

Golden Age

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[ILLUSTRATED]

By

Kenneth Grahame

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ABOUT AUTHOR:



*K*enneth Grahame (July 20, 1859 – July 6, 1932)

was a British writer, most famous for *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), one of the classics of children's literature. He also wrote *The Reluctant Dragon*, which was much later adapted into a Disney film.

PROLOGUE: THE OLYMPIANS



Looking back to those days of old, ere the gate shut
behind me, I can see now that to children with a proper
equipment of parents these things would have worn a

different aspect. But to those whose nearest were aunts and uncles, a special attitude of mind may be allowed. They treated us, indeed, with kindness enough as to the needs of the flesh, but after that with indifference (an indifference, as I recognise, the result of a certain stupidity), and therewith the commonplace conviction that your child is merely animal. At a very early age I remember realising in a quite impersonal and kindly way the existence of that stupidity, and its tremendous influence in the world; while there grew up in me, as in the parallel case of Caliban upon Setebos, a vague sense of a ruling power, wilful and freakish, and prone to the practice of vagaries—"just choosing so:" as, for instance, the giving of authority over us to these hopeless and incapable creatures, when it might far more reasonably have been given to ourselves over them. These elders, our betters by a trick of chance, commanded no respect, but only a certain blend of envy—of their good luck—and pity—for their inability to make use of it. Indeed, it was one of the most hopeless features in their character (when we troubled ourselves to waste a thought on them: which wasn't often) that, having absolute licence to indulge in the pleasures of life, they could get no good of it. They might dabble in the pond all day, hunt the chickens, climb trees in the most uncompromising Sunday clothes; they were free to issue forth and buy gunpowder in the full eye of the sun—free to fire cannons and explode mines on the lawn:

yet they never did any one of these things. No irresistible Energy haled them to church o' Sundays; yet they went there regularly of their own accord, though they betrayed no greater delight in the experience than ourselves.

On the whole, the existence of these Olympians seemed to be entirely void of interests, even as their movements were confined and slow, and their habits stereotyped and senseless. To anything but appearances they were blind. For them the orchard (a place elf-haunted, wonderful!) simply produced so many apples and cherries: or it didn't, when the failures of Nature were not infrequently ascribed to us. They never set foot within fir-wood or hazel-copse, nor dreamt of the marvels hid therein. The mysterious sources—sources as of old Nile—that fed the duck-pond had no magic for them. They were unaware of Indians, nor recked they anything of bisons or of pirates (with pistols!), though the whole place swarmed with such portents. They cared not about exploring for robbers' caves, nor digging for hidden treasure. Perhaps, indeed, it was one of their best qualities that they spent the greater part of their time stuffily indoors.

To be sure, there was an exception in the curate, who would receive unblenching the information that the meadow beyond the orchard was a prairie studded with herds of buffalo, which it was our delight, moccasined and tomahawked, to ride down with those whoops that

announce the scenting of blood. He neither laughed nor sneered, as the Olympians would have done; but possessed of a serious idiosyncrasy, he would contribute such lots of valuable suggestion as to the pursuit of this particular sort of big game that, as it seemed to us, his mature age and eminent position could scarce have been attained without a practical knowledge of the creature in its native lair. Then, too, he was always ready to constitute himself a hostile army or a band of marauding Indians on the shortest possible notice: in brief, a distinctly able man, with talents, so far as we could judge, immensely above the majority. I trust he is a bishop by this time,—he had all the necessary qualifications, as we knew.

These strange folk had visitors sometimes,—stiff and colourless Olympians like themselves, equally without vital interests and intelligent pursuits: emerging out of the clouds, and passing away again to drag on an aimless existence somewhere out of our ken. Then brute force was pitilessly applied. We were captured, washed, and forced into clean collars: silently submitting, as was our wont, with more contempt than anger. Anon, with unctuous hair and faces stiffened in a conventional grin, we sat and listened to the usual platitudes. How could reasonable people spend their precious time so? That was ever

our wonder as we bounded forth at last—to the old clay-pit to make pots, or to hunt bears among the hazels.

It was incessant matter for amazement how these Olympians would talk over our heads—during meals, for instance—of this or the other social or political inanity, under the delusion that these pale phantasms of reality were among the importances of life. We illuminati, eating silently, our heads full of plans and conspiracies, could have told them what real life was. We had just left it outside, and were all on fire to get back to it. Of course we didn't waste the revelation on them; the futility of imparting our ideas had long been demonstrated. One in thought and purpose, linked by the necessity of combating one hostile fate, a power antagonistic ever,—a power we lived to evade,—we had no confidants save ourselves. This strange anaemic order of beings was further removed from us, in fact, than the kindly beasts who shared our natural existence in the sun. The estrangement was fortified by an abiding sense of injustice, arising from the refusal of the Olympians ever to defend, retract, or admit themselves in the wrong, or to accept similar concessions on our part. For instance, when I flung the cat out of an upper window (though I did it from no ill-feeling, and it didn't hurt the cat), I was ready, after a moment's reflection, to own I was wrong, as a gentleman should. But was the matter allowed to end there? I trow not. Again, when

Harold was locked up in his room all day, for assault and battery upon a neighbour's pig,—an action he would have scorned, being indeed on the friendliest terms with the porker in question,—there was no handsome expression of regret on the discovery of the real culprit. What Harold had felt was not so much the imprisonment,—indeed he had very soon escaped by the window, with assistance from his allies, and had only gone back in time for his release,—as the Olympian habit. A word would have set all right; but of course that word was never spoken.

Well! The Olympians are all past and gone. Somehow the sun does not seem to shine so brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. *Et in Arcadia ego*,—I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. Can it be I too have become an Olympian?

