XXXII. MR. HOOPDRIVER, KNIGHT ERRANT

As Mr. Dangle bad witnessed, the fugitives had been left by him by the side of the road about two miles from Botley. Before Mr. Dangle's appearance, Mr. Hoopdriver had been learning with great interest that mere roadside flowers had names,--star-flowers, wind-stars, St. John's wort, willow herb, lords and ladies, bachelor's buttons,--most curious names, some of them. "The flowers are all different in South Africa, y'know," he was explaining with a happy fluke of his imagination to account for his ignorance. Then suddenly, heralded by clattering sounds and a gride of wheels, Dangle had flared and thundered across the tranquillity of the summer evening; Dangle, swaying and gesticulating behind a corybantic black horse, had hailed Jessie by her name, had backed towards the hedge for no ostensible reason, and vanished to the accomplishment of the Fate that had been written down for him from the very beginning of things. Jessie and Hoopdriver had scarcely time to stand up and seize their machines, before this tumultuous, this swift and wonderful passing of Dangle was achieved. He went from side to side of the road,--worse even than the riding forth of Mr. Hoopdriver it was,--and vanished round the corner.

"He knew my name," said Jessie. "Yes--it was Mr. Dangle."

"That was our bicycles did that," said Mr. Hoopdriver simultaneously, and speaking with a certain complacent concern. "I hope he won't get hurt."

"That was Mr. Dangle," repeated Jessie, and Mr. Hoopdriver heard this time, with a violent start. His eyebrows went up spasmodically.

"What! someone you know?"

"Yes."

"Lord!"

"He was looking for me," said Jessie. "I could see. He began to call to me before the horse shied. My stepmother has sent him."

Mr. Hoopdriver wished he had returned the bicycle after all, for his ideas were still a little hazy about Bechamel and Mrs. Milton. Honesty IS the best policy--often, he thought. He turned his head this way and that. He became active. "After us, eigh? Then he'll come back. He's gone down that hill, and he won't be able to pull up for a bit, I'm certain."

Jessie, he saw, had wheeled her machine into the road and was mounting. Still staring at the corner that had swallowed up Dangle, Hoopdriver followed suit. And so, just as the sun was setting, they began another flight together,--riding now towards Bishops Waltham, with Mr. Hoopdriver in the post of danger--the rear--ever and again looking over his shoulder and swerving dangerously as he did so. Occasionally Jessie had to slacken her pace. He breathed heavily, and hated himself because

his mouth fell open, After nearly an hour's hard riding, they found themselves uncaught at Winchester. Not a trace of Dangle nor any other danger was visible as they rode into the dusky, yellow-lit street. Though the bats had been fluttering behind thehedges and the evening star was bright while they were still two miles from Winchester, Mr. Hoopdriver pointed out the dangers of stopping in such an obvious abiding-place, and gently but firmly insisted upon replenishing the lamps and riding on towards Salisbury. From Winchester, roads branch in every direction, and to turn abruptly westward was clearly the way to throw off the chase. As Hoopdriver saw the moon rising broad and yellow through the twilight, he thought he should revive the effect of that ride out of Bognor; but somehow, albeit the moon and all the atmospheric effects were the same, the emotions were different. They rode in absolute silence, and slowly after they had cleared the outskirts of Winchester. Both of them were now nearly tired out,--the level was tedious, and even a little hill a burden; and so it came about that in the hamlet of Wallenstock they were beguiled to stop and ask for accommodation in an exceptionally prosperous-looking village inn. A plausible landlady rose to the occasion.

Now, as they passed into the room where their suppers were prepared, Mr. Hoopdriver caught a glimpse through a door ajar and floating in a reek of smoke, of three and a half faces--for the edge of the door cut one down--and an American cloth-covered table with several glasses and a tankard. And he also heard a remark. In the second before he heard that remark, Mr. Hoopdriver had been a proud and happy man, to particularize,

a baronet's heir incognito. He had surrendered their bicycles to the odd man of the place with infinite easy dignity, and had bowingly opened the door for Jessie. "Who's that, then?" he imagined people saying; and then, "Some'n pretty well orf--judge by the bicycles." Then the imaginary spectators would fall a-talking of the fashionableness of bicycling,--how judges And stockbrokers and actresses and, in fact, all the best people rode, and how that it was often the fancy of such great folk to shun the big hotels, the adulation of urban crowds, and seek, incognito, the cosy quaintnesses of village life. Then, maybe, they would think of a certain nameless air of distinction about the lady who had stepped across the doorway, and about the handsome, flaxen-moustached, blue-eyed Cavalier who had followed her in, and they would look one to another. "Tell you what it is," one of the village elders would say--just as they do in novels--voicing the thought of all, in a low, impressive tone: "There's such a thin' as entertaining barranets unawares--not to mention no higher things--"

