

## XXXVIII. AT THE RUFUS STONE

He folded his arms as Dangle and Phipps returned towards him. Phipps was abashed by his inability to cope with the tandem, which he was now wheeling, but Dangle was inclined to be quarrelsome. "Miss Milton?" he said briefly.

Mr. Hoopdriver bowed over his folded arms.

"Miss Milton within?" said Dangle.

"AND not to be disturbed," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"You are a scoundrel, sir," said Mr. Dangle.

"Et your service," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "She awaits 'er stepmother, sir."

Mr. Dangle hesitated. "She will be here immediately," he said. "Here is her friend, Miss Mergle."

Mr. Hoopdriver unfolded his arms slowly, and, with an air of immense calm, thrust his hands into his breeches pockets. Then with one of those fatal hesitations of his, it occurred to him that this attitude was merely vulgarly defiant he withdrew both, returned one and pulled at the insufficient moustache with the other. Miss Mergle caught him in

confusion. "Is this the man?" she said to Dangle, and forthwith, "How DARE you, sir? How dare you face me? That poor girl!"

"You will permit me to observe," began Mr. Hoopdriver, with a splendid drawl, seeing himself, for the first time in all this business, as a romantic villain.

"Ugh," said Miss Mergle, unexpectedly striking him about the midriff with her extended palms, and sending him staggering backward into the hall of the hotel.

"Let me pass," said Miss Mergle, in towering indignation. "How dare you resist my passage?" and so swept by him and into the dining-room, wherein Jessie had sought refuge.

As Mr. Hoopdriver struggled for equilibrium with the umbrella-stand, Dangle and Phipps, roused from their inertia by Miss Mergle's activity, came in upon her heels, Phipps leading. "How dare you prevent that lady passing?" said Phipps.

Mr. Hoopdriver looked obstinate, and, to Dangle's sense, dangerous, but he made no answer. A waiter in full bloom appeared at the end of the passage, guardant. "It is men of your stamp, sir," said Phipps, "who discredit manhood."

Mr. Hoopdriver thrust his hands into his pockets. "Who the juice are you?" shouted Mr. Hoopdriver, fiercely.

"Who are YOU, sir?" retorted Phipps. "Who are you? That's the question. What are YOU, and what are you doing, wandering at large with a young lady under age?"

"Don't speak to him," said Dangle.

"I'm not a-going to tell all my secrets to any one who comes at me," said Hoopdriver. "Not Likely." And added fiercely, "And that I tell you, sir."

He and Phipps stood, legs apart and both looking exceedingly fierce at one another, and Heaven alone knows what might not have happened, if the long clergyman had not appeared in the doorway, heated but deliberate.

"Petticoated anachronism," said the long clergyman in the doorway, apparently still suffering from the antiquated prejudice that demanded a third wheel and a black coat from a clerical rider. He looked at Phipps and Hoopdriver for a moment, then extending his hand towards the latter, he waved it up and down three times, saying, "Tchak, tchak, tchak," very deliberately as he did so. Then with a concluding "Ugh!" and a gesture of repugnance he passed on into the dining-room from which the voice of Miss Mergle was distinctly audible remarking that the weather was extremely hot even for the time of year.

This expression of extreme disapprobation had a very demoralizing effect upon Hoopdriver, a demoralization that was immediately completed by the advent of the massive Widgery.

"Is this the man?" said Widgery very grimly, and producing a special voice for the occasion from somewhere deep in his neck.

"Don't hurt him!" said Mrs. Milton, with clasped hands. "However much wrong he has done her--No violence!"

"Ow many more of you?" said Hoopdriver, at bay before the umbrella stand. "Where is she? What has he done with her?" said Mrs. Milton.

"I'm not going to stand here and be insulted by a lot of strangers," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "So you needn't think it."

"Please don't worry, Mr. Hoopdriver," said Jessie, suddenly appearing in the door of the dining-room. "I'm here, mother." Her face was white.

Mrs. Milton said something about her child, and made an emotional charge at Jessie. The embrace vanished into the dining-room. Widgery moved as if to follow, and hesitated. "You'd better make yourself scarce," he said to Mr. Hoopdriver.

"I shan't do anything of the kind," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with a catching of the breath. "I'm here defending that young lady."

"You've done her enough mischief, I should think," said Widgery, suddenly walking towards the dining-room, and closing the door behind him, leaving Dangle and Phipps with Hoopdriver.

"Clear!" said Phipps, threateningly.

"I shall go and sit out in the garden," said Mr. Hoopdriver, with dignity. "There I shall remain."

"Don't make a row with him," said Dangle.

And Mr. Hoopdriver retired, unassaulted, in almost sobbing dignity.