

## XXVII. THE AWAKENING OF MR. HOOPDRIVER

Mr. Hoopdriver stirred on his pillow, opened his eyes, and, staring unmeaningly, yawned. The bedclothes were soft and pleasant. He turned the peaked nose that overrides the insufficient moustache, up to the ceiling, a pinkish projection over the billow of white. You might see it wrinkle as he yawned again, and then became quiet. So matters remained for a space. Very slowly recollection returned to him. Then a shock of indeterminate brown hair appeared, and first one watery grey eye a-wondering, and then two; the bed upheaved, and you had him, his thin neck projecting abruptly from the clothes he held about him, his face staring about the room. He held the clothes about him, I hope I may explain, because his night-shirt was at Bognor in an American-cloth packet, derelict. He yawned a third time, rubbed his eyes, smacked his lips. He was recalling almost everything now. The pursuit, the hotel, the tremulous daring of his entry, the swift adventure of the inn yard, the moonlight--Abruptly he threw the clothes back and rose into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Without was the noise of shutters being unfastened and doors unlocked, and the passing of hoofs and wheels in the street. He looked at his watch. Half-past six. He surveyed the sumptuous room again.

"Lord!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "It wasn't a dream, after all."

"I wonder what they charge for these Juiced rooms!" said Mr. Hoopdriver,

nursing one rosy foot.

He became meditative, tugging at his insufficient moustache. Suddenly he gave vent to a noiseless laugh. "What a rush it was! Rushed in and off with his girl right under his nose. Planned it well too. Talk of highway robbery! Talk of brigands Up and off! How juiced SOLD he must be feeling It was a shave too--in the coach yard!"

Suddenly he became silent. Abruptly his eyebrows rose and his jaw fell. "I sa-a-ay!" said Mr. Hoopdriver.

He had never thought of it before. Perhaps you will understand the whirl he had been in overnight. But one sees things clearer in the daylight. "I'm hanged if I haven't been and stolen a blessed bicycle."

"Who cares?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, presently, and his face supplied the answer.

Then he thought of the Young Lady in Grey again, and tried to put a more heroic complexion on the business. But of an early morning, on an empty stomach (as with characteristic coarseness, medical men put it) heroics are of a more difficult growth than by moonlight. Everything had seemed exceptionally fine and brilliant, but quite natural, the evening before.

Mr. Hoopdriver reached out his hand, took his Norfolk jacket, laid it over his knees, and took out the money from the little ticket pocket.

"Fourteen and six-half," he said, holding the coins in his left hand and stroking his chin with his right. He verified, by patting, the presence of a pocketbook in the breast pocket. "Five, fourteen, six-half," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Left."

With the Norfolk jacket still on his knees, he plunged into another silent meditation. "That wouldn't matter," he said. "It's the bike's the bother."

"No good going back to Bognor."

"Might send it back by carrier, of course. Thanking him for the loan. Having no further use--" Mr. Hoopdriver chuckled and lapsed into the silent concoction of a delightfully impudent letter. "Mr. J. Hoopdriver presents his compliments." But the grave note reasserted itself.

"Might trundle back there in an hour, of course, and exchange them. MY old crock's so blessed shabby. He's sure to be spiteful too. Have me run in, perhaps. Then she'd be in just the same old fix, only worse. You see, I'm her Knight-errant. It complicates things so."

His eye, wandering loosely, rested on the sponge bath. "What the juice do they want with cream pans in a bedroom?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, en passant.

"Best thing we can do is to set out of here as soon as possible,

anyhow. I suppose she'll go home to her friends. That bicycle is a juicy nuisance, anyhow. Juicy nuisance!"

He jumped to his feet with a sudden awakening of energy, to proceed with his toilet. Then with a certain horror he remembered that the simple necessities of that process were at Bognor! "Lord!" he remarked, and whistled silently for a space. "Rummy go! profit and loss; profit, one sister with bicycle complete, wot offers?--cheap for tooth and 'air brush, vests, night-shirt, stockings, and sundries.

"Make the best of it," and presently, when it came to hair-brushing, he had to smooth his troubled locks with his hands. It was a poor result. "Sneak out and get a shave, I suppose, and buy a brush and so on. Chink again! Beard don't show much."

He ran his hand over his chin, looked at himself steadfastly for some time, and curled his insufficient moustache up with some care. Then he fell a-meditating on his beauty. He considered himself, three-quarter face, left and right. An expression of distaste crept over his features. "Looking won't alter it, Hoopdriver," he remarked. "You're a weedy customer, my man. Shoulders narrow. Skimpy, anyhow."

He put his knuckles on the toilet table and regarded himself with his chin lifted in the air. "Good Lord!" he said. "WHAT a neck! Wonder why I got such a thundering lump there."

He sat down on the bed, his eye still on the glass. "If I'd been exercised properly, if I'd been fed reasonable, if I hadn't been shoved out of a silly school into a silly shop--But there! the old folks didn't know no better. The schoolmaster ought to have. But he didn't, poor old fool!--Still, when it comes to meeting a girl like this--It's 'ARD.

"I wonder what Adam'd think of me--as a specimen. Civilisation, eigh? Heir of the ages! I'm nothing. I know nothing. I can't do anything--sketch a bit. Why wasn't I made an artist?

"Beastly cheap, after all, this suit does look, in the sunshine."

"No good, Hoopdriver. Anyhow, you don't tell yourself any lies about it. Lovers ain't your game,--anyway. But there's other things yet. You can help the young lady, and you will--I suppose she'll be going home--And that business of the bicycle's to see to, too, my man. FORWARD, Hoopdriver! If you ain't a beauty, that's no reason why you should stop and be copped, is it?"

And having got back in this way to a gloomy kind of self-satisfaction, he had another attempt at his hair preparatory to leaving his room and hurrying on breakfast, for an early departure. While breakfast was preparing he wandered out into South Street and refurnished himself with the elements of luggage again. "No expense to be spared," he murmured, disgorging the half-sovereign.