

HOW I DROVE A MOTOR CAR FOR RANDAL.



RANDAL was just about to start for the station to meet his aunt, Miss Ilchester, when word was brought that he was required at Mrs. Cranfield's immediately. It was a summons which a doctor could not possibly neglect. The motor-car was actually at the door. I was at the door; Holmes was at the door; and so was Randal. Mrs. Cranfield's house was within ten minutes' walk. The station was at a distance of about four miles.

Randal rubbed his chin.

"I shall have to go to that old woman's—and pretty quickly too—or I shall hear of it. And Miss Ilchester will have to be met; we shall have all our work cut out to get there. There's no time to put the mare in; not to speak of her being still lame. I suppose, Holmes, you couldn't drive the motor-car?"

"No, sir, begging of your pardon, but I could not."

The expression on Holmes's face as he said this was remarkable. He could not have looked more acidulated had Randal requested him to murder his mother.

Randal glanced my way—interrogation in his eye.

"Eh, Short?—think you could?"

Vol. xxi.—56.

"Well; I never have driven a motor-car, but that's no reason why I never should."

"It certainly isn't; all the other way. You've seen me drive. I've explained to you about the starting, stopping, and steering—all that's necessary for you to know. There's nothing in it—would you like to try your hand? My aunt will have to be met, and it seems that I can't meet her."

"Well; that's just what I was feeling."

"Then that's all right; off you go; there's no time to waste. Aunt will jacket you like anything if she's there first. Holmes will show you the way. I hope, Holmes, you do know the way to the station?"

"Yes, I do know the way to the station."

"Then jump up and sit by Mr. Short—unless you're afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid."

"You understand, Short—you pull this handle when you want to start, and the farther you pull it the faster you go. This is the brake; this is the alarm; and this is the steerer—turn this way when you want to go to the right, and that for the left. Only have a light hand, because it answers to the slightest touch."

"I see. You pull this handle when you want to start—halloa!"

I must have moved the handle in question

quite inadvertently ; because, on a sudden, the machine began to move in a forward direction, and in another couple of seconds we should have dashed into the one chestnut tree which gives Randal's house its name had I not, with great presence of mind, pulled up in time.

"Precisely," remarked the doctor. "Only, don't pull the handle unless you do want to start ; as I've said, the whole machine answers to the slightest touch." He glanced at his watch. "Now you ought to be off."

An instant conviction flashed across my mind that he was right ; though in a different sense to that which he intended. A glance which I caught at Holmes's countenance showed me that his conviction upon that point was even stronger than mine. The unexpected rush which the machine had made for that chestnut tree had given me quite a curious sensation. But Randal gave me no opportunity for that calm reflection which the matter demanded.

"Now then, start away." We did start ; again almost inadvertently. It was with what almost amounted to a thrill of relief that I realized that we had cleared the gate and, after a sharp turn, were heading straight along the road. Randal's voice came after us : "Don't be afraid of giving her her head. She won't tire. You've only got just over twenty minutes to do it in."

No sooner was The Chestnuts being left behind and we were really off than it was borne in on to me with irresistible clearness that I was a person who was, in many respects, wholly unfitted to drive a motor-car. The puzzle of how I ever came to allow myself to occupy such a position was already filling me with bewildered amazement. In the first place, I never could drive anything. I hate driving. I have always been unhappy on the few occasions on which I have held a pair of reins. Then, I am short-sighted. For instance, on that particular occasion we had not gone a hundred yards before I became aware that my glasses were crooked. Although that fact naturally impeded my vision I dared not release either hand for the purpose of setting them straight. What might become of the machine if, while it was careering along at that rate, I let go of it for an instant, I did not like to think. And I did not know how Holmes would take it if I were to ask him to set them straight upon my nose. Again, I am of a nervous disposition, especially when I find myself in a situation to

which I am unaccustomed. As the car wheezed and rumbled along I was becoming more and more conscious that I knew no more about the thing really than about the man in the moon. To my anxious fancy there seemed to be an unusual tone in the panting noise which it was making ; while —although I did no more than keep my hand near the steering-wheel—it wobbled about in a manner which was distinctly unbecoming.

