

## XXVI. THE SURBITON INTERLUDE

And here, thanks to the glorious institution of sleep, comes a break in the narrative again. These absurd young people are safely tucked away now, their heads full of glowing nonsense, indeed, but the course of events at any rate is safe from any fresh developments through their activities for the next eight hours or more. They are both sleeping healthily you will perhaps be astonished to hear. Here is the girl--what girls are coming to nowadays only Mrs. Lynn Linton can tell!--in company with an absolute stranger, of low extraction and uncertain accent, unchaperoned and unabashed; indeed, now she fancies she is safe, she is, if anything, a little proud of her own share in these transactions. Then this Mr. Hoopdriver of yours, roseate idiot that he is! is in illegal possession of a stolen bicycle, a stolen young lady, and two stolen names, established with them in an hotel that is quite beyond his means, and immensely proud of himself in a somnolent way for these incomparable follies. There are occasions when a moralising novelist can merely wring his hands and leave matters to take their course. For all Hoopdriver knows or cares he may be locked up the very first thing to-morrow morning for the rape of the cycle. Then in Bognor, let alone that melancholy vestige, Bechamel (with whom our dealings are, thank Goodness! over), there is a Coffee Tavern with a steak Mr. Hoopdriver ordered, done to a cinder long ago, his American-cloth parcel in a bedroom, and his own proper bicycle, by way of guarantee, carefully locked up in the hayloft. To-morrow he will be a Mystery, and they will be looking for his body along the sea front. And so far we have never

given a glance at the desolate home in Surbiton, familiar to you no doubt through the medium of illustrated interviews, where the unhappy stepmother--

That stepmother, it must be explained, is quite well known to you. That is a little surprise I have prepared for you. She is 'Thomas Plantagenet,' the gifted authoress of that witty and daring book, "A Soul Untrammelled," and quite an excellent woman in her way,--only it is such a crooked way. Her real name is Milton. She is a widow and a charming one, only ten years older than Jessie, and she is always careful to dedicate her more daring works to the 'sacred memory of my husband' to show that there's nothing personal, you know, in the matter. Considering her literary reputation (she was always speaking of herself as one I martyred for truth,' because the critics advertised her written indecorums in column long 'slates'),--considering her literary reputation, I say, she was one of the most respectable women it is possible to imagine. She furnished correctly, dressed correctly, had severe notions of whom she might meet, went to church, and even at times took the sacrament in some esoteric spirit. And Jessie she brought up so carefully that she never even let her read "A Soul Untrammelled." Which, therefore, naturally enough, Jessie did, and went on from that to a feast of advanced literature. Mrs. Milton not only brought up Jessie carefully, but very slowly, so that at seventeen she was still a clever schoolgirl (as you have seen her) and quite in the background of the little literary circle of unimportant celebrities which 'Thomas Plantagenet' adorned. Mrs. Milton knew Bechamel's reputation of being a

dangerous man; but then bad men are not bad women, and she let him come to her house to show she was not afraid--she took no account of Jessie. When the elopement came, therefore, it was a double disappointment to her, for she perceived his hand by a kind of instinct. She did the correct thing. The correct thing, as you know, is to take hansom cabs, regardless of expense, and weep and say you do not know WHAT to do, round the circle of your confidential friends. She could not have ridden nor wept more had Jessie been her own daughter--she showed the properest spirit. And she not only showed it, but felt it.

Mrs. Milton, as a successful little authoress and still more successful widow of thirty-two,--"Thomas Plantagenet is a charming woman," her reviewers used to write invariably, even if they spoke ill of her,--found the steady growth of Jessie into womanhood an unmitigated nuisance and had been willing enough to keep her in the background. And Jessie--who had started this intercourse at fourteen with abstract objections to stepmothers--had been active enough in resenting this. Increasing rivalry and antagonism had sprung up between them, until they could engender quite a vivid hatred from a dropped hairpin or the cutting of a book with a sharpened knife. There is very little deliberate wickedness in the world. The stupidity of our selfishness gives much the same results indeed, but in the ethical laboratory it shows a different nature. And when the disaster came, Mrs. Milton's remorse for their gradual loss of sympathy and her share in the losing of it, was genuine enough.

You may imagine the comfort she got from her friends, and how West Kensington and Notting Hill and Hampstead, the literary suburbs, those decent penitentiaries of a once Bohemian calling, hummed with the business, Her 'Men'--as a charming literary lady she had, of course, an organised corps--were immensely excited, and were sympathetic; helpfully energetic, suggestive, alert, as their ideals of their various dispositions required them to be. "Any news of Jessie?" was the pathetic opening of a dozen melancholy but interesting conversations. To her Men she was not perhaps so damp as she was to her women friends, but in a quiet way she was even more touching. For three days, Wednesday that is, Thursday, and Friday, nothing was heard of the fugitives. It was known that Jessie, wearing a patent costume with buttonup skirts, and mounted on a diamond frame safety with Dunlops, and a loofah covered saddle, had ridden forth early in the morning, taking with her about two pounds seven shillings in money, and a grey touring case packed, and there, save for a brief note to her stepmother,--a declaration of independence, it was said, an assertion of her Ego containing extensive and very annoying quotations from "A Soul Untrammelled," and giving no definite intimation of her plans--knowledge ceased. That note was shown to few, and then only in the strictest confidence.

