

# THE ROAD THAT FAILED

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MANY years ago the earlier settlers attempted in a certain place to cross this province by running roads from either side to meet in the interior after the fashion of certain well-known tunnels. On the south side the road is said to have been carried safely about halfway; but the section from the north comes to an end a few miles inland from the Basin. Perhaps, like certain public speakers, it does not so much come to an end as cease to continue. The reason is fairly obvious. It meets the blueberry barrens, land that here for miles resembles a miniature desert over which some jesting demon has sprinkled granite boulders with lavish hand. It abounds with blasted trees, and here and there a scanty stream of water trickles on or under the surface. Geologists in their humorous way attribute such phenomena as granite boulders to the action of glaciers; a stalwart glacier it must have been to cast about it pebbles as large as respectable houses, and thus destroy, apparently for ever, the prospects of the Sandwich Road.

The Sandwich Road, properly so called, begins at the old mill, or the spot where not many years ago the old mill stood, and is distinguishable as a road for five or six miles on towards the south-east; to be exact, somewhat more south than east. The old mill stood at the head of the tide, and the mill-pond is still clearly discernible, though the broken dam forbids the accumulation of water, and a dreary expanse of decaying sawdust marks the space that once in the season was filled with logs and industry, and in the frozen months was a Mecca of skaters. A bridge crosses the pond just above the dam, and around one side of the pond grows a heavy row of sombre willows. Behind these willows one can see glimpses of green grass and apple trees and sometimes of fruit, the whole neglected and dishevelled. A little below the site of the old mill lies a block of salt marsh, said to contain seven acres. There is a wild tale of a mighty mower of old who cut this whole marsh in one day with his single scythe. A good man in good training might mow as much as three acres of upland, though two acres is a good day's work; and two acres of salt grass is as hard to cut as three of upland, so one is not bound to credit this tale of the Hercules of the marsh. But the romances of our ancestors should be treated with decent reverence.

The ground rises rather steeply from the bridge and dam in all directions, except in the ravine where the brook comes down to meet the tide. A great house that used to stand a few rods above the mill is gone,—burnt one night in March—and the big old red barn stands disconsolate and alone. It is a stern place in the daytime, a picture of ruin and desolation, with the gloomy willows bending over the dreary remains of the pond. At night there is a weird interest; people have been drowned in the pond, and indeed there is a long tale of woe about the place as though it had been cursed by some malignant spirit. There used to be a story that one standing on the bridge at midnight heard a sharp clear crack like the sudden snapping of a chain. It is not hard to hear sounds where water and wood and iron are, but midnight on the bridge has other fascinations. On a still night there is an ominous hush, and an atmosphere of impending disaster; and when the wind is high, the trees on the hillside above moan and shriek and howl. There is only one old house near that serves to make the desolation more desolate. The comfortable terrors of life flesh lay hold on one. It is good to be a little afraid of darkness and ghosts and the grisly things of the night.

The Sandwich Road climbs south-east from the old mill-site, and continues to climb for three quarters of a mile. Just as one begins to mount the hill there is a hollow on the left, and in the hollow a spring of clear water and a well-kerb. On the well-kerb there used often to lie for the comfort of the traveller a cup of sorts, sometimes the half of a cocoanut shell. On the right was a little tannery, long since gone. Old men remember it, and it stands as a dim and teasing memory in the minds of younger men. There were vats filled with some powerful fluid, and once a man fell into one and died. One may recall that the hollow by the bridge, with its mill and its tannery and its big house, was a stirring place when there was no Chicago. Now Chicago is Chicago, and nothing is left at the hollow by the bridge, and no man knows which is better. The old tannery field stretches from the road to the brook below; next to it lies a dense thicket, with here and there a path through the tangled alders along the brook. Beside these paths are high blackberries, a royal fruit, and royally protected by the great briars.

Further one climbs along the hill, with a high bluff rising on the left, and on the right a slope falling to the brook below. Past the brook the ground rises very sharply for three or four hundred feet. It is part of a mighty ridge of slate that runs from tide-water and beyond, until it loses itself among farms and woods to the south-west. The decomposed slate makes marvellous soil for roots, but

the ground near the brook is too steep for cultivation, and is mostly covered with hardwood; a pleasant sight at any time, and especially when the maples turn in the autumn. But there is no slaterock on the Sandwich Road. The glacier attended to that.

