the town cobbles and the stony streets branching east, west, north, and south, at a stone cross under the shadow of the cathedral the tracks vanished. "O Cricky!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, dismounting in dismay and standing agape. "Dropped anything?" said an inhabitant at the kerb. "Yes," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "I've lost the spoor," and walked upon his way, leaving the inhabitant marvelling what part of a bicycle a spoor might be. Mr. Hoopdriver, abandoning tracking, began asking people if they had seen a Young Lady

in Grey on a bicycle. Six casual people hadn't, and he began to feel the inquiry was conspicuous, and desisted. But what was to be done?

Hoopdriver was hot, tired, and hungry, and full of the first gnawings of a monstrous remorse. He decided to get himself some tea and meat, and in the Royal George he meditated over the business in a melancholy frame enough. They had passed out of his world--vanished, and all his wonderful dreams of some vague, crucial interference collapsed like a castle of cards. What a fool he had been not to stick to them like a leech! He might have thought! But there!--what WAS the good of that sort of thing now? He thought of her tears, of her helplessness, of the bearing of the other man in brown, and his wrath and disappointment surged higher. "What CAN I do?" said Mr. Hoopdriver aloud, bringing his fist down beside the teapot.

What would Sherlock Holmes have done? Perhaps, after all, there might be such things as clues in the world, albeit the age of miracles was past. But to look for a clue in this intricate network of cobbled streets, to examine every muddy interstice! There was a chance by looking about and inquiry at the various inns. Upon that he began. But of course they might have ridden straight through and scarcely a soul have marked them. And then came a positively brilliant idea. "Ow many ways are there out of Chichester?" said Mr. Hoopdriver. It was really equal to Sherlock Holmes--that. "If they've made tracks, I shall find those tracks. If not--they're in the town." He was then in East Street, and he started at once to make the circuit of the place, discovering incidentally that

Chichester is a walled city. In passing, he made inquiries at the Black Swan, the Crown, and the Red Lion Hotel. At six o'clock in the evening, he was walking downcast, intent, as one who had dropped money, along the road towards Bognor, kicking up the dust with his shoes and fretting with disappointed pugnacity. A thwarted, crestfallen Hoopdriver it was, as you may well imagine. And then suddenly there jumped upon his attention--a broad line ribbed like a shilling, and close beside it one chequered, that ever and again split into two. "Found!" said Mr. Hoopdriver and swung round on his heel at once, and back to the Royal George, helter skelter, for the bicycle they were minding for him. The ostler thought he was confoundedly imperious, considering his machine.