

**Pagan Papers**

**By**

**Kenneth Grahame**

## The Romance of the Road

Among the many places of magic visited by Pantagruel and his company during the progress of their famous voyage, few surpass that island whose roads did literally "go" to places -- "ou les chemins chement, comme animaux": and would-be travellers, having inquired of the road as to its destination, and received satisfactory reply, "se guindans" (as the old book hath it -- hoisting themselves up on) "au chemin opportun, sans aultrement se poiner ou fatiguer, se trouvoient au lieu destiné."

The best example I know of an approach to this excellent sort of vitality in roads is the Ridgeway of the North Berkshire Downs. Join it at Streatley, the point where it crosses the Thames; at once it strikes you out and away from the habitable world in a splendid, purposeful manner, running along the highest ridge of the Downs a broad green ribbon of turf, with but a shade of difference from the neighbouring grass, yet distinct for all that. No villages nor homesteads tempt it aside or modify its course for a yard; should you lose the track where it is blent with the bordering turf or merged in and obliterated by criss-cross paths, you have only to walk straight on, taking heed of no alternative to right or left; and in a minute 'tis with you again -- arisen out of the earth as it were. Or, if still not quite assured, lift you your eyes, and there it runs over the brow of the fronting hill. Where a railway crosses it, it disappears indeed -- hiding Alpheus-like, from the ignominy of rubble

and brick-work; but a little way on it takes up the running again with the same quiet persistence. Out on that almost trackless expanse of billowy Downs such a track is in some sort humanly companionable: it really seems to lead you by the hand.

The "Rudge" is of course an exceptional instance; but indeed this pleasant personality in roads is not entirely fanciful. It exists as a characteristic of the old country road, evolved out of the primitive prehistoric track, developing according to the needs of the land it passes through and serves: with a language, accordingly, and a meaning of its own. Its special services are often told clearly enough; but much else too of the quiet story of the country-side: something of the old tale whereof you learn so little from the printed page. Each is instinct, perhaps, with a separate suggestion. Some are martial and historic, and by your side the hurrying feet of the dead raise a ghostly dust. The name of yon town -- with its Roman or Saxon suffix to British root -- hints at much. Many a strong man, wanting his vates sacer, passed silently to Hades for that suffix to obtain. The little rise up yonder on the Downs that breaks their straight green line against the sky showed another sight when the sea of battle surged and beat on its trampled sides; and the Roman, sore beset, may have gazed down this very road for relief, praying for night or the succouring legion. This child that swings on a gate and peeps at you from under her sun-bonnet -- so may some girl-ancestress of hers have watched with beating heart the Wessex levies hurry along to clash with the heathen and break them on the down where the ash trees grew. And

yonder, where the road swings round under gloomy overgrowth of drooping boughs -- is that gleam of water or glitter of lurking spears?

Some sing you pastorals, fluting low in the hot sun between dusty hedges overlooked by contented cows; past farmsteads where man and beast, living in frank fellowship, learn pleasant and serviceable lessons each of the other; over the full-fed river, lipping the meadow-sweet, and thence on either side through leagues of hay. Or through bending corn they chant the mystical wonderful song of the reaper when the harvest is white to the sickle. But most of them, avoiding classification, keep each his several tender significance; as with one I know, not so far from town, which woos you from the valley by gentle ascent between nut-laden hedges, and ever by some touch of keen fragrance in the air, by some mystery of added softness under foot -- ever a promise of something to come, unguessed, delighting. Till suddenly you are among the pines, their keen scent strikes you through and through, their needles carpet the ground, and in their swaying tops moans the unappeasable wind -- sad, ceaseless, as the cry of a warped humanity. Some paces more, and the promise is fulfilled, the hints and whisperings become fruition: the ground breaks steeply away, and you look over a great inland sea of fields, homesteads, rolling woodland, and -- bounding all, blent with the horizon, a greyness, a gleam -- the English Channel. A road of promises, of hinted surprises, following each other with the inevitable sequence in a melody.

But we are now in another and stricter sense an island of chemins qui cheminent: dominated, indeed, by them. By these the traveller, veritably se guindans, may reach his destination "sans se pointer ou se fatiguer" (with large qualifications); but sans very much else whereof he were none the worse. The gain seems so obvious that you forget to miss all that lay between the springing stride of the early start and the pleasant weariness of the end approached, when the limbs lag a little as the lights of your destination begin to glimmer through the dusk. All that lay between! "A Day's Ride a Life's Romance" was the excellent title of an unsuccessful book; and indeed the journey should march with the day, beginning and ending with its sun, to be the complete thing, the golden round, required of it. This makes that mind and body fare together, hand in hand, sharing the hope, the action, the fruition; finding equal sweetness in the languor of aching limbs at eve and in the first god-like intoxication of motion with braced muscle in the sun. For walk or ride take the mind over greater distances than a throbbing whirl with stiffening joints and cramped limbs through a dozen counties. Surely you seem to cover vaster spaces with Lavengro, footing it with gipsies or driving his tinker's cart across lonely commons, than with many a globe-trotter or steam-yachtsman with diary or log? And even that dividing line -- strictly marked and rarely overstepped -- between the man who bicycles and the man who walks, is less due to a prudent regard for personal safety of the one part than to an essential difference in minds.

There is a certain supernal, a deific, state of mind which may indeed be experienced in a minor degree, by any one, in the siesta part of a Turkish bath. But this particular golden glow of the faculties is only felt at its fulness after severe and prolonged exertion in the open air. "A man ought to be seen by the gods," says Marcus Aurelius, "neither dissatisfied with anything, nor complaining." Though this does not sound at first hearing an excessive demand to make of humanity, yet the gods, I fancy, look long and often for such a sight in these unblest days of hurry. If ever seen at all, 'tis when after many a mile in sun and wind -- maybe rain -- you reach at last, with the folding star, your destined rustic inn. There, in its homely, comfortable strangeness, after unnumbered chops with country ale, the hard facts of life begin to swim in a golden mist. You are isled from accustomed cares and worries -- you are set in a peculiar nook of rest. Then old failures seem partial successes, then old loves come back in their fairest form, but this time with never a shadow of regret, then old jokes renew their youth and flavour. You ask nothing of the gods above, nothing of men below -- not even their company. To-morrow you shall begin life again: shall write your book, make your fortune, do anything; meanwhile you sit, and the jolly world swings round, and you seem to hear it circle to the music of the spheres. What pipe was ever thus beatifying in effect? You are aching all over, and enjoying it; and the scent of the limes drifts in through the window. This is undoubtedly the best and greatest country in the world; and none but good fellows abide in it.

Laud we the Gods,  
And let our crooked smokes climb to their nostrils  
From our blest altars.