

XXX. THE RESCUE EXPEDITION

And now to tell of those energetic chevaliers, Widgery, Dangle, and Phipps, and of that distressed beauty, 'Thomas Plantagenet,' well known in society, so the paragraphs said, as Mrs. Milton. We left them at Midhurst station, if I remember rightly, waiting, in a state of fine emotion, for the Chichester train. It was clearly understood by the entire Rescue Party that Mrs. Milton was bearing up bravely against almost overwhelming grief. The three gentlemen outdid one another in sympathetic expedients; they watched her gravely almost tenderly. The substantial Widgery tugged at his moustache, and looked his unspeakable feelings at her with those dog-like, brown eyes of his; the slender Dangle tugged at HIS moustache, and did what he could with unsympathetic grey ones. Phipps, unhappily, had no moustache to run any risks with, so he folded his arms and talked in a brave, indifferent, bearing-up tone about the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway, just to cheer the poor woman up a little. And even Mrs. Milton really felt that exalted melancholy to the very bottom of her heart, and tried to show it in a dozen little, delicate, feminine ways.

"There is nothing to do until we get to Chichester," said Dangle.

"Nothing."

"Nothing," said Widgery, and aside in her ear: "You really ate scarcely anything, you know."

"Their trains are always late," said Phipps, with his fingers along the edge of his collar. Dangle, you must understand, was a sub-editor and reviewer, and his pride was to be Thomas Plantagenet's intellectual companion. Widgery, the big man, was manager of a bank and a mighty golfer, and his conception of his relations to her never came into his mind without those charming oldlines, "Douglas, Douglas, tender and true," falling hard upon its heels. His name was Douglas-Douglas Widgery. And Phipps, Phipps was a medical student still, and he felt that he laid his heart at her feet, the heart of a man of the world. She was kind to them all in her way, and insisted on their being friends together, in spite of a disposition to reciprocal criticism they displayed. Dangle thought Widgery a Philistine, appreciating but coarsely the merits of "A Soul Untrammelled," and Widgery thought Dangle lacked, humanity--would talk insincerely to say a clever thing. Both Dangle and Widgery thought Phipps a bit of a cub, and Phipps thought both Dangle and Widgery a couple of Thundering Bounders.

"They would have got to Chichester in time for lunch," said Dangle, in the train. "After, perhaps. And there's no sufficient place in the road. So soon as we get there, Phipps must inquire at the chief hotels to see if any one answering to her description has lunched there."

"Oh, I'll inquire," said Phipps. "Willingly. I suppose you and Widgery will just hang about--"

He saw an expression of pain on Mrs. Milton's gentle face, and stopped abruptly.

"No," said Dangle, "we shan't HANG ABOUT, as you put it. There are two places in Chichester where tourists might go--the cathedral and a remarkably fine museum. I shall go to the cathedral and make an inquiry or so, while Widgery--"

"The museum. Very well. And after that there's a little thing or two I've thought of myself," said Widgery.

To begin with they took Mrs. Milton in a kind of procession to the Red Hotel and established her there with some tea. "You are so kind to me," she said. "All of you." They signified that it was nothing, and dispersed to their inquiries. By six they returned, their zeal a little damped, without news. Widgery came back with Dangle. Phipps was the last to return. "You're quite sure," said Widgery, "that there isn't any flaw in that inference of yours?"

"Quite," said Dangle, rather shortly.

"Of course," said Widgery, "their starting from Midhurst on the Chichester road doesn't absolutely bind them not to change their minds."

"My dear fellow!--It does. Really it does. You must allow me to have enough intelligence to think of cross-roads. Really you must. There

aren't any cross-roads to tempt them. Would they turn aside here? No. Would they turn there? Many more things are inevitable than you fancy."

"We shall see at once," said Widgery, at the window. "Here comes Phipps. For my own part--"

"Phipps!" said Mrs. Milton. "Is he hurrying? Does he look--" She rose in her eagerness, biting her trembling lip, and went towards the window.

"No news," said Phipps, entering.

"Ah!" said Widgery.

"None?" said Dangle.

"Well," said Phipps. "One fellow had got hold of a queer story of a man in bicycling clothes, who was asking the same question about this time yesterday."

