# The Fate of Humphrey Snell

George Gissing

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At seven years old Humphrey Snell was brought from his village home to live in London. The part of Essex to which the family belonged was falling into desolation. Thomas Snell, by trade a wheelwright, could hardly keep the wolf from the door; he had three boys to bring up, and, like his neighbours, he saw no hope but in the roaring city of refuge. Father, mother, and children housed themselves in three small rooms, somewhere near Caledonian Road.

The step was not so rash as in many similar cases. Snell had useful acquaintances, and found work. In time the two elder boys began to help with their earnings; James, the hope of the family, advanced himself at a large carriage−builder's, and his brother Andrew, working for a dealer in second−hand furniture, learned how to buy for little what might be sold for much. Humphrey, a more difficult lad to manage, entered the postal service as a telegraph messenger.

For one thing, Humphrey had more brain than muscle, and brain of the quality which does not easily command a price in open market. At school they called him a boy of promise, but his promises were not always fulfilled, for whenever he got the chance, he idled. As a craftsman, he would never be worth his salt, and the arts of money−making had no allurement for him. His delight was to escape from London streets and catch a glimpse of the country  no easy thing for a boy without pocket−money, but attainable now and then at the cost of walks which overtaxed his strength. Thomas Snell, who had not a good word for rural life, dealt harshly with the lad in this matter. 'Fields? What do you want with fields? Can you live on grass?' And when Humphrey returned from one of his rambles at a late hour, mud besmirched, with his pockets full of berries, he learnt the taste of the rod. However, it was necessary to find some occupation for him which afforded plenty of exercise in the open air, so said the hospital doctor who treated Humphrey for a small ailment. For a few months he ran about as an errand boy; but in the end, at his own suggestion, he succeeded in a higher aim, and donned the post−office uniform.

This, of course, represented the toga virilis, and Humphrey was granted a few pence out of his weekly pay. When spring came round he spent the money on rail or tram−car. Sunday morning saw him make for the nearest exit from town, and as time went on, the growth of his legs enabled him to cover greater distances, till at length, from the limit of a threepenny ride he walked as far as to his old home, the Essex village of which he had never ceased to talk with affectionate remembrance. There he found kinsfolk: an old woman, his mother's aunt, who lived with her unmarried son, a market gardener in a small, poor way. They welcomed him, for Humphrey was a tall, comely lad, and pleasant to talk with; he had warm affections, generous instincts, and thought of himself with a rare modesty. Twice or thrice that summer the visit was repeated.

Humphrey's growth had been too rapid; his strength did not keep pace with it, and he began to suffer in health. This was a serious anxiety, for the time drew near when he would have to undergo the medical examination for night duty, with the benefit, if he passed, of an increased pay. Through the winter it seemed probable that his career in this direction was closed; but with the spring  as always  he experienced a revival of health and spirits. The sight of the first green leaf did him more good than all the medicine he had been taking, and when put to the doctor's test, he passed without objection.

In his brief hours of leisure, when a flight from town was impossible, he merely idled. Books did not much attract him; when he opened one he was sure to come upon something or other which took such possession of his thoughts, or so affected his imagination, that he went off into dreaminess, and for that day read no more. No young man ever had less interest in the life about him. For male companionship he cared little; and girls, though he sometimes admired them from a distance, always frightened him at close quarters. His mother called him a booby, for his small money−earning power, in comparison with that of the other sons, tried her patience. And a booby he thought himself; every year he grew shyer and had less to say in the family circle. James and Andrew shook their heads after trying to converse with him of such things as delighted their souls  profit and loss, the theatres and music−halls, the pleasures of the street.

'He'll get chucked one of these days,' Andrew remarked to his father, as they smoked together over a pot of old Burton.

'We shall have him on our 'ands.'

