HOW TO TELL STORIES TO CHILDREN

BY

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BOSTON NEW YORK CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

PREFACE

THE stories which are given in the following pages are for the most part those which I have found to be best liked by the children to whom I have told these and others. I have tried to reproduce the form in which I actually tell them, — although that inevitably varies with every repetition, — feeling that it would be of greater value to another story-teller than a more closely literary form.

For the same reason, I have confined my statements of theory as to method, to those which reflect my own experience; my "rules" were drawn from introspection and retrospection, at the urging of others, long after the instinctive method they exemplify had become habitual.

These facts are the basis of my hope that the book may be of use to those who have much to do with children.

It would be impossible, in the space of any pardonable preface, to name the teachers, mothers, and librarians who have given me hints

and helps during the past few years of story-telling. But I cannot let these pages go to press without recording my especial indebtedness to the few persons without whose interested aid the little book would scarcely have come to be. They are: Mrs. Elizabeth Young Rutan, at whose generous instance I first enlarged my own field of entertaining story-telling to include hers, of educational narrative, and from whom I had many valuable suggestions at that time; Miss Ella L. Sweeney, assistant superintendent of schools, Providence, R. I., to whom I owe exceptional opportunities for investigation and experiment; Mrs. Root, children's librarian of Providence Public Library, and Miss Alice M. Jordan, Boston Public Library, children's room, to whom I am indebted for much gracious and efficient aid.

My thanks are due also to G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, for permission to make use of three stories from Joseph Jacobs's "English Fairy Tales;" to the Frederick A. Stokes Company for "Five Little White Heads," by Walter Learned, and for "Bird Thoughts;" to Charles Scribner's Sons for Ernest Thompson Seton's "Raggylug;" to

Little, Brown & Co. for three stories from Laura E. Richards's "The Golden Windows;" and to McClure, Phillips & Co. for Seumas McManus's "Billy Beg and his Bull."

S. C. B.

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, I chanced to open a magazine at a story of Italian life which dealt with a curious popular custom. It told of the love of the people for the performances of a strangely clad, periodically appearing old man who was a professional story-teller. This old man repeated whole cycles of myth and serials of popular history, holding his audience-chamber in whatever corner of the open court or square he happened upon, and always surrounded by an eager crowd of listeners. So great was the respect in which the story-teller was held, that any interruption was likely to be resented with violence.

As I read of the absorbed silence and the changing expressions of the crowd about the old man, I was suddenly reminded of a company of people I had recently seen. They were gathered in one of the parlors of a women's college, and their serious young faces had, habitually, none of the childlike responsiveness of the Italian populace; they were suggestive,

rather, of a daily experience which precluded over-much surprise or curiosity about anything. In the midst of the group stood a frail-looking woman with bright eyes. She was telling a story, a children's story, about a good and a bad little mouse.

She had been asked to do that thing, for a purpose, and she did it, therefore. But it was easy to see from the expressions of the listeners how trivial a thing it seemed to them.

That was at first. But presently the room grew quieter; and yet quieter. The faces relaxed into amused smiles, sobered in unconscious sympathy, finally broke in ripples of mirth. The story-teller had come to her own.

The memory of the college girls listening to the mouse-story brought other memories with it. Many a swift composite view of faces passed before my mental vision, faces with the child's look on them, yet not the faces of children. And of the occasions to which the faces belonged, those were most vivid which were earliest in my experience. For it was those early experiences which first made me realize the modern possibilities of the old, old art of telling stories.

It had become a part of my work, some

years ago, to give English lectures on German literature. Many of the members of my class were unable to read in the original the works with which I dealt, and as these were modern works it was rarely possible to obtain translations. For this reason, I gradually formed the habit of telling the story of the drama or novel in question before passing to a detailed consideration of it. I enjoyed this part of the lesson exceedingly, but it was some time before I realized how much the larger part of the lesson it had become to the class. They used — and they were mature women — to wait for the story as if it were a sugar-plum and they children; and to grieve openly if it was omitted. Substitution of reading from a translation was greeted with precisely the same abatement of eagerness that a child shows when he has asked you to tell a story, and you offer, instead, to "read one from the pretty book." And so general and constant were the tokens of enjoyment that there could ultimately be no doubt of the power which the mere story-telling exerted.

The attitude of the grown-up listeners did but illustrate the general difference between the effect of telling a story and of reading one.

Every one who knows children well has felt the difference. With few exceptions, children listen twice as eagerly to a story told as to one read, and even a "recitation" or a so-called "reading" has not the charm for them that the person wields who can "tell a story." And there are sound reasons for their preference.

