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Far From The Madding Crowd

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We left the North Shore at sunset and plunged into the inland woods. The shadow of our tourist-car was stretching far out over the clearings and beginning to climb up the trees beyond. The porter—a symphony in black and white—was lighting the lamps that jangled and jarred along the ceiling of the car. Blinds were pulled down, those little one-legged tourist-car tables which one articulates into the car wall were brought out, and suppers were unswathed. We—four young fellows out on the road for health or business—groped our way down the swaying car amid a tinkle of cups and spoons. We stopped opposite a table whose nakedness was covered by a cloth white as the driven snow, on which trembled to the motion of the car glass salt-celars, cups (with saucers!) at the bottom of which lingered no dregs from the last potation, knives, forks, and butter in dainty platters. In a file of bare, greasy tables on whose surfaces saucerless cups had left demilunes of milk this speckless board shone like a princess among slatterns.

Behind this table rose the benign faces of an elderly lady and gentleman. We waited for no invitation to sit down. We had eaten from no other table but that since, on the first day of the long transcontinental trip, a motherly hand had arrested me as I was going out to snatch some rolls at a refreshment station and had compelled me to sit down at this hospitable board. Since then we had been under a spell. This homely table had acquired for us the sacredness of a family hearth, whose fire was the glowing bowl of our elderly host's pipe.

The influence upon us of this table—set with a regularity and scrupulousness that seemed to symbolize stability in this feverish travel-world—puzzled me, for I am no psychologist. It could not have been the charm of our host's conversation—for that was but a digest of the three-days-old newspaper he had bought at triple its value from an agent. It could not have been the fare—for the table was more cleanly than sumptuous. The magnetism of youth for youth should have made us join the party of young people who played cards every night till the berths were made up. But we preferred our strange commensals—the elderly lady and gentleman—we, four young men in the pride of life, who had cast off the leading-strings of home, who would have torn off the rind of life to get at its juice, who were intoxicated with the wine of independence. I say the phenomenon of our being attracted by this homely, prosaic couple presented itself to me as an interesting problem in psychology. I

lay down in my berth that night, too pre-occupied with it even to undress.

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In the bottomless silence of a night-stop, I awoke and heard the tick of a telegraph. It was a hot night and my window was open. I looked out. A hissing arc-light, enveloped in a swarm of night-flies, lighted up part of a platform and a wooden station. Beyond and around rose the oppressive woods; no sign of other habitation. The ticking telegraph seemed the throbbing heart of this wilderness.

My berth was stifling hot, and sleep was beyond the dreams of weariness. I stepped out into the aisle. Across it I could hear my good host and his lady producing a sound, bourgeois snore. I went out on to the station-platform. The conductor sauntered up, almost blinding me with his lantern.

I learned that a broken coupler would necessitate a stop of at least fifteen minutes. I walked towards the luminous circle cast by the arc-light. Just then a figure issued from a door in the station whence the sound of the telegraph had proceeded and stepped into that frame of light. It was a man on whose upturned face the light shone full. I recognized that face. The last time I had seen it had been far away, in the populous city, at a social gathering, a dance, amid glittering chandeliers, amid cozy furniture, amid elegant women. It was the face of Roy Blake, the favorite of society, the prince at a ball, the good fellow, the friend of his kind that I had known. What fate had sent him to these wilds? All this rushed through my brain as he saw me and gripped my hand. That grip prepared me for the sight I was to see presently. It was like iron—I recognized something abnormal in it.

He said nothing, but keeping that iron grip on my hand, led me to the station-door, opened it and ascended a dark, narrow stair, at the top of which a door opened into a low-roofed room, lit by a dormer window. A dim, cold light from the somewhat distant arc-light bathed the recesses of the room in a kind of penumbra. The wall seemed to be covered with a paper of rather irregular pattern.

"How long have you been operator here?" I asked.

"Two years!"

Two years! He who chafed at being away from his fellows for two days to be banished to a clearing in New Ontario in order that a little instrument might click a message to a station ten miles off!