There is cultivated land occurring with fair regularity for the first mile or two along the Sandwich Road, and a living to be made thereon for those who will work. But no longer is the road a busy thoroughfare. In the golden days of prosperity the land abounded in timber, the timber in game, and the brooks and lakes with trout. The early settlers were attracted by the timber, and paid small heed to the abundant stone among the trees; for there are many places at some distance from the barrens where, from appearances, it might logically be argued that infant glaciers had been running around the country, throwing glacial pebbles of more diminutive size. There still stands, not much over a mile from the head of the tide, a gnarled old apple tree beside a depression in the ground. The story goes that a Loyalist had a house near-by, and that he set out the apple-tree. He also attempted a garden. To get a space for his garden he picked off the stones; and when the stones were picked off, he had not a garden but a well. The skeptical may say that the depression represents the remains of a cellar, but those who have dwelt in our granite country are not to be numbered among the skeptical.

These early settlers were trying to get close to the timber, and perhaps also to avoid the salt water. At any rate, they left the more fertile and friable land to be squatted upon by the blameless Ethiopian while they pressed on into the wilderness. They felled their timber, and at first burned it where it lay, to procure ground for their modest farming operations. Two men from New Jersey cleared their first acre of land by means of axes and hoes and spades and their own muscle, without any team of any sort. The ground was and is reasonably good between the stones, and before the days of machinery it was relatively easier to clear rough and broken ground than it is now. In fact, at times to some honest souls, the advent of machinery was of dubious value. One man bought a mower when mowers began to be popular. He was not an expert with machinery. He got his oxen fastened to the tongue, and started proudly forth. The knife, running at full speed, crashed into a small stoneheap, and there the mower stood in silent sorrow beneath the waxing and waning moons, until rain and rust dissolved its joints, and it crumbled inglorious into the all-receiving earth.

Brave tales are told of the road in the old days. These were the epic times of the neighborhood. There was abundance,

independence, interest. The woods were full of choppers, and the puzzled game retreated farther and farther into the forest. As shipbuilding prospered, so prospered the Sandwich Road. And as the forest near the road yielded to the burnt-land, and the burnt-land with much labour of men and teams passed into level fields save for the omnipresent granite that only dynamite can remove, there was an era of prosperity. Flocks and herds thrived. Men spent their winters in the woods, their summers in the fields. Two generations were hardened by the axe. There were no eight or ten-hour days. There were Homeric revels, chopping frolics, haying frolics, all manner of hearty, boisterous, healthful entertainments. The name "frolic" persists, and has been used in recent years of a few sedate men with teams bringing in the minister's supply of firewood from the back lot. Jamaica rum was incredibly cheap, good,—so our ancestors tell us—and ubiquitous. These heroes of the axe were not painfully puritanical, but their achievements should be told by one of the near-centenarian survivors of their second generation before an open fire to the accompaniment of abundant tobacco. Everywhere was life and zest and energy; the vigorous satisfaction of people who had left property and prospects for a principle, if only the principle of stubbornness, and were making for themselves a new property and new prospects by fighting with the wilderness. They are all in the church-yard now, but their descendants may ponder profitably beside their graves. They did their work, and feared nothing on earth. Little material remains of their labours; a few houses, some cleared fields, indifferently fertile and indifferently cared for. The ships they built have long ago gone to the bottom, or mouldered on the beach. No longer is the road a busy thoroughfare. Few and small are the ship-timbers that come down over the hill. An occasional load of firewood for use in the neighbouring town; mixed vegetables for summer hotels; a little milk for the creamery: that is about all. All the more readily may one recall the atmosphere of the past.