The great difference, including lesser ones, between telling and reading is that the teller is free; the reader is bound. The book in hand, or the wording of it in mind, binds the reader. The story-teller is bound by nothing; he stands or sits, free to watch his audience, free to follow or lead every changing mood, free to use body, eyes, voice, as aids in expression. Even his mind is unbound, because he lets the story come in the words of the moment, being so full of what he has to say. For this reason, a story told is more spontaneous than one read, however well read. And, consequently, the connection with the audience is closer, more electric, than is possible when the book or its wording intervenes.

Beyond this advantage, is the added charm of the personal element in story-telling. When you make a story your own and tell it, the listener gets the story, *plus your appreciation*

of it. It comes to him filtered through your own enjoyment. That is what makes the funny story thrice funnier on the lips of a jolly raconteur than in the pages of "Life." It is the filter of personality. Everybody has something of the curiosity of the primitive man concerning his neighbor; what another has in his own person felt and done has an especial hold on each one of us. The most cultured of audiences will listen to the personal reminiscences of an explorer with a different tingle of interest from that which it feels for a scientific lecture on the results of the exploration. The longing for the personal in experience is a very human longing. And this instinct or longing is especially strong in children. It finds expression in their delight in tales of what father or mother did when they were little, of what happened to grandmother when she went on a journey, and so on, but it also extends to stories which are not in themselves personal: which take their personal savor merely from the fact that they flow from the lips in spontaneous, homely phrases, with an appreciative gusto which suggests participation.

The greater ease in holding the attention of children is, for teachers, a sufficient practical

reason for telling stories rather than reading them. It is incomparably easier to make the necessary exertion of "magnetism," or whatever it may be called, when nothing else distracts the attention. One's eyes meet the children's gaze naturally and constantly; one's expression responds to and initiates theirs without effort; the connection is immediate. For the ease of the teacher, then, no less than for the joy of the children, may the art of story-telling be urged as preëminent over the art of reading.

It is a very old, a very beautiful art. To think much of it carries one's imaginary vision to scenes of glorious and touching antiquity. The tellers of the stories of which Homer's Iliad was compounded; the transmitters of the legend and history which make up the "Gesta Romanorum;" the traveling raconteurs whose brief heroic tales are woven into our own national epic; the grannies of age-old tradition whose stories are parts of Celtic folk-lore, of Germanic myth, of Asiatic wonder-tales, — these are but younger brothers and sisters to the generations of story-tellers whose inventions are but vaguely outlined in resultant forms of ancient literatures, and the names

of whose tribes are no longer even guessed. There was a time when story-telling was the chiefest of the arts of entertainment; kings and warriors could ask for nothing better; serfs and children were satisfied with nothing less. In all times there have been occasional revivals of this pastime, and in no time has the art died out in the simple human realms of which mothers are queens. But perhaps never, since the really old days, has story-telling so nearly reached a recognized level of dignity as a legitimate and general art of entertainment as now.

Its present popularity seems in a way to be an outgrowth of the recognition of its educational value which was given impetus by the German pedagogues of Froebel's school. That recognition has, at all events, been a noticeable factor in educational conferences of late. The function of the story is no longer considered solely in the light of its place in the kindergarten; it is being sought in the first, the second, and indeed in every grade where the children are still children. Sometimes the demand for stories is made solely in the interests of literary culture, sometimes in far ampler and vaguer relations, ranging from

inculcation of scientific fact to admonition of moral theory; but whatever the reason given, the conclusion is the same: tell the children stories.

The average teacher has yielded to the pressure, at least in theory. Cheerfully, as she has already accepted so many modifications of old methods by "new thought," she accepts the idea of instilling mental and moral desiderata into the receptive pupil, *via* the charming tale. But, confronted with the concrete problem of what desideratum by which tale, and how, the average teacher sometimes finds her cheerfulness displaced by a sense of inadequacy to the situation.

People who have always told stories to children, who do not know when they began or how they do it; whose heads are stocked with the accretions of years of fairy-land-dwelling and nonsense-sharing, — these cannot understand the perplexity of one to whom the gift and the opportunity have not "come natural." But there are many who can understand it, personally and all too well. To these, the teachers who have not a knack for story-telling, who feel as shy as their own youngest scholar at the thought of it, who do not know

where the good stories are, or which ones are easy to tell, it is my earnest hope that the following pages will bring something definite and practical in the way of suggestion and reference.

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Let us first consider together the primary matter of the *aim* in educational story-telling. On our conception of this must depend very largely all decisions as to choice and method; and nothing in the whole field of discussion is more vital than a just and sensible notion of this first point. What shall we attempt to accomplish by stories in the schoolroom? What can we reasonably expect to accomplish? And what, of this, is best accomplished by this means and no other?

These are questions which become the more interesting and practical because the recent access of enthusiasm for stories in education has led many people to claim very wide and very vaguely outlined territory for their possession, and often to lay heaviest stress on