

A Meditation on Roads

(By BONAVENTURE MEAGHER, O.P., in the *London Month.*)

I

The cause of things was the ceasing of the track; it ended suddenly, without warning, in the Bush. It was, and then it was not. There was a weird significance about the sudden extinction of the trail, as though beyond were an enchanted land, and the flat-topped thorn trees were in reality former travellers literally rooted to the spot. In those vast stretches of bush veldt, and in its vaster silences, anything might happen.

So thought the solitary horseman, as he cast about in vain endeavor to pick up again the lost trail. He had followed directions, but directions are necessarily vague in a roadless land. "Four hours to the west" is vague, especially when trails diverge on the four hours' ride.

The west was a riot of rapidly deepening reds and purples, such as one only sees in an African after-glow. A distant range of mountains, behind which the sun had disappeared, stood out against the glowing sky, clear cut, black and flat, as though cut out of cardboard. The stars came leaping into the sky with the swift advance of utter darkness.

"Bushed!" exclaimed the rider, more in sad amazement than in anger. Bushed meant a night in a tree—not a pleasant prospect at any time, less so in big-game territory! Accordingly he betook himself to a tree that looked less unfriendly than its neighbors; tethered his horse securely; climbed up, and made himself as comfortable as circumstances (which included thorns) permitted, and there prepared to await the advent of the long-coming dawn.

"Why a tree, and a thorn tree at that," asks the untravelled reader, "when one might couch comfortably on leaves and grass with saddle for pillow?" No Darwinian need found an argument for arboreal ancestors on this habit of South African wanderers. On the ground are creepy-crawly things, and a horse, a valuable asset by day, becomes a danger by night when the felidæ are about. So the horse has to take his chance; just as in the open veldt in one of the terrible thunder-storms peculiar to the region one hobbles one's horse and then goes apart an arrow's flight, like Agar, to lie flat under the cataracts of heaven, praying that if the lightning comes one's way, it may select the highest point, the poor quadruped, which at £10 odd is reckoned less valuable than the biped.

Therefore the rider, who is also the writer, climbed his tree.

In the subsequent blackness and silence of the night, broken at intervals by the eerie cries of predatory beasts, he first leguiled himself by counting the brilliant constellations he knew in the bejewelled skies, then, tiring of that, he meditated on the advantages of roads.

Thus ran his thoughts. One seldom gives a thought to ordinary, every-day blessings, until the extraordinary happens. Roads are such ordinary blessings that one would feel

staggered indeed, if, on looking out of the window some morning, one perceived that they had all disappeared. In big cities, in towns and villages, it would not be difficult to find one's way, but in the country, specially in a country like this, it would be well-nigh impossible to get about without danger of being lost, or, at best, seriously delayed.

His thoughts next turned naturally to the first white settlers in this country who had trekked inland from the coast, carrying all their worldly possessions in the tented, slow-moving ox-waggons, over the great mountain ranges, across the vast spaces of the veldt. Perils of every kind had beset them: starvation, thirst, sickness, savage beasts and justly hostile natives. Moreover, the magnitude of their achievements is enhanced by the fact that they faced, and overcame, a roadless land.

The first conclusion of the treed one was, that whereas a mere track left by a savage tribe might lead anywhere (for example, up a thorn tree), a road, be it good or bad, did lead eventually to civilised people. For civilisation demands highways to facilitate commerce, to nurture social life, to maintain law. A road is therefore the hall-mark of civilisation, just as a land without roads bears the stamp of savagery.

II

And this conclusion led without effort of mind to the consideration of those great road makers, the civilisers and law-givers of Europe, the Romans. "All roads lead to Rome" is a truism, because all roads radiated from Rome as their centre. The march of civilisation across our continent is told in the history of those arterial roads that lay like ribbons unrolled upon the map of Europe. Rome kept in touch with all the outposts of her far-flung empire by means of the roads. Along the roads sprang up the ancient cities of Europe, and barbarians forsook in time their wild woods for the towns where affairs of commerce could be transacted and culture attained.

In the decline and decay of that mighty empire other civilising forces, more powerful than those of the Cæsars, were marching along the old roads, not bearing aloft the standard of the Eagle, but the standard of man's redemption, the Cross of Christ. Instead of the military camps marking the progress of invasion, monasteries arose where men, dedicated to God and their fellowmen, taught the use of the plough, the rudiments of letters, and the mysteries of the Christian Faith.

Later still, in the Dark Ages, the roads were an important factor in helping Christendom to survive the awful onslaughts from without. When peace dawned again and men could lay aside once more the arts of war for those of peace, the roads saw the rise of the medieval universities which brought such sound learning to all, both rich and poor, who cared to drink at the fountains of knowledge.

The man in the tree saw quaint pictures as he dreamed. He saw the broad highways running on over hill and down dale straight to their object. He saw again the long glistening lines of Roman legions, the bands of missionaries, Charlemagne and his dauntless troops, monks, and friars, scholars footing it across a continent, crusaders on the march, country folk with slow pack animals, gay cavaliers and the later coaches. And he saw again in his mind, as he had seen in reality, the long columns of khaki and horizon blue, and the hideous work of shells on the stalwart Roman roads.

As sleep claimed him, he breathed into the brooding silence: "The Roman road ran straight. The way to heaven must be by the Roman road. Tracks are no use: they end in the Bush."

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