

XXXIV.

"Good morning, Madam," said Hoopdriver, as Jessie came into the breakfast room of the Golden Pheasant on Monday morning, and he smiled, bowed, rubbed his hands together, and pulled out a chair for her, and rubbed his hands again.

She stopped abruptly, with a puzzled expression on her face. "Where HAVE I seen that before?" she said.

"The chair?" said Hoopdriver, flushing.

"No--the attitude."

She came forward and shook hands with him, looking the while curiously into his face. "And--Madam?"

"It's a habit," said Mr. Hoopdriver, guiltily. "A bad habit. Calling ladies Madam. You must put it down to our colonial roughness. Out there up country--y'know--the ladies--so rare--we call 'em all Madam."

"You HAVE some funny habits, brother Chris," said Jessie. "Before you sell your diamond shares and go into society, as you say, and stand for Parliament--What a fine thing it is to be a man!--you must cure yourself. That habit of bowing as you do, and rubbing your hands, and looking expectant."

"It's a habit."

"I know. But I don't think it a good one. You don't mind my telling you?"

"Not a bit. I'm grateful."

"I'm blessed or afflicted with a trick of observation," said Jessie, looking at the breakfast table. Mr. Hoopdriver put his hand to his moustache and then, thinking this might be another habit, checked his arm and stuck his hand into his pocket. He felt juiced awkward, to use his private formula. Jessie's eye wandered to the armchair, where a piece of binding was loose, and, possibly to carry out her theory of an observant disposition, she turned and asked him for a pin.

Mr. Hoopdriver's hand fluttered instinctively to his lappel, and there, planted by habit, were a couple of stray pins he had impounded.

"What an odd place to put pins!" exclaimed Jessie, taking it.

"It's 'andy," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "I saw a chap in a shop do it once."

"You must have a careful disposition," she said, over her shoulder, kneeling down to the chair.

"In the centre of Africa--up country, that is--one learns to value pins," said Mr. Hoopdriver, after a perceptible pause. "There weren't over many pins in Africa. They don't lie about on the ground there." His face was now in a fine, red glow. Where would the draper break out next? He thrust his hands into his coat pockets, then took one out again, furtively removed the second pin and dropped it behind him gently. It fell with a loud 'ping' on the fender. Happily she made no remark, being preoccupied with the binding of the chair.

Mr. Hoopdriver, instead of sitting down, went up to the table and stood against it, with his finger-tips upon the cloth. They were keeping breakfast a tremendous time. He took up his rolled serviette looked closely and scrutinisingly at the ring, then put his hand under the fold of the napkin and examined the texture, and put the thing down again. Then he had a vague impulse to finger his hollow wisdom tooth--happily checked. He suddenly discovered he was standing as if the table was a counter, and sat down forthwith. He drummed with his hand on the table. He felt dreadfully hot and self-conscious.

"Breakfast is late," said Jessie, standing up.

"Isn't it?"

Conversation was slack. Jessie wanted to know the distance to Ringwood. Then silence fell again.

Mr. Hoopdriver, very uncomfortable and studying an easy bearing, looked again at the breakfast things and then idly lifted the corner of the tablecloth on the ends of his fingers, and regarded it. "Fifteen three," he thought, privately.

"Why do you do that?" said Jessie.

"WHAT?" said Hoopdriver, dropping the tablecloth convulsively.

"Look at the cloth like that. I saw you do it yesterday, too."

Mr. Hoopdriver's face became quite a bright red. He began pulling his moustache nervously. "I know," he said. "I know. It's a queer habit, I know. But out there, you know, there's native servants, you know, and--it's a queer thing to talk about--but one has to look at things to see, don't y'know, whether they're quite clean or not. It's got to be a habit."

"How odd!" said Jessie.

"Isn't it?" mumbled Hoopdriver.

"If I were a Sherlock Holmes," said Jessie, "I suppose I could have told you were a colonial from little things like that. But anyhow, I guessed it, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Hoopdriver, in a melancholy tone, "you guessed it."

Why not seize the opportunity for a neat confession, and add, "unhappily in this case you guessed wrong." Did she suspect? Then, at the psychological moment, the girl bumped the door open with her tray and brought in the coffee and scrambled eggs.

"I am rather lucky with my intuitions, sometimes," said Jessie.

Remorse that had been accumulating in his mind for two days surged to the top of his mind. What a shabby liar he was!

And, besides, he must sooner or later, inevitably, give himself away.