Yet they were not actively unkind to Humphrey  decent people, they could not pick a quarrel with one so amiably disposed. For all his sharpness at school, they thought he must have a 'weak place.' How otherwise explain the fact that a fellow of his age would walk himself to death for the sake of gathering a few flowers, which he pressed in sheets of paper and stored away as if they were worth money? He had a collection of this rubbish, and Mrs Snell declared that it bred fleas. Humphrey never attempted to explain his unaccountable taste; as yet, perhaps, he was unable to make any defence which even to himself would have seemed valid. He went his way in silence, and by habitual gentleness apologised for his unprofitable character.

At the age of nineteen another crisis lay before him: he must now face the medical examination which admits to the rank of postman, with the splendid salary of eighteen shillings a week. Of late his health had given him very little trouble, and it seemed unlikely that he would fail to satisfy the doctor; yet it so befell that, on the day of trial; he came home with abashed and dejected countenance. It was all over with him: the doctor had discovered so many points of constitutional weakness that Humphrey could not possibly be passed: he must resign the service.

'I told you we should have him on our 'ands,' said Andrew Snell, when the family met to consider this catastrophe.

Distress and apprehension made the poor lad really ill. Some disorder of the heart, hitherto obscurely manifested, took a bad turn, and he was obliged to attend a hospital. Week after week he led a life of silent misery under his parents' eyes; there was no saying whether he would ever again be able to work for his living, and at his age to what, indeed, could he turn? Mrs Snell lectured him by the hour on his bygone opportunities. He had only himself to thank for this disaster; it was a judgment upon him for his waste of time in running about after flowers and berries and suchlike childish things. If he had any sense of shame he would burn all that dirty stuff that cumbered his room. And Humphrey straightway did so, feeling he could do no less.

Thus might he have perished, but a kindly hand interposed. His relative in Essex, the market gardener, happened to come to town; he saw Humphrey, and in his private talk with him learnt what was the lad's desire. Thereupon he proposed to the parents that Humphrey should go back into the country with him, and try the effect upon his health of living there for a month or so. Thomas Snell agreed, and was willing to pay two or three shillings a week for his son's support.

Now this countryman, Doggett by name, sympathised in a half−articulate way with Humphrey's passion for the study of nature, and old Mrs Doggett so far inclined the same way that she had become a village authority on medicinal herbs; her teas and potions, cordials and fomentations enjoyed much credit among the neighbours. By this good woman's advice Humphrey threw away the pint bottle of physic he had brought with him from the hospital, and followed a course of homely remedies which Mrs Doggett prescribed and administered. To his boundless joy he rapidly grew better; before long he could walk miles without undue fatigue, and once more he

gave himself up to the delight of searching wood and meadow and lane for plants that were still strange to him.

In talk with Mrs Doggett he called to mind that not far from his home in London was the shop of a herbalist. Now, how did that man procure his stock of herbs? Would he be willing to pay money for plants of a useful kind, such as one might collect here in Essex? Mrs Doggett had no doubt that he would. She knew of men who got a sort of living, at all events in the summer months, by going about herb−gathering and then selling to the shops. She believed there were a good many such shops in London and in other large towns. This information supplied Humphrey with so much matter for thought that he went out and brooded for a whole day. The result was that, not very long after, he privately journeyed up to London, carrying with him a bundle of 'herbs' of the rarer sorts, and so presented himself at the shop he knew of. Mrs Doggett's opinion proved correct: he could sell his plants though for a very small sum; and by conversing with the herbalist, he got hints as to the species it would best pay him to collect. So, with careful avoidance of his family, he returned to the village, still deeply brooding, and conscious of a hope he durst not confess.

