

THE LAND OF ONCE UPON A TIME.

BY FRANK PIERSON TEBBETS.

LOOKING back across the years since I was a child—and estimating the advantages and disadvantages, pro and con, of having had to grow up, I find no loss that I have suffered so hard to bear and no condition of manhood that seems so oppressive, as the loss of that imaginary world, which we used to think of, after the nomenclature of the fairy stories, as, “the land of once upon a time.”

As I remember it, I conceive “the land of once upon a time” to have been a country of perpetually green fields, smiled upon by eternal sunshine, behind which at convenient intervals loomed deep and gloomy forests and across which one occasionally caught glimpses of the grey turrets of ancient castles.

The level plains were fields of honor where gallant knights might seek adventure or engage in contests of chivalry for beautiful princesses, confined in the towers of the distant castles. The wood was principally the abiding place of hungry wolves, fiery dragons and cruel giants—a fearsome place where young princes or gentlemen adventurers went to slay these ferocious monsters and to rescue helpless victims who were confined by them within its depths. There was always an enchanted forest which lay just behind the first and which was inhabited by witches and wicked fairies who made use of it to accomplish their evil purposes. Here the forest fastnesses were indescribably deep and overshadowed by arching limbs. The trunks of the aged oaks rose gnarled and twisted upon every side. The network of branches and heavy foliage shutting out the light from above and a thick tangle of vines underfoot made travel both difficult and exhausting. Huge festoons of moss and hanging plants, suspended from the tree trunks, gave to these forests a lonely and funereal appearance while the contorted and terrible faces of evil spirits seemed to peer from the grotesque formations of root and limb. The enormous roots of the trees lay spread over the ground

like writhing serpents, their gray folds coiled about large boulders, knotted firmly around each other and thrust deep down into the earth under the surrounding vegetation. The ground beneath the tall trees was damp and slimy, and the air, heavy with the perfume of poisonous herbs, invited the wayfarer to pause in his journey and fall into that slumber from which there was no awakening. In the enchanted forest the products of nature, warped from their usual courses, joined with the wicked inhabitants to lure the unsuspecting victim on to his destruction. Here when night approached, and the traveler had been enticed into the heart of the silent forest where he was helpless and confused—the great trunks would bend slowly together and crush the unlucky being beneath their heavy branches—or one of the long, snakelike roots would reach out and strangle him in its coils—or some black, bottomless pool would swallow up his body and close silent over his head—or the venomous perfumes of the night would put him to sleep forever. Then there were other forests where there were neither beasts to devour nor enchantments to entrap but where everything was bright and inviting and altogether delightful. Here the vegetation was thinner, frequently intersected by little winding paths, and gave way occasionally to patches of velvety greensward upon which the dun deer fed. The golden arrows of flashing sunlight everywhere pierced the leafy canopy and let in amongst the mystery and the silence, the merry tidings of the joyous day. In the branches of the young trees there was song and festival, and happy chattering. Little animals and creeping things scampered and squeaked cheerily among the dead leaves and low underbrush. Here dwelt the merry robbers and sturdy outlaws to whom the countryside paid tribute. In these retreats and among the wooded glades they had their home—along these leafy avenues was heard the silvery winding of their hunting horn—here they feasted and sang lusty songs and quaffed nut-brown ale about the trysting tree—upon these greensward places they threw their fresh killed venison and engaged in boisterous pastimes—in these forest paths they robbed priest and prince to fee man and beggar—behind these familiar tree trunks, with quarter-staff and broadsword and cloth-yard shaft they defended their title to the land—and here, at last, in some silent, sequestered, unfrequented spot, they were laid finally to rest, their graves remembered by the birds, the sunlight, the flowers and the trees.

And yet of all these pleasant scenes, the most delightful to me was the sweeping plain. Here, lying in the long grass, at the edge of the forest, of a warm midsummer afternoon, one could look

across miles of open country toward the blue hills and see the scarlet banners of those inevitable castles whipping gaily in the breeze. Occasionally, with a clang of portcullis and drawbridge, a knight in flashing armor would ride out through a castle gate and gallop off into the dusty highway. Here and there the quaint, red-tiled housetops of a town peeped over the edge of the hills. Behind it all ran the forest, in its deep shadows and ragged outline a sharp contrast with the brightness and beauty of the world which lay between. As one lay eagerly taking it all in, one felt strangely content and wonderfully at home.