Such, I say, had been the filmy, delightful stuff in Mr. Hoopdriver's head the moment before he heard that remark. But the remark toppled him headlong. What the precise remark was need not concern us. It was a casual piece of such satire as Strephon delights in. Should you be curious, dear lady, as to its nature, you have merely to dress yourself in a really modern cycling costume, get one of the feeblest-looking of your men to escort you, and ride out, next Saturday evening, to any public house where healthy, homely people gather together. Then you will hear quite a lot of the kind of thing Mr. Hoopdriver heard. More,

possibly, than you will desire.

The remark, I must add, implicated Mr. Hoopdriver. It indicated an entire disbelief in his social standing. At a blow, it shattered all the gorgeous imaginative fabric his mind had been rejoicing in. All that foolish happiness vanished like a dream. And there was nothing to show for it, as there is nothing to show for any spiteful remark that has ever been made. Perhaps the man who said the thing had a gleam of satisfaction at the idea of taking a complacent-looking fool down a peg, but it is just as possible he did not know at the time that his stray shot had hit. He had thrown it as a boy throws a stone at a bird. And it not only demolished a foolish, happy conceit, but it wounded. It touched Jessie grossly.

She did not hear it, he concluded from her subsequent bearing; but during the supper they had in the little private dining-room, though she talked cheerfully, he was preoccupied. Whiffs of indistinct conversation, and now and then laughter, came in from the inn parlor through the pelargoniums in the open window. Hoopdriver felt it must all be in the same strain,--at her expense and his. He answered her abstractedly. She was tired, she said, and presently went to her room. Mr. Hoopdriver, in his courtly way, opened the door for her and bowed her out. He stood listening and fearing some new offence as she went upstairs, and round the bend where the barometer hung beneath the stuffed birds. Then he went back to the room, and stood on the hearthrug before the paper fireplace ornament. "Cads!" he said in a scathing

undertone, as a fresh burst of laughter came floating in. All through supper he had been composing stinging repartee, a blistering speech of denunciation to be presently delivered. He would rate them as a nobleman should: "Call themselves Englishmen, indeed, and insult a woman!" he would say; take the names and addresses perhaps, threaten to speak to the Lord of the Manor, promise to let them hear from him again, and so out with consternation in his wake. It really ought to be done.

"Teach 'em better," he said fiercely, and tweaked his moustache painfully. What was it? He revived the objectionable remark for his own exasperation, and then went over the heads of his speech again.

He coughed, made three steps towards the door, then stopped and went back to the hearthrug. He wouldn't--after all. Yet was he not a Knight Errant? Should such men go unreproved, unchecked, by wandering baronets
incognito? Magnanimity? Look at it in that way? Churls beneath one's notice? No; merely a cowardly subterfuge. He WOULD after all.

Something within him protested that he was a hot-headed ass even as he went towards the door again. But he only went on the more resolutely. He crossed the hall, by the bar, and entered the room from which the remark had proceeded. He opened the door abruptly and stood scowling on them in the doorway. "You'll only make a mess of it," remarked the internal sceptic. There were five men in the room altogether: a fat person, with a long pipe and a great number of chins, in an armchair by the

fireplace, who wished Mr. Hoopdriver a good evening very affably; a young fellow smoking a cutty and displaying crossed legs with gaiters; a little, bearded man with a toothless laugh; a middle-aged, comfortable man with bright eyes, who wore a velveteen jacket; and a fair young man, very genteel in a yellowish-brown ready-made suit and a white tie.

"H'm," said Mr. Hoopdriver, looking very stern and harsh. And then in a forbidding tone, as one who consented to no liberties, "Good evening."

"Very pleasant day we've been 'aving," said the fair young man with the white tie.

"Very," said Mr. Hoopdriver, slowly; and taking a brown armchair, he planted it with great deliberation where he faced the fireplace, and sat down. Let's see--how did that speech begin?

"Very pleasant roads about here," said the fair young man with the white tie.

"Very," said Mr. Hoopdriver, eyeing him darkly. Have to begin somehow. "The roads about here are all right, and the weather about here is all right, but what I've come in here to say is--there's some damned unpleasant people--damned unpleasant people!"