"What question?" said Mrs. Milton, in the shadow of the window. She spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"Why--Have you seen a young lady in a grey bicycling costume?"

Dangle caught at his lower lip. "What's that?" he said. "Yesterday! A man asking after her then! What can THAT mean?"

"Heaven knows," said Phipps, sitting down wearily. "You'd better infer."

"What kind of man?" said Dangle.

"How should I know?--in bicycling costume, the fellow said."

"But what height?--What complexion?"

"Didn't ask," said Phipps. "DIDN'T ASK! Nonsense," said Dangle.

"Ask him yourself," said Phipps. "He's an ostler chap in the White Hart,--short, thick-set fellow, with a red face and a crusty manner. Leaning up against the stable door. Smells of whiskey. Go and ask him."

"Of course," said Dangle, taking his straw hat from the shade over the stuffed bird on the chiffonier and turning towards the door. "I might have known."

Phipps' mouth opened and shut.

"You're tired, I'm sure, Mr. Phipps," said the lady, soothingly. "Let me ring for some tea for you." It suddenly occurred to Phipps that he had lapsed a little from his chivalry. "I was a little annoyed at the way he rushed me to do all this business," he said. "But I'd do a hundred times as much if it would bring you any nearer to her." Pause. "I WOULD like a

little tea."

"I don't want to raise any false hopes," said Widgery. "But I do NOT believe they even came to Chichester. Dangle's a very clever fellow, of course, but sometimes these Inferences of his--"

"Tchak!" said Phipps, suddenly.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Milton.

"Something I've forgotten. I went right out from here, went to every other hotel in the place, and never thought--But never mind. I'll ask when the waiter comes."

"You don't mean--" A tap, and the door opened. "Tea, m'm? yes, m'm," said the waiter.

"One minute," said Phipps. "Was a lady in grey, a cycling lady--"

"Stopped here yesterday? Yessir. Stopped the night. With her brother, sir--a young gent."

"Brother!" said Mrs. Milton, in a low tone. "Thank God!"

The waiter glanced at her and understood everything. "A young gent, sir," he said, "very free with his money. Give the name of Beaumont."

He proceeded to some rambling particulars, and was cross-examined by Widgery on the plans of the young couple.

"Havant! Where's Havant?" said Phipps. "I seem to remember it somewhere."

"Was the man tall?" said Mrs. Milton, intently, "distinguished looking? with a long, flaxen moustache? and spoke with a drawl?"

"Well," said the waiter, and thought. "His moustache, m'm, was scarcely long--scrubby more, and young looking."

"About thirty-five, he was?"

"No, m'm. More like five and twenty. Not that."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Milton, speaking in a curious, hollow voice, fumbling for her salts, and showing the finest self-control. "It must have been her YOUNGER brother--must have been."

"That will do, thank you," said Widgery, officiously, feeling that she would be easier under this new surprise if the man were dismissed. The waiter turned to go, and almost collided with Dangle, who was entering the room, panting excitedly and with a pocket handkerchief held to his right eye. "Hullo!" said dangle. "What's up?"

"What's up with YOU?" said Phipps.

"Nothing--an altercation merely with that drunken ostler of yours. He thought it was a plot to annoy him--that the Young Lady in Grey was mythical. Judged from your manner. I've got a piece of raw meat to keep over it. You have some news, I see?"

"Did the man hit you?" asked Widgery.

Mrs. Milton rose and approached Dangle. "Cannot I do anything?"

Dangle was heroic. "Only tell me your news," he said, round the corner of the handkerchief.

"It was in this way," said Phipps, and explained rather sheepishly. While he was doing so, with a running fire of commentary from Widgery, the waiter brought in a tray of tea. "A time table," said Dangle, promptly, "for Havant." Mrs. Milton poured two cups, and Phipps and Dangle partook in passover form. They caught the train by a hair's breadth. So to Havant and inquiries.

Dangle was puffed up to find that his guess of Havant was right. In view of the fact that beyond Havant the Southampton road has a steep hill continuously on the right-hand side, and the sea on the left, he hit upon a magnificent scheme for heading the young folks off. He and Mrs. Milton would go to Fareham, Widgery and Phipps should alight one each at

the intermediate stations of Cosham and Porchester, and come on by the next train if they had no news. If they did not come on, a wire to the Fareham post office was to explain why. It was Napoleonic, and more than consoled Dangle for the open derision of the Havant street boys at the handkerchief which still protected his damaged eye.

