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One More River to Cross to the Wedding

Archdeacon James Young

It was of course a great event in the social history of the Far South of the West Coast where weddings are by no means everyday happenings. The wedding was to take place about halfway down between the last of the bridges and the end of habitation. So, as the great day approached, one cavalcade of riders, men and women, traveled up the pack-tracks and beaches from the south, while a similar group rode down from "the end of the wheel-track road" in the north.

I was with the northern contingent. We were about twenty strong, and a very cheerful party too, strung out along the pack-track, or gathered into more sociable groups where riverbed or beaches gave us room to bunch together for a bit. Every now and then the musicians among us would burst into song (to the great consternation of the birds in the bush) and the rest of us would join in the choruses, at the top of our voices, every man in his own key. The miles, which can seem mighty long when you travel alone, slipped by very pleasantly.

We had timed our journey carefully so as to arrive at the scene of the wedding in the evening before the ceremony. But then, as so often happened in the days before the bridges, the West Coast weather took a hand. "The sea went round to the north", as the curious expression of the Coasters has it. It makes sense because as you travel along that narrow strip of land between the great ranges of the Southern Alps and the wild steep beaches of the turbulent Tasman, the sound of the breakers is always in your ears. Naturally you hear the distant roar most clearly down the wind, so that when the wind changes from, say, south-west to north-west, instead of hearing the breakers to the south, you hear them roaring in the north. So "the sea has gone round to the north", and it is the nor'-wester driving in, warm and moist from the sea, and coming into collision with the snowy Alps that gives Westland its phenomenal rainfall. So, when the North starts roaring, the traveller does some quick thinking about any rivers that may flow between him and his destination, and takes appropriate action.

The whole cavalcade seemed to be saying at once: "The sea's gone round to the north" – and the rain would be pouring down any time now, in buckets…

We had lots of wild little creeks ahead of us, and three rivers, two of them not very difficult, but the last and largest notorious for the speed with which it rose and its danger when in flood. So the cavalcade began to crack on the pace. And then the storm hit us. Great rolling black clouds raced in from the sea and the rain came down in a grey wall of water that limited visibility to about fifty yards. It was coming down in streaks about as thick as your thumb. When we pounded across a shingle creekbed, the fall of the water was raising a spray about a foot high where the great drops splashed on the stones. I remember being annoyed (and not for the first time) because the splash of the rain on the shoulders of my oilskin was wetting my ears under the overhang of my sou'-wester.

"Do you think we can beat the flood to the ford of the big river?" shouted somebody.

"I very much doubt it," answered one of the old hands, "but we'll give it a go."

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So on we moved at a spanking trot, as that's the best pace to cover the miles and the rough going quickly. I was deeply interested by the quiet but effective way two or three of the old hands organised our cavalcade. An experienced man was put in the lead, to negotiate any stream and river crossings. Then followed the slowest travellers, so that no one would be left behind – not that anyone was particularly slow. Everyone rides good horses on a journey. The rest of the old hands were distributed along the line, to give help or encouragement if needed: and a thoroughly competent man brought up the rear. It seemed as if it was all arranged without anybody saying anything, though I caught an odd word or nod from one old hand to another.

There was no talking or singing now – for one thing it couldn't have been heard – as we belted along through the bush, the pack-track sometimes rough and rocky, sometimes muddy, with long pools of surface water. The interval between riders was just enough to make sure that the horse in front didn't throw mud in your eye. The sky was deeply overcast and, in the heavy bush, the track was in twilight.

The creeks were foaming a bit but they gave us no trouble. Each rider, as he crossed, waited until the one behind him was safely over, and then went ahead at a walking pace until all were across, and then the shouted word came along the line: "Let her go", and we all broke into a trot again, determined to make that wedding, come heaven or high water.

The first of the smaller rivers was just beginning to rise when we came to it, and the cavalcade waded straight through, on a ford picked by the leader. No trouble. But some of the women of the party were beginning to get a bit weary, good riders though they were, and we'd slow up to a walking pace now and then and it was pretty welcome, too. The next river was up a bit, swirling along and very discoloured. So its crossing was treated with a little more care – the dinkum pioneer treatment our grandparents used when travelling a wild, untamed New Zealand.