The season was autumn. Doggett, who made a bare living by his agricultural work, had a second pursuit, by which through the winter months he was accustomed to earn a little. He made a rough kind of basket, which could be sold in quantities at a neighbouring town. Humphrey, whose dread of a return to London inspired him with unwonted energy, put the question to his relative whether, if he mastered the simple art of basket−making, it would be possible for him to earn food and lodging till next spring. Doggett favoured the idea; such food and lodging as he could offer might very well be paid for in that way. Thereupon Humphrey took a great resolve. He would never go back to London. In one way and another, so it appeared, he could keep himself alive amid the scenes he loved; a crust by the hedge−side and a draught from the stream were sufficient to him, and for clothing he need take but little thought. Thus, too, he might hope to grow strong in body and escape the doom with which he had been threatened.

From this day began a life of strange independence, of rare contentment; a life such as the philosopher might admire and envy; possible only to a nature endowed in high simplicity, and intellectual fervour. It lasted for seven years; so long a respite had Humphrey ere the fate of which he never dreamed confronted him.

In London there are some three−score herbalists, men and women whose business, however obscure, is not unprofitable. They supply old−fashioned remedies to poor people by whom the habits or traditions of a rural origin are still preserved; and not seldom thrive by common quackery among the merely ignorant. With many of these tradesfolk Humphrey came to have dealings; from all parts of the country he supplied them with the herbs they wanted, and received his money by post wherever he chanced to be. It brought him the barest livelihood, but that was all he asked. The warm nights of summertide he spent, as often as not, in field or coppice; at other times a wayside inn gave him shelter. Through county after county, north, south, east and west, he pursued his joyous pilgrimage, saddening only when the fall of the leaf admonished him that he must turn towards the Essex village which was his home in winter. Sickness he knew not; that became a far off memory, blended with the dreamy thought of his life as a messenger in London streets. He had the supreme happiness of earning bread at the same time that he pursued a beloved study. Without so much as glancing at a book, he stored his mind with knowledge of flower and fern and tree. Apart from the plants he sold, names were of little account to him; his untrained intellect cared nothing for the classifications of science, though with opportunity he would doubtless have acquired all that the books could teach, and have added to them from the riches of his own observation. He marked the signs of kindred, and made distinction of families in original, often uncouth, terms; but, after all, each plant was to him an end in itself, a thing to be watched and cherished for its beauty, to be recognised with joy as often as his eyes fell upon it. His memory was wonderfully tenacious; after these seven summers it formed a floral map of the country traversed by him, and only in this way did he recall his wanderings. As much as possible he avoided intercourse with men, though gentle and friendly as ever when brought into their company. His appearance, in spite of rude clothing, was anything but repellent, for the comeliness of his boyhood still appeared in the man's lineaments; he was browned with breeze and sunshine, had long, thick hair of the chestnut shade, a beard roughly trimmed, soft, large eyes. From the habit of bending earthward, he walked with a slight stoop, but

his frame was well knit and hardy.

On the close of the seventh summer, when trees were changing hue, but as yet no leaf had fallen, Humphrey found himself at a great distance from the friendly dwelling which would, as usual, shelter him through the months of gloom. He was at the foot of the Mendips, a district hitherto unknown to him. After a hot day, spent in idling about a spot that pleased him, he set forth at sundown to walk for a few hours on the road he had resolved to follow. This led him to the city of Wells, which he reached about ten o'clock. So clear a moon shone in the heavens that he had been able to observe the wayside plants by its light. It irked him to think of seeking a comfortless bed in some poor tavern on such a night as this. He would pass through the town, and in the meadows beyond find a free resting place, where no one would interfere with him.

The streets were all but silent. He crossed the market place and issued from it by an old porch, wondering at the quaint appearance of everything about him. When he came forth again into the moonlight his wonder changed to astonishment, for he was in the Cathedral Close, and before him stood the lofty front of an edifice more majestic than he had ever beheld. Humphrey knew nothing of Wells, save that it was a little market town; he had never heard of the Cathedral, and could not surmise its historic significance; but the scene impressed him strongly, and there he remained for a long time, in solitude and silence, his imagination moved by the glories of earth and heaven.

