

## ON GETTING INTO RUTS

Almost everyone who hears of it is amused at the rigid routine of daily activity that was prescribed for himself and exactly carried out by Immanuel Kant. Winter and summer, he rose at five o'clock every morning, studied two hours, lectured two, and spent the rest of the time until noon at writing. He then took his only meal of the day at a restaurant, walked for exactly an hour by the watch with his man-servant following twenty paces behind, umbrella in hand, and returned home to read until bedtime. This regimen he maintained for more than half a century. He never traveled more than 40 miles from his native Königsberg. During nearly all of his 80 years he walked a beaten round. He wore a rut, and he stayed in it. He seemed to enjoy ruts.

To most people the maintenance of this exacting routine seems at best an amiable oddity. Most of us

would feel that knowledge is increased almost exclusively by stirring about, by seeing new faces and places, or, in short, by keeping out of ruts. Our sympathies are all with the sort of character exemplified by Tennyson's Ulysses, whose wisdom and knowledge had grown in constant travel, in personal observation of "manners, climates, councils, governments." Like Ulysses, we "cannot rest from travel," and we have no notion whatever of the advantages to be gained by sitting still and letting the world come to us. Consequently, it seems to us simply inexplicable that the little man who never left Königsberg, a second-rate Prussian town, and who never varied for half a century the even jog trot of his routine, should have been one of the best-informed men in history, and one of the two or three most influential thinkers of modern times.

But perhaps we have not been quite fair to ruts. The

example of Immanuel Kant is by no means unique. For everyone will think at once of Henry Thoreau who was as singly devoted to his native region so long and philosopher to his little town. "I cannot but regard it as a kindness in those that have the steering of me," he writes, "that I have been nailed down to this my native Concord as the German steadily, and made to study and love this spot of earth more and more. What would signify in comparison a thin and diffused love and knowledge of the whole world instead, got by wandering?"

Thoreau and Kant would have understood and approved the remark of Hamlet that he could confine himself in a nutshell and yet count himself a king of infinite space, for they both realized that freedom, far from being lessened, is positively and often greatly increased when we lay certain external restrictions upon it.

Something of this sort is probably the explanation of the large amount of work often done by persons who are obliged to give the greater amount of their

time and strength to some prescribed activity. The success of George Grote as an historian may have been won not in spite of the fact that much of his time had to be given to banking but in some degree because of that fact, and we may possibly attribute the brilliant writing of Walter Bagehot to a similar cause. These were business men. Chaucer was also a business man. All three were men of routine. It is more than possible that they did so much for literature because they had something else to do, because they were following ruts of daily routine which gave regularity to all their efforts.

Kant brought the knowledge and intelligence of the world into sharp focus at Konigsberg and Thoreau's thought traveled abroad from Concord to ancient Greece and Rome, but the opportunities of one who sits quietly at home today are vastly greater than those that these two men enjoyed and used. In addition to the written and the printed page which was their chief means of communication with the outer world we

have the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, the cinematograph, modern journalism, photography, the airplane, and many other such devices for making ruts glorious. One who lives in a hermit's hut in the midst of a wilderness today may know much more of what is going on in the world, may hear more music and see more people and think more world-wide thoughts, than the citizen of a metropolis did a century ago. The rewards of sitting still and waiting have always been great, but they have never been so obvious as they are today.

And this is only a small part of what may be said in favor of ruts. Who gets the most solid and enduring happiness out of reading? Clearly, the reader who returns again and again to one author, one book, one passage. To whom does friendship mean most? Probably to the person who has few friends but those of long standing and intimately known.

If the truth of this be granted, then certain practical consequences follow. Almost all of us, today, are

bound in some sense of the word to a fixed routine; in some degree we are obliged to move in ruts. But why should we not look at the definite advantages of the situation?

The place that we cannot get away from sets us free when we cheerfully decide that we would not leave it even if we were able, and it becomes a watch tower from which we look out over a wide surrounding country. The routine to which we have seemed tied becomes a source of strength and gives a liberty such as purposeless drifters can never know when we accept it as our own.

Why is it that we are continually warning one another not to "get into ruts"? The reason for all this is apparently, that ruts are frequently misused. People sometimes get into them, it would almost seem, with the primary intention of hiding themselves and of shutting away all the prospect of the outer world together with as much as possible of the light that streams in from above. — *Excerpt from The Christian Science Monitor (Nov 1929).*