There is one field on the right now nearly overgrown with alders. Beside the path that runs into this field there stood for a century a huge Balm-of-Gilead tree, and the skeletons of mighty cherry trees rise near-by. The remains of the old house were seen not long ago. It was once a singularly attractive field, rich and fruitful, sloping with a graceful curve to the mill-brook below. Nothing happened to it. That was the trouble. For a farm to remain a farm, it is necessary for something to happen to it all the time. A farmer must work hard to stand still, and harder to advance. There is a strange tale of the owner of this farm, a prosperous,

kindly, childless man who lost his temper with a boy whom he employed. He was beating the boy lustily as the wives of two neighbours passed. They said to each other that they hoped the man's arm might lose its power so he could never strike another blow; and in a few days the farmer had a stroke, and never worked again. Perhaps it is an aetiological myth, though told by reputable witnesses; perhaps an instance of omnipresent feminine influence on everyone's affairs. At any rate, the farm stands covered with alders; and yet the shape of it, the very lie of the land, shows it as a delectable place were it once cleared again; alders, as everyone knows, are an indication of rich soil beneath. There is no real reason for the decline of such farms, except the fact that young men could make an easier living elsewhere. There is no need to blame them. Especially is there no need to accuse them of a lack of patriotism. When faced with a crisis, they responded as readily in 1914 as their ancestors did in 1776. But *ubi bene ibi patria* is no new proverb. One gets in debt; one gets bored; one longs for romance. For some of us, all good things are always somewhere else. None of us can make a living on the Sandwich Road or elsewhere for much over a century; most of us have to be content with much less. But there is a spirit in a countryside after it has been settled for a century or two that may die as a man dies. Roads like the Sandwich road are not dead or dying; but they are in a low state of vitality.

Yet there are still inhabitants and occupied houses on the road. Here it runs between a prosperous house and its barn. This is an excellent situation, where there is not too much travelling. It offers infinite attraction in the way of gossip at chore times and on rainy days. This farmer has cleared the land nearly to the millbrook, and out of sight over the hill on the other side. There is no real necessity for these farms to be deserted; and indeed just beyond five generations of the same name have subdued the forest and the soil. There is a steep hill just beyond, after which the road runs level for the greater part of its remaining course. The hill has witnessed no small amount of rather bold coasting; when the ice forms a glair towards spring, it must be treated with care. At the brow of the hill stands an old house upon a cellar that was not new a century ago. Here it was that a widow lamented the passing of her husband Paul. "It wouldn't have been so bad in the spring; but it was hard to die in the fall, with the cellar full of meat and vegetables, and the barn full of grain and hay and cattle. What a good winter Paul would have had if he had lived!" And a little farther on is a small house in which for many years lived

another widow with a sister or two and a daughter or two. An aged woman she was for the last thirty or forty years of her life, but "knowledgeable", and a great reader. As she grew older she read later; so that some young men who lived across the way used to look out of their windows on a black winter morning to see if her lamp still shone. If it did, they turned in for another nap; if it did not, they rose without further investigation of the time, and repaired to the barn to feed the team preparatory to an early start for the woods.

Further to the south there are only a few houses, and places where houses used to be. Knowledge of these places still stands in a few ageing memories, and will soon be among the things that were. Now the farming districts are passed, and only woodlands and pastures and swamps remain. After a little the mill-brook is crossed again, here running a leisurely course and widening into a lake. There is a vast pile of sawdust beside the lake, clearly indicating the former presence of a portable mill. Around the banks are high swamp shrubs, and among these shrubs an occasional large snake may sometimes be found. Four feet long they are at times, and stout; but quite harmless. The lake abounds in perch, a fish whose object in life is to grow as many bones as a shad in smaller compass, and to drive the trout, a decent, civilized fish, out of the water.

A tolerant government, interested teamsters, and the hardness of the soil, have maintained the roadbed beyond the lake so that it is possible to travel in fair comfort to the greater road that crosses the Sandwich Road and terminates its course abruptly. This greater road runs only from one small town to another. It too passed through excellent woodland in its twenty-mile course, which has now mostly been stripped; but it has a terminus at either end, and runs through some good farming country, so that it may not suffer acutely. South of it at a little distance lie the barrens extending for miles, wild, desolate, the stamping ground of moose, often visited by bears, and in a good autumn producing numberless bushels of blueberries.

A little south of the lake lies a pasture to which for seventy years or so people from one farm have driven cows each morning for six months of the year, and from which they have brought them back each night—a distance of a mile and a half from the barn to the pasture bars. One can compute how many times the drivers of these cows might have walked around the earth on their way to and from the pasture bars; without mentioning the odd miles or hundreds of miles that they may have had to wander in the pasture.

It is not clear, however, that walking around the earth is more edifying or profitable than walking on the Sandwich Road. Time, as has been observed by someone else, is not of paramount value to a cow; a boy will run to the woods in any case; so that perhaps the long morning and evening walk is not more futile than other human activities.

