

XXXV.

Mr. Hoopdriver helped the eggs and then, instead of beginning, sat with his cheek on his hand, watching Jessie pour out the coffee. His ears were a bright red, and his eyes bright. He took his coffee cup clumsily, cleared his throat, suddenly leant back in his chair, and thrust his hands deep into his pockets. "I'll do it," he said aloud.

"Do what?" said Jessie, looking up in surprise over the coffee pot. She was just beginning her scrambled egg.

"Own up."

"Own what?"

"Miss Milton--I'm a liar." He put his head on one side and regarded her with a frown of tremendous resolution. Then in measured accents, and moving his head slowly from side to side, he announced, "Ay'm a deraper."

"You're a draper? I thought--"

"You thought wrong. But it's bound to come up. Pins, attitude, habits--It's plain enough.

"I'm a draper's assistant let out for a ten-days holiday. Jest a

draper's assistant. Not much, is it? A counter-jumper."

"A draper's assistant isn't a position to be ashamed of," she said, recovering, and not quite understanding yet what this all meant.

"Yes, it is," he said, "for a man, in this country now. To be just another man's hand, as I am. To have to wear what clothes you are told, and go to church to please customers, and work--There's no other kind of men stand such hours. A drunken bricklayer's a king to it."

"But why are you telling me this now?"

"It's important you should know at once."

"But, Mr. Benson--"

"That isn't all. If you don't mind my speaking about myself a bit, there's a few things I'd like to tell you. I can't go on deceiving you. My name's not Benson. WHY I told you Benson, I DON'T know. Except that I'm a kind of fool. Well--I wanted somehow to seem more than I was. My name's Hoopdriver."

"Yes?"

"And that about South Africa--and that lion."

"Well?"

"Lies."

"Lies!"

"And the discovery of diamonds on the ostrich farm. Lies too. And all the reminiscences of the giraffes--lies too. I never rode on no giraffes. I'd be afraid."

He looked at her with a kind of sullen satisfaction. He had eased his conscience, anyhow. She regarded him in infinite perplexity. This was a new side altogether to the man. "But WHY," she began.

"Why did I tell you such things? I don't know. Silly sort of chap, I expect. I suppose I wanted to impress you. But somehow, now, I want you to know the truth."

Silence. Breakfast untouched. "I thought I'd tell you," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "I suppose it's snobbishness and all that kind of thing, as much as anything. I lay awake pretty near all last night thinking about myself; thinking what a got-up imitation of a man I was, and all that."

"And you haven't any diamond shares, and you are not going into Parliament, and you're not--"

"All Lies," said Hoopdriver, in a sepulchral voice. "Lies from beginning to end. 'Ow I came to tell 'em I DON'T know."

She stared at him blankly.

"I never set eyes on Africa in my life," said Mr. Hoopdriver, completing the confession. Then he pulled his right hand from his pocket, and with the nonchalance of one to whom the bitterness of death is passed, began to drink his coffee.

"It's a little surprising," began Jessie, vaguely.

"Think it over," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart."

And then breakfast proceeded in silence. Jessie ate very little, and seemed lost in thought. Mr. Hoopdriver was so overcome by contrition and anxiety that he consumed an extraordinarily large breakfast out of pure nervousness, and ate his scrambled eggs for the most part with the spoon that belonged properly to the marmalade. His eyes were gloomily downcast. She glanced at him through her eyelashes. Once or twice she struggled with laughter, once or twice she seemed to be indignant.

"I don't know what to think," she said at last. "I don't know what to make of you--brother Chris. I thought, do you know? that you were perfectly honest. And somehow--"

"Well?"

"I think so still."

"Honest--with all those lies!"

"I wonder."

"I don't," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "I'm fair ashamed of myself. But anyhow--I've stopped deceiving you."

"I THOUGHT," said the Young Lady in Grey, "that story of the lion--"

"Lord!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Don't remind me of THAT."

"I thought, somehow, I FELT, that the things you said didn't ring quite true." She suddenly broke out in laughter, at the expression of his face. "Of COURSE you are honest," she said. "How could I ever doubt it? As if I had never pretended! I see it all now."

Abruptly she rose, and extended her hand across the breakfast things. He looked at her doubtfully, and saw the dancing friendliness in her eyes. He scarcely understood at first. He rose, holding the marmalade spoon, and took her proffered hand with abject humility. "Lord," he broke out, "if you aren't enough--but there!"

"I see it all now." A brilliant inspiration had suddenly obscured her humour. She sat down suddenly, and he sat down too. "You did it," she said, "because you wanted to help me. And you thought I was too Conventional to take help from one I might think my social inferior."

"That was partly it," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"How you misunderstood me!" she said.

"You don't mind?"

"It was noble of you. But I am sorry," she said, "you should think me likely to be ashamed of you because you follow a decent trade."

"I didn't know at first, you see," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

And he submitted meekly to a restoration of his self-respect. He was as useful a citizen as could be,--it was proposed and carried,--and his lying was of the noblest. And so the breakfast concluded much more happily than his brightest expectation, and they rode out of ruddy little Blandford as though no shadow of any sort had come between them.