

XXIV. THE MOONLIGHT RIDE

And so the twenty minutes' law passed into an infinity. We leave the wicked Bechamel clothing himself with cursing as with a garment,--the wretched creature has already sufficiently sullied our modest but truthful pages,--we leave the eager little group in the bar of the Vicuna Hotel, we leave all Bognor as we have left all Chichester and Midhurst and Haslemere and Guildford and Ripley and Putney, and follow this dear fool of a Hoopdriver of ours and his Young Lady in Grey out upon the moonlight road. How they rode! How their hearts beat together and their breath came fast, and how every shadow was anticipation and every noise pursuit! For all that flight Mr. Hoopdriver was in the world of Romance. Had a policeman intervened because their lamps were not lit, Hoopdriver had cut him down and ridden on, after the fashion of a hero born. Had Bechamel arisen in the way with rapiers for a duel, Hoopdriver had fought as one to whom Agincourt was a reality and drapery a dream. It was Rescue, Elopement, Glory! And she by the side of him! He had seen her face in shadow, with the morning sunlight tangled in her hair, he had seen her sympathetic with that warm light in her face, he had seen her troubled and her eyes bright with tears. But what light is there lighting a face like hers, to compare with the soft glamour of the midsummer moon?

The road turned northward, going round through the outskirts of Bognor, in one place dark and heavy under a thick growth of trees, then amidst villas again, some warm and lamplit, some white and sleeping in the

moonlight; then between hedges, over which they saw broad wan meadows shrouded in a low-lying mist. They scarcely heeded whither they rode at first, being only anxious to get away, turning once westward when the spire of Chichester cathedral rose suddenly near them out of the dewy night, pale and intricate and high. They rode, speaking little, just a rare word now and then, at a turning, at a footfall, at a roughness in the road.

She seemed to be too intent upon escape to give much thought to him, but after the first tumult of the adventure, as flight passed into mere steady riding his mind became an enormous appreciation of the position. The night was a warm white silence save for the subtle running of their chains. He looked sideways at her as she sat beside him with her ankles gracefully ruling the treadles. Now the road turned westward, and she was a dark grey outline against the shimmer of the moon; and now they faced northwards, and the soft cold light passed caressingly over her hair and touched her brow and cheek.

There is a magic quality in moonshine; it touches all that is sweet and beautiful, and the rest of the night is hidden. It has created the fairies, whom the sunlight kills, and fairyland rises again in our hearts at the sight of it, the voices of the filmy route, and their faint, soul-piercing melodies. By the moonlight every man, dull though he be by day, tastes something of Endymion, takes something of the youth and strength of Endymion, and sees the dear white goddess shining at him from his Lady's eyes. The firm substantial daylight

things become ghostly and elusive, the hills beyond are a sea of unsubstantial texture, the world a visible spirit, the spiritual within us rises out of its darkness, loses something of its weight and body, and swims up towards heaven. This road that was a mere rutted white dust, hot underfoot, blinding to the eye, is now a soft grey silence, with the glitter of a crystal grain set starlike in its silver here and there. Overhead, riding serenely through the spacious blue, is the mother of the silence, she who has spiritualised the world, alone save for two attendant steady shining stars. And in silence under her benign influence, under the benediction of her light, rode our two wanderers side by side through the transfigured and transfiguring night.

Nowhere was the moon shining quite so brightly as in Mr. Hoopdriver's skull. At the turnings of the road he made his decisions with an air of profound promptitude (and quite haphazard). "The Right," he would say. Or again "The Left," as one who knew. So it was that in the space of an hour they came abruptly down a little lane, full tilt upon the sea. Grey beach to the right of them and to the left, and a little white cottage fast asleep inland of a sleeping fishing-boat. "Hullo!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, sotto voce. They dismounted abruptly. Stunted oaks and thorns rose out of the haze of moonlight that was tangled in the hedge on either side.

"You are safe," said Mr. Hoopdriver, sweeping off his cap with an air and bowing courtly.

"Where are we?"

"SAFE."

"But WHERE?"

"Chichester Harbour." He waved his arm seaward as though it was a goal.

"Do you think they will follow us?"

"We have turned and turned again."

It seemed to Hoopdriver that he heard her sob. She stood dimly there, holding her machine, and he, holding his, could go no nearer to her to see if she sobbed for weeping or for want of breath. "What are we to do now?" her voice asked.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"I will do what has to be done."

The two black figures in the broken light were silent for a space. "Do you know," she said, "I am not afraid of you. I am sure you are honest to me. And I do not even know your name!"

He was taken with a sudden shame of his homely patronymic. "It's an ugly

name," he said. "But you are right in trusting me. I would--I would do anything for you.... This is nothing."

She caught at her breath. She did not care to ask why. But compared with Bechamel!--"We take each other on trust," she said. "Do you want to know--how things are with me?"

"That man," she went on, after the assent of his listening silence, "promised to help and protect me. I was unhappy at home--never mind why. A stepmother--Idle, unoccupied, hindered, cramped, that is enough, perhaps. Then he came into my life, and talked to me of art and literature, and set my brain on fire. I wanted to come out into the world, to be a human being--not a thing in a hutch. And he--"

"I know," said Hoopdriver.

"And now here I am--"

"I will do anything," said Hoopdriver.

She thought. "You cannot imagine my stepmother. No! I could not describe her--"

"I am entirely at your service. I will help you with all my power."

"I have lost an Illusion and found a Knight-errant." She spoke of

Bechamel as the Illusion.

Mr. Hoopdriver felt flattered. But he had no adequate answer.

"I'm thinking," he said, full of a rapture of protective responsibility, "what we had best be doing. You are tired, you know. And we can't wander all night--after the day we've had."

"That was Chichester we were near?" she asked.

"If," he meditated, with a tremble in his voice, "you would make ME your brother, MISS BEAUMONT."

"Yes?"

"We could stop there together--"

She took a minute to answer. "I am going to light these lamps," said Hoopdriver. He bent down to his own, and struck a match on his shoe. She looked at his face in its light, grave and intent. How could she ever have thought him common or absurd?

"But you must tell me your name--brother," she said,

"Er--Carrington," said Mr. Hoopdriver, after a momentary pause. Who would be Hoopdriver on a night like this?

"But the Christian name?"

"Christian name? MY Christian name. Well--Chris." He snapped his lamp and stood up. "If you will hold my machine, I will light yours," he said.

She came round obediently and took his machine, and for a moment they stood face to face. "My name, brother Chris," she said, "is Jessie."

He looked into her eyes, and his excitement seemed arrested. "JESSIE," he repeated slowly. The mute emotion of his face affected her strangely. She had to speak. "It's not such a very wonderful name, is it?" she said, with a laugh to break the intensity.

He opened his mouth and shut it again, and, with a sudden wincing of his features, abruptly turned and bent down to open the lantern in front of her machine. She looked down at him, almost kneeling in front of her, with an unreasonable approbation in her eyes. It was, as I have indicated, the hour and season of the full moon.