

**FAIRLESS
MICHAEL**

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ROADMENDER

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THE ROADMENDER

I

I have attained my ideal: I am a roadmender, some say stonebreaker. Both titles are correct, but the one is more pregnant than the other. All day I sit by the roadside on a stretch of grass under a high hedge of saplings and a tangle of traveller's joy, woodbine, sweetbriar, and late roses. Opposite me is a white gate, seldom used, if one may judge from the trail of honeysuckle growing tranquilly along it: I know now that whenever and wherever I die my soul will pass out through this white gate; and then, thank God, I shall not have need to undo that trail.

In our youth we discussed our ideals freely: I wonder how many beside myself have attained, or would understand my attaining. After all, what do we ask of life, here or indeed hereafter, but leave to serve, to live, to commune with our fellow-men and with ourselves; and from the lap of earth to look up into the face of God? All these gifts are mine as I sit by the winding white road and serve the footsteps of my fellows. There is no

room in my life for avarice or anxiety; I who serve at the altar live of the altar: I lack nothing but have nothing over; and when the winter of life comes I shall join the company of weary old men who sit on the sunny side of the workhouse wall and wait for the tender mercies of God.

Just now it is the summer of things; there is life and music everywhere – in the stones themselves, and I live to-day beating out the rhythmical hammer-song of *The Ring*. There is real physical joy in the rise and swing of the arm, in the jar of a fair stroke, the split and scatter of the quartz: I am learning to be ambidextrous, for why should Esau sell his birthright when there is enough for both? Then the rest-hour comes, bringing the luxurious ache of tired but not weary limbs; and I lie outstretched and renew my strength, sometimes with my face deep-nestled in the cool green grass, sometimes on my back looking up into the blue sky which no wise man would wish to fathom.

The birds have no fear of me; am I not also of the brown brethren in my sober fustian livery? They share my meals – at least the little dun-coated Franciscans do; the blackbirds and thrushes care not a whit for such simple food as crumbs, but with legs well apart and claws tense with purchase they disinter poor brother worm, having first mocked him with sound of rain. The robin that lives by the gate regards my heap of stones as subject to his special inspection. He sits atop and practises the trill of his summer song until it shrills above and through the metallic clang of my strokes; and when I pause he cocks his tail, with

a humorous twinkle of his round eye which means – "What! shirking, big brother?" – and I fall, ashamed, to my mending of roads.

The other day, as I lay with my face in the grass, I heard a gentle rustle, and raised my head to find a hedge-snake watching me fearless, unwinking. I stretched out my hand, picked it up unresisting, and put it in my coat like the husbandman of old. Was he so ill-rewarded, I wonder, with the kiss that reveals secrets? My snake slept in peace while I hammered away with an odd quickening of heart as I thought how to me, as to Melampus, had come the messenger – had come, but to ears deafened by centuries of misrule, blindness, and oppression; so that, with all my longing, I am shut out of the wondrous world where walked Melampus and the Saint. To me there is no suggestion of evil in the little silent creatures, harmless, or deadly only with the Death which is Life. The beasts who turn upon us, as a rule maul and tear unreflectingly; with the snake there is the swift, silent strike, the tiny, tiny wound, then sleep and a forgetting.

My brown friend, with its message unspoken, slid away into the grass at sundown to tell its tale in unstopped ears; and I, my task done, went home across the fields to the solitary cottage where I lodge. It is old and decrepit – two rooms, with a quasi-attic over them reached by a ladder from the kitchen and reached only by me. It is furnished with the luxuries of life, a truckle bed, table, chair, and huge earthenware pan which I fill from the ice-cold well at the back of the cottage. Morning and night

I serve with the Gibeonites, their curse my blessing, as no doubt it was theirs when their hearts were purged by service. Morning and night I send down the moss-grown bucket with its urgent message from a dry and dusty world; the chain tightens through my hand as the liquid treasure responds to the messenger, and then with creak and jangle – the welcome of labouring earth – the bucket slowly nears the top and disperses the treasure in the waiting vessels. The Gibeonites were servants in the house of God, ministers of the sacrament of service even as the High Priest himself; and I, sharing their high office of servitude, thank God that the ground was accursed for my sake, for surely that curse was the womb of all unborn blessing.