Moreover, the scheme answered to perfection. The fugitives escaped by a hair's breadth. They were outside the Golden Anchor at Fareham, and preparing to mount, as Mrs. Milton and Dangle came round the corner from the station. "It's her!" said Mrs. Milton, and would have screamed. "Hist!" said Dangle, gripping the lady's arm, removing his handkerchief in his excitement, and leaving the piece of meat over his eye, an extraordinary appearance which seemed unexpectedly to calm her. "Be cool!" said Dangle, glaring under the meat. "They must not see us. They will get away else. Were there flies at the station?" The young couple mounted and vanished round the corner of the Winchester road. Had it not been for the publicity of the business, Mrs. Milton would have fainted. "SAVE HER!" she said.

"Ah! A conveyance," said Dangle. "One minute."

He left her in a most pathetic attitude, with her hand pressed to her heart, and rushed into the Golden Anchor. Dog cart in ten minutes. Emerged. The meat had gone now, and one saw the cooling puffiness over his eye. "I will conduct you back to the station," said Dangle; "hurry back here, and pursue them. You will meet Widgery and Phipps and tell

them I am in pursuit."

She was whirled back to the railway station and left there, on a hard, blistered, wooden seat in the sun. She felt tired and dreadfully ruffled and agitated and dusty. Dangle was, no doubt, most energetic and devoted; but for a kindly, helpful manner commend her to Douglas Widgery.

Meanwhile Dangle, his face golden in the evening sun, was driving (as well as he could) a large, black horse harnessed into a thing called a gig, northwestward towards Winchester. Dangle, barring his swollen eye, was a refined-looking little man, and he wore a deerstalker cap and was dressed in dark grey. His neck was long and slender. Perhaps you know what gigs are,--huge, big, wooden things and very high and the horse, too, was huge and big and high, with knobby legs, a long face, a hard mouth, and a whacking trick of pacing. Smack, smack, smack, smack it went along the road, and hard by the church it shied vigorously at a hooded perambulator.

The history of the Rescue Expedition now becomes confused. It appears that Widgery was extremely indignant to find Mrs. Milton left about upon the Fareham platform. The day had irritated him somehow, though he had started with the noblest intentions, and he seemed glad to find an outlet for justifiable indignation. "He's such a spasmodic creature," said Widgery. "Rushing off! And I suppose we're to wait here until he comes back! It's likely. He's so egotistical, is Dangle. Always wants to

mismanage everything himself."

"He means to help me," said Mrs. Milton, a little reproachfully, touching his arm. Widgery was hardly in the mood to be mollified all at once. "He need not prevent ME," he said, and stopped. "It's no good talking, you know, and you are tired."

"I can go on," she said brightly, "if only we find her." "While I was cooling my heels in Cosham I bought a county map." He produced and opened it. "Here, you see, is the road out of Fareham." He proceeded with the calm deliberation of a business man to develop a proposal of taking train forthwith to Winchester. "They MUST be going to Winchester," he explained. It was inevitable. To-morrow Sunday, Winchester a cathedral town, road going nowhere else of the slightest importance.

"But Mr. Dangle?"

"He will simply go on until he has to pass something, and then he will break his neck. I have seen Dangle drive before. It's scarcely likely a dog-cart, especially a hired dog-cart, will overtake bicycles in the cool of the evening. Rely upon me, Mrs. Milton--"

"I am in your hands," she said, with pathetic littleness, looking up at him, and for the moment he forgot the exasperation of the day.

Phipps, during this conversation, had stood in a somewhat depressed attitude, leaning on his stick, feeling his collar, and looking from one speaker to the other. The idea of leaving Dangle behind seemed to him an excellent one. "We might leave a message at the place where he got the dog-cart," he suggested, when he saw their eyes meeting. There was a cheerful alacrity about all three at the proposal.

