

XXVIII. THE DEPARTURE FROM CHICHESTER

He caused his 'sister' to be called repeatedly, and when she came down, explained with a humorous smile his legal relationship to the bicycle in the yard. "Might be disagreeable, y' know." His anxiety was obvious enough. "Very well," she said (quite friendly); "hurry breakfast, and we'll ride out. I want to talk things over with you." The girl seemed more beautiful than ever after the night's sleep; her hair in comely dark waves from her forehead, her ungauntleted finger-tips pink and cool. And how decided she was! Breakfast was a nervous ceremony, conversation fraternal but thin; the waiter overawed him, and he was cowed by a multiplicity of forks. But she called him "Chris." They discussed their route over his sixpenny county map for the sake of talking, but avoided a decision in the presence of the attendant. The five-pound note was changed for the bill, and through Hoopdriver's determination to be quite the gentleman, the waiter and chambermaid got half a crown each and the ostler a florin. "Oolidays," said the ostler to himself, without gratitude. The public mounting of the bicycles in the street was a moment of trepidation. A policeman actually stopped and watched them from the opposite kerb. Suppose him to come across and ask: "Is that your bicycle, sir?" Fight? Or drop it and run? It was a time of bewildering apprehension, too, going through the streets of the town, so that a milk cart barely escaped destruction under Mr. Hoopdriver's chancy wheel. That recalled him to a sense of erratic steering, and

he pulled himself together. In the lanes he breathed freer, and a less formal conversation presently began.

"You've ridden out of Chichester in a great hurry," said Jessie.

"Well, the fact of it is, I'm worried, just a little bit. About this machine."

"Of course," she said. "I had forgotten that. But where are we going?"

"Jest a turning or two more, if you don't mind," said Hoopdriver.

"Jest a mile or so. I have to think of you, you know. I should feel more easy. If we was locked up, you know--Not that I should mind on my own account--"

They rode with a streaky, grey sea coming and going on their left hand. Every mile they put between themselves and Chichester Mr. Hoopdriver felt a little less conscience-stricken, and a little more of the gallant desperado. Here he was riding on a splendid machine with a Slap-up girl beside him. What would they think of it in the Emporium if any of them were to see him? He imagined in detail the astonishment of Miss Isaacs and of Miss Howe. "Why! It's Mr. Hoopdriver," Miss Isaacs would say. "Never!" emphatically from Miss Howe. Then he played with Briggs, and then tried the 'G.V.' in a shay. "Fancy introducing 'em to her--My sister pro tem." He was her brother Chris--Chris what?--Confound it!

Harrington, Hartington--something like that. Have to keep off that topic until he could remember. Wish he'd told her the truth now--almost. He glanced at her. She was riding with her eyes straight ahead of her. Thinking. A little perplexed, perhaps, she seemed. He noticed how well she rode and that she rode with her lips closed--a thing he could never manage.

Mr. Hoopdriver's mind came round to the future. What was she going to do? What were they both going to do? His thoughts took a graver colour. He had rescued her. This was fine, manly rescue work he was engaged upon. She ought to go home, in spite of that stepmother. He must insist gravely but firmly upon that. She was the spirited sort, of course, but still--Wonder if she had any money? Wonder what the second-class fare from Havant to London is? Of course he would have to pay that--it was the regular thing, he being a gentleman. Then should he take her home? He began to rough in a moving sketch of the return. The stepmother, repentant of her indescribable cruelties, would be present,--even these rich people have their troubles,--probably an uncle or two. The footman would announce, Mr.--(bother that name!) and Miss Milton. Then two women weeping together, and a knightly figure in the background dressed in a handsome Norfolk jacket, still conspicuously new. He would conceal his feeling until the very end. Then, leaving, he would pause in the doorway in such an attitude as Mr. George Alexander might assume, and say, slowly and dwindlingly: "Be kind to her--BE kind to her," and so depart, heartbroken to the meanest intelligence. But that was a matter for the

future. He would have to begin discussing the return soon. There was no traffic along the road, and he came up beside her (he had fallen behind in his musing). She began to talk. "Mr. Denison," she began, and then, doubtfully, "That is your name? I'm very stupid--"

"It is," said Mr. Hoopdriver. (Denison, was it? Denison, Denison, Denison. What was she saying?)

"I wonder how far you are willing to help me?" Confoundedly hard to answer a question like that on the spur of the moment, without steering wildly. "You may rely--" said Mr. Hoopdriver, recovering from a violent wobble. "I can assure you--I want to help you very much. Don't consider me at all. Leastways, consider me entirely at your service." (Nuisance not to be able to say this kind of thing right.)

"You see, I am so awkwardly situated."

"If I can only help you--you will make me very happy--" There was a pause. Round a bend in the road they came upon a grassy space between hedge and road, set with yarrow and meadowsweet, where a felled tree lay among the green. There she dismounted, and propping her machine against a stone, sat down. "Here, we can talk," she said.

"Yes," said Mr. Hoopdriver, expectant.

She answered after a little while, sitting, elbow on knee, with her chin

in her hand, and looking straight in front of her. "I don't know--I am resolved to Live my Own Life."

"Of course," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Naturally."

"I want to Live, and I want to see what life means. I want to learn. Everyone is hurrying me, everything is hurrying me; I want time to think."

Mr. Hoopdriver was puzzled, but admiring. It was wonderful how clear and ready her words were. But then one might speak well with a throat and lips like that. He knew he was inadequate, but he tried to meet the occasion. "If you let them rush you into anything you might repent of, of course you'd be very silly."

"Don't YOU want to learn?" she asked.

"I was wondering only this morning," he began, and stopped.

