

XXXVII. IN THE NEW FOREST

At Ringwood they lunched, and Jessie met with a disappointment. There was no letter for her at the post office. Opposite the hotel, The Chequered Career, was a machine shop with a conspicuously second-hand Marlborough Club tandem tricycle displayed in the window, together with the announcement that bicycles and tricycles were on hire within. The establishment was impressed on Mr. Hoopdriver's mind by the proprietor's action in coming across the road and narrowly inspecting their machines. His action revived a number of disagreeable impressions, but, happily, came to nothing. While they were still lunching, a tall clergyman, with a heated face, entered the room and sat down at the table next to theirs. He was in a kind of holiday costume; that is to say, he had a more than usually high collar, fastened behind and rather the worse for the weather, and his long-tail coat had been replaced by a black jacket of quite remarkable brevity. He had faded brown shoes on his feet, his trouser legs were grey with dust, and he wore a hat of piebald straw in the place of the customary soft felt. He was evidently socially inclined.

"A most charming day, sir," he said, in a ringing tenor.

"Charming," said Mr. Hoopdriver, over a portion of pie.

"You are, I perceive, cycling through this delightful country," said the clergyman.

"Touring," explained Mr. Hoopdriver. "I can imagine that, with a properly oiled machine, there can be no easier nor pleasanter way of seeing the country."

"No," said Mr. Hoopdriver; "it isn't half a bad way of getting about."

"For a young and newly married couple, a tandem bicycle must be, I should imagine, a delightful bond."

"Quite so," said Mr. Hoopdriver, reddening a little.

"Do you ride a tandem?"

"No--we're separate," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"The motion through the air is indisputably of a very exhilarating description." With that decision, the clergyman turned to give his orders to the attendant, in a firm, authoritative voice, for a cup of tea, two gelatine lozenges, bread and butter, salad, and pie to follow.

"The gelatine lozenges I must have. I require them to precipitate the tannin in my tea," he remarked to the room at large, and folding his hands, remained for some time with his chin thereon, staring fixedly at a little picture over Mr. Hoopdriver's head.

"I myself am a cyclist," said the clergyman, descending suddenly upon

Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, attacking the moustache. "What machine, may I ask?"

"I have recently become possessed of a tricycle. A bicycle is, I regret to say, considered too--how shall I put it?--flippant by my parishioners. So I have a tricycle. I have just been hauling it hither."

"Hauling!" said Jessie, surprised.

"With a shoe lace. And partly carrying it on my back."

The pause was unexpected. Jessie had some trouble with a crumb. Mr. Hoopdriver's face passed through several phases of surprise. Then he saw the explanation. "Had an accident?"

"I can hardly call it an accident. The wheels suddenly refused to go round. I found myself about five miles from here with an absolutely immobile machine."

"Ow!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, trying to seem intelligent, and Jessie glanced at this insane person.

"It appears," said the clergyman, satisfied with the effect he had created, "that my man carefully washed out the bearings with paraffin,

and let the machine dry without oiling it again. The consequence was that they became heated to a considerable temperature and jammed. Even at the outset the machine ran stiffly as well as noisily, and I, being inclined to ascribe this stiffness to my own lassitude, merely redoubled my exertions."

"O't work all round," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"You could scarcely put it more appropriately. It is my rule of life to do whatever I find to do with all my might. I believe, indeed, that the bearings became red hot. Finally one of the wheels jammed together. A side wheel it was, so that its stoppage necessitated an inversion of the entire apparatus,--an inversion in which I participated."

"Meaning, that you went over?" said Mr. Hoopdriver, suddenly much amused.

"Precisely. And not brooking my defeat, I suffered repeatedly. You may understand, perhaps, a natural impatience. I expostulated--playfully, of course. Happily the road was not overlooked. Finally, the entire apparatus became rigid, and I abandoned the unequal contest. For all practical purposes the tricycle was no better than a heavy chair without castors. It was a case of hauling or carrying."

The clergyman's nutriment appeared in the doorway.

"Five miles," said the clergyman. He began at once to eat bread and butter vigorously. "Happily," he said, "I am an eupeptic, energetic sort of person on principle. I would all men were likewise."

"It's the best way," agreed Mr. Hoopdriver, and the conversation gave precedence to bread and butter.

"Gelatine," said the clergyman, presently, stirring his tea thoughtfully, "precipitates the tannin in one's tea and renders it easy of digestion."

"That's a useful sort of thing to know," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"You are altogether welcome," said the clergyman, biting generously at two pieces of bread and butter folded together.

In the afternoon our two wanderers rode on at an easy pace towards Stoney Cross. Conversation languished, the topic of South Africa being in abeyance. Mr. Hoopdriver was silenced by disagreeable thoughts. He had changed the last sovereign at Ringwood. The fact had come upon him suddenly. Now too late he was reflecting upon his resources. There was twenty pounds or more in the post office savings bank in Putney, but his book was locked up in his box at the Antrobus establishment. Else this infatuated man would certainly have surreptitiously withdrawn the entire sum in order to prolong these journeyings even for a few days. As it was, the shadow of the end fell across his happiness. Strangely enough,

in spite of his anxiety and the morning's collapse, he was still in a curious emotional state that was certainly not misery. He was forgetting his imaginings and posings, forgetting himself altogether in his growing appreciation of his companion. The most tangible trouble in his mind was the necessity of breaking the matter to her.