The great days of the Sandwich Road are over, but some work and some play can still be found along its course. "The autumn", says a certain revered geography, "is a very pleasant season." On the inhabitant section of our road the scenery is so good, the air so bracing, that it is worth while merely to be alive and look around. In the winter there is still something to be done in the woods. These shady summer ways, that look like pleasant paths to nowhere, become in season hard snow roads with every sign of busy occupation. The first growth is about all gone; but the second growth is not very young now, and there are fine groves of tall, dark spruce, and of clean white birch, with here and there a bit of maple; the fir we do not count for much. Also there are a few islands of original virgin forest, or what passes for such.

It is no bad work, even to-day, when there are no big ships to be built of wood and no big trees anywhere near to make into spars; when all that one wants from the woods is firewood, or sleepers for the greedy railroad, or perhaps a little timber to cut up for ordinary building purposes. There is still a mill on the brook, perhaps three miles above the spot where the old mill used to stand; a wood road runs through from the Sandwich Road to this mill. It begins with a clearing of moderate size, for that is the sort of place needed to pile cordwood that is started out of the woods to be hauled to the town at one's leisure. It is a very good road for a walk in the summer, when the ground is sufficiently dry. It is rough going when frozen before a snowfall in the early winter. It is impassable, or nearly so, in the spring and fall, when the rain or melting snow floods the swampy spots, and again when the snow is three feet deep as it may be at times in winter. But when there is a snowfall of eight inches to a foot, and the teams are going through every day, it becomes a pleasant journey that can be managed even with a horse and sleigh. With oxen and bob-sleds it is a thoroughly comfortable trip. Laden teams may be travelling in either direction, east with cordwood, west to the new mill with timber. When travelling light with the bob-sled, it is easy to turn aside to meet a load. The oxen push themselves over against the brush, and the empty bob-sled will go anywhere. The laden team has always the right of way, with no regard to any formal rule of the road,

statutory or other. But two cargoes on sleds are not so easily managed, and the teamster listens to the advancing bells to judge whether the team that he must meet is travelling heavy or light, and chooses a suitable place for passing. The volume of traffic on any one day is not usually large, and troublesome collisions are infrequent. A good teamster, after his load is safely stowed and his team started on their journey, may walk peacefully behind his load all the way. Occasional steep cradle-hills, that even a foot of snow has not sufficiently smoothed, are fitted with skidpoles that guide the sled unerringly into the proper course.

The teamster carries with him a heavy old coat to wear while riding into the woods on the empty sled, and especially for use outside on the road homeward where a different climate and atmosphere prevail. When the northeasterly snow comes on, dry, mealy, and businesslike, "snow like feathers, clearin' weather, snow like meal, snow a good deal", it steals at first through the dark boughs of the spruce and fir in a quiet, apologetic way, a procession of small and fragile creatures. In the woods there is no noise of the storm except a faint wail among the trees and the almost noiseless rustle of the snowflakes; one snowflake makes no noise—how is it that the addition of so many nothings makes something? The teamster knows all that this means outside. There is little discomfort at one's work; the wood is sloppy with melted flakes, and one's mittens become slushy. The oxen now and then, as they stand still while the load is being thrown on or off, give a huge shake to clear themselves of the snow that persistently, peacefully, with a quiet obstinate relentlessness almost feminine in character, occupies and envelopes them, and is repulsed only to return at the same unchanging, steady speed. At the junction with the Sandwich Road the clearing where the cordwood is piled to await further transport opens toward the east, and the snow that steals so quietly among the trees here drives in violently with stinging impact. It is hard to face, like a storm of diminutive bullets. One throws off one's load, and returns gladly into the contemplative peace of the woods. The outward bound tracks are already half submerged. The teamster scrapes around for some dry fuel under the brush in some chopping, and tries to get a bit of fire to warm up his dinner. The dinner has been hidden in a hollow tree where the snow could not penetrate. The oxen have a light lunch—a bag of good hay. After dinner the day is short, and by four o'clock or so the team is headed for home, plunging through the drifts and tearing across the long exposed flat in the Sandwich Road, where the wind with accumulated force not only sweeps away the snow, but seems to tear



off the frozen clods beneath. The bob-sleds crunch and tear the bare earth. The oxen are impatient to get home to their own warm barn and their evening feed of cornmeal. They snort impatiently, and throw their mighty heads savagely into the yoke. Often a brief coruscation of sparks springs out where the steel shoe strikes the gravel. Then they go into the drifts again, down past ruins of the old mill where the snow benevolently obliterates the sordid debris, up the hill past the church where the storm howls like a demon, and on to supper and rest and sleep.

