

## X. THE IMAGININGS OF MR. HOOPDRIVER'S HEART

Mr. Hoopdriver was (in the days of this story) a poet, though he had never written a line of verse. Or perhaps romancer will describe him better. Like I know not how many of those who do the fetching and carrying of life,--a great number of them certainly,--his real life was absolutely uninteresting, and if he had faced it as realistically as such people do in Mr. Gissing's novels, he would probably have come by way of drink to suicide in the course of a year. But that was just what he had the natural wisdom not to do. On the contrary, he was always decorating his existence with imaginative tags, hopes, and poses, deliberate and yet quite effectual self-deceptions; his experiences were mere material for a romantic superstructure. If some power had given Hoopdriver the 'giftie' Burns invoked, 'to see oursels as ithers see us,' he would probably have given it away to some one else at the very earliest opportunity. His entire life, you must understand, was not a continuous romance, but a series of short stories linked only by the general resemblance of their hero, a brown-haired young fellow commonly, with blue eyes and a fair moustache, graceful rather than strong, sharp and resolute rather than clever (cp., as the scientific books say, p. 2). Invariably this person possessed an iron will. The stories fluctuated indefinitely. The smoking of a cigarette converted Hoopdriver's hero into something entirely worldly, subtly rakish, with a humorous twinkle in the eye and some gallant sinning in the background.

You should have seen Mr. Hoopdriver promenading the brilliant gardens at Earl's Court on an early-closing night. His meaning glances! (I dare not give the meaning.) Such an influence as the eloquence of a revivalist preacher would suffice to divert the story into absolutely different channels, make him a white-soured hero, a man still pure, walking untainted and brave and helpful through miry ways. The appearance of some daintily gloved frockcoated gentleman with buttonhole and eyeglass complete, gallantly attendant in the rear of customers, served again to start visions of a simplicity essentially Cromwell-like, of sturdy plainness, of a strong, silent man going righteously through the world. This day there had predominated a fine leisurely person immaculately clothed, and riding on an unexceptional machine, a mysterious person--quite unostentatious, but with accidental self-revelation of something over the common, even a "bloomin' Dook," it might be incognito, on the tour of the South Coast.

You must not think that there was any TELLING of these stories of this life-long series by Mr. Hoopdriver. He never dreamt that they were known to a soul. If it were not for the trouble, I would, I think, go back and rewrite this section from the beginning, expunging the statements that Hoopdriver was a poet and a romancer, and saying instead that he was a playwright and acted his own plays. He was not only the sole performer, but the entire audience, and the entertainment kept him almost continuously happy. Yet even that playwright comparison scarcely expresses all the facts of the case. After all, very many of his dreams never got acted at all, possibly indeed, most of them, the dreams of

a solitary walk for instance, or of a tramcar ride, the dreams dreamt behind the counter while trade was slack and mechanical foldings and rollings occupied his muscles. Most of them were little dramatic situations, crucial dialogues, the return of Mr. Hoopdriver to his native village, for instance, in a well-cut holiday suit and natty gloves, the unheard asides of the rival neighbours, the delight of the old 'mater,' the intelligence--"A ten-pound rise all at once from Antrobus, mater. Whad d'yer think of that?" or again, the first whispering of love, dainty and witty and tender, to the girl he served a few days ago with sateen, or a gallant rescue of generalised beauty in distress from truculent insult or ravening dog.

So many people do this--and you never suspect it. You see a tattered lad selling matches in the street, and you think there is nothing between him and the bleakness of immensity, between him and utter abasement, but a few tattered rags and a feeble musculature. And all unseen by you a host of heaven-sent fatuities swathes him about, even, maybe, as they swathe you about. Many men have never seen their own profiles or the backs of their heads, and for the back of your own mind no mirror has been invented. They swathe him about so thickly that the pricks of fate scarce penetrate to him, or become but a pleasant titillation. And so, indeed, it is with all of us who go on living. Self-deception is the anaesthetic of life, while God is carving out our beings.

But to return from this general vivisection to Mr. Hoopdriver's imaginings. You see now how external our view has been; we have had but

the slightest transitory glimpses of the drama within, of how the things looked in the magic mirror of Mr. Hoopdriver's mind. On the road to Guildford and during his encounters with his haunting fellow-cyclists the drama had presented chiefly the quiet gentleman to whom we have alluded, but at Guildford, under more varied stimuli, he burgeoned out more variously. There was the house agent's window, for instance, set him upon a charming little comedy. He would go in, make inquiries about that thirty-pound house, get the key possibly and go over it--the thing would stimulate the clerk's curiosity immensely. He searched his mind for a reason for this proceeding and discovered that he was a dynamiter needing privacy. Upon that theory he procured the key, explored the house carefully, said darkly that it might suit his special needs, but that there were OTHERS to consult. The clerk, however, did not understand the allusion, and merely pitied him as one who had married young and paired himself to a stronger mind than his own.

This proceeding in some occult way led to the purchase of a note-book and pencil, and that started the conception of an artist taking notes. That was a little game Mr. Hoopdriver had, in congenial company, played in his still younger days--to the infinite annoyance of quite a number of respectable excursionists at Hastings. In early days Mr. Hoopdriver had been, as his mother proudly boasted, a 'bit of a drawer,' but a conscientious and normally stupid schoolmaster perceived the incipient talent and had nipped it in the bud by a series of lessons in art. However, our principal character figured about quite happily in old corners of Guildford, and once the other man in brown, looking out of

the bay window of the Earl of Kent, saw him standing in a corner by a gateway, note-book in hand, busily sketching the Earl's imposing features. At which sight the other man in brown started back from the centre of the window, so as to be hidden from him, and crouching slightly, watched him intently through the interstices of the lace curtains.