With a view of obtaining reassurance on certain points on which I was in doubt I addressed to Holmes what was intended to be a cheerful little observation.

"Going along nicely, don't you think ?"

I do not hesitate to say that his reply was unexpected.

"Glad I'm insured. I've paid my club money regularly every week for two-and-twenty years."

What could have induced him to suppose that that was a subject in which I was interested at that particular moment, I was at a loss to imagine. No theme could have been farther from my thoughts. The idea that, in consequence of my innocent remark, he should have dragged it in by the head and heels really pained me. Yet, as I had gathered from Randal that the man was, in his way, a character, I felt that it perhaps might be as well not to show resentment.

"Very praiseworthy of you to persevere, I'm sure. Every person ought to have an eye to the future, no matter what his position in life may be. You seem to enjoy excellent health."

"It isn't only a question of health. I'm insured against accidents, too."

"Accidents ? Ah ! it is just as well to be prepared for every eventuality. Though why you speak of that just now I don't quite gather."

"Don't you ? Then I do. I can't help it if the doctor discharges me to-morrow, but if I come back from this little trip alive it's as much as I expect ! Are you going to take us through that hedge, sir ?"

The fellow's words so startled me that I suppose that, without intending it, I must have given the steering-wheel a turn, because, without the slightest warning, swerving to one side, we began racing across the road towards the quickset hedge. I gave the wheel a twirl, which brought us back upon the road, and going pretty straight. Only in my anxiety to get the steering apparatus in the proper position I must have given an extra tug at the starting handle ; in con-

sequence of which we began tearing along at what seemed to me to be a pace of about sixty miles an hour. Before I could correct my error and bring the machine to a standstill—which I did with a jerk which almost threw us on to the road—my glasses were all aslant, and my cap had been torn off my head by the rush of air.

My feelings, when we were stationary, were of a somewhat complicated kind. I was at any rate able to take advantage of the pause to place my glasses in their proper position on the bridge of my nose. Holmes indulged himself with comments of his own.

"That was a lively bit. This motor-car's a kind of a acrobat. It's all over the place at once."

"It was the remark you made which startled me."

"And it was the way you jumped us about which startled me. There's one thing to be thankful for—we are still alive!"

"May I ask you to get down and fetch me my cap? I fancy it must be lying some little distance behind us on the road."

"You'll excuse me, sir, but if I once do get off this beauty I'll never get on again, so long as I've my seven senses. Understand that."

I looked at the fellow. Randal had certainly been right in describing him as a character. I should have added

to that description a few remarks of my own. But as, under the circumstances, I had no wish to be left in sole custody of that evidently erratic machine, I judged it prudent to go in search of my hat myself.

"I suppose if I leave you while I go and look for it, I can trust you not to play tricks with the machinery?"

"Play tricks with the machinery!—me! I wouldn't touch anything not if you was to give me £1,000."

The sincerity of his tone was unmistakable. While I hunted for my cap, which proved to

be farther in the rear than I had supposed, I had reason to congratulate myself that that was a lonely country road. It proved to have found a haven in the ditch. As I endeavoured to free it from some portion of the wet and mud I was beset by a temptation to march straight back to The Chestnuts, leaving the motor-car—with Holmes in it—planted exactly where it was. But something which was not exactly principle prevailed, so that I retraced my steps towards that latest example of human ingenuity. When I reached it I tried to parley with Holmes.

"After all, Holmes, you know a great deal more about driving than I do, and you can't know less about a motor-car; so that I can't help thinking that the thing will be much safer in your hands than in mine. So strongly do I feel this to be the case that if



"MY CAP PROVED TO HAVE FOUND A HAVEN IN THE DITCH."

you'll drive for the remainder of the distance I—I'll give you half a sovereign."