The old widow with whom I lodge has been deaf for the last twenty years. She speaks in the strained high voice which protests against her own infirmity, and her eyes have the pathetic look of those who search in silence. For many years she lived alone with her son, who laboured on the farm two miles away. He met his death rescuing a cart-horse from its burning stable; and the farmer gave the cottage rent free and a weekly half-crown for life to the poor old woman whose dearest terror was the workhouse. With my shilling a week rent, and sharing of supplies, we live in the lines of comfort. Of death she has no fears, for in the long chest in the kitchen lie a web of coarse white linen, two pennies covered with the same to keep down tired eyelids, decent white stockings, and a white cotton sun-bonnet – a decorous death-suit truly – and enough money in the little bag for self-respecting

burial. The farmer buried his servant handsomely – good man, he knew the love of reticent grief for a 'kind' burial – and one day Harry's mother is to lie beside him in the little churchyard which has been a cornfield, and may some day be one again.

II

On Sundays my feet take ever the same way. First my temple service, and then five miles tramp over the tender, dewy fields, with their ineffable earthly smell, until I reach the little church at the foot of the grey-green down. Here, every Sunday, a young priest from a neighbouring village says Mass for the tiny hamlet, where all are very old or very young – for the heyday of life has no part under the long shadow of the hills, but is away at sea or in service. There is a beautiful seemliness in the extreme youth of the priest who serves these aged children of God. He bends to communicate them with the reverent tenderness of a son, and reads with the careful intonation of far-seeing love. To the old people he is the son of their old age, God-sent to guide their tottering footsteps along the highway of foolish wayfarers; and he, with his youth and strength, wishes no better task. Service ended, we greet each other friendly – for men should not be strange in the acre of God; and I pass through the little hamlet and out and up on the grey down beyond. Here, at the last gate, I pause for breakfast; and then up and on with quickening pulse, and evergreen memory of the weary war-worn Greeks who broke rank to greet the great blue Mother-way that led to home. I stand on the summit hatless, the wind in my hair, the smack of salt on my cheek, all round me rolling stretches of cloud-shadowed down, no sound but the shrill mourn of the peewit and

the gathering of the sea.

The hours pass, the shadows lengthen, the sheep-bells clang; and I lie in my niche under the stunted hawthorn watching the to and fro of the sea, and Æolus shepherding his white sheep across the blue. I love the sea with its impenetrable fathoms, its wash and undertow, and rasp of shingle sucked anew. I love it for its secret dead in the Caverns of Peace, of which account must be given when the books are opened and earth and heaven have fled away. Yet in my love there is a paradox, for as I watch the restless, ineffective waves I think of the measureless, reflective depths of the still and silent Sea of Glass, of the dead, small and great, rich or poor, with the works which follow them, and of the Voice as the voice of many waters, when the multitude of one mind rends heaven with alleluia: and I lie so still that I almost feel the kiss of White Peace on my mouth. Later still, when the flare of the sinking sun has died away and the stars rise out of a veil of purple cloud, I take my way home, down the slopes, through the hamlet, and across miles of sleeping fields over which night has thrown her shifting web of mist – home to the little attic, the deep, cool well, the kindly wrinkled face with its listening eyes – peace in my heart and thankfulness for the rhythm of the road.

Monday brings the joy of work, second only to the Sabbath of rest, and I settle to my heap by the white gate. Soon I hear the distant stamp of horsehoofs, heralding the grind and roll of the wheels which reaches me later – a heavy flour-waggon with a team of four great gentle horses, gay with brass trappings and

scarlet earcaps. On the top of the craftily piled sacks lies the white-clad waggoner, a pink in his mouth which he mumbles meditatively, and the reins looped over the inactive whip – why should he drive a willing team that knows the journey and responds as strenuously to a cheery chirrup as to the well-directed lash? We greet and pass the time of day, and as he mounts the rise he calls back a warning of coming rain. I am already white with dust as he with flour, sacramental dust, the outward and visible sign of the stir and beat of the heart of labouring life.