A long stretch up hill tired them long before Stoney Cross was reached, and they dismounted and sat under the shade of a little oak tree. Near the crest the road looped on itself, so that, looking back, it sloped below them up to the right and then came towards them. About them grew a rich heather with stunted oaks on the edge of a deep ditch along the roadside, and this road was sandy; below the steepness of the hill, however, it was grey and barred with shadows, for there the trees clustered thick and tall. Mr. Hoopdriver fumbled clumsily with his cigarettes.

"There's a thing I got to tell you," he said, trying to be perfectly calm.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'd like to jest discuss your plans a bit, y'know."

"I'm very unsettled," said Jessie. "You are thinking of writing Books?"

"Or doing journalism, or teaching, or something like that."

"And keeping yourself independent of your stepmother?"

"Yes."

"How long'd it take now, to get anything of that sort to do?"

"I don't know at all. I believe there are a great many women journalists and sanitary inspectors, and black-and-white artists. But I suppose it takes time. Women, you know, edit most papers nowadays, George Egerton says. I ought, I suppose, to communicate with a literary agent."

"Of course," said Hoopdriver, "it's very suitable work. Not being heavy like the drapery."

"There's heavy brain labour, you must remember."

"That wouldn't hurt YOU," said Mr. Hoopdriver, turning a compliment.

"It's like this," he said, ending a pause. "It's a juiced nuisance alluding to these matters, but--we got very little more money."

He perceived that Jessie started, though he did not look at her. "I was counting, of course, on your friend's writing and your being able to take some action to-day." 'Take some action' was a phrase he had learnt at his last 'swop.'

"Money," said Jessie. "I didn't think of money."

"Hullo! Here's a tandem bicycle," said Mr. Hoopdriver, abruptly, and pointing with his cigarette.

She looked, and saw two little figures emerging from among the trees at the foot of the slope. The riders were bowed sternly over their work and made a gallant but unsuccessful attempt to take the rise. The machine was evidently too highly geared for hill climbing, and presently the rearmost rider rose on his saddle and hopped off, leaving his companion to any fate he found proper. The foremost rider was a man unused to such machines and apparently undecided how to dismount. He wobbled a few yards up the hill with a long tail of machine wobbling behind him. Finally, he made an attempt to jump off as one does off a single bicycle, hit his boot against the backbone, and collapsed heavily, falling on his shoulder.

She stood up. "Dear me!" she said. "I hope he isn't hurt."

The second rider went to the assistance of the fallen man.

Hoopdriver stood up, too. The lank, shaky machine was lifted up and wheeled out of the way, and then the fallen rider, being assisted, got up slowly and stood rubbing his arm. No serious injury seemed to be done to the man, and the couple presently turned their attention to the

machine by the roadside. They were not in cycling clothes Hoopdriver observed. One wore the grotesque raiment for which the Cockney discovery of the game of golf seems indirectly blamable. Even at this distance the flopping flatness of his cap, the bright brown leather at the top of his calves, and the chequering of his stockings were perceptible. The other, the rear rider, was a slender little man in grey.

"Amatoors," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

Jessie stood staring, and a veil of thought dropped over her eyes. She no longer regarded the two men who were now tinkering at the machine down below there.

"How much have you?" she said.

He thrust his right hand into his pocket and produced six coins, counted them with his left index finger, and held them out to her. "Thirteen four half," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "Every penny."

"I have half a sovereign," she said. "Our bill wherever we stop--" The hiatus was more eloquent than many words.

"I never thought of money coming in to stop us like this," said Jessie.

"It's a juiced nuisance."

"Money," said Jessie. "Is it possible--Surely! Conventionality! May only people of means--Live their own Lives? I never thought ..."

Pause.

"Here's some more cyclists coming," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

The two men were both busy with their bicycle still, but now from among the trees emerged the massive bulk of a 'Marlborough Club' tandem, ridden by a slender woman in grey and a burly man in a Norfolk jacket. Following close upon this came lank black figure in a piebald straw hat, riding a tricycle of antiquated pattern with two large wheels in front. The man in grey remained bowed over the bicycle, with his stomach resting on the saddle, but his companion stood up and addressed some remark to the tricycle riders. Then it seemed as if he pointed up hill to where Mr. Hoopdriver and his companion stood side by side. A still odder thing followed; the lady in grey took out her handkerchief, appeared to wave it for a moment, and then at a hasty motion from her companion the white signal vanished.

"Surely," said Jessie, peering under her hand. "It's never--"

The tandem tricycle began to ascend the hill, quartering elaborately from side to side to ease the ascent. It was evident, from his heaving shoulders and depressed head, that the burly gentleman was exerting himself. The clerical person on the tricycle assumed the shape of a note

of interrogation. Then on the heels of this procession came a dogcart driven by a man in a billycock hat and containing a lady in dark green.

"Looks like some sort of excursion," said Hoopdriver.