"Thank you, sir; but not for a hundred half a sovereigns. If you don't know more about a motor-car than I do, then I'm sorry for both of us. That's all I can say."

"But you are a coachman!"

"A 'oss coachman; but not a motor-car coachman—as yet; and that I never sha'n't be. I was as good as born in a stable, and was used to the ways of 'osses before I was breeched. There's nothing I wouldn't do for a 'oss—nothing. And all the 'osses ever

I come across knows it as soon as they get a smell at me. I never thought I should come to be sitting in a thing like this. And as to driving one—why, if I was to meet a 'oss as I was going along, I should have to get down and beg his pardon. I shouldn't be 'appy if I was to let him see me doing a thing like that."

Since, after such a confession of faith, reasoning would be plainly thrown away, I resumed my seat and we re-started. I am not about to suggest that the rest of the journey was a period of complete enjoyment, for either Holmes or myself. Or that it was wholly devoid of incidents. When we had gone some way farther—at varying rates of speed; I found it difficult to maintain the same rate; the fingers which held the starting handle would fidget—I descried, or thought I descried, an object in the distance. Previously we had had the road to ourselves.

"Isn't that someone in front?"

"It's a woman. She's half a mile away. You needn't get ready to pass her just at present."

For this remark I was indebted to the fact that the mere sight of a person who would have to be passed began to worry me right away. Possibly I did make a sudden movement across the road with the object of letting her have her side entirely to herself when we did draw near. With that cautious policy which always does actuate me in moments of difficulty I moderated the pace at which we were moving, apparently to a degree which Holmes considered unjustifiable.

"I should say you was going under four miles an hour, sir. It's about three miles to the station, and you've got about ten minutes to do it in. At this rate I don't see how you're going to get there in the time."

"Three miles in ten minutes; it's impossible!"

"Is it? I have been told these things can do sixty miles an hour, and Mr. Trafford Smith, who lent this one to the governor, I heard him say that he himself has done forty mile an hour in it."

"Forty miles an hour! I can assure you, Holmes, that I don't intend to attempt to do anything of the kind."

"No, nor yet four, not by the look of it. Only Miss Ilchester, she won't like being kept waiting—and the governor won't like it neither."

"Goodness, man! what do you want me to do? I'm doing the best I can, although I'll go faster if you think it's necessary."

"It's not so much that as it is that if you don't go faster it won't be no good going at all; because, from what I know of Miss Ilchester, she'll have gone back home before you get there."

Although I was well aware of the hazard attending any hasty manipulation of the mechanism of the car, particularly as the foot-passenger—from whom I had never once removed my eyes—was now within sixty or seventy yards of us, the man's insistence so annoyed me that I resolved to increase our rate of progress. With that view I moved the starting handle just a little forward—at least, such was my intention. But, in my anxiety—for the propinquity of the female, who still seemed unconscious of our approach, made me ridiculously nervous—I must have moved it farther than I desired. Instantly the machine gave a kind of jump—a performance in which it seemed disposed to indulge on the slightest provocation—and we were rushing onward at goodness alone could tell what speed. Wishing to sufficiently advertise our coming I squeezed the india-rubber bulb which Randal had described as the "alarm." Immediately the air was rent by the most discordant sounds. The woman in front of us—who, I am convinced, must have been pretty nearly stone-deaf—seemed to be for the first time roused to a consciousness of our existence. The "alarm" affected her to an extent which was entirely unlooked-for. She positively leaped right off her feet. When, on twisting round her head, she saw us rushing towards her, she made not the slightest attempt to get out of our way, but collapsed—just as we were close upon her—in a heap upon the ground. The singularity of her behaviour caused me to make such a sudden attack upon the steering-wheel that it was a wonder we did not go right over her. Mercifully, however, we just grazed the hem of her dress, though, from the jolt we had, we must have come in contact with a basket, or a parcel, or something which she had dropped from her hand.