Slowly compassing the cathedral, he came within sight of the Bishop's Palace; here again wonder and awe arrested him, so strangely beautiful was the scene. He proceeded with soft step, as if afraid of intruding where such as he had no admission, towards the great trees that overhang the moat, and gazed at the ivied wall with battlements clear cut against the sky. A sound of rushing water fell on his ears; he paced onwards, and discovered the white moonlit torrent leaping from St Andrew's well, which for centuries has poured its flood around the episcopal stronghol heard of the Cathedral, and could not surmise its historic significance; but the scene impressed him strongly, and there he remained for a long time, in solitude and silence, his imagination moved by the glories of earth and heaven.

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Here was the verge of open country — broad meadows gently rising to wooded hills. The town lay hidden by the ancient structures whereat he marvelled. No ordinary habitation could be seen, and not a sound was audible, save that music of the rushing water. Feeling no desire of sleep, and reluctant to turn away, Humphrey retraced his steps along the moat. On reaching the corner where the rank of great elms began, he saw a female figure standing by, or rather leaning against the nearest trunk; the attitude was one of distress — arms raised and head bent. Startled, he moved aside, and was endeavouring to pass without drawing attention, when the person suddenly faced him; in the shadow of the trees he could only ascertain that she was of girlish appearance, but he distinctly heard a sob escape her, and his curiosity turned to compassion. Perhaps his mood, which was far from worldliness, prompted him to indulge the simple impulse of humanity; the gloom, no doubt, aided an unusual boldness. Be that as it may, Humphrey stepped forward with the purpose of asking if he could be of help. But, even as his lips parted, courage failed him. He would have drawn back again; but the girl, surprised at his approach, said, in a frightened voice, 'What do you want?'

'Nothing. I was only going to ask if you could tell me what this place is.'

Uneducated man as he was, Humphrey had at all times a softness of utterance which mitigated the defects of his pronunciation; moreover, such thoughts as were native to him, and such a life as he had led for years past, could not but endow him with speech very different from that of the class he belonged to. At present the sympathy he felt made his tones peculiarly gentle and reassuring. After a moment's hesitation, and with an obvious effort to command herself, the girl answered his inquiry, even addressing him with a respectful 'Sir.' The tears in her eyes,

no doubt, helped the darkness to disguise Humphrey's costume. Her own tongue declared her of humble birth and a native of this county.

Humphrey thanked her, and again wished to go his way, yet he stood hesitating. The Cathedral clock struck eleven.

'It's getting late,' he said, as the girl also remained motionless. 'You're going home, aren't you?'

'I want to, Sir; but ——'

Her voice broke, and she was ready to begin crying again. Apart from its note of distress, the voice itself affected the listener in a way that was very strange to him. He wished to hear it once more.

'Don't call me "Sir"! I'm only a common man, as you'd see if it was daylight. Is it anything you can tell a stranger?'

'It isn't my fault,' sobbed the girl. 'They've turned me out, and I don't know where to go. I've got a little money, but I don't like to go to an inn 'cause they might know me and it 'ud look funny. It ain't my fault; I don't know what to do. I haven't done nothing ——'

