The road, at this place, is merely a long narrow strip of hard mud, littered with half-burnt chips, which passes out of sight in both directions into the high, primeval bush, familiar to them all. On every side the enormous columns of the trees stand dusty and motionless as stone, under the dark roof of foliage. The narrow crack in that roof, which lets in a strip of light sky above the brown strip of road, is like a single knife cut, already closing. Branches reach across overhead; at a little distance the edges seem to join.

 The little group of hoe men, their naked bodies glistening with sweat, who stand under these enormous vaults in the hot gloom, are at home. They smile at the road, because they have made it and sung of it, but they have no idea of its beginning or end. They are still like men brought up on a forgotten island far from ship routes, to whom the rest of the world is as much a mystery, a blank inhabited by monsters, as to their ancestors of the old Stone Age. They do not even imagine it. Suddenly, in the immense silence of the morning, familiar as the forest twilight, which seems like the very substance of it, they hear a strange noise, between drumming and gunfire. It increases quickly. Two of the pagans dart among the trees and disappear into the silence. The rest stiffen. They do not seem to move, but each muscle is tense; their eyes open widely and stare with fixed and blank apprehension.

A lorry comes pounding out of the shadows, and at once they know what it must be. Two or three voices together cry, “Motor!”

All grin with astonishment and delight. They lift their hoes and rush forward, shouting greetings. The lorry driver, a tall Yoruba in blue dungarees, with a stub of cigarette stuck to his lips, pays no attention to them. He clanks and rattles past and disappears from sight. He doesn’t even know he is the first man to drive over the Fada road. The gang burst into excited talk. One of them dances, another gives a whoop. Rudbeck is seen cantering toward them on his brown pony. He pulls up and asks, “Did you see a motor?”

“Yes, master, a motor – a big motor.” The surround him laughing, shouting, waving their arms. “It was a motor- from the north –he went throught, poot, poot.”

Rudbeck says, “I suppose that means that the last bridge is finished. Have you seen TasukI?”

“No, we haven’t seen Tasuki, but it was a motor – a big motor.”

Rudbeck, with a puzzled, disconcerted expression rides away to find Tasuki. He has not realized perhaps that the road would open itself.

But the next day the villagers, except a few ditchers, are going home. Tasuki has discharged the last bridge gang. The chip fires are still smoldering in the clearing, but there is no sound of drum or ax. In the bush camp, Johnson, Tasuki, and Audu are counting tools and paying off the headmen. Rudbeck is answering arrears of mail and listening to cases. He is surprised to find how much his court work has increased in the last three months, not only with cases due to the new road, such as disputed bargains, complaints of extortion, adulteration, fraud, highway robbery; but purely local ones, such as theft, assault, quarrels between villages, disputes between chiefs and their people, disputed claims to all kinds of rights; and even wife-beating, kidnapping, and divorce. There is a crime wave in Fada and every time the Waziri reports to Rudbeck, he mentions it and says with the appearance of innocence, “It is a most strange thing, but all the thieves and blackguards in the country have come to Fada, especially from the north. The Fada people, too, have never been so insolent. They are getting spoiled.”

“You can’t say it’s the motors - there’s only been one.

“Oh, no, Zaki, it’s nothing to do with your road. For that we are all grateful – we thank god for it. No, but for the last six months a lot of new people have been coming to Fada. I don’t know why; small traders and rascals of that kind, from the north. They always make trouble. They stir up the people against us even in the villages. I fear there will be big trouble – w need more police already.”

Rudbeck authorizes four more police on the Emir’s roll and warns the Waziri against the prejudice that roads and motors will bring trouble to a state.

“When the motors begin to use this road, you will see the advantage of it. Fada market will be twice as big and all your people will get good cash prices for their produce. Motor roads are very good things, Waziri. The Governor himself has given the order for them. Native official and even Emirs who try to prevent them by spreading false reports that they do harm will displease the Governor very much. In that case, of course, it is possible that their pay will not go up; it may even come down.”
Waziri bows to the ground and cries out, “Master, lord, but the Emir admires motor roads above everything – and so do I. We pray for them and for you. We pray that you make still more road and bring many more motors to Fada.”

“All right, Waziri. I salute the Emir. Good-bye.”

“God be with you, lord, provider of roads, benefactor of Faxa.”

Waziri goes home in a fright and the next day, not only he, but the Treasurer, the Master of the Horse and the Chief Justice all come ten miles down the road, to the first bush camp, in order to congratulate Rudbeck on the road and to assure him that it is a blessing to them all.