A HOLIDAY.



*T*he masterful wind was up and out, shouting and chasing, the lord of the morning. Poplars swayed and

tossed with a roaring swish; dead leaves sprang aloft, and whirled into space; and all the clear-swept heaven seemed to thrill with sound like a great harp.

It was one of the first awakenings of the year. The earth stretched herself, smiling in her sleep; and everything leapt and pulsed to the stir of the giant's movement. With us it was a whole holiday; the occasion a birthday—it matters not whose. Some one of us had had presents, and pretty conventional speeches, and had glowed with that sense of heroism which is no less sweet that nothing has been done to deserve it. But the holiday was for all, the rapture of awakening Nature for all, the various outdoor joys of puddles and sun and hedge-breaking for all. Colt-like I ran through the meadows, frisking happy heels in the face of Nature laughing responsive. Above, the sky was bluest of the blue; wide pools left by the winter's floods flashed the colour back, true and brilliant; and the soft air thrilled with the germinating touch that seemed to kindle something in my own small person as well as in the rash primrose already lurking in sheltered haunts. Out into the brimming sun-bathed world I sped, free of lessons, free of discipline and correction, for one day at least. My legs ran of themselves, and though I heard my name called faint and shrill behind, there was no stopping for me. It was only Harold, I concluded, and his legs, though shorter than mine, were good for a longer spurt

than this. Then I heard it called again, but this time more faintly, with a pathetic break in the middle; and I pulled up short, recognising Charlotte's plaintive note.

She panted up anon, and dropped on the turf beside me. Neither had any desire for talk; the glow and the glory of existing on this perfect morning were satisfaction full and sufficient.

"Where's Harold;" I asked presently.

"Oh, he's just playin' muffin-man, as usual," said Charlotte with petulance. "Fancy wanting to be a muffin-man on a whole holiday!"

It was a strange craze, certainly; but Harold, who invented his own games and played them without assistance, always stuck staunchly to a new fad, till he had worn it quite out. Just at present he was a muffin-man, and day and night he went through passages and up and down staircases, ringing a noiseless bell and offering phantom muffins to invisible wayfarers. It sounds a poor sort of sport; and yet—to pass along busy streets of your own building, for ever ringing an imaginary bell and offering airy muffins of your own make to a bustling thronging crowd of your own creation—there were points about the game, it cannot be denied, though it seemed scarce in harmony with this radiant wind-swept morning!

"And Edward, where is he?" I questioned again.

"He's coming along by the road," said Charlotte. "He'll be crouching in the ditch when we get there, and he's going to be a grizzly bear and spring out on us, only you mustn't say I told you, 'cos it's to be a surprise."

"All right," I said magnanimously. "Come on and let's be surprised." But I could not help feeling that on this day of days even a grizzly felt misplaced and common.

Sure enough an undeniable bear sprang out on us as we dropped into the road; then ensued shrieks, growlings, revolver-shots, and unrecorded heroisms, till Edward condescended at last to roll over and die, bulking large and grim, an unmitigated grizzly. It was an understood thing, that whoever took upon himself to be a bear must eventually die, sooner or later, even if he were the eldest born; else, life would have been all strife and carnage, and the Age of Acorns have displaced our hard-won civilisation. This little affair concluded with satisfaction to all parties concerned, we rambled along the road, picking up the defaulting Harold by the way, muffinless now and in his right and social mind.

"What would you do?" asked Charlotte presently,—the book of the moment always dominating her thoughts until it was sucked dry and cast aside,—"what would you do if you saw two lions in the road, one on each side, and you didn't know if they was loose or if they was chained up?"

"Do?" shouted Edward, valiantly, "I should—I should—I should—"

His boastful accents died away into a mumble: "Dunno what I should do."

"Shouldn't do anything," I observed after consideration; and really it would be difficult to arrive at a wiser conclusion.

"If it came to DOING," remarked Harold, reflectively, "the lions would do all the doing there was to do, wouldn't they?"

"But if they was GOOD lions," rejoined Charlotte, "they would do as they would be done by."

"Ah, but how are you to know a good lion from a bad one?" said Edward. "The books don't tell you at all, and the lions ain't marked any different."

"Why, there aren't any good lions," said Harold, hastily.

"Oh yes, there are, heaps and heaps," contradicted Edward. "Nearly all the lions in the story-books are good lions. There was Androcles' lion, and St. Jerome's lion, and—and—the Lion and the Unicorn—"

"He beat the Unicorn," observed Harold, dubiously, "all round the town."

"That PROVES he was a good lion," cried Edwards triumphantly. "But the question is, how are you to tell 'em when you see 'em?"

"I should ask Martha," said Harold of the simple creed.

Edward snorted contemptuously, then turned to Charlotte. "Look here," he said; "let's play at lions, anyhow, and I'll run on to that corner and be a lion,—I'll be two lions, one on each side of the road,—and you'll come along, and you won't know whether I'm chained up or not, and that'll be the fun!"

"No, thank you," said Charlotte, firmly; "you'll be chained up till I'm quite close to you, and then you'll be loose, and you'll tear me in pieces, and make my frock all dirty, and p'raps you'll hurt me as well. I know your lions!"

"No, I won't; I swear I won't," protested Edward. "I'll be quite a new lion this time,—something you can't even imagine." And he raced off to his post. Charlotte hesitated; then she went timidly on, at each step growing less Charlotte, the mummer of a minute, and more the anxious Pilgrim of all time. The lion's wrath waxed terrible at her approach; his roaring filled the startled air. I waited until they were both thoroughly absorbed, and then I slipped through the hedge out of the trodden highway, into the