We formed up in groups of threes, the tallest horse in each group on the upstream side and slightly behind, with his head opposite the leader's shoulder; and the third horse again slightly behind, his head opposite the shoulder of the horse in the middle. So we crossed steadily, everyone carefully keeping station. The water came rushing strongly, hungrily, and reached up licking round the saddle-flaps – quite deep enough to give everyone a good bootful and, of course, straight off the mountain ice.

It was three or four miles on to the only two little bush houses on our side of the Big River, and we urged our tired horses to their best pace to cover the distance. One of the residents was standing in his doorway to greet us.

"Any chance of getting across?" I called to him.

"Not a hope in the world. She's as wild as a hawk – running a banker and rising about a foot in a minute. You couldn't possibly put a boat on it if you had one."

But I wasn't going to be stopped on hearsay, so I rode on the half-mile or so to the river itself, and a couple of the other men came with me. The river was tearing along, a quarter of a mile wide, carrying logs and stumps and great forest trees that thrashed about, as their roots, often weighted with clay and rocks, struck some obstruction on the riverbed. No. Not a hope in the world of getting across there.

But I was a bit jealous of a reputation I had for not being easily stopped – and especially on an occasion like a wedding. So I turned and rode up the bank of the river for a mile or so, looking for any place where there'd be a chance of getting across. I didn't find one, but I came to a place where the flood ran deep and silent through a

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perpendicular-sided cutting it had made in a gravel terrace. It was only about 150 yards from the top of one fifty-foot bank to the other. I had a good look at it, and made up my mind that, if I couldn't get my *body* across, I could at least get my *voice* across. And with that I turned and rode thoughtfully back to rejoin the rest of the party.

The rain was easing off, and the first remark I heard was: "The sea's gone round to the south and it will be fine tomorrow."

"How long will it be before the river goes down?' I asked one of the residents.

"A week at least," he said, "with all that mild rain in the snow."

There was just one telephone line that ran away down to the end of habitation – a good stout 8-gauge fencing-wire, often stapled from tree-trunk to tree-trunk beside the pack-track. All the little settlements were connected to it. So that evening I got in touch with a much-troubled bridegroom in the next settlement across the river.

We discussed the situation. He had all the necessary papers ready on his side of the river – and what was the use of that? To his astonished delight, I told him that if he and his bride and their witnesses would come up to "the narrows" at the time fixed – ten the next morning – I and the party from the north would come up on our side, and, if I could hear their responses, I'd marry them *across the river*.

There was much mirth in our northern camp when I told them what I proposed to do. As sometimes happens on the Coast, after "the sea has gone round to the south", the next morning was crisp and cloudless and calm. Punctual to the minute my northern party ranged themselves round me. I'd put on my cassock and surplice and advanced to within a few feet of the cliff's edge. The bride and groom and their party ranged themselves on their side of the river according to the instructions I'd given over the phone the night before. I was delighted to find how easily my voice carried across in the clear still morning air. It was a beautiful setting for a very reverent, if somewhat unusual service.

All went well until it came to the place where I asked the groom: "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?" – and so on – at which he was overcome with shyness, and just mumbled.

"Can't hear what you say," I called.

The bride gave him a dig in the ribs with her elbow and said, very audibly, "Speak up." And he did!

When it came to her turn I asked her: "Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband?" and she cupped her hands before her mouth and shouted "I will", with the utmost audibility. The northern contingent, I regret to say, let out a gust of laughter, and cheered lustily. But they were soon quiet again, and so that the nice buxom bride shouldn't feel put out of face: "Good girl," I called, "I heard that all right", and went on with the service.

So I gave them my blessing across the river.

That was a good many years ago: but, as far as I know, they've lived happily ever after.

All the liquid refreshments for the wedding breakfast happened to be on *our* side of the flood, their transfer having been blocked by the sudden rise of the river on the previous day. All the glasses were with the southerners. But we raised our bottles in enthusiastic salute to the bride and groom – a gesture which was greeted with howls and yells of rage and frustration.

Courteously we offered to try and float a bottle or two across to them.

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But, of course, the only bottle that will float is an empty one.