Everything seemed to be in just its proper place. In the castles were kings and princesses, on the plain were knights and squires, in the forests were witches and giants—while everywhere at hand, in the rustling grass, in the bending trees, in the perfume of distant gardens, in the singing birds, in the rolling hills, in the very atmosphere itself was the voice of a calling fairyland. Sometimes if you watched closely enough you might even see the tiny elfin faces in the nodding clover and hear the shrill, piping voices teasing you to come away and play pranks with them. And in the moonlight, after the long evening shadows had begun to fall—they came to you in bands and droves—weaving daintily through the forest in long undulating columns, to dance upon the green and hold high festival while the darkness lasted.

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For years, a ramble in the fields of a bright, midsummer day, meant a pilgrimage to the land of once upon a time. It meant lying face down upon the fragrant turf and dreaming for hours of the things that might be seen and heard if one only watched long enough and had sufficient faith. Every field, every wooded coppice, every dusty country road, every gamboling meadow brook—was to me a fairies' rendezvous, where the "little people" came to pass the magic hours between sunset and sunrise. Until I was quite a boy I believed that those irregular circles of button mushrooms, known as fairy rings, were the seats about these midnight dancing places. Many an hour I have passed after bedtime, sitting propped up on the pillows before my little table lamp, turning the pages of *The Green Fairy Book* and wandering hand in hand with goblin comrades through the land of once upon a time.

But at about this period I was approaching, unsuspectingly and unknowingly, one of the most serious and trying experiences in my career. For I had come to the parting of the ways—the spon-

taneity, the freedom, the romancing of the past ten years was to be put aside and I was to become the slave of society. Very much dressed, regulated, confined and painfully respectable I was henceforward to be chiefly concerned with the pursuit of "an aim in life," and the acquisition of learning. After the custom of the age I was now taught that to give vent to the imagination was frivolous and unmanly, that the only real, important things in life were the things which might be felt and tasted and seen. I was schooled to believe that only very little and silly boys cared anything about those ridiculous tales in *The Green Fairy Book* and that the necessary business of life was to "grow up," "learn things from books," and somehow, sometime, to get hold of that thing "success" which was such an obvious source of envy to one's neighbors as well as of pride and happiness to one's self. Principally I was told, in common with the other children who with me were passing across the great gulf between childhood and manhood "to have done with frivolity," "to take life seriously," "to spend less time in play," to be old and dignified in my manner and accomplishments, and to come at this problem of "living" with all the gravity and solemnity which so serious an occupation should demand.

How shall I attempt to describe the evils of the years that elapsed between the beginning of the process and the time when the change was finally affected? How shall I tell of the idols dethroned, of the beliefs denied, of the faiths shattered, of the shrines deserted? How can I picture the doubts and fears, the haltings and gropings, the indecisions and misunderstandings which accompanied this evolutionary process? Let it suffice that at length, and in the course of due time I did finally "grow up" and was able to look about me and take the measure of my immediate surroundings. I first noted that what I had passed through in the transition from youth to majority seemed to have failed, for some reason, of its usual and expected result. It may have been my early training, it may have been some inherent quality of my nature which was too tenacious to be dislodged, whatever it was that influenced the result, I came through the experience strained and tried and lacking somewhat the ardor of the early faith but still sound and unimpaired as to essentials. And so in my capacity as prophet of the child in man and of man in the child, I bring a message which should be of interest to all mankind. To those who tread the whirling mill of toil, to those who slave at many tasks, to those cramped by custom and chained at desks it means the promise of eternal youth. To those

who are yet children it means the resanctification of youthful gospels and the awakening of a new confidence in their own social attitude.

