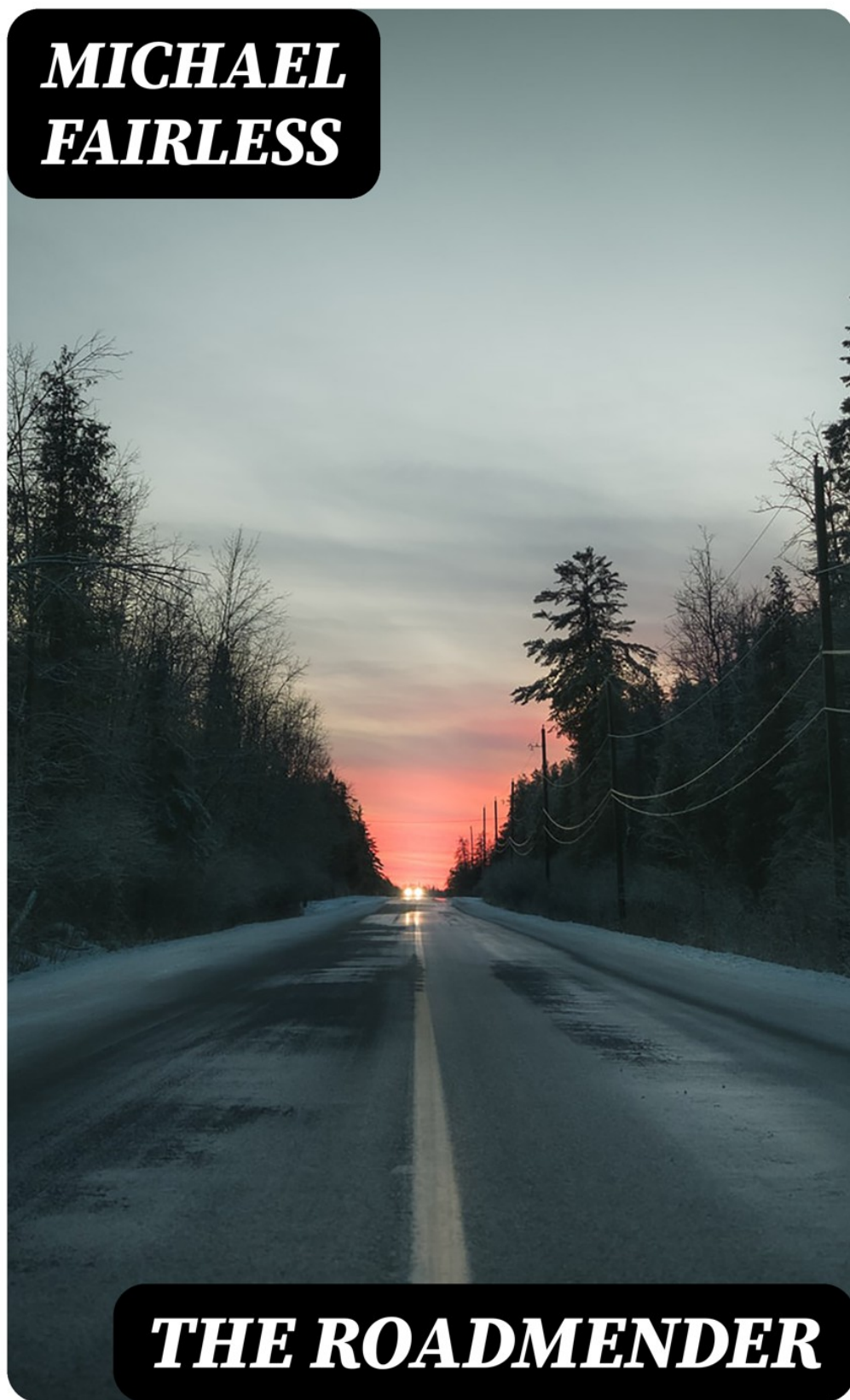


***MICHAEL
FAIRLESS***



THE ROADMENDER

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CHAPTER I

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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, sweetbrier, 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 fellowmen 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 carthorse 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.

CHAPTER II

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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 earthy 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.