



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

The Road

BY PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

An old road came crawling up alongside the river. In its early days it was a fairly small road; in fact, it was born down in the valley. At the time—it could well be fifty or sixty years ago—when Iver Steinbraekken had put some food in his knapsack and rambled to Langvatnet in search of land, he had to make his way through windfall and screes. But once his place was registered and Ingeboranna was convinced, they fetched Roselin and drove her up along the river. Wherever she went, Iver put up a marking, because cows, like children, have a good sense of direction.

This is how the trail came about, through feet meeting the soft earth. People and trail grew up together, sharing both hardship and hope. When, thanks to the crops of the valley, the first children appeared, and when these stood in front of the priest in the cha-

pel of Langvassli, the trail's childhood had also come to an end. All of a sudden, the young had started to chat about “the road,” whilst leaving the church and entering the valley and their early youth. Baard Iversa even uttered the word “carriage” to make an impression, and the girls gaped.

But the word lingered, and people started to make use of the trail when travelling between the village and the hamlet. Somebody pulled out a root, someone else pushed a rock aside, and a third person chopped off a branch so nobody had to bend over. A carriage arrived, a new one with a door to the side. The carriage was followed by a long wagon, and finally came a cariole. By then, the road started to feel as if she was the queen of the valley, since they all bowed for her and talked about her, holding her dear.

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“May we have the honor to lead Your Highness across the scree?” “With pleasure,” the road replied, and she went on, carefully traversing the slope, stumbling against the stone wall and birch trunks that were left there: the neat work of some young men. From now on, no-one had to jump over branches and stones any longer, and no-one had to wade through the water on his socks, with the muck splashing up. It was an embarrassing memory, a recollection of that time when she nearly stumbled down Blåberget hill! Gracefully and sleepily she proceeded, under the overhanging leaves; she tiptoed across the old wooden bridge that covered the Krokøbækken stream. With the help of a stick, she crossed the marshes at ease. Only when coming to Vadet she needed to lift her long skirt up, so that she could jump from stone to stone.

One shouldn't think that her success made her arrogant! For she remembered her first years all too well: the time when she had arrived as a stranger and had begged each and every puddle and stump for permission to proceed. In the course of time she was made to feel welcome by the Langvass river and the Ravne marshland, and even by Tyrinuten, who at the time was the ruler of all. They had become her soulmates, after all those years they'd spent together—through frost and heat, and through wet and dry. The tiny knots that sometimes appeared were merely a bother to whiners. She never tried to draw too much attention



River flow.

to herself and never tried to stand out above others. She'd rather lay low. Uttering a thousand apologies, she trod gently and carefully on the twigs that covered Raynemyra, that old, acidic marshland. At the scree though, where there was no other way but to interfere, she persuaded the stones that had lived there from time immemorial to move, with the lichen, to the wall of rock, where they would surely feel at home. The timber logs were lying next to the stump, so nobody should complain that no local services were called upon! Only when traversing scanty Gjeiteberg mountain did she feel shameless and bold, while she hurried across its crest as fast as she could. Each time she came to Tyrinuten, majestic and firm as he was, she bowed deeply into the Bregnedalen valley—he had given her permission to pass by, on condition that she would confine herself to the area down by the river.

That she did happily, because it was a funny and enjoyable river: fresh, boyish and full of surprises. And the stories he could tell! Imagine, he was born all the way up under the Blue Ice; as a child he had played in frightening places, on slippery rocks and along dreadful precipices. At times, he got crushed into bits and had to dive down into dark basins where he could recollect himself. “You would certainly have broken your neck there, my dear wanderer,” he said as he chuckled under the overhanging cliff. The road shuddered, full of awe. These were the kind of things she heard while they accompanied each other. Together they went through thick and thin, although they each had their own hurdles. One spring he was at his fiercest and he nearly abused her. He wanted them to get married before they would each go their separate ways. But she got scared and gave him a nice basket made of silver birch. It was inconceivable that she would ever be lonely. Even the flowers, towards whom she had been so unyielding at first, had understood and had forgiven her everything. Now they stood in herds on both sides and in dense beds in-between the wheel tracks and the bare horse trail, with which they had a tacit agreement. Some fell off, so she always had a choice of summer

dresses when she wanted to dress up for her faithful friend, as he plummeted into the Hammergjelet gorge by way of saluting her.

One day something happened. A noisy, smelly and monstrous thing forced its way up through the valley. Inside sat a man smoking a cigar, swearing and spitting, and he kept saying “damned road,” which certainly didn’t make things any better. With four nasty, heavy wheels it flattened the flowers on either side. This caused the trail to want to vanish out of utter horror and shame, as just at this time everything was at its height of beauty.

“What a delightful, lovely place,” the man uttered, when they finally arrived at Langvattnet. “Sure as hell, here I shall place a tourist hotel. Nature’s big church—the breath of eternity, yum yum, 400.000. But first we must have a *road*.” The engineers came. Strange men with iron rods and T-squares and eyes of quartz with

which they could see the beams. They yelled and they dug and with a lot of roar and smoke they tore a broad and bleeding soar in the rock, right through the valley. The Ravnemyra marshland had to bear thousands of tons, instead of just home-grown branches. Tyrinuten was obliterated, and the Bregnedalen valley disappeared in a landslide. A red-leaded dragon was suspended in the air, across the Langvass river. In a haze of asphalt and dynamite, the new road went *berserk*, blind and deaf to everything except reaching its final goal. The birches tumbled over and landed with broken limbs on the old trail. She could only help some of the smallest ones in striking root again in the abandoned horse track; the others were only to receive her blessings, whilst they withered away.

Iver and Ingeboranna clung to using the old one. Up on the rocky plains, where people chased their luck,



The digging of a grave at the church cemetery, Northern Norway.

it was as if their clothes blew off their bodies, as if an unknown dismay was breaking their hearts. They had become frail now. One autumn day, after they had taken a rest under Blåberget hill, Iver again had to put his bag down. At that point they said to each other that this would probably be their last trip. Not many would follow them from their homes. Langvassli was in the grip of progress; cabins and hotels provided a livelihood to hundreds of people, folks who made sure to pick up whatever the tourists might drop. Visitors came rushing

to film “a peasant funeral.” There were even fewer people to lament the disappearance of the old road, now that it was overgrown by ferns and bushes. Only a small part had remained; it was fenced in when the cemetery was extended to the east of the chapel.

Iver and Ingeboranna each got their place there. The three of them came to lay next to each other. In the end, the flowers did not know which grave they were to adorn; but that’s the way things go.



Kistefossen (Kiste waterfall) around 1920.