Jessie did not answer. She was still peering under her hand. "Surely," she said.

The clergyman's efforts were becoming convulsive. With a curious jerking motion, the tricycle he rode twisted round upon itself, and he partly dismounted and partly fell off. He turned his machine up hill again immediately and began to wheel it. Then the burly gentleman dismounted, and with a courtly attentiveness assisted the lady in grey to alight. There was some little difference of opinion as to assistance, she so clearly wished to help push. Finally she gave in, and the burly gentleman began impelling the machine up hill by his own unaided strength. His face made a dot of brilliant colour among the greys and greens at the foot of the hill. The tandem bicycle was now, it seems, repaired, and this joined the tail of the procession, its riders walking behind the dogcart, from which the lady in green and the driver had now descended.

"Mr. Hoopdriver," said Jessie. "Those people--I'm almost sure--"

"Lord!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, reading the rest in her face, and he turned to pick up his machine at once. Then he dropped it and assisted her to

mount.

At the sight of Jessie mounting against the sky line the people coming up the hill suddenly became excited and ended Jessie's doubts at once. Two handkerchiefs waved, and some one shouted. The riders of the tandem bicycle began to run it up hill, past the other vehicles. But our young people did not wait for further developments of the pursuit. In another moment they were out of sight, riding hard down a steady incline towards Stoney Cross.

Before they had dropped among the trees out of sight of the hill brow, Jessie looked back and saw the tandem rising over the crest, with its rear rider just tumbling into the saddle. "They're coming," she said, and bent her head over her handles in true professional style.

They whirled down into the valley, over a white bridge, and saw ahead of them a number of shaggy little ponies frisking in the roadway. Involuntarily they slackened. "Shoo!" said Mr. Hoopdriver, and the ponies kicked up their heels derisively. At that Mr. Hoopdriver lost his temper and charged at them, narrowly missed one, and sent them jumping the ditch into the bracken under the trees, leaving the way clear for Jessie.

Then the road rose quietly but persistently; the treadles grew heavy, and Mr. Hoopdriver's breath sounded like a saw. The tandem appeared, making frightful exertions, at the foot, while the chase was still

climbing. Then, thank Heaven! a crest and a stretch of up and down road, whose only disadvantage was its pitiless exposure to the afternoon sun. The tandem apparently dismounted at the hill, and did not appear against the hot blue sky until they were already near some trees and a good mile away.

"We're gaining," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with a little Niagara of perspiration dropping from brow to cheek. "That hill--"

But that was their only gleam of success. They were both nearly spent. Hoopdriver, indeed, was quite spent, and only a feeling of shame prolonged the liquidation of his bankrupt physique. From that point the tandem gained upon them steadily. At the Rufus Stone, it was scarcely a hundred yards behind. Then one desperate spurt, and they found themselves upon a steady downhill stretch among thick pine woods. Downhill nothing can beat a highly geared tandem bicycle. Automatically Mr. Hoopdriver put up his feet, and Jessie slackened her pace. In another moment they heard the swish of the fat pneumatics behind them, and the tandem passed Hoopdriver and drew alongside Jessie. Hoopdriver felt a mad impulse to collide with this abominable machine as it passed him. His only consolation was to notice that its riders, riding violently, were quite as dishevelled as himself and smothered in sandy white dust.

Abruptly Jessie stopped and dismounted, and the tandem riders shot panting past them downhill. "Brake," said Dangle, who was riding behind,

and stood up on the pedals. For a moment the velocity of the thing increased, and then they saw the dust fly from the brake, as it came down on the front tire. Dangle's right leg floundered in the air as he came off in the road. The tandem wobbled. "Hold it!" cried Phipps over his shoulder, going on downhill. "I can't get off if you don't hold it." He put on the brake until the machine stopped almost dead, and then feeling unstable began to pedal again. Dangle shouted after him. "Put out your foot, man," said Dangle.

In this way the tandem riders were carried a good hundred yards or more beyond their quarry. Then Phipps realized his possibilities, slacked up with the brake, and let the thing go over sideways, dropping on to his right foot. With his left leg still over the saddle, and still holding the handles, he looked over his shoulder and began addressing uncomplimentary remarks to Dangle. "You only think of yourself," said Phipps, with a florid face.

"They have forgotten us," said Jessie, turning her machine.

"There was a road at the top of the hill--to Lyndhurst," said Hoopdriver, following her example.

"It's no good. There's the money. We must give it up. But let us go back to that hotel at Rufus Stone. I don't see why we should be led captive."

So to the consternation of the tandem riders, Jessie and her companion

mounted and rode quietly back up the hill again. As they dismounted at the hotel entrance, the tandem overtook them, and immediately afterwards the dogcart came into view in pursuit. Dangle jumped off.

"Miss Milton, I believe," said Dangle, panting and raising a damp cap from his wet and matted hair.

"I SAY," said Phipps, receding involuntarily. "Don't go doing it again, Dangle. HELP a chap."

"One minute," said Dangle, and ran after his colleague.

Jessie leant her machine against the wall, and went into the hotel entrance. Hoopdriver remained in the hotel entrance, limp but defiant.