"Oh!" said the young man with the gaiters, apparently making a mental inventory of his pearl buttons as he spoke. "How's that?"

Mr. Hoopdriver put his hands on his knees and stuck out his elbows with extreme angularity. In his heart he was raving at his idiotic folly at thus bearding these lions,--indisputably they WERE lions,--but he had to go through with it now. Heaven send, his breath, which was already getting a trifle spasmodic, did not suddenly give out. He fixed his eye on the face of the fat man with the chins, and spoke in a low, impressive voice. "I came here, sir," said Mr. Hoopdriver, and paused to inflate his cheeks, "with a lady."

"Very nice lady," said the man with the gaiters, putting his head on one side to admire a pearl button that had been hiding behind the curvature of his calf. "Very nice lady indeed."

"I came here," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "with a lady."

"We saw you did, bless you," said the fat man with the chins, in a curious wheezy voice. "I don't see there's anything so very extraordinary in that. One 'ud think we hadn't eyes."

Mr. Hoopdriver coughed. "I came, here, sir--"

"We've 'eard that," said the little man with the beard, sharply and went off into an amiable chuckle. "We know it by 'art," said the little man, elaborating the point.

Mr. Hoopdriver temporarily lost his thread. He glared malignantly at the little man with the beard, and tried to recover his discourse. A pause.

"You were saying," said the fair young man with the white tie, speaking very politely, "that you came here with a lady."

"A lady," meditated the gaiter gazer.

The man in velveteen, who was looking from one speaker to another with keen, bright eyes, now laughed as though a point had been scored, and stimulated Mr. Hoopdriver to speak, by fixing him with an expectant regard.

"Some dirty cad," said Mr. Hoopdriver, proceeding with his discourse, and suddenly growing extremely fierce, "made a remark as we went by this door."

"Steady on!" said the old gentleman with many chins. "Steady on! Don't you go a-calling us names, please."

"One minute!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "It wasn't I began calling names." ("Who did?" said the man with the chins.) "I'm not calling any of you dirty cads. Don't run away with that impression. Only some person in this room made a remark that showed he wasn't fit to wipe boots on, and, with all due deference to such gentlemen as ARE gentlemen" (Mr. Hoopdriver looked round for moral support), "I want to know which it

was."

"Meanin'?" said the fair young man in the white tie.

"That I'm going to wipe my boots on 'im straight away," said Mr. Hoopdriver, reverting to anger, if with a slight catch in his throat--than which threat of personal violence nothing had been further from his thoughts on entering the room. He said this because he could think of nothing else to say, and stuck out his elbows truculently to hide the sinking of his heart. It is curious how situations run away with us.

"'Ullo, Charlie!" said the little man, and "My eye!" said the owner of the chins. "You're going to wipe your boots on 'im?" said the fair young man, in a tone of mild surprise.

"I am," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with emphatic resolution, and glared in the young man's face.

"That's fair and reasonable," said the man in the velveteen jacket; "if you can."

The interest of the meeting seemed transferred to the young man in the white tic. "Of course, if you can't find out which it is, I suppose you're prepared to wipe your boots in a liberal way on everybody in the room," said this young man, in the same tone of impersonal question.

"This gentleman, the champion lightweight--"

"Own up, Charlie," said the young man with the gaiters, looking up for a moment. "And don't go a-dragging in your betters. It's fair and square. You can't get out of it."

"Was it this--gent?" began Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Of course," said the young man in the white tie, "when it comes to talking of wiping boots--"

"I'm not talking; I'm going to do it," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

He looked round at the meeting. They were no longer antagonists; they were spectators. He would have to go through with it now. But this tone of personal aggression on the maker of the remark had somehow got rid of the oppressive feeling of Hoopdriver contra mundum. Apparently, he would have to fight someone. Would he get a black eye? Would he get very much hurt? Pray goodness it wasn't that sturdy chap in the gaiters! Should he rise and begin? What would she think if he brought a black eye to breakfast to-morrow? "Is this the man?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, with a business-like calm, and arms more angular than ever.

"Eat 'im!" said the little man with the beard; "eat 'im straight orf."

"Steady on!" said the young man in the white tie. "Steady on a minute.

If I did happen to say--"

"You did, did you?" said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Backing out of it, Charlie?" said the young man with the gaiters.

"Not a bit," said Charlie. "Surely we can pass a bit of a joke--"

"I'm going to teach you to keep your jokes to yourself," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Bray-vo!" said the shepherd of the flock of chins.

