

## XXIX. THE UNEXPECTED ANECDOTE OF THE LION

They rode on to Cosham and lunched lightly but expensively there. Jessie went out and posted her letter to her school friend. Then the green height of Portsdown Hill tempted them, and leaving their machines in the village they clambered up the slope to the silent red-brick fort that crowned it. Thence they had a view of Portsmouth and its cluster of sister towns, the crowded narrows of the harbour, the Solent and the Isle of Wight like a blue cloud through the hot haze. Jessie by some miracle had become a skirted woman in the Cosham inn. Mr. Hoopdriver lounged gracefully on the turf, smoked a Red Herring cigarette, and lazily regarded the fortified towns that spread like a map away there, the inner line of defence like toy fortifications, a mile off perhaps; and beyond that a few little fields and then the beginnings of Landport suburb and the smoky cluster of the multitudinous houses. To the right at the head of the harbour shallows the town of Porchester rose among the trees. Mr. Hoopdriver's anxiety receded to some remote corner of his brain and that florid half-voluntary imagination of his shared the stage with the image of Jessie. He began to speculate on the impression he was creating. He took stock of his suit in a more optimistic spirit, and reviewed, with some complacency, his actions for the last four and twenty hours. Then he was dashed at the thought of her infinite perfections.

She had been observing him quietly, rather more closely during the last hour or so. She did not look at him directly because he seemed always

looking at her. Her own troubles had quieted down a little, and her curiosity about the chivalrous, worshipping, but singular gentleman in brown, was awakening. She had recalled, too, the curious incident of their first encounter. She found him hard to explain to herself. You must understand that her knowledge of the world was rather less than nothing, having been obtained entirely from books. You must not take a certain ignorance for foolishness.

She had begun with a few experiments. He did not know French except 'sivver play,' a phrase he seemed to regard as a very good light table joke in itself. His English was uncertain, but not such as books informed her distinguished the lower classes. His manners seemed to her good on the whole, but a trifle over-respectful and out of fashion. He called her 'Madam' once. He seemed a person of means and leisure, but he knew nothing of recent concerts, theatres, or books. How did he spend his time? He was certainly chivalrous, and a trifle simpleminded. She fancied (so much is there in a change of costume) that she had never met with such a man before. What COULD he be?

"Mr. Benson," she said, breaking a silence devoted to landscape.

He rolled over and regarded her, chin on knuckles.

"At your service."

"Do you paint? Are you an artist?"

"Well." Judicious pause. "I should hardly call myself a Nartist, you know. I DO paint a little. And sketch, you know--skitty kind of things."

He plucked and began to nibble a blade of grass. It was really not so much lying as his quick imagination that prompted him to add, "In Papers, you know, and all that."

"I see," said Jessie, looking at him thoughtfully. Artists were a very heterogeneous class certainly, and geniuses had a trick of being a little odd. He avoided her eye and bit his grass. "I don't do MUCH, you know."

"It's not your profession?"

"Oh, no," said Hoopdriver, anxious now to hedge. "I don't make a regular thing of it, you know. Jest now and then something comes into my head and down it goes. No--I'm not a regular artist."

"Then you don't practise any regular profession?" Mr. Hoopdriver looked into her eyes and saw their quiet unsuspecting regard. He had vague ideas of resuming the detective role. "It's like this," he said, to gain time. "I have a sort of profession. Only there's a kind of reason--nothing much, you know."

"I beg your pardon for cross-examining you."

"No trouble," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Only I can't very well--I leave it to you, you know. I don't want to make any mystery of it, so far as that goes." Should he plunge boldly and be a barrister? That anyhow was something pretty good. But she might know about barristry.

"I think I could guess what you are."

"Well--guess," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"You come from one of the colonies?"

"Dear me!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, veering round to the new wind. "How did you find out THAT?" (the man was born in a London suburb, dear Reader.)

"I guessed," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows as one astonished, and clutched a new piece of grass.

"You were educated up country."

"Good again," said Hoopdriver, rolling over again into her elbow.

"You're a CLAIRVOY ant." He bit at the grass, smiling. "Which colony was it?"

"That I don't know."

"You must guess," said Hoopdriver.

"South Africa," she said. "I strongly incline to South Africa."