She was too intent upon her own thoughts to notice this insufficiency.

"I find myself in life, and it terrifies me. I seem to be like a little speck, whirling on a wheel, suddenly caught up. 'What am I here for?' I ask. Simply to be here at a time--I asked it a week ago, I asked it yesterday, and I ask it to-day. And little things happen and the days pass. My stepmother takes me shopping, people come to tea, there is a new play to pass the time, or a concert, or a novel. The wheels of the

world go on turning, turning. It is horrible. I want to do a miracle like Joshua and stop the whirl until I have fought it out. At home--It's impossible."

Mr. Hoopdriver stroked his moustache. "It IS so," he said in a meditative tone. "Things WILL go on," he said. The faint breath of summer stirred the trees, and a bunch of dandelion puff lifted among the meadowsweet and struck and broke into a dozen separate threads against his knee. They flew on apart, and sank, as the breeze fell, among the grass: some to germinate, some to perish. His eye followed them until they had vanished.

"I can't go back to Surbiton," said the Young Lady in Grey.

"EIGH?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, catching at his moustache. This was an unexpected development.

"I want to write, you see," said the Young Lady in Grey, "to write Books and alter things. To do Good. I want to lead a Free Life and Own myself. I can't go back. I want to obtain a position as a journalist. I have been told--But I know no one to help me at once. No one that I could go to. There is one person--She was a mistress at my school. If I could write to her--But then, how could I get her answer?"

"H'mp," said Mr. Hoopdriver, very grave.

"I can't trouble you much more. You have come--you have risked things--"

"That don't count," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "It's double pay to let me do it, so to speak."

"It is good of you to say that. Surbiton is so Conventional. I am resolved to be Unconventional--at any cost. But we are so hampered. If I could only burgeon out of all that hinders me! I want to struggle, to take my place in the world. I want to be my own mistress, to shape my own career. But my stepmother objects so. She does as she likes herself, and is strict with me to ease her conscience. And if I go back now, go back owning myself beaten--" She left the rest to his imagination.

"I see that," agreed Mr. Hoopdriver. He MUST help her. Within his skull he was doing some intricate arithmetic with five pounds six and twopence. In some vague way he inferred from all this that Jessie was trying to escape from an undesirable marriage, but was saying these things out of modesty. His circle of ideas was so limited.

"You know, Mr.--I've forgotten your name again."

Mr. Hoopdriver seemed lost in abstraction. "You can't go back of course, quite like that," he said thoughtfully. His ears waxed suddenly red and his cheeks flushed.

"But what IS your name?"

"Name!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Why!--Benson, of course."

"Mr. Benson--yes it's really very stupid of me. But I can never remember names. I must make a note on my cuff." She clicked a little silver pencil and wrote the name down. "If I could write to my friend. I believe she would be able to help me to an independent life. I could write to her--or telegraph. Write, I think. I could scarcely explain in a telegram. I know she would help me."

Clearly there was only one course open to a gentleman under the circumstances. "In that case," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "if you don't mind trusting yourself to a stranger, we might continue as we are perhaps. For a day or so. Until you heard." (Suppose thirty shillings a day, that gives four days, say four thirties is hun' and twenty, six quid,--well, three days, say; four ten.)

"You are very good to me."

His expression was eloquent.

"Very well, then, and thank you. It's wonderful--it's more than I deserve that you--" She dropped the theme abruptly. "What was our bill at Chichester?"

"Eigh?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, feigning a certain stupidity. There was a

brief discussion. Secretly he was delighted at her insistence in paying. She carried her point. Their talk came round to their immediate plans for the day. They decided to ride easily, through Havant, and stop, perhaps, at Fareham or Southampton. For the previous day had tried them both. Holding the map extended on his knee, Mr. Hoopdriver's eye fell by chance on the bicycle at his feet. "That bicycle," he remarked, quite irrelevantly, "wouldn't look the same machine if I got a big, double Elarum instead of that little bell."

"Why?"

"Jest a thought." A pause.

"Very well, then,--Havant and lunch," said Jessie, rising.

"I wish, somehow, we could have managed it without stealing that machine," said Hoopdriver. "Because it IS stealing it, you know, come to think of it."

"Nonsense. If Mr. Bechamel troubles you--I will tell the whole world--if need be."

"I believe you would," said Mr. Hoopdriver, admiring her. "You're plucky enough--goodness knows."

Discovering suddenly that she was standing, he, too, rose and picked up

her machine. She took it and wheeled it into the road. Then he took his own. He paused, regarding it. "I say!" said he. "How'd this bike look, now, if it was enamelled grey?" She looked over her shoulder at his grave face. "Why try and hide it in that way?"

"It was jest a passing thought," said Mr. Hoopdriver, airily. "Didn't MEAN anything, you know."

As they were riding on to Havant it occurred to Mr. Hoopdriver in a transitory manner that the interview had been quite other than his expectation. But that was the way with everything in Mr. Hoopdriver's experience. And though his Wisdom looked grave within him, and Caution was chinking coins, and an ancient prejudice in favour of Property shook her head, something else was there too, shouting in his mind to drown all these saner considerations, the intoxicating thought of riding beside Her all to-day, all to-morrow, perhaps for other days after that. Of talking to her familiarly, being brother of all her slender strength and freshness, of having a golden, real, and wonderful time beyond all his imaginings. His old familiar fancyings gave place to anticipations as impalpable and fluctuating and beautiful as the sunset of a summer day.

At Havant he took an opportunity to purchase, at small hairdresser's in the main street, a toothbrush, a pair of nail scissors, and a little bottle of stuff to darken the moustache, an article the shopman introduced to his attention, recommended highly, and sold in the

excitement of the occasion.