Next to pass down the road is an anxious ruffled hen, her speckled breast astir with maternal troubles. She walks delicately, lifting her feet high and glancing furtively from side to side with comb low dressed. The sight of man, the heartless egg-collector, from whose haunts she has fled, wrings from her a startled cluck, and she makes for the white gate, climbs through, and disappears. I know her feelings too well to intrude. Many times already has she hidden herself, amassed four or five precious treasures, brooding over them with anxious hope; and then, after a brief desertion to seek the necessary food, she has returned to find her efforts at concealment vain, her treasures gone. At last, with the courage of despair she has resolved to brave the terrors of the unknown and seek a haunt beyond the tyranny of man. I will watch over her from afar, and when her mother-hope is fulfilled I will marshal her and her brood back to the farm where she belongs; for what end I care not to think, it is of the mystery which lies at the heart of things; and we are all God's beasts, says

St Augustine.

What a wonderful work Wagner has done for humanity in translating the toil of life into the readable script of music! For those who seek the tale of other worlds his magic is silent; but earth-travail under his wand becomes instinct with rhythmic song to an accompaniment of the elements, and the blare and crash of the bottomless pit itself. The Pilgrims' March is the sad sound of footsore men; the San Graal the tremulous yearning of servitude for richer, deeper bondage. The yellow, thirsty flames lick up the willing sacrifice, the water wails the secret of the river and the sea; the birds and beasts, the shepherd with his pipe, the underground life in rocks and caverns, all cry their message to this nineteenth-century toiling, labouring world – and to me as I mend my road.

Two tramps come and fling themselves by me as I eat my noonday meal. The one, red-eyed, furtive, lies on his side with restless, clutching hands that tear and twist and torture the living grass, while his lips mutter incoherently. The other sits stooped, bare-footed, legs wide apart, his face grey, almost as grey as his stubbly beard; and it is not long since Death looked him in the eyes. He tells me querulously of a two hundred miles tramp since early spring, of search for work, casual jobs with more kicks than halfpence, and a brief but blissful sojourn in a hospital bed, from which he was dismissed with sentence passed upon him. For himself, he is determined to die on the road under a hedge, where a man can see and breathe. His anxiety is all for his fellow;

he has said he will "do for a man"; he wants to "swing," to get out of his "dog's life." I watch him as he lies, this Ishmael and would-be Lamech. Ignorance, hunger, terror, the exhaustion of past generations, have done their work. The man is mad, and would kill his fellow-man.

Presently we part, and the two go, dogged and footsore, down the road which is to lead them into the great silence.

III

Yesterday was a day of encounters.

First, early in the morning, a young girl came down the road on a bicycle. Her dressguard was loose, and she stopped to ask for a piece of string. When I had tied it for her she looked at me, at my worn dusty clothes and burnt face; and then she took a Niphetos rose from her belt and laid it shyly in my dirty disfigured palm. I bared my head, and stood hat in hand looking after her as she rode away up the hill. Then I took my treasure and put it in a nest of cool dewy grass under the hedge. *Ecce ancilla Domini.*

My next visitor was a fellow-worker on his way to a job at the cross-roads. He stood gazing meditatively at my heap of stones.

"Ow long 'ave yer bin at this job that y'ere in such a hurry?"

I stayed my hammer to answer – "Four months."

"Seen better days?"

"Never," I said emphatically, and punctuated the remark with a stone split neatly in four.

The man surveyed me in silence for a moment; then he said slowly, "Mean ter say yer like crackin' these blamed stones to fill 'oles some other fool's made?"

I nodded.