I should like to take every little child upon my knee and with all the strength of will that I possess, with all the power of conviction that life's experience has given me, I should like to urge it never to "grow up." If to believe in fairies means to be able to see visions where others see only things, to find friends and counsellors where others see only trees and stones, to believe in a vast imaginary world where all men are brave and all women true, to be able to withdraw at will to a dream country peopled with amusing and delightful if altogether impossible beings, and return to the cares of daily existence, refreshed and rejuvenated, then I should like to urge them to believe in fairies always and to convert as many other people as possible to that belief.

Why should we have to "grow up" at all? Why should the child spirit not remain always with us? When to "grow up" means, as it so often does, conventions and superstitions, falsehoods and hypocrisy, retrogression and cowardice, when it means judging people by their clothes and pocketbook instead of by their hearts and character, when it means throwing a man himself aside and judging him by his society, his house, his money and his parentage, the mere husk of his personality, and when it means assuming toward life in general an attitude of protest and discontent, what indeed can you offer a child by aiding him to "grow up"?

In a sense, as the years come and go, we must advance in age and must play our part in the drama of life, accepting its responsibilities and bearing its burdens, making of it either a tragedy or a comedy, whichever we may choose. I am not advocating an irresponsible attitude toward life, far from it, we must all play our parts like men if we would deserve well of ourselves or of our fellows. Man's estate should be infinitely higher and infinitely happier than that of a child. I consider it quite as important that we should become men in fact, as that we should remain children in spirit. The very glories of manhood are its dangers and sufferings, its disappointments and struggles. It is only through the winning of battles, the bearing of crosses, and the overcoming of temptations that we can come at last to excellence of character. Carrière said: "The human body is not a cast; it is a piece of repoussé work formed by great blows from within"; and in the nomenclature of the artist he expressed a moral truth. What is true, in this connection, of the body is doubly true of the soul for each of us every day, by every thought and deed is engaged upon a great piece of repoussé

work, beating out the figure which is to typify our character with blows that are light and heavy, with blows that are false and true.

But all these things are perfectly consistent with the child spirit of which we are speaking. The thing to be contended for is a change, not of action, but of point of view. Let us indeed bear our burdens conscientiously, but let us bear them with the easy confidence of children. Why not go upon our way with laughter and rejoicing rather than with sadness and stern faces? We can learn something here from the infant—the child is often really father to the man, in virtue, wisdom, in experience. What does Emerson say of children—does he not tell us that the child's sense of social distinctions is far keener than that of a man? Does he not tell us that children are franker, more direct, more courageous, less moved by pageantry and display, and more given to estimating people by "essentials" than those who are commonly said to possess greater knowledge? To become tall and portly, to have white heads and bowed shoulders, to lead important social movements, to accomplish large worldly successes, to rise to places of power and responsibility in the counsels of one's fellow-men—is not necessarily to "grow up." For these things depend not so much upon evolution of the heart as upon the development of the body and the intelligence. The heart which directs it all may, if we will, be locked away from the moil of human strife and, bathed in the waters of Ponce de Leon's fountain of eternal youth, remain ever young.

So I should say to all children—you will come to new experiences as you advance in years. You will meet new problems, new obstacles, new difficulties in the way of life, but you will not have to put on spectacles and frown painfully and look gravely in order to find their solution. Go at them with a rush and a shout and a merry laugh, just as you climb the hill and swim the creek, and follow the hounds, and you will find them melting away like snow before the summer sunshine leaving you fresh and unexhausted. I should say to them—you will meet with new crises and dangers, new burdens and responsibilities, new aspirations and disappointments as you travel upon this lengthy road, the relationships of your new estate will surround you with difficulties and problems which each day you will be called upon to solve;—meet all these trials bravely, resolutely and with a quiet courage—but above all meet them joyfully, gladly and with a childish confidence. I should endeavor to offset by every power at my command this reprehensible tendency to make children "old" at any cost, to darken their lives with "tasks" and "duties," to oppress them with a sense of the

solemnity of life, to tear out of their hearts every shred of romance and imagination, and to feed them upon rules and systems until they become prating, artificial things. I should tell them to be children forever and nothing less than children. I should encourage their belief in the visions of childhood until they had become a part of their very existence, tempering all their beliefs and transforming their every deed. I should tell them to cling to their belief in the land of once upon a time as one clings to life and to hope.