She seemed to be about eighteen, and betrayed a weakness of character even in excess of the failing common to her kind; her manner was childish, and could not have excited suspicion in the most experienced observer. Humphrey Snell, whose seven and twenty years represented the minimum of experience with regard to women, felt a profound pity as he listened to her; and therewith blended that other vague emotion stirred by the first sound from her lips — an emotion which reminded him of early manhood, when he was wont to shrink from girls and yet to worship afar off. He began to speak more freely; to urge that she should not remain out of doors at so late an hour. The dialogue was prolonged, and presently Humphrey learned all the particulars of the distressful story. Disentangled from a confusion of superfluous words, feeble ejaculations, repetitions endless, and periods of indiscoverable connection, the narrative can be briefly set forth. This young woman, having long ago lost her parents, had for three years been in service at Bristol; her only home was the house of a married sister, Mrs Davis, who lived at Wells. Now, for chosen friend she had a sister of her brother−in−law, Jenny Davis by name, who also took service in Bristol; and this, as it turned out, was anything but a happy circumstance, for Miss Davis one day disappeared from her situation, and left behind her some disagreeable rumours. Arriving in search of his sister, the man from Wells made inquiries which threw an unpleasant light not only on her behaviour, but also on that of her friend Annie Frost, who was under notice to leave her situation. Annie, after living alone in Bristol for some weeks, obtained another place, but kept it only a short time. 'It wasn't my fault,' she declared. 'I did nothing.' The latter statement might be true enough; doubtless it accounted for Annie's failure to procure another engagement. Having all but exhausted her money, she took a ticket for Wells, and presented herself at her sister's house. Mrs Davis received her coldly, and could not promise hospitality; it depended upon her husband, who would not be home till late that night. When Davis returned, he was somewhat the worse for liquor; without a moment's hesitation, he turned his sister−in−law out of the house, forbidding her, with many oaths, ever to show her face there again.

Humphrey, fully believing all that the girl said in her own defence, was overcome with indignation. He urged her to go back to the house and make another appeal. Surely her own sister would not let her be driven out into the street. Annie was persuaded to act on this advice, and they walked together in the direction of her relative's abode, which was not far off. On coming forth from shadow into moonlight, the companions exchanged a look, and Humphrey beheld the face he might have pictured — foolishly pretty, with round eyes and baby lips, and neither nose nor chin to speak of; on the whole, good−natured in expression, and even through the traces of tears displaying a coquettish self−consciousness.

Watching from a discreet distance, he saw the girl in long parley with someone who opened the door to her. At length she entered, and Humphrey turned away with a sigh of vast relief. That night he did not lie down to rest; the hours passed very quickly, and morning broke before he had time to think of sleep. The next day found him a changed man. He paid no heed to the promise of the sky, always his first care; he walked the lanes without a glance at what grew there; he forgot the necessity of eating. A voice was in his ears, and before his mind's eye shone a face upturned in moonlight.

On the second day he still lingered near to Wells. At sunset, as on the evening before, he paced the shadowed walk by the Bishop's Palace, and there, with a great leap of his heart, he encountered Annie Frost. Her eyes cast down, she stood still as he approached her. They talked for some minutes; Annie related her difficulties and trials,

which she declared unendurable. The Davises grudgingly allowed her to stay beneath their roof till she could find employment, but she must be quick about it. While speaking, she cast rapid glances at her casual acquaintance, and seemed to pay more attention to his features than to his poor and travel−worn garb. Humphrey uttered scarce half a dozen words, and when she left him he walked rapidly away.

A fortnight later he was still in this neighbourhood. Every evening at sunset he had loitered near the moat, and several times had been rewarded by a meeting with Annie Frost. They had walked together over the fields. Humphrey, when he ventured to give an account of himself, perceived with a tremor of exquisite surprise that the girl willingly lent ear; at each meeting she grew more confidential, and seemed to regard him with a trust, an appealing simplicity, which thrilled him to the heart. Never in his life before had he revealed himself as to this girl. He imagined she understood him, that her mute attention meant sympathy. Yet of a sudden she asked: 'Don't you think you could earn more if you was to try?' Humphrey kept a silence, but said at length, absently, 'Yes, I dare say I might.'

Then Annie got a place, as general servant in a small house at Shepton Mallet. They met as though for the last time, and Humphrey was overcome with a profound melancholy. He listened to the girl's babble, sweeter now to his ear than ever song of lark on the uplands, or the ripple of a stream in ferny dells. She seemed to him a creature of exquisite modesty, of transparent truth; a child, yet a woman; pathetic in her pretty helplessness, yet worthy of any sacrifice a man could make for her.

'And shall I never see you again?' he faltered with throbbing heart.

Annie bit her lip and looked away.

'P'r'aps you'll be coming here again.'