So unstrung was I by the thought of how nearly I had been the cause of the annihilation of a sentient human being that I was trembling like a child.

"Thank Heaven," I murmured, "that we didn't kill her quite."

The strange creature at my side immediately gave utterance to sentiments which filled me with amazement.

"Pity you didn't. It would be just as well if some of them old women was killed off."



"SHE POSITIVELY LEAPED RIGHT OFF HER FEET."

Seem to think that all the roads in the country was made for their own private and particular use. It's no use shouting at 'em—not a bit. The only way to get past is to drive straight into the hedge. And then if you do get upset they want to know what you think you was a-doing of."

I made no reply; feeling that it would be worse than waste of time to bandy words with an individual who could give utterance to sentiments of that description.

We did reach our destination at last, after one or two other little incidents. The railway company have placed their station at the extreme end of the village—Berrymead is a village, though its inhabitants amuse themselves by calling it a town. Its principal, and practically only, street is not a very wide one, nor a very straight one either. And as the people thereabouts have a way of leaving their vehicles by the roadside in charge of no one in particular, while their owners waste their time in what they are pleased to call "business," our progress was the cause of one or two rather lively diversions. A frisky pony dashed off with a governess-cart, under the apparent impression that something was going to happen; while a huge cart-horse insisted on standing on its hind legs, as if the very sight of us was sufficient to cause it to suppose itself a star performer in a circus. But these were trivialities. What was no trifle was the fact

that when we did arrive at the station we were something like an hour behind the appointed time; while I was a mixture of heat, worry, rage, nervousness, and misery.

A large, fresh-complexioned lady was standing on the steps. At sight of her Holmes nudged me in the side.

"That's her," he murmured. Immediately adding, by way of increasing my comfort: "Now we're a-going to get it."

I brought the car to a standstill, not, I was aware, in very workmanlike fashion, nor as near to the steps as I had intended. I had found it difficult to arrest the machine exactly where I desired, and experience had already taught me that it was better to stop at what might be called a prudent distance. I had no wish to let the thing run right up the steps and into the station.

"Miss Ilchester?" I inquired, as I removed my muddy cap with a tremulous hand, painfully conscious of my dishevelled appearance. The lady looked at me, then at Holmes, then at the machine—very much at the machine—then back again at me.

"Who are you?" she demanded. I explained; so far as I was able. Her manner was not conciliatory. "It's a pity you should have troubled. There's a train starting in ten minutes to take me back again."

I remarked that I was aware that we were a little late, which I sincerely regretted.

She favoured the motor with another stare. "Do you mean to say John Randal has sent that thing to carry me to his house?" I was about to repeat my former attempt at an explanation when she cut me short, addressing herself to Holmes: "Isn't there a Christian vehicle about the place, adapted to the requirements of a Christian woman?"

Holmes touched the brim of his hat.

"Mare's lame, miss. Ain't been no time to get another."

She marched round the car, examining it in detail. By this time a little crowd of loafers had assembled, who also evinced a disposition to be curious. My sense of dissatisfaction was not growing less. Finally, planting herself beside me, she regarded me with a pair of keen eyes.

"Is the thing perfectly safe? And are you an expert driver?"

"Good gracious, no. Very much the other way. Are you?"

"Am I?—Man!—What do you mean?"

"I can only tell you, madam, that I never drove a machine of the kind before; and I'll take uncommonly good care that I never do again."

I do not know what there was about my remark—which was spoken in a perfectly audible tone of voice—to cause certain of the bystanders to giggle. They did. My candour seemed to surprise Miss Ilchester.

"It's very extraordinary that John Randal should send such a thing, in charge of such a person, to carry me to his house. I hope, at least, that you don't career along at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, as I have been told that these things can do."