Rudbeck is most gracious and promises them a golden age for Fada. But when they have gone he is left with a sensation of confusion and disappointment. He feels that something is wrong, but he can’t make out what it is. He suspects that he has been misled and even that he has misled others; but how, when or where he cannot discover. He shouts, in sudden anger, at a headman who is dragging a bundle of ax-helves across the camp, “Don’t kick up all that dust – isn’t there enough as it is?”

He is disgusted with the camp. The place where he has enjoyed some of the happiest hours of his life, of which he has loved even the fire glow half a mile away, has become a squalid rubbish heap. Everywhere there are heaps of filth, broken tools, cracked calabashes, rotten mats, tottering huts, half-burnt embers, rusty tins. All the trees about are splintered, singed by fires; their branches are broken and their leaves shriveled. Over all there is a stink, never noticed before, of rottenness and baldly sealed latrines.

The Fada road is finished, the great idea is realized, and suddenly Rudbeck feels as if life holds nothing more for him. There is, of course, plenty of work waiting for him; the new assessment, a new census, a questionnaire about infantile death rate, another town-planning circular, as well as arrears of office and court work. But he thinks of them merely as routine jobs, figures to be gathered, columns to be filled.

“More eyewash about sanitation,” he says to Celia, throwing a blue circular on the breakfast table.

“Poor darling.” Celia already has a maternal kindness for her husband; and the maternal absent-mindedness.

“As if you can plan towns without cash – and there won’t be any cash to spare in Fada until we have some real trade.”

“Yes, darling, more motor roads.’

Rudbeck looks still more gloomy. “We can’t do any more, I’ve tapped all the local trade with this north-south route. Now we can only wait for the other divisions to do something – and the central government.”

“Couldn’t you do just one more little road?”

Rudbeck glances at her and says “Keep the children amused.”

Celia does not answer. She is counting her knitting stitches. Probably she has not heard Rudbeck. He continues to stare at her for a moment and then gives a snort of laughter. She looks at him affectionately and says, “Three more lorries went through this morning and one of them was loaded.”

“You’re interested in roads, what?”

“Oh, dear, is that another hole in your shirt?”

“No, it’s only a bit of dirt.” He disappears into the store hut and can be heard snorting again there. It is his only protest against the maternal distraction.

It is time to go back to Fada. After breakfast Celia begins to pack. She is neither depressed nor pleased. Her air is still that of the accomplished and cheerful traveler who carries her home with her, and sets up her household, complete with family and knitting bag, even in trains and tram shelters. She packs with careful art and when each uniform trunk has been dusted, papered and carefully filled with exactly folded clothes, her glance of appreciation, before she closes the lid, meres at once into the look of pleased expectancy with which she opens the next one and says to Jamesu, “We ought to get the rest of the bush kit in here if we don’t waste any corners.”

Rudbeck hates packing even more than he dislikes putting figures into forms. He wanders about the camp, pipe in mouth and wonders vaguely why he feels so wretched, bored, and disgusted. It is exactly as if he has just returned after three months’ debauch to ordinary life and finds it more stupid and pointless than before.

Even the road gives him no pleasure. He looks sulkily and doubtfully at the great raw cut extending through the forest as far as the eye can reach, until on the horizon it becomes a mere nick in the dark skyline, like the back sight of a rifle. A grand job. Far bigger and grander than he had ever thought possible. But what was it doing to Fada? Where were all the good results? Could it be that dirt old savages like the Emir and Waziri were right in their detestation of motor roads; that roads upset things, brought confusion, revolution. And wasn’t there confusion enough? Wasn’t everybody complaining that the world was getting into such confusion that civilization itself would disappear.

Ideas like these, or rather feelings which cannot take form as ideas for lack of clear definition, are as common to Rudbeck as everyone else who reads the newspaper and can’t distinguish between their sense and their nonsense. Over a thousand lunch tables and camp fires he has discussed them with his friends, and tossed about these words, “confusion,” “chaos,” “breakdown of civilization,” without offering or reaching any kind of conclusion. He knows only that certain conclusions are not popular with his seniors. He has said to Bulteel, “But, sir, if native civilization does break down, there’ll be a proper mess one day.”

Bulteel takes off his hat, lifts it in the air in a line with the sun, and then at once puts it on again. They are taking their evening walk along the river road at Dorua.

“Ah! That’s a big question.” Bulteel hates talking shop out of office hours.