'If I could—if I found ——'

He stammered, and stood still in the darkness. Annie sighed, then murmured with touching sincerity:

'I should like to see you wearing better clothes.'

A silence.

'I'll write to you,' murmured Humphrey. 'I might have something to say ——'

He offered to shake hands; Annie gave the tips of her fingers. He turned away; Annie moved to his side again.

'You will write?'

'You'd really like me to?'

'I never get a letter from nobody.'

'Yes, I'll write you a letter, and as soon as I can.'

So they parted, and Humphrey in that hour set forth upon his eastward journey. By dawn he had walked thirty miles along the highroad. Then he slept under a hedge; and, in the afternoon, when he had munched his dinner of bread and blackberries, plodded on once more.

Farewell the tranquil mind! All he thought of now was to travel as quickly as possible to his friends in Essex that he might take counsel with them about a purpose he had conceived, even as he sought their advice as to a momentous step nearly eight years ago. A dread misgiving haunted his hours of weariness, but after sleep he arose with a thrill of rapturous resolve. His blood ran turbid; he cooled his burning forehead in a wayside stream. Ingenuous as a child, he never debated with himself the significance of what had befallen him; his only question was whether he could achieve the undertaking he had in view. He yielded to his passion as to an uncontrollable, inscrutable force of nature. Right or wrong, wise or foolish, choice he had none. Of course, it seemed to him that his desire was the height of wisdom, for he loved with virgin heart.

The Essex village could not forward his projects. Here was no employment for him by which he could earn more than subsistence. Doggett shook a despondent head; with him things were going cheerlessly, and he talked of having to seek a home elsewhere. The old mother lay sick unto death, and Humphrey could not trouble her with worldly things. Tortured by delay, he turned his thoughts to London. James and Andrew had continued to thrive; Thomas Snell and his wife enjoyed repose in their green old age. Between them they might surely help the wanderer to such moderate security as he aimed at.

'Just what I always said,' Andrew remarked. 'All these years you've disgraced yourself leadin' a tramp's life, and now you expect us to find a berth for you. A nice sort of chap you are!'

To his mother, Humphrey confided the facts of the case. Mrs Snell was interested and asked some scores of questions, pertinent and other. But she regarded her youngest son as an amiable lunatic, and could not take his

wishes seriously. Meanwhile, he had written twice to Annie, in the second letter begging for a reply, but none came — possibly she could not write. Weeks passed, and he worked at basket−making. His life was devastated: he had no joy in the priceless past, and was agonised with dread of the future lest his supreme desire should never be granted him. Many and desperate were the schemes he projected. At length, when he was on the point of setting forth to walk into Somerset, careless if he begged by the way, there came a letter from Andrew, which enclosed a newspaper cutting. 'Is this any use to you?' wrote his brother. 'It's a club that a friend of mine belongs to. Jim and me wouldn't mind helping you with the money if you really meant settling down.' The advertisement to which Humphrey's attention was drawn ran thus:

'Steward and Stewardess wanted to take charge of a Workman's Club — members four hundred — to keep the place clean, and serve at bar. Wages £1 15s. per week, with rooms, coal and gas. Cash security, £30. Apply ——'

Instantly he started for London, and on the following day, with money borrowed from his relatives, he travelled by rail to Shepton Mallet, where he spent twenty−four hours. He returned to London, frantic with alternate exultation and fear. His suspense was prolonged for a week; then the committee of the Workman's Club solemnly announced to him that his application would be favourably considered, if he and his wife were ready to enter upon their duties on that day fortnight.

Annie, whose handwriting was decipherable only by a lover 5 eyes, answered his news by return of post:

'Send me money to come i shall want all i have for my things i cant tell you how delited I feal but its that sudin it taks my breth away with heepes of love and ——'

There followed a row of crosses, which Humphrey found it easy to interpret. A cross is frequently set upon a grave; but he did not think of that.