At this the wretched Holmes—towards whom I was becoming conscious of a feeling almost amounting to positive hatred—broke into a distinct chuckle.

"Mr. Short, he don't do no hundred miles an hour, miss. More like one. We've took two hours to get here. I could have 'opped it in less time."

The statement was a preposterous exaggeration. But I could not consent to argument with a common coachman. The fellow's words—which certain members of the crowd seemed to find amusing; if I had not exercised great self-control I should have resented the behaviour of an individual who, I am persuaded, was a butcher—apparently tended to reassure Miss Ilchester. She directed the porter to bring out her luggage. It was brought out, proving to be contained in thirteen or fourteen packages, as is the manner of a particular kind of female when travelling. The various articles were distributed about the car in such a manner that I really thought we should have to get off to make room for them. Finally, I found that my feet were resting on what looked like a bundle of rugs, causing my knees to be hunched up in the neighbourhood of my chin. A bonnet-box was on the seat between Holmes and myself, nearly forcing both of us into the road. A huge dress-trunk was on the dash-board, while how they

found space for Miss Ilchester and her property on the seat behind was a problem I do not pretend to solve.

"Now for the hundred miles an hour!"

The remark emanated from the person who I was convinced was a butcher. As a matter of fact we were so encumbered with Miss Ilchester's impedimenta that it was actually dangerous for us to move at all, as events quickly showed. But I had been so annoyed by the remarks which had been made in my own hearing, and by the manner in which they had been received, that I was quite resolved to show Holmes and Miss Ilchester, and everybody else who had been good enough to show themselves interested in the matter, that there were occasions on which it might be difficult to out-hop that motor-car. The butcher's observation—I am sure he was a butcher!—clinched the matter.

"Out of the way!" I shouted—just to let them understand that I did mean business.

Before one or two of the loiterers had really time to leap aside I had pulled the starting-lever, twisted the steering-wheel, and we were tearing down the village street at a pace which, I rather fancy, took some of their breath away. I know it took nearly all mine. Miss Ilchester screamed; I could hear her voice above the cries of the people.

"Give her her 'ead!" exclaimed Holmes. "Lord save us all from sudden death!—There's a cart in front!"

I had learnt that in such cases it was wiser to leave the task of getting out of the way to the other side.

I was dimly conscious that some sort of vehicle was dragged, as it seemed, from right under our wheels. Observations of a distinctly objectionable kind reached my ears. I believe they proceeded from the driver, who, I have a faint notion, was standing up in the cart in an attitude of violent indignation. But details went unnoticed. We were going very much faster than I had intended. That diabolical machine seemed to have an incendiary inclination to increase its speed upon the slightest provocation. But allusions had been made to a hundred miles an hour; and also to hopping. I was quite determined to let everybody see that there were moments during which pace was to me absolutely no object. So I made not the slightest effort to moderate our mad career.

There is a vague impression in my mind that our proceedings created no slight amount of interest. People ran to the doors, and some of them rushed off the footpaths into

the houses. Windows were thrown up; heads thrust out. The whole place was in a condition of excitement. Something tumbled off the car. I am confirmed in the belief by a remark which came from Holmes.

"There goes two boxes and a bundle!"

I have a faint notion that someone—probably Miss Ilchester—shrieked out to me to stop and pick up the fallen property. But

the machinery. It seemed to me that the handle was resisting the attempts I was making to persuade it to move. There was a sudden jolting.

"Run over something!" exclaimed Holmes. "Is it a baby?" He looked behind. My heart was in my mouth. "Mail-cart. Took the baby out just in time. We shall run over something worth running over if we go on very long like this."

I was becoming aware that people were calling at us as we passed, that warnings were being shouted to moderate our pace. The thing was easier talked about than done. The lever would not act. It was becoming momentarily more obvious that something had gone wrong.

"I'm afraid," I ejaculated, between the intervals of tugging at the handle, "that I can't go slower. Something's—broken."

