

## THE ROMAN ROAD

ALL the roads of our neighbourhood were cheerful and friendly, having each of them pleasant qualities of their own; but this one seemed different from the others in its masterful suggestion of a serious purpose, speeding you along with a strange uplifting of the heart. The others tempted chiefly with their treasures of hedge and ditch; the rapt surprise of the first lords-and-ladies, the rustle of a field-mouse, splash of a frog; while cool noses of brother-beasts were pushed at you through gate or gap. A loiterer you had need to be, did you choose one of them,--so many were the tiny hands thrust out to detain you, from this side and that. But this other was of a sterner sort, and even in its shedding off of bank and hedgerow as it marched straight and full for the open downs, it seemed to declare its contempt for adventitious trappings to catch the shallow-pated. When the sense of injustice or disappointment was heavy on me, and things were very black within, as on this particular day, the road of character was my choice for that solitary ramble, when I turned my back for an afternoon on a world that had unaccountably declared itself against me.

"The Knights' Road," we children had named it, from a sort of feeling that, if from any quarter at all, it would be down this track we might some day see Lancelot and his peers come pacing on their great war-horses,--supposing that any of the stout band still survived, in nooks and unexplored places. Grown-up people sometimes spoke of it as

the "Pilgrims' Way"; but I didn't know much about pilgrims,--except Walter in the Horselberg story. Him I sometimes saw, breaking with haggard eyes out of yonder copse, and calling to the pilgrims as they hurried along on their desperate march to the Holy City, where peace and pardon were awaiting them. "All roads lead to Rome," I had once heard somebody say; and I had taken the remark very seriously, of course, and puzzled over it many days. There must have been some mistake, I concluded at last; but of one road at least I intuitively felt it to be true. And my belief was clinched by something that fell from Miss Smedley during a history lesson, about a strange road that ran right down the middle of England till it reached the coast, and then began again in France, just opposite, and so on undeviating, through city and vineyard, right from the misty Highlands to the Eternal City. Uncorroborated, any statement of Miss Smedley's usually fell on incredulous ears; but here, with the road itself in evidence, she seemed, once, in a way, to have strayed into truth.

Rome! It was fascinating to think that it lay at the other end of this white ribbon that rolled itself off from my feet over the distant downs. I was not quite so uninstructed as to imagine I could reach it that afternoon; but some day, I thought, if things went on being as unpleasant as they were now,--some day, when Aunt Eliza had gone on a visit,--we would see.

I tried to imagine what it would be like when I got there. The Coliseum I knew, of course, from a woodcut in the history-book: so to begin with

I plumped that down in the middle. The rest had to be patched up from the little grey market-town where twice a year we went to have our hair cut; hence, in the result, Vespasian's amphitheatre was approached by muddy little streets, wherein the Red Lion and the Blue Boar, with Somebody's Entire along their front, and "Commercial Room" on their windows; the doctor's house, of substantial red-brick; and the facade of the New Wesleyan Chapel, which we thought very fine, were the chief architectural ornaments: while the Roman populace potted about in smocks and corduroys, twisting the tails of Roman calves and inviting each other to beer in musical Wessex. From Rome I drifted on to other cities, dimly heard of--Damascus, Brighton (Aunt Eliza's ideal), Athens, and Glasgow, whose glories the gardener sang; but there was a certain sameness in my conception of all of them: that Wesleyan chapel would keep cropping up everywhere. It was easier to go a-building among those dream-cities where no limitations were imposed, and one was sole architect, with a free hand. Down a delectable street of cloud-built palaces I was mentally pacing, when I happened upon the Artist.

He was seated at work by the roadside, at a point whence the cool large spaces of the downs, juniper-studded, swept grandly westwards. His attributes proclaimed him of the artist tribe: besides, he wore knickerbockers like myself,--a garb confined, I was aware, to boys and artists. I knew I was not to bother him with questions, nor look over his shoulder and breathe in his ear--they didn't like it, this genus irritabile; but there was nothing about staring in my code of instructions, the point having somehow been overlooked: so, squatting

down on the grass, I devoted myself to a passionate absorbing of every detail. At the end of five minutes there was not a button on him that I could not have passed an examination in; and the wearer himself of that homespun suit was probably less familiar with its pattern and texture than I was. Once he looked up, nodded, half held out his tobacco pouch,--mechanically, as it were,--then, returning it to his pocket, resumed his work, and I my mental photography.