But on a fine day the sun throws a kindly gleam among even the thickest brush. The snow in the open spots shines brightly, too brightly for comfort; and the small animals weave their delicate paths among the trees and alongside the road. Sometimes a rabbit leaps by, and sometimes he may be seen for a moment before he leaps, standing with rage and fear upon his face, ready to rail valiantly against the human depredators of his home had he the power and courage. The squirrel indulges in his merry scolding. A stray dog pursues his greedy or vagrant quest. As the sun mounts higher, there is a packing and settling of the snow on top. It will begin to make a crust during the night. The dinner can be eaten in a small clearing far in the quiet woods, where a huge gnarled old pine towers above its neighbours. The wood in this clearing is dry enough to sit on; the fire burns merrily. One indulges in the luxury of an after-dinner smoke, while the oxen consume the last remnants of their hay. And the sun in February is strangely indicative of the coming of spring, just as one feels by anticipation the first shiver of winter in the shortening days of August.

So life goes on the Sandwich Road, even though it is a road that failed. There must be dozens of roads of the same sort in the country, roads that were originally built to enable people to live near their timber. Farming was a mere side-issue, a by-product; and as the timber grew less and less, the relative importance of the farming became greater and greater. It is the cities and the West that keep the Sandwich Road and other such roads in a state of suspended animation. People live comfortable lives there. The epic days, to be sure, have passed. But the heroic moments in the life of most people and nations are short and few, and it takes a long spell of patience and endurance for most of us to live. So the Sandwich Road continues its course unperturbed through the passing of the years. If no longer huge timbers come down the hill to make a "mast of some great admiral", at least there is cordwood and piling. If no longer buckwheat and turnips spring luxuriant around the blackened stumps of new, rich burntland,

they may grow quietly and quite prosperously in level, prosaic ploughed fields. The apple trees are more interesting for their age, and the new orchards are coming on well. The mighty teams of stalwart cattle are shrunk to few in number, of moderate size; but the humble Ford carries the farmer and his family safely up and down the hills to places that could scarcely have been reached in a journey of moderate time by the kindly horse. And the tale of the dull and dreary days that our ancestors passed has not been told. To us, they appear doing hard things in heroic fashion; and we suspect that we shall not appear to our descendants either heroic or hard. We forget that we and our Sandwich roads will appear ennobled by the glamour of antiquity. Our inventions will be tolerantly regarded as creditable, for our primitive time; our opinions as not too ridiculous, in view of our necessary ignorance; our achievements as worthy, in spite of our limited opportunities.

That Sandwich Road has length and some breadth and thickness to the centre of the earth, as has the Sacred Way. The only difference in their fame is due to the experience of the people that trod and tread them both. A vanished mill and a forgotten tannery add their small contribution to history as does the Basilica of Caesar its greater one: the Road that Failed leads people from one place to another, even as did the Appian Way. Perhaps some day the local Horace will arise to tell of the journey to the blueberry barrens; and the later tale may rival the earlier one at least in frogs and gnats and the humours of the travellers. People have lived and do live on the Sandwich Road of whom it may be said, as Horace said of his friends, *animae quales neque candidiores terra tulit*. If the bread is not gritty, one can easily find a *sedulus hospes* who will spare no pains in entertaining his guest; and if one does not find the town that is rich in fishes, one may at least detect abundant perch in the lake.

The road performs its function; and it is only because such roads and their inhabitants throughout the world are there ready to listen that there is an audience for the greater places that extend their fame. Even the Road that Failed, as Chesterton would put it, has succeeded in being itself; and that is all that most men and institutions can do. Reputations now great will wane in another century; towns now famous will give place to more fortunate or notorious successors; but it is entirely likely that the Sandwich Road will lie between the broken milldam and the blueberry barrens; that its granite rocks will contemplate the course of later generations as tolerantly as they contemplate ours; that it will still conduct safe to their journey's end such travellers as may choose to tread its stony way.