Holmes's comment filled me—



"MISS ILCHESTER SHRIEKED OUT TO ME TO STOP."

the lady kept indulging in a series of shrill exclamations; and the car was making such a noise upon its own account, that it was difficult to distinguish exactly what was said. All at once, however, some unmistakably audible observations did salute my ear.

"Stop! Stop there! You're going too fast!"

By whom the words were uttered I, personally, had not the least idea. But it seemed that Holmes had. I should not have been surprised to learn that he had eyes all round his head.

"That's the policeman; that's old Coppard. I owe him one. Mr. Short, sir, don't you stop for no such man as him."

I did not. To be frank, I could not. An unpleasant suspicion was beginning to dawn on me that the motor was beyond my control; that the jerk I had given the starting-lever had caused something dreadful to happen to

not for the first time—with amazement.

"Then that's all right. I dare bet Coppard means business. He's run himself off his fat old legs, and now I shouldn't be surprised but what he telegraphed over to 'em to lock us up at the other end. Let's hope that if we do kill someone it won't be no one what's of any account."

There was another jolt. Yells seemed to assail me from every side. Again Holmes twisted himself round in his seat.

"Unless I'm wrong, that's Mrs. Perkins. She ain't dead. Only leg broke, or something. So long as you keep to them kind you won't do much harm. Old woman like her's better off in 'ospital than she is out of it."

The man's sanguinary sentiments made my blood run cold. Metaphorically, that is; for as a plain matter of fact the perspiration was dropping off my brow. The motor-car

was running away. There was not the slightest doubt about it. The more I tugged at the lever the more it declined to move even so much as the fraction of an inch. I have no notion what was our rate of speed. I know that we seemed to be flying past surrounding objects on the wings of the wind, and the air pressure against my features was unpleasantly conspicuous. Mercifully, as I dragged at the lever with both hands, I had to leave the steering-wheel alone, or I do not know what would have happened. What actually did take place I am not prepared to state. I can only hope that every jolt did not mean that we had run over someone or something.

At last, realizing that the case was hopeless, I ceased to struggle with the handle which was supposed to keep the murderous monster under proper control, exclaiming:—

"It's no good. Heaven help us, for no one else can!"

"This is better than 'opping," was all that Holmes observed.

All at once the car began to tremble—almost as if it were gasping for breath.

"What's going to 'appen?" demanded Holmes. "If it's going to bust up, the question is if it'd be better to jump off and get smashed up that way or sit tight and get blown to pieces t'other."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the car stopped dead. I am unable to say why. Possibly it had run itself to a standstill; though I am not in a position to furnish a logical and scientific disquisition as to the why and the wherefore. Throughout the creature's erratic proceedings had been quite beyond my comprehension. I know that it did stop dead. And that was enough for me.

In a remarkably short space of time we

were surrounded by an excited, and distinctly abusive, crowd of persons. There seemed to be a general impression that I was to blame. To attempt to explain, either then or afterwards, was simply to waste my breath.

I was summoned for furious driving; and fined, with costs. The persons on the Bench



"THERE SEEMED TO BE A GENERAL IMPRESSION THAT I WAS TO BLAME."

delivered themselves of some exceedingly objectionable remarks, which were reported at full length in the local Press. I had to compensate the woman Perkins for injury to her leg, which was not broken, and which I do not believe was really damaged. All sorts of ridiculous claims were made against me for all sorts of ridiculous things. Miss Ilchester actually suggested that I should pay her money because—owing to there being so much too much of it—some of her property tumbled overboard.

But I kept my temper on that peculiarly trying occasion. I wish to preserve it now. And would merely remark that the next time John Randal sends a motor-car to meet his aunt I hope he will intrust it to the hands of a more efficient conductor. I have had one experience of the vagaries of that kind of vehicle. I came out of it alive, even physically uninjured. I have no intention of tempting fate again in that particular form.