After another five minutes or so had passed he remarked, without looking my way: "Fine afternoon we're having: going far to-day?"

"No, I'm not going any farther than this," I replied; "I WAS thinking of going on to Rome but I've put it off."

"Pleasant place, Rome," he murmured; "you'll like it." It was some minutes later that he added: "But I wouldn't go just now, if I were you,--too jolly hot."

"YOU haven't been to Rome, have you?" I inquired.

"Rather," he replied, briefly; "I live there."

This was too much, and my jaw dropped as I struggled to grasp the fact that I was sitting there talking to a fellow who lived in Rome. Speech was out of the question: besides, I had other things to do. Ten solid minutes had I already spent in an examination of him as a mere stranger

and artist; and now the whole thing had to be done over again, from the changed point of view. So I began afresh, at the crown of his soft hat, and worked down to his solid British shoes, this time investing everything with the new Roman halo; and at last I managed to get out: "But you don't really live there, do you?" never doubting the fact, but wanting to hear it repeated.

"Well," he said, good-naturedly overlooking the slight rudeness of my query, "I live there as much as I live anywhere,--about half the year sometimes. I've got a sort of a shanty there. You must come and see it some day."

"But do you live anywhere else as well?" I went on, feeling the forbidden tide of questions surging up within me.

"O yes, all over the place," was his vague reply. "And I've got a diggings somewhere off Piccadilly."

"Where's that?" I inquired.

"Where's what?" said he. "Oh, Piccadilly! It's in London."

"Have you a large garden?" I asked; "and how many pigs have you got?"

"I've no garden at all," he replied, sadly, "and they don't allow me to keep pigs, though I'd like to, awfully. It's very hard."

"But what do you do all day, then," I cried, "and where do you go and play, without any garden, or pigs, or things?"

"When I want to play," he said, gravely, "I have to go and play in the street; but it's poor fun, I grant you. There's a goat, though, not far off, and sometimes I talk to him when I'm feeling lonely; but he's very proud."

"Goats ARE proud," I admitted. "There's one lives near here, and if you say anything to him at all, he hits you in the wind with his head. You know what it feels like when a fellow hits you in the wind?"

"I do, well," he replied, in a tone of proper melancholy, and painted on.

"And have you been to any other places," I began again, presently, "besides Rome and Piccy-what's-his-name?"

"Heaps," he said. "I'm a sort of Ulysses--seen men and cities, you know. In fact, about the only place I never got to was the Fortunate Island."

I began to like this man. He answered your questions briefly and to the point, and never tried to be funny. I felt I could be confidential with him.

"Wouldn't you like," I inquired, "to find a city without any people in it at all?"

He looked puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said he.

"I mean," I went on eagerly, "a city where you walk in at the gates, and the shops are all full of beautiful things, and the houses furnished as grand as can be, and there isn't anybody there whatever! And you go into the shops, and take anything you want--chocolates and magic lanterns and injirubber balls--and there's nothing to pay; and you choose your own house and live there and do just as you like, and never go to bed unless you want to!"

The artist laid down his brush. "That WOULD be a nice city," he said.

"Better than Rome. You can't do that sort of thing in Rome,--or in Piccadilly either. But I fear it's one of the places I've never been to."

"And you'd ask your friends," I went on, warming to my subject,--"only those you really like, of course,--and they'd each have a house to themselves,--there'd be lots of houses,--and no relations at all, unless they promised they'd be pleasant, and if they weren't they'd have to go."

"So you wouldn't have any relations?" said the artist. "Well, perhaps you're right. We have tastes in common, I see."

"I'd have Harold," I said, reflectively, "and Charlotte. They'd like it awfully. The others are getting too old. Oh, and Martha--I'd have Martha, to cook and wash up and do things. You'd like Martha. She's ever so much nicer than Aunt Eliza. She's my idea of a real lady."