"Charlie IS a bit too free with his jokes," said the little man with the beard.

"It's downright disgusting," said Hoopdriver, falling back upon his speech. "A lady can't ride a bicycle in a country road, or wear a dress a little out of the ordinary, but every dirty little greaser must needs go shouting insults--"

"I didn't know the young lady would hear what I said," said Charlie. "Surely one can speak friendly to one's friends. How was I to know the door was open--"

Hoopdriver began to suspect that his antagonist was, if possible, more

seriously alarmed at the prospect of violence than himself, and his spirits rose again. These chaps ought to have a thorough lesson. "Of COURSE you knew the door was open," he retorted indignantly. "Of COURSE you thought we should hear what you said. Don't go telling lies about it. It's no good your saying things like that. You've had your fun, and you meant to have your fun. And I mean to make an example of you, Sir."

"Ginger beer," said the little man with the beard, in a confidential tone to the velveteen jacket, "is regular up this 'ot weather. Bustin' its bottles it is everywhere."

"What's the good of scrapping about in a public-house?" said Charlie, appealing to the company. "A fair fight without interruptions, now, I WOULDN'T mind, if the gentleman's so disposed."

Evidently the man was horribly afraid. Mr. Hoopdriver grew truculent.

"Where you like," said Mr. Hoopdriver, "jest wherever you like."

"You insulted the gent," said the man in velveteen.

"Don't be a bloomin' funk, Charlie," said the man in gaiters. "Why, you got a stone of him, if you got an ounce."

"What I say, is this," said the gentleman with the excessive chins,

trying to get a hearing by banging his chair arms. "If Charlie goes saying things, he ought to back 'em up. That's what I say. I don't mind his sayin' such things 't all, but he ought to be prepared to back 'em up."

"I'll BACK 'em up all right," said Charlie, with extremely bitter emphasis on 'back.' "If the gentleman likes to come Toosday week--"

"Rot!" chopped in Hoopdriver. "Now."

"'Ear, 'ear," said the owner of the chins.

"Never put off till to-morrow, Charlie, what you can do to-day," said the man in the velveteen coat.

"You got to do it, Charlie," said the man in gaiters. "It's no good."

"It's like this," said Charlie, appealing to everyone except Hoopdriver. "Here's me, got to take in her ladyship's dinner to-morrow night. How should I look with a black eye? And going round with the carriage with a split lip?"

"If you don't want your face sp'iled, Charlie, why don't you keep your mouth shut?" said the person in gaiters.

"Exactly," said Mr. Hoopdriver, driving it home with great fierceness.

"Why don't you shut your ugly mouth?"

"It's as much as my situation's worth," protested Charlie.

"You should have thought of that before," said Hoopdriver.

"There's no occasion to be so thunderin' 'ot about it. I only meant the thing joking," said Charlie. "AS one gentleman to another, I'm very sorry if the gentleman's annoyed--"

Everybody began to speak at once. Mr. Hoopdriver twirled his moustache. He felt that Charlie's recognition of his gentlemanliness was at any rate a redeeming feature. But it became his pose to ride hard and heavy over the routed foe. He shouted some insulting phrase over the tumult.

"You're regular abject," the man in gaiters was saying to Charlie.

More confusion.

"Only don't think I'm afraid,--not of a spindle-legged cuss like him," shouted Charlie. "Because I ain't."

"Change of front," thought Hoopdriver, a little startled. "Where are we going?"

"Don't sit there and be abusive," said the man in velveteen. "He's

offered to hit you, and if I was him, I'd hit you now."

"All right, then," said Charlie, with a sudden change of front and springing to his feet. "If I must, I must. Now, then!" At that, Hoopdriver, the child of Fate, rose too, with a horrible sense that his internal monitor was right. Things had taken a turn. He had made a mess of it, and now there was nothing for it, so far as he could see, but to hit the man at once. He and Charlie stood six feet apart, with a table between, both very breathless and fierce. A vulgar fight in a public-house, and with what was only too palpably a footman! Good Heavens! And this was the dignified, scornful remonstrance! How the juice had it all happened? Go round the table at him, I suppose. But before the brawl could achieve itself, the man in gaiters intervened. "Not here," he said, stepping between the antagonists. Everyone was standing up.

"Charlie's artful," said the little man with the beard.

"Buller's yard," said the man with the gaiters, taking the control of the entire affair with the easy readiness of an accomplished practitioner. "If the gentleman DON'T mind." Buller's yard, it seemed, was the very place. "We'll do the thing regular and decent, if you please." And before he completely realized what was happening, Hoopdriver was being marched out through the back premises of the inn, to the first and only fight with fists that was ever to glorify his life.