“We’re obviously breaking up the old native tribal organization or it’s breaking by itself. The people are bored with it.”

“Yes, yes, and I’m not surprised,” Bulteel says.

Rudbeck is greatly surprised. “Don’t you believe in the native civilization?”

“Well, how would you llike it yourself?” Bulteel smiles at him sideways with a kind of twinkle.

“Then you think it will go to pieces?”

“Yes, I think so, if it hasn’t gone already.”

“But what’s going to happen then? Are we going to give them any new civilization, or simply let them slide downhill?”

“No idea,” Bulteel says cheerfully. He takes off his hat again and replaces it at once because he finds it a nuisance to hold at arm’s length above his bald head.

“I suppose one mustn’t talk about a plan,” Rudbeck says.

“Oh, no, no, no. They’ll take you for a Bolshy.”

“Well, sir, an idea. I supppose some people do have an idea of what life ought to be like – the Catholics did and the missionaries do, or ought to – and I suppose old Arnold did.”

“Oh, Arnold, the Rugby man – yesss.”

“I don’t mean their ideas would do now, but only that a general idea might be possible – something to work to.”

“Well, what idea?”

“That’s the question.”

“Yes, that’s the question.”

There is a short pause and then Rudbeck, seeing that Bulteel is not going to make any suggestions, says “But it’s a question you mustn’t put up to the Secretariat.”

“Oh, no, no-no. Not at all.” Bulteel pauses. He dislikes this kind of conversation, which, as he says, gets you nowhere. But after a moment his affection for Rudbeck overcomes his disinclination to spoil the evening’s walk and he says gravely, “But don’t think it’s the Secretariat’s fault – people think they’ve been held up by the Secretariat when it’s really Service conditions.”

Rudbeck perfectly understands this phrase. He accepts it as a reasonable explanation of the fact that obstacles stand in the way of every constructive plan. He understands that people in themselves, full of good will and good sense, can form, in an organization, simply an obstructive mass blocking all creative energy; not from any conspiracy or jealousy, but simply from the nature of rules and routine, of official life. He accepts this cheerfully and says to Bulteel, “Ours not to reason why.”

“Exactly; the higher the fewer or words to that effect. It doesn’t do you any good or anyone else,” and, stopping at the station garden, he says in the same good-natured, laughing tone, too cheerful to be called cynical, “What do you think of my zinnias? I hope you don’t despise zinnias. They have one great merit as flowers – they always come up.”

Rudbeck has at once dropped the problem from his mind. He has not thought about it again for perhaps a year. He is too busy.

But now his road work finished, he notices it again, and for a moment, it seems so large and urgent that he wonders how he ever forgot it.

The road itself seems to speak to him. “I’m smashing up the old Fada – I shall change everything and everybody in it. I am abolishing the old ways, the old ideas, the old law; I am bringing wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice, new powers to men and therefore new conflicts. I am the revolution. I am giving you plenty of trouble already, you governors, and I am going to give you plenty more. I destroy and I make new. What are you going to do about it? I am your idea. You made me, so I suppose you know.”

Rudbeck, staring at the road, feels rather than understands this question and he feels again a sense of confusion and frustration. It seems to him, not to his reason, but his feelings, that he has been used and driven like a blind instrument. This gives him a very disagreeable sensation. He stands for several minutes smoking and gazing, with a kind of disgusted surprise, and then gives a snort so loud that a passing headman bobs a curtsy and says in a mildly apologetic tone, “Zaki.”

The headmen, with their usual nonchalant and world-worn air, are collecting their stores to return to Fada. They are not depressed. They have forgotten already their enthusiasm for the great Fada road. It is already a part of Fada to them, like the ground and the air. Johnson, too, shouting to Tasuki across the dusty waste, is in excellent spirits.

“Tasuki, hi-monkey-beard.”

“*Naam*, clerk.”

“What about the pot you borrowed from Waziri?”

“He took it back.”

“I meant the other one – the one that didn’t leak.”

“It got broken when number three gang had that fight.”

“What, another shilling pot broken?”

“Allah, clerk, it wasn’t my fault.”

Rudbeck turns away toward the office hut. It has been surrounded three deep, for at least two hours, by applicants and petitioners. He gives a sigh, taps his pipe with his thumb, and slowly makes his way towards a boring duty; rolling in his walk, swinging his arms, stooping his broad thick shoulders as if his burden of confusion and blind treadmill effort has turned into a physical weight on his back.