Manuscript: Man Afraid of the Cars

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MAN AFRAID OF THE CARS

I knew him well when I was twelve or thereabouts though I had never seen him - only heard my father and his friends talk about him. He was a special favorite in the small private Gallery of interesting people I kept to think about at night when I lay awake. I called him "Man Afraid of the Cars."

I liked him because he made me feel superior; I was not afraid of the cars. Everyone else in the Gallery awed me, being so far as I recall, more or less like its chief figure, the Bishop, a grand, thrilling personage, fit only for worship. It was years before I ever saw a real Bishop and the man could never know how he suffered in comparison with the Bishop of my Gallery.

The original of Man Afraid of the Cars was a farmer living on a hilltop not so many miles away. His father had cleared that hilltop - he had been born there, inherited the land, stayed by it. He was a good farmer. Until he was forty five years old the nearest railroad had been some twenty five miles away. He had never been to see it. Why should he? He had all he wanted at home. There were two terms of school
each year for his children and the school house so near they could walk. There was a church which shared a preacher with two other country congregations and he was a Deacon. There was a general store where every Saturday he went to barter produce for groceries — hear the neighborhood news — pick up his copy of the Weekly Tribune — "Mr. Greeley's paper." What more could a man want? Besides he was too busy farming to "go gadding about."

Such was his life and satisfactions when his part of the world was turned topsy-turvy. Less than twenty miles away a man drilled a hole some seventy feet into the earth and began pumping up large quantities of petroleum, rock oil — its value already known. The news spread and overnight men from all directions came hurrying into the country to try their luck. They even hauled their engines and tools and boilers over his hilltop, cutting up the roads, tearing down his fences. And worst, an infidelity of man, many of his neighbors turned teamsters or drillers. He thought the whole business impious and applauded when the preacher declared that taking oil out of the earth was interfering with the plans of the Almighty. He had put it there to use in burning up the world on the last day. What was He going to do now?

The business had been going on five years or so when there appeared in the Valley over which he looked and into which he had never descended gangs of men cutting down the trees, laying a road bed, bridging the streams. They were
bringing in a railroad. From the first he looked on it as an outrage but when a train actually ran over the tracks below shrieking at the crossings, belching out smoke in the way of engines seventy five years ago, the outrage turned to terror. "It was a thing out of Hell," he said. One day when this thing out of Hell picked up a careless friend of his as he drove over the tracks and scattered him and his horses and wagon in pieces right and left, he grimly said, "the devil was getting in his work."

How I treasured every word I heard of him. How I built him up into a figure nobody who knew him would have recognized. To think there should be such a man in the world. How superior I felt.

I grew up, indiscriminately, forgetting my Gallery of interesting people. If I had ever thought about my Man afraid of the Cars it would have been to say the day had passed when there was his like in the United States. Then suddenly I discovered we were rearing a new generation of the breed, and of all places here in New York City.

It came about this way:--

I was walking up and down the platform of an up-state railroad platform getting a bit of exercise before I took the late afternoon train to town... when I suddenly came upon a pretty girl sobbing on the shoulder of a handsome young man. First parting of young lovers, I reflected, and felt a little sorry for myself that the day had gone when I could
sob so heartily on anybody's shoulder.

It was a blistering hot day and I found that the chair cars were not air-conditioned. The conductor, however, found me a seat in a cooked Pullman which I took much as I detest a Pullman for daylight travel. I was hardly in with my bags when a porter put the pretty girl I had seen crying outside into the seat opposite mine. She was trying to check her tears, but settled into her corner she buried her face in her handkerchief and started in again.

I was too hot and tired to feel either motherly or efficacious, so I hid behind my New Yorker, peering out now and then to see if there was any prospect of recovery. When the steward came in announcing dinner in the dining car I seized the chance to escape. Leave her to herself, I thought, and she will be all right when I come back. And that was true.

When I came in an hour later she was showing no sign of tears, even if her eyes were still a little red. Very prettily she made room for me, obviously not adverse to speaking. I remarked casually that in spite of the crowding it was much more comfortable here in the sleeper than in the chair car through which I just passed.

"Is this a sleeping car?" she asked with interest.

"Why, yes," I said surprised. "Have you never been in one before?"
"No," she said, "where are the beds?"

Now I am an authority on life in sleeping cars - upper and lower berths. I shudder to think of the nights I have spent in them as I have gone about the country on the most brutal of all the sidelines a writer can practice - lyceum lecturing. Here was a time to use my knowledge to divert the child and that I did.

She looked a bit shocked after I had explained the process, particularly the climbing into the upper berth.

"It must be dreadful," she said, "getting up in the morning. With all these people - how do you do it? It doesn't seem nice."

And with the memory of the process in a crowded sleeper - the indecency of it - the near nausea - I said heartily, "No it is not nice."

But I was curious. Here was one who looked the traveled young woman, her gown and accessories smacked of the rue de la Paix, her luggage was the top notch of exclusive smartness. How could it be that she was unfamiliar with Pullmans. I ventured the question.

"Oh," she said quite simply, "I was never on a train before. We always travel by plane or by car if we are not in a hurry. But this time it could not be arranged. I am sailing back to school tomorrow. There was no other way. That is why I was crying. My brother" (not her lover then)
"said I was foolish. But it seemed so dreadful not to know how to act and to be with people I did not know. I was afraid."

As she talked my Man Afraid of the Cars came to life. And with him tumbled others to whom I had never given a second thought but whom on the instant I recognized to be of his kind. There was the woman who blanched at the idea of going into the subway. She would drive her car seventy five miles an hour and skip warning lights but to walk into an underground tube, to be crowded in with a multitude of people she did not know, she was sick with terror and disgust at the idea. I have known women to whom a taxi was a degradation. Who might not have been before you? And how can you trust every man you pick up with on the street driving a car? I have known men who stayed in town over the week and if chauffeur or car or plane was out of commission rather than trust themselves to the dangers and the confusion of railway. I even met a millionaire once who said he never went abroad unless he went in his own ocean-going yacht.

"How awful," he said with genuine distaste, "to spend a week with strange people, to have no control over route or speed."

But when I submit to my sophisticated and experienced friends these little exhibits I find them either looking at me with surprise that I should be so ignorant of the
ways of the great world or matching them with multitudes of similar exhibits. That is, it seems to be coming about that we are breeding a new race of cats that walk alone, a race bred to speed and exclusiveness. One wonders if they should be allowed to vote.

Certain it is that these strange new ways of conquering space have not taken from them the fear of earlier men of things they do not know. They still are afraid of the cars.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

May it not be that the age of the motor produces as many kinds of fools - I will not suggest more - than the age of the horse and buggy?