Outwardly, so far as the intermittent moonlight showed, Mr. Hoopdriver was quietly but eagerly prepared to fight. But inwardly he was a chaos of conflicting purposes. It was extraordinary how things happened. One remark had trod so closely on the heels of another, that he had had the greatest difficulty in following the development of the business.
He distinctly remembered himself walking across from one room to the other,--a dignified, even an aristocratic figure, primed with considered eloquence, intent upon a scathing remonstrance to these wretched yokels, regarding their manners. Then incident had flickered into incident until here he was out in a moonlit lane,--a slight, dark figure in a group of larger, indistinct figures,--marching in a quiet, business-like way towards some unknown horror at Buller's yard. Fists! It was astonishing. It was terrible! In front of him was the pallid figure of Charles, and he saw that the man in gaiters held Charles kindly but firmly by the arm.

"It's blasted rot," Charles was saying, "getting up a fight just for a thing like that; all very well for 'im. 'E's got 'is 'olidays; 'e 'asn't no blessed dinner to take up to-morrow night like I 'ave.--No need to numb my arm, IS there?"

They went into Buller's yard through gates. There were sheds in Buller's yard--sheds of mystery that the moonlight could not solve--a smell of cows, and a pump stood out clear and black, throwing a clear black shadow on the whitewashed wall. And here it was his face was to be

battered to a pulp. He knew this was the uttermost folly, to stand up here and be pounded, but the way out of it was beyond his imagining. Yet afterwards--? Could he ever face her again? He patted his Norfolk jacket and took his ground with his back to the gate. How did one square? So? Suppose one were to turn and run even now, run straight back to the inn and lock himself into his bedroom? They couldn't make, him come out--anyhow. He could prosecute them for assault if they did. How did one set about prosecuting for assault? He saw Charles, with his face ghastly white under the moon, squaring in front of him.

He caught a blow on the arm and gave ground. Charles pressed him. Then he hit with his right and with the violence of despair. It was a hit of his own devising,--an impromptu,--but it chanced to coincide with the regulation hook hit at the head. He perceived with a leap of exultation that the thing his fist had met was the jawbone of Charles. It was the sole gleam of pleasure he experienced during the fight, and it was quite momentary. He had hardly got home upon Charles before he was struck in the chest and whirled backward. He had the greatest difficulty in keeping his feet. He felt that his heart was smashed flat. "Gord darm!" said somebody, dancing toe in hand somewhere behind him. As Mr. Hoopdriver staggered, Charles gave a loud and fear-compelling cry. He seemed to tower over Hoopdriver in the moonlight. Both his fists were whirling. It was annihilation coming--no less. Mr. Hoopdriver ducked perhaps and certainly gave ground to the right, hit, and missed. Charles swept round to the left, missing generously. A blow glanced over Mr. Hoopdriver's left ear, and the flanking movement was completed.

Another blow behind the ear. Heaven and earth spun furiously round Mr. Hoopdriver, and then he became aware of a figure in a light suit shooting violently through an open gate into the night. The man in gaiters sprang forward past Mr. Hoopdriver, but too late to intercept the fugitive. There were shouts, laughter, and Mr. Hoopdriver, still solemnly squaring, realized the great and wonderful truth--Charles had fled. He, Hoopdriver, had fought and, by all the rules of war, had won.

"That was a pretty cut under the jaw you gave him," the toothless little man with the beard was remarking in an unexpectedly friendly manner.

"The fact of it is," said Mr. Hoopdriver, sitting beside the road to Salisbury, and with the sound of distant church bells in his cars, "I had to give the fellow a lesson; simply had to."

"It seems so dreadful that you should have to knock people about," said Jessie.

"These louts get unbearable," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "If now and then we didn't give them a lesson,--well, a lady cyclist in the roads would be an impossibility."

"I suppose every woman shrinks from violence," said Jessie. "I suppose men ARE braver--in a way--than women. It seems to me-I can't imagine--how one could bring oneself to face a roomful of rough characters, pick out the bravest, and give him an exemplary thrashing.

I quail at the idea. I thought only Ouida's guardsmen did things like that."

"It was nothing more than my juty--as a gentleman," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"But to walk straight into the face of danger!"

"It's habit," said Mr. Hoopdriver, quite modestly, flicking off a particle of cigarette ash that had settled on his knee.