But on Friday evening late came a breathless Man Friend, Widgery, a correspondent of hers, who had heard of her trouble among the first. He had been touring in Sussex,--his knapsack was still on his back,--and he testified hurriedly that at a place called Midhurst, in the bar of an

hotel called the Angel, he had heard from a barmaid a vivid account of a Young Lady in Grey. Descriptions tallied. But who was the man in brown? "The poor, misguided girl! I must go to her at once," she said, choking, and rising with her hand to her heart.

"It's impossible to-night. There are no more trains. I looked on my way."

"A mother's love," she said. "I bear her THAT."

"I know you do." He spoke with feeling, for no one admired his photographs of scenery more than Mrs. Milton. "It's more than she deserves."

"Oh, don't speak unkindly of her! She has been misled."

It was really very friendly of him. He declared he was only sorry his news ended there. Should he follow them, and bring her back? He had come to her because he knew of her anxiety. "It is GOOD of you," she said, and quite instinctively took and pressed his hand. "And to think of that poor girl--tonight! It's dreadful." She looked into the fire that she had lit when he came in, the warm light fell upon her dark purple dress, and left her features in a warm shadow. She looked such a slight, frail thing to be troubled so. "We must follow her." Her resolution seemed magnificent. "I have no one to go with me."

"He must marry her," said the man.

"She has no friends. We have no one. After all--Two women.--So helpless."

And this fair-haired little figure was the woman that people who knew her only from her books, called bold, prurient even! Simply because she was great-hearted--intellectual. He was overcome by the unspeakable pathos of her position.

"Mrs. Milton," he said. "Hetty!"

She glanced at him. The overflow was imminent. "Not now," she said, "not now. I must find her first."

"Yes," he said with intense emotion. (He was one of those big, fat men who feel deeply.) "But let me help you. At least let me help you."

"But can you spare time?" she said. "For ME."

"For you--"

"But what can I do? what can WE do?"

"Go to Midhurst. Follow her on. Trace her. She was there on Thursday night, last night. She cycled out of the town. Courage!" he said. "We

will save her yet!"

She put out her hand and pressed his again.

"Courage!" he repeated, finding it so well received.

There were alarms and excursions without. She turned her back to the fire, and he sat down suddenly in the big armchair, which suited his dimensions admirably. Then the door opened, and the girl showed in Dangle, who looked curiously from one to the other. There was emotion here, he had heard the armchair creaking, and Mrs. Milton, whose face was flushed, displayed a suspicious alacrity to explain. "You, too," she said, "are one of my good friends. And we have news of her at last."

It was decidedly an advantage to Widgery, but Dangle determined to show himself a man of resource. In the end he, too, was accepted for the Midhurst Expedition, to the intense disgust of Widgery; and young Phipps, a callow youth of few words, faultless collars, and fervent devotion, was also enrolled before the evening was out. They would scour the country, all three of them. She appeared to brighten up a little, but it was evident she was profoundly touched. She did not know what she had done to merit such friends. Her voice broke a little, she moved towards the door, and young Phipps, who was a youth of action rather than of words, sprang and opened it--proud to be first.

"She is sorely troubled," said Dangle to Widgery. "We must do what we

can for her."

"She is a wonderful woman," said Dangle. "So subtle, so intricate, so many faceted. She feels this deeply."

Young Phipps said nothing, but he felt the more.

And yet they say the age of chivalry is dead!

But this is only an Interlude, introduced to give our wanderers time to refresh themselves by good, honest sleeping. For the present, therefore, we will not concern ourselves with the starting of the Rescue Party, nor with Mrs. Milton's simple but becoming grey dress, with the healthy Widgery's Norfolk jacket and thick boots, with the slender Dangle's energetic bearing, nor with the wonderful chequerings that set off the legs of the golf-suited Phipps. They are after us. In a little while they will be upon us. You must imagine as you best can the competitive raidings at Midhurst of Widgery, Dangle, and Phipps. How Widgery was great at questions, and Dangle good at inference, and Phipps so conspicuously inferior in everything that he felt it, and sulked with Mrs. Milton most of the day, after the manner of your callow youth the whole world over. Mrs. Milton stopped at the Angel and was very sad and charming and intelligent, and Widgery paid the bill in the afternoon of Saturday, Chichester was attained. But by that time our fugitives--As you shall immediately hear.