"South Africa's quite a large place," he said.

"But South Africa is right?"

"You're warm," said Hoopdriver, "anyhow," and the while his imagination was eagerly exploring this new province.

"South Africa IS right?" she insisted.

He turned over again and nodded, smiling reassuringly into her eyes.

"What made me think of South Africa was that novel of Olive Schreiner's, you know--'The Story of an African Farm.' Gregory Rose is so like you."

"I never read 'The Story of an African Farm,'" said Hoopdriver. "I must. What's he like?"

"You must read the book. But it's a wonderful place, with its mixture of races, and its brand-new civilisation jostling the old savagery. Were you near Khama?"

"He was a long way off from our place," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "We had a little ostrich farm, you know--Just a few hundred of 'em, out Johannesburg way."

"On the Karroo--was it called?"

"That's the term. Some of it was freehold though. Luckily. We got along very well in the old days.--But there's no ostriches on that farm now." He had a diamond mine in his head, just at the moment, but he stopped and left a little to the girl's imagination. Besides which it had occurred to him with a kind of shock that he was lying.

"What became of the ostriches?"

"We sold 'em off, when we parted with the farm. Do you mind if I have another cigarette? That was when I was quite a little chap, you know, that we had this ostrich farm."

"Did you have Blacks and Boers about you?"

"Lots," said Mr. Hoopdriver, striking a match on his instep and beginning to feel hot at the new responsibility he had brought upon himself.

"How interesting! Do you know, I've never been out of England except to

Paris and Mentone and Switzerland."

"One gets tired of travelling (puff) after a bit, of course."

"You must tell me about your farm in South Africa. It always stimulates my imagination to think of these places. I can fancy all the tall ostriches being driven out by a black herd--to graze, I suppose. How do ostriches feed?"

"Well," said Hoopdriver. "That's rather various. They have their fancies, you know. There's fruit, of course, and that kind of thing. And chicken food, and so forth. You have to use judgment."

"Did you ever see a lion?" "They weren't very common in our district," said Hoopdriver, quite modestly. "But I've seen them, of course. Once or twice."

"Fancy seeing a lion! Weren't you frightened?"

Mr. Hoopdriver was now thoroughly sorry he had accepted that offer of South Africa. He puffed his cigarette and regarded the Solent languidly as he settled the fate on that lion in his mind. "I scarcely had time," he said. "It all happened in a minute."

"Go on," she said.

"I was going across the inner paddock where the fatted ostriches were."

"Did you EAT ostriches, then? I did not know--"

"Eat them!--often. Very nice they ARE too, properly stuffed. Well, we--I, rather--was going across this paddock, and I saw something standing up in the moonlight and looking at me." Mr. Hoopdriver was in a hot perspiration now. His invention seemed to have gone limp. "Luckily I had my father's gun with me. I was scared, though, I can tell you. (Puff.) I just aimed at the end that I thought was the head. And let fly. (Puff.) And over it went, you know."

"Dead?"

"AS dead. It was one of the luckiest shots I ever fired. And I wasn't much over nine at the time, neither."

"I should have screamed and run away."

"There's some things you can't run away from," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "To run would have been Death."

"I don't think I ever met a lion-killer before," she remarked, evidently with a heightened opinion of him.

There was a pause. She seemed meditating further questions. Mr.



Hoopdriver drew his watch hastily. "I say," said Mr. Hoopdriver, showing it to her, "don't you think we ought to be getting on?"

His face was flushed, his ears bright red. She ascribed his confusion to modesty. He rose with a lion added to the burthens of his conscience, and held out his hand to assist her. They walked down into Cosham again, resumed their machines, and went on at a leisurely pace along the northern shore of the big harbour. But Mr. Hoopdriver was no longer happy. This horrible, this fulsome lie, stuck in his memory. Why HAD he done it? She did not ask for any more South African stories, happily--at least until Porchester was reached--but talked instead of Living One's Own Life, and how custom hung on people like chains. She talked wonderfully, and set Hoopdriver's mind fermenting. By the Castle, Mr. Hoopdriver caught several crabs in little shore pools. At Fareham they stopped for a second tea, and left the place towards the hour of sunset, under such invigorating circumstances as you shall in due course hear.