"Well, that beats everything. Now, I 'ave seen better days; worked in a big brewery over near Maidstone – a town that, and something doing; and now, 'ere I am, 'ammering me 'eart out on

these blasted stones for a bit o' bread and a pipe o' baccy once a week – it ain't good enough." He pulled a blackened clay from his pocket and began slowly filling it with rank tobacco; then he lit it carefully behind his battered hat, put the spent match back in his pocket, rose to his feet, hitched his braces, and, with a silent nod to me, went on to his job.

Why do we give these tired children, whose minds move slowly, whose eyes are holden that they cannot read the Book, whose hearts are full of sore resentment against they know not what, such work as this to do – hammering their hearts out for a bit of bread? All the pathos of unreasoning labour rings in these few words. We fit the collar on unwilling necks; and when their service is over we bid them go out free; but we break the good Mosaic law and send them away empty. What wonder there is so little willing service, so few ears ready to be thrust through against the master's door.

The swift stride of civilisation is leaving behind individual effort, and turning man into the Dæmon of a machine. To and fro in front of the long loom, lifting a lever at either end, paces he who once with painstaking intelligence drove the shuttle. *Then* he tasted the joy of completed work, that which his eye had looked upon, and his hands had handled; now his work is as little finished as the web of Penelope. Once the reaper grasped the golden corn stems, and with dexterous sweep of sickle set free the treasure of the earth. Once the creatures of the field were known to him, and his eye caught the flare of scarlet and blue as the frail poppies

and sturdy corn-cockles laid down their beauty at his feet; now he sits serene on Juggernaut's car, its guiding Dæmon, and the field is silent to him.

As with the web and the grain so with the wood and stone in the treasure-house of our needs. The ground was accursed *for our sake* that in the sweat of our brow we might eat bread. Now the many live in the brain-sweat of the few; and it must be so, for as little as great King Cnut could stay the sea until it had reached the appointed place, so little can we raise a barrier to the wave of progress, and say, "Thus far and no further shalt thou come."

What then? Tins at least; if we live in an age of mechanism let us see to it that we are a race of intelligent mechanics; and if man is to be the Dæmon of a machine let him know the setting of the knives, the rise of the piston, the part that each wheel and rod plays in the economy of the whole, the part that he himself plays, co-operating with it. Then, when he has lived and served intelligently, let us give him of our flocks and of our floor that he may learn to rest in the lengthening shadows until he is called to his work above.

So I sat, hammering out my thoughts, and with them the conviction that stonebreaking should be allotted to minor poets or vagrant children of nature like myself, never to such tired folk as my poor mate at the cross-roads and his fellows.

At noon, when I stopped for my meal, the sun was baking the hard white road in a pitiless glare. Several waggons and carts passed, the horses sweating and straining, with drooping, fly-

tormented ears. The men for the most part nodded slumberously on the shaft, seeking the little shelter the cart afforded; but one shuffled in the white dust, with an occasional chirrup and friendly pressure on the tired horse's neck.

Then an old woman and a small child appeared in sight, both with enormous sun-bonnets and carrying baskets. As they came up with me the woman stopped and swept her face with her hand, while the child, depositing the basket in the dust with great care, wiped her little sticky fingers on her pinafore. Then the shady hedge beckoned them and they came and sat down near me. The woman looked about seventy, tall, angular, dauntless, good for another ten years of hard work. The little maid – her only grandchild, she told me – was just four, her father away soldiering, and the mother died in childbed, so for four years the child had known no other guardian or playmate than the old woman. She was not the least shy, but had the strange self-possession which comes from associating with one who has travelled far on life's journey.

"I couldn't leave her alone in the house," said her grandmother, "and she wouldn't leave the kitten for fear it should be lonesome" – with a humorous, tender glance at the child – "but it's a long tramp in the heat for the little one, and we've another mile to go."

"Will you let her bide here till you come back?" I said. "She'll be all right by me."

The old lady hesitated.

"Will 'ee stay by him, dearie?" she said.

