

XXXVI.

As they were sitting by the roadside among the pine trees half-way up a stretch of hill between Wimborne and Ringwood, however, Mr. Hoopdriver reopened the question of his worldly position.

"Ju think," he began abruptly, removing a meditative cigarette from his mouth, "that a draper's shopman IS a decent citizen?"

"Why not?"

"When he puts people off with what they don't quite want, for instance?"

"Need he do that?"

"Salesmanship," said Hoopdriver. "Wouldn't get a crib if he didn't.--It's no good your arguing. It's not a particularly honest nor a particularly useful trade; it's not very high up; there's no freedom and no leisure--seven to eight-thirty every day in the week; don't leave much edge to live on, does it?--real workmen laugh at us and educated chaps like bank clerks and solicitors' clerks look down on us. You look respectable outside, and inside you are packed in dormitories like convicts, fed on bread and butter and bullied like slaves. You're just superior enough to feel that you're not superior. Without capital there's no prospects; one draper in a hundred don't even earn enough to marry on; and if he DOES marry, his G.V. can just use him to black boots

if he likes, and he daren't put his back up. That's drapery! And you tell me to be contented. Would YOU be contented if you was a shop girl?"

She did not answer. She looked at him with distress in her brown eyes, and he remained gloomily in possession of the field.

Presently he spoke. "I've been thinking," he said, and stopped.

She turned her face, resting her cheek on the palm of her hand. There was a light in her eyes that made the expression of them tender. Mr. Hoopdriver had not looked in her face while he had talked. He had regarded the grass, and pointed his remarks with redknuckled hands held open and palms upwards. Now they hung limply over his knees.

"Well?" she said.

"I was thinking it this morning," said Mr. Hoopdriver.

"Yes?"

"Of course it's silly." "Well?"

"It's like this. I'm twenty-three, about. I had my schooling all right to fifteen, say. Well, that leaves me eight years behind.--Is it too late? I wasn't so backward. I did algebra, and Latin up to auxiliary verbs, and French genders. I got a kind of grounding."

"And now you mean, should you go on working?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hoopdriver. "That's it. You can't do much at drapery without capital, you know. But if I could get really educated. I've thought sometimes..."

"Why not?" said the Young Lady in Grey.

Mr. Hoopdriver was surprised to see it in that light. "You think?" he said. "Of course. You are a Man. You are free--" She warmed. "I wish I were you to have the chance of that struggle."

"Am I Man ENOUGH?" said Mr. Hoopdriver aloud, but addressing himself.

"There's that eight years," he said to her.

"You can make it up. What you call educated men--They're not going on. You can catch them. They are quite satisfied. Playing golf, and thinking of clever things to say to women like my stepmother, and dining out. You're in front of them already in one thing. They think they know everything. You don't. And they know such little things."

"Lord!" said Mr. Hoopdriver. "How you encourage a fellow!"

"If I could only help you," she said, and left an eloquent hiatus. He became pensive again.

"It's pretty evident you don't think much of a draper," he said abruptly.

Another interval. "Hundreds of men," she said, "have come from the very lowest ranks of life. There was Burns, a ploughman; and Hugh Miller, a stonemason; and plenty of others. Dodsley was a footman--"

"But drapers! We're too sort of shabby genteel to rise. Our coats and cuffs might get crumpled--"

"Wasn't there a Clarke who wrote theology? He was a draper."

"There was one started a sewing cotton, the only one I ever heard tell of."

"Have you ever read 'Hearts Insurgent'?"

"Never," said Mr. Hoopdriver. He did not wait for her context, but suddenly broke out with an account of his literary requirements. "The fact is--I've read precious little. One don't get much of a chance, situated as I am. We have a library at business, and I've gone through that. Most Besant I've read, and a lot of Mrs. Braddon's and Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli--and, well--a Ouida or so. They're good stories, of course, and first-class writers, but they didn't seem to have much to do with me. But there's heaps of books one hears talked

about, I HAVEN'T read."

"Don't you read any other books but novels?"

"Scarcely ever. One gets tired after business, and you can't get the books. I have been to some extension lectures, of course, 'Elizabethan Dramatists,' it was, but it seemed a little high-flown, you know. And I went and did wood-carving at the same place. But it didn't seem leading nowhere, and I cut my thumb and chucked it."

He made a depressing spectacle, with his face anxious and his hands limp. "It makes me sick," he said, "to think how I've been fooled with. My old schoolmaster ought to have a juiced HIDING. He's a thief. He pretended to undertake to make a man of me, and he's stole twenty-three years of my life, filled me up with scraps and sweepings. Here I am! I don't KNOW anything, and I can't DO anything, and all the learning time is over."

"Is it?" she said; but he did not seem to hear her. "My o' people didn't know any better, and went and paid thirty pounds premium--thirty pounds down to have me made THIS. The G.V. promised to teach me the trade, and he never taught me anything but to be a Hand. It's the way they do with draper's apprentices. If every swindler was locked up--well, you'd have nowhere to buy tape and cotton. It's all very well to bring up Burns and those chaps, but I'm not that make. Yet I'm not such muck that I might not have been better--with teaching. I wonder what the chaps who sneer

and laugh at such as me would be if they'd been fooled about as I've been. At twenty-three--it's a long start."

He looked up with a wintry smile, a sadder and wiser Hoopdriver indeed than him of the glorious imaginings. "It's YOU done this," he said.

"You're real. And it sets me thinking what I really am, and what I might have been. Suppose it was all different--"

"MAKE it different."

"How?"

"WORK. Stop playing at life. Face it like a man."

"Ah!" said Hoopdriver, glancing at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"And even then--"

"No! It's not much good. I'm beginning too late."

And there, in blankly thoughtful silence, that conversation ended.