"Then I'm sure I should like her," he replied, heartily, "and when I come to--what do you call this city of yours? Nephelo--something, did you say?"

"I--I don't know," I replied, timidly. "I'm afraid it hasn't got a name--yet."

The artist gazed out over the downs. "'The poet says, dear city of Cecrops,'" he said, softly, to himself, "'and wilt not thou say, dear city of Zeus?' That's from Marcus Aurelius," he went on, turning again to his work. "You don't know him, I suppose; you will some day."

"Who's he?" I inquired.

"Oh, just another fellow who lived in Rome," he replied, dabbing away.

"O dear!" I cried, disconsolately. "What a lot of people seem to live at Rome, and I've never even been there! But I think I'd like MY city best."

"And so would I," he replied with unction. "But Marcus Aurelius wouldn't, you know."

"Then we won't invite him," I said, "will we?"

"I won't if you won't," said he. And that point being settled, we were silent for a while.

"Do you know," he said, presently, "I've met one or two fellows from time to time who have been to a city like yours,--perhaps it was the same one. They won't talk much about it--only broken hints, now and then; but they've been there sure enough. They don't seem to care about anything in particular--and every thing's the same to them, rough or smooth; and sooner or later they slip off and disappear; and you never see them again. Gone back, I suppose."

"Of course," said I. "Don't see what they ever came away for; I wouldn't,--to be told you've broken things when you haven't, and stopped having tea with the servants in the kitchen, and not allowed to have a dog to sleep with you. But I've known people, too, who've gone there."

The artist stared, but without incivility.

"Well, there's Lancelot," I went on. "The book says he died, but it never seemed to read right, somehow. He just went away, like Arthur. And Crusoe, when he got tired of wearing clothes and being respectable. And

all the nice men in the stones who don't marry the Princess, 'cos only one man ever gets married in a book, you know. They'll be there!"

"And the men who never come off," he said, "who try like the rest, but get knocked out, or somehow miss,--or break down or get bowled over in the melee,--and get no Princess, nor even a second-class kingdom,--some of them'll be there, I hope?"

"Yes, if you like," I replied, not quite understanding him; "if they're friends of yours, we'll ask 'em, of course."

"What a time we shall have!" said the artist, reflectively; "and how shocked old Marcus Aurelius will be!"

The shadows had lengthened uncannily, a tide of golden haze was flooding the grey-green surface of the downs, and the artist began to put his traps together, preparatory to a move. I felt very low; we would have to part, it seemed, just as we were getting on so well together. Then he stood up, and he was very straight and tall, and the sunset was in his hair and beard as he stood there, high over me. He took my hand like an equal. "I've enjoyed our conversation very much," he said. "That was an interesting subject you started, and we haven't half exhausted it. We shall meet again, I hope."

"Of course we shall," I replied, surprised that there should be any doubt about it.

"In Rome, perhaps?" said he.

"Yes, in Rome," I answered, "or Piccy-the-other-place, or somewhere."

"Or else," said he, "in that other city,--when we've found the way there. And I'll look out for you, and you'll sing out as soon as you see me. And we'll go down the street arm-in-arm, and into all the shops, and then I'll choose my house, and you'll choose your house, and we'll live there like princes and good fellows."

"Oh, but you'll stay in my house, won't you?" I cried; "wouldn't ask everybody; but I'll ask YOU."

He affected to consider a moment; then "Right!" he said: "I believe you mean it, and I WILL come and stay with you. I won't go to anybody else, if they ask me ever so much. And I'll stay quite a long time, too, and I won't be any trouble."

Upon this compact we parted, and I went down-heartedly from the man who understood me, back to the house where I never could do anything right. How was it that everything seemed natural and sensible to him, which these uncles, vicars, and other grown-up men took for the merest tomfoolery? Well, he would explain this, and many another thing, when we met again. The Knights' Road! How it always brought consolation! Was he possibly one of those vanished knights I had been looking for so long?

Perhaps he would be in armour next time,--why not? He would look well in armour, I thought. And I would take care to get there first, and see the sunlight flash and play on his helmet and shield, as he rode up the High Street of the Golden City.

Meantime, there only remained the finding it,--an easy matter.