The small child nodded, drew from her miniature pocket a piece of sweetstuff, extracted from the basket a small black cat, and settled in for the afternoon. Her grandmother rose, took her basket, and, with a nod and "Thank 'ee kindly, mister," went off down the road.

I went back to my work a little depressed – why had I not white hair? – for a few minutes had shown me that I was not old enough for the child despite my forty years. She was quite happy with the little black cat, which lay in the small lap blinking its yellow eyes at the sun; and presently an old man came by, lame and bent, with gnarled twisted hands, leaning heavily on his stick.

He greeted me in a high, piping voice, limped across to the child, and sat down.

"Your little maid, mister?" he said.

I explained.

"Ah," he said, "I've left a little darlin' like this at 'ome. It's 'ard on us old folks when we're one too many; but the little mouths must be filled, and my son, 'e said 'e didn't see they could keep me on the arf-crown, with another child on the way; so I'm tramping to N – , to the House; but it's a 'ard pinch, leavin' the little ones."

I looked at him – a typical countryman, with white hair, mild blue eyes, and a rosy, childish, unwrinkled face.

"I'm eighty-four," he went on, "and terrible bad with the rheumatics and my chest. Maybe it'll not be long before the Lord remembers me."

The child crept close and put a sticky little hand confidently into the tired old palm. The two looked strangely alike, for the world seems much the same to those who leave it behind as to those who have but taken the first step on its circular pathway.

"Ook at my kitty," she said, pointing to the small creature in her lap. Then, as the old man touched it with trembling fingers she went on – "'Oo isn't my grandad; he's away in the sky, but I'll kiss 'oo."

I worked on, hearing at intervals the old piping voice and the child-treble, much of a note; and thinking of the blessings vouchsafed to the simple old age which crowns a harmless working-life spent in the fields. The two under the hedge had everything in common and were boundlessly content together, the sting of the knowledge of good and evil past for the one, and for the other still to come; while I stood on the battlefield of the world, the flesh, and the devil, though, thank God, with my face to the foe.

The old man sat resting: I had promised him a lift with my friend the driver of the flour-cart, and he was almost due when the child's grandmother came down the road.

When she saw my other visitor she stood amazed.

"What, Richard Hunton, that worked with my old man years ago up at Ditton, whatever are you doin' all these miles from your own place?"

"Is it Eliza Jakes?"

He looked at her dazed, doubtful.

"An' who else should it be? Where's your memory gone, Richard Hunton, and you not such a great age either? Where are you stayin'?"

Shame overcame him; his lips trembled, his mild blue eyes filled with tears. I told the tale as I had heard it, and Mrs Jakes's indignation was good to see.

"Not keep you on 'alf a crown! Send you to the House! May the Lord forgive them! You wouldn't eat no more than a fair-sized cat, and not long for this world either, that's plain to see. No, Richard Hunton, you don't go to the House while I'm above ground; it'd make my good man turn to think of it. You'll come 'ome with me and the little 'un there. I've my washin', and a bit put by for a rainy day, and a bed to spare, and the Lord and the parson will see I don't come to want."

She stopped breathless, her defensive motherhood in arms.

The old man said quaveringly, in the pathetic, grudging phrase of the poor, which veils their gratitude while it testifies their independence, "Maybe I might as well." He rose with difficulty, picked up his bundle and stick, the small child replaced the kitten in its basket, and thrust her hand in her new friend's.

"Then 'oo *is* grandad tum back," she said.

Mrs Jakes had been fumbling in her pocket, and extracted a penny, which she pressed on me.

"It's little enough, mister," she said.

Then, as I tried to return it: "Nay, I've enough, and yours is poor paid work."

I hope I shall always be able to keep that penny; and as I watched the three going down the dusty white road, with the child in the middle, I thanked God for the Brotherhood of the Poor.