But they never got beyond Botley. For even as their train ran into the station, a mighty rumbling was heard, there was a shouting overhead, the guard stood astonished on the platform, and Phipps, thrusting his head out of the window, cried, "There he goes!" and sprang out of the carriage. Mrs. Milton, following in alarm, just saw it. From Widgery it was hidden. Botley station lies in a cutting, overhead was the roadway, and across the lemon yellows and flushed pinks of the sunset, there whirled a great black mass, a horse like a long-nosed chess knight, the upper works of a gig, and Dangle in transit from front to back. A monstrous shadow aped him across the cutting. It was the event of a second. Dangle seemed to jump, hang in the air momentarily, and vanish, and after a moment's pause came a heart-rending smash. Then two black heads running swiftly.

"Better get out," said Phipps to Mrs. Milton, who stood fascinated in the doorway.

In another moment all three were hurrying up the steps. They found Dangle, hatless, standing up with cut hands extended, having his hands

brushed by an officious small boy. A broad, ugly road ran downhill in a long vista, and in the distance was a little group of Botley inhabitants holding the big, black horse. Even at that distance they could see the expression of conscious pride on the monster's visage. It was as wooden-faced a horse as you can imagine. The beasts in the Tower of London, on which the men in armour are perched, are the only horses I have ever seen at all like it. However, we are not concerned now with the horse, but with Dangle. "Hurt?" asked Phipps, eagerly, leading.

"Mr. Dangle!" cried Mrs. Milton, clasping her hands.

"Hullo!" said Dangle, not surprised in the slightest. "Glad you've come. I may want you. Bit of a mess I'm in--eigh? But I've caught 'em. At the very place I expected, too."

"Caught them!" said Widgery. "Where are they?"

"Up there," he said, with a backward motion of his head. "About a mile up the hill. I left 'em. I HAD to."

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Milton, with that rapt, painful look again. "Have you found Jessie?"

"I have. I wish I could wash the gravel out of my hands somewhere. It was like this, you know. Came on them suddenly round a corner. Horse shied at the bicycles. They were sitting by the roadside botanising

flowers. I just had time to shout, 'Jessie Milton, we've been looking for you,' and then that confounded brute bolted. I didn't dare turn round. I had all my work to do to save myself being turned over, as it was--so long as I did, I mean. I just shouted, 'Return to your friends. All will be forgiven.' And off I came, clatter, clatter. Whether they heard--"

"TAKE ME TO HER," said Mrs. Milton, with intensity, turning towards Widgery.

"Certainly," said Widgery, suddenly becoming active. "How far is it, Dangle?"

"Mile and a half or two miles. I was determined to find them, you know. I say though--Look at my hands! But I beg your pardon, Mrs. Milton." He turned to Phipps. "Phipps, I say, where shall I wash the gravel out? And have a look at my knee?"

"There's the station," said Phipps, becoming helpful. Dangle made a step, and a damaged knee became evident. "Take my arm," said Phipps.

"Where can we get a conveyance?" asked Widgery of two small boys.

The two small boys failed to understand. They looked at one another.

"There's not a cab, not a go-cart, in sight," said Widgery. "It's a case

of a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse."

"There's a harse all right," said one of the small boys with a movement of the head.

"Don't you know where we can hire traps?" asked Widgery. "Or a cart or--anything?" asked Mrs. Milton.

"John Ooker's gart a cart, but no one can't 'ire'n," said the larger of the small boys, partially averting his face and staring down the road and making a song of it. "And so's my feyther, for's leg us broke."

"Not a cart even! Evidently. What shall we do?"

It occurred to Mrs. Milton that if Widgery was the man for courtly devotion, Dangle was infinitely readier of resource. "I suppose--" she said, timidly. "Perhaps if you were to ask Mr. Dangle--"

And then all the gilt came off Widgery. He answered quite rudely.

"Confound Dangle! Hasn't he messed us up enough? He must needs drive after them in a trap to tell them we're coming, and now you want me to ask him--"

Her beautiful blue eyes were filled with tears. He stopped abruptly.

"I'll go and ask Dangle," he said, shortly. "If you wish it." And went striding into the station and down the steps, leaving her in the road

under the quiet inspection of the two little boys, and with a kind of ballad refrain running through her head, "Where are the Knights of the Olden Time?" and feeling tired to death and hungry and dusty and out of curl, and, in short, a martyr woman.