IV

Yesterday a funeral passed, from the workhouse at N – , a quaint sepulture without solemnities. The rough, ungarnished coffin of stained deal lay bare and unsightly on the floor of an old market-cart; a woman sat beside, steadying it with her feet. The husband drove; and the most depressed of the three was the horse, a broken-kneed, flea-bitten grey. It was pathetic, this bringing home in death of the old father whom, while he lived, they had been too poor to house; it was at no small sacrifice that they had spared him that terror of old age, a pauper's grave, and brought him to lie by his wife in our quiet churchyard. They felt no emotion, this husband and wife, only a dull sense of filial duty done, respectability preserved; and above and through all, the bitter but necessary counting the cost of this last bed.

It is strange how pagan many of us are in our beliefs. True, the funeral libations have made way for the comfortable bake-meats; still, to the large majority Death is Pluto, king of the dark Unknown whence no traveller returns, rather than Azrael, brother and friend, lord of this mansion of life. Strange how men shun him as he waits in the shadow, watching our puny straining after immortality, sending his comrade sleep to prepare us for himself. When the hour strikes he comes – very gently, very tenderly, if we will but have it so – folds the tired hands together, takes the wayworn feet in his broad strong palm; and lifting us

in his wonderful arms he bears us swiftly down the valley and across the waters of Remembrance.

Very pleasant art thou, O Brother Death, thy love is wonderful, passing the love of women.

To-day I have lived in a whirl of dust. To-morrow is the great annual Cattle Fair at E – , and through the long hot hours the beasts from all the district round have streamed in broken procession along my road, to change hands or to die. Surely the lordship over creation implies wise and gentle rule for intelligent use, not the pursuit of a mere immediate end, without any thought of community in the great sacrament of life.

For the most part mystery has ceased for this working Western world, and with it reverence. Coventry Patmore says: "God clothes Himself actually and literally with His whole creation. Herbs take up and assimilate minerals, beasts assimilate herbs, and God, in the Incarnation and its proper Sacrament, assimilates us, who, says St Augustine, 'are God's beasts.'" It is man in his blind self-seeking who separates woof from weft in the living garment of God, and loses the more as he neglects the outward and visible signs of a world-wide grace.

In olden days the herd led his flock, going first in the post of danger to defend the creatures he had weaned from their natural habits for his various uses. Now that good relationship has ceased for us to exist, man drives the beasts before him, means to his end, but with no harmony between end and means. All day long the droves of sheep pass me on their lame and patient

way, no longer freely and instinctively following a protector and forerunner, but *driven*, impelled by force and resistless will – the same will which once went before without force. They are all trimmed as much as possible to one pattern, and all make the same sad plaint. It is a day on which to thank God for the unknown tongue. The drover and his lad in dusty blue coats plod along stolidly, deaf and blind to all but the way before them; no longer wielding the crook, instrument of deliverance, or at most of gentle compulsion, but armed with a heavy stick and mechanically dealing blows on the short thick fleeces; without evil intent because without thought – it is the ritual of the trade.

Of all the poor dumb pilgrims of the road the bullocks are the most terrible to see. They are not patient, but go most unwillingly with lowered head and furtive sideways motion, in their eyes a horror of great fear. The sleek cattle, knee deep in pasture, massed at the gate, and stared mild-eyed and with inquiring bellow at the retreating drove; but these passed without answer on to the Unknown, and for them it spelt death.

Behind a squadron of sleek, well-fed cart-horses, formed in fours, with straw braid in mane and tail, came the ponies, for the most part a merry company. Long strings of rusty, shaggy two-year-olds, unbroken, unkempt, the short Down grass still sweet on their tongues; full of fun, frolic, and wickedness, biting and pulling, casting longing eyes at the hedgerows. The boys appear to recognise them as kindred spirits, and are curiously forbearing and patient. Soon both ponies and boys vanish in a white whirl,

and a long line of carts, which had evidently waited for the dust to subside, comes slowly up the incline. For the most part they carry the pigs and fowls, carriage folk of the road. The latter are hot, crowded, and dusty under the open netting; the former for the most part cheerfully remonstrative.

I drew a breath of relief as the noise of wheels died away and my road sank into silence. The hedgerows are no longer green but white and choked with dust, a sight to move good sister Rain to welcome tears. The birds seem to have fled before the noisy confusion. I wonder whether my snake has seen and smiled at the clumsy ruling of the lord he so little heeds? I turned aside through the gate to plunge face and hands into the cool of the sheltered grass that side the hedge, and then rested my eyes on the stretch of green I had lacked all day. The rabbits had apparently played and browsed unmindful of the stir, and were still flirting their white tails along the hedgerows; a lark rose, another and another, and I went back to my road. Peace still reigned, for the shadows were lengthening, and there would be little more traffic for the fair. I turned to my work, grateful for the stillness, and saw on the white stretch of road a lone old man and a pig. Surely I knew that tall figure in the quaint grey smock, surely I knew the face, furrowed like nature's face in springtime, and crowned by a round, soft hat? And the pig, the black pig walking decorously free? Ay, I knew them.

In the early spring I took a whole holiday and a long tramp; and towards afternoon, tired and thirsty, sought water at a little lonely

cottage whose windows peered and blinked under overhanging brows of thatch. I had, not the water I asked for, but milk and a bowl of sweet porridge for which I paid only thanks; and stayed for a chat with my kindly hosts. They were a quaint old couple of the kind rarely met with nowadays. They enjoyed a little pension from the Squire and a garden in which vegetables and flowers lived side by side in friendliest fashion. Bees worked and sang over the thyme and marjoram, blooming early in a sunny nook; and in a homely sty lived a solemn black pig, a pig with a history.

It was no common utilitarian pig, but the honoured guest of the old couple, and it knew it. A year before, their youngest and only surviving child, then a man of five-and-twenty, had brought his mother the result of his savings in the shape of a fine young pig: a week later he lay dead of the typhoid that scourged Maidstone. Hence the pig was sacred, cared for and loved by this Darby and Joan.

"Ee be mos' like a child to me and the mother, an' mos' as sensible as a Christian, ee be," the old man had said; and I could hardly credit my eyes when I saw the tall bent figure side by side with the black pig, coming along my road on such a day.

I hailed the old man, and both turned aside; but he gazed at me without remembrance.

I spoke of the pig and its history. He nodded wearily. "Ay, ay, lad, you've got it; 'tis poor Dick's pig right enow."

"But you're never going to take it to E – ?"

"Ay, but I be, and comin' back alone, if the Lord be merciful.

The missus has been terrible bad this two months and more; Squire's in foreign parts; and food-stuffs such as the old woman wants is hard buying for poor folks. The stocking's empty, now 'tis the pig must go, and I believe he'd be glad for to do the missus a turn; she were terrible good to him, were the missus, and fond, too. I dursn't tell her he was to go; she'd sooner starve than lose poor Dick's pig. Well, we'd best be movin'; 'tis a fairish step."

The pig followed comprehending and docile, and as the quaint couple passed from sight I thought I heard Brother Death stir in the shadow. He is a strong angel and of great pity.

V

There is always a little fire of wood on the open hearth in the kitchen when I get home at night; the old lady says it is "company" for her, and sits in the lonely twilight, her knotted hands lying quiet on her lap, her listening eyes fixed on the burning sticks.

I wonder sometimes whether she hears music in the leap and lick of the fiery tongues, music such as he of Bayreuth draws from the violins till the hot energy of the fire spirit is on us, embodied in sound.

Surely she hears some voice, that lonely old woman on whom is set the seal of great silence?

It is a great truth tenderly said that God builds the nest for the blind bird; and may it not be that He opens closed eyes and unstops deaf ears to sights and sounds from which others by these very senses are debarred?

Here the best of us see through a mist of tears men as trees walking; it is only in the land which is very far off and yet very near that we shall have fulness of sight and see the King in His beauty; and I cannot think that any listening ears listen in vain.

The coppice at our back is full of birds, for it is far from the road and they nest there undisturbed year after year. Through the still night I heard the nightingales calling, calling, until I could bear it no longer and went softly out into the luminous dark.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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