

NON-FICTION

Ellis Parker Butler

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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HOW IT FEELS TO BE FIFTY

By Ellis Parker Butler

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To tell you the honest truth,

I am obliged to say that, if I had not been asked to write these few lines on "How it Feels to be Fifty," being fifty would n't have meant anything in my young life.

Of course this will be a terrible disappointment to the thousands of people who, for twenty-five years, have been counting off the months and days and hours and minutes, saying:

"In twenty-one years more he will be fifty; in ten months more he will be fifty; in eight minutes more he will be fifty! And *then* he will tell us how it feels, and we can absorb the knowledge from his wise old lips and get ready to feel as we ought to feel when we, too, are fifty."

It is a shame to disappoint such a large and intelligent audience, but I am compelled to state that I do not feel like a doddering old wreck teetering on the edge of the grave.

I remember a lovely underwear advertisement that depicted a sort of "cradle to grave" scene, with a toddling youngster at one end of the bridge of life and an aged man at the other end, and men of various progressive underwear ages scattered between. They were all arrayed in nice comfy underwear, and the bridge over which they were ambling was highest in the middle. It suggested that a man climbs up the bridge of life half his years and then goes down grade until he does n't need any more underwear, because of circumstances over which he has no control.

This bridge-of-life or hill-of-life idea, with its forty years up-hill and then forty years down-hill, is pure fake. If life were like that I would now be writing a sadly introspective farewell ode, telling how I had reached the apex of life's hill and now saw before me the long slope down into the valley, toward the river all must cross.

I would ring in something about the setting sun and the cooing of the turtle doves in the neat little cemetery at the foot of the hill, and then say I was shouldering my heavy pack with hope and resignation for the final weary down-hill hike. I would add something about being footsore, about spent talents and honorable gray hairs, and everybody would weep and begin to save up money for a floral funeral wreath for me.

The fact is that, except for the almanac, I don't know whether I am fifty or twenty. Judged by the way I feel to-day, I shall keep right on going up-hill, until--it may be a thousand years from now--I come to a jumping-off place.

At fifty I have no feeling of starting down-hill, or of having reached the top of any hill. If you want to call my life a hill, I'll say I see the road rising just as steadily and regularly and pleasantly ahead of me now as when I was twenty. And the top of it is so far from where I am now, and so much higher, that I can't even see it. Life is just beginning to be interesting.

At fifty I feel like a young teamster who has just got his skittish colts broken in and is now ready to start out on the real job. Until now I have been a raw hand, stopping to adjust the harness, talking about what I meant to do, studying the guide books, getting the stiff wagon greased, laying in provisions, fussing around one way and another trying to find out where I wanted to go, and why I wanted to go there, and how to get there when I started.

At fifty a man should feel younger and stronger and more fit than he ever felt before. I do. Most men do, I believe. Younger fellows do not even play properly. They make a sort of work of it. It is not until a man is fifty that he knows that golf and fishing and poker and pinochle are play, and that work is play, and that life itself is kind of an interesting big game, too.

I took out an old photograph of mine the other day--one I had taken away back in 1887, when I was eighteen--and I remembered how full of cares and worries I was at that time. I used to stay awake night after night and worry over getting married, for instance. I used to wonder how I could ever get up enough courage to go up to a girl and ask her to marry me.

That awful necessity loomed up before me and filled me with woe and agony, gave me cold chills and hot flushes, and made me absolutely miserable for years.

I remember that when I was about twenty I saw an item in a newspaper, away inside somewheres and tucked in a corner. It said statistics showed that bashful men were usually the first to marry. That item was a wonderful source of relief to me. I cut it out and carried it in my pocket, and whenever I felt the cold chill of fear come over me and I began to sweat at the thought that some day I must ask a girl to marry me, I got out that clipping and read it, and tried to brace up and be brave. To-day I have a wife and four children and *that* worry is gone.

My hair was another great worry in those days. My father is quite bald, and he had become bald when he was a very young man; when he was twenty-one or twenty-two, I believe.

I don't know why a young man should think a heavy head of hair is such an imperative necessity, when hats are so cheap, but I was haunted by a dire fear that I might grow bald while still young. I was in continual distress lest the Butler baldness might be hereditary. I had just one great hope--that at least some of my hair might stay on my head until I was married, anyway.

When I became engaged, this hair-fear took the place of the afraid-to-propose fear. It was with me night and day. It was a keen, personal agony. The thought that I might have to walk up the church aisle to the music of the wedding march, with my bald head shining like a white watermelon, almost made me collapse with shame. And the worst of it was that my hair did begin to come out by handfuls. I shed hair like a cat in the springtime. Those were awful days! I saw myself doomed to a life of hairless disgrace and degradation.

At fifty I have more hair than a man of that age is expected to have; and I don't care a continental whether it stays or goes. It has worn well. If it goes to-morrow I can say, "No matter; it was a good crop while it lasted, and it lasted well." If I become absolutely bald it will be a good publicity feature, like the late Bill Nye's baldness. I should worry!

At fifty the few pains and aches I have are, so to speak, standardized. They are old friends; if they went away I should miss them. I should not be myself without them.

There is one I am especially fond of, because I have had it so long. It resides in my tummy. I have had that pain so many years that I have, so to speak, built my character around it, as an oyster builds the beautiful, lustrous pearl around the intruding grain of sand.

Forty years ago I used to howl when that pain came. I used to lie across a chair, or a log, or a hummock of ground, and howl when it made remarks. Twenty years ago, when that pain gripped me I used to imagine death was about to end my promising career. To-day I treat it like an old friend when it makes itself felt. It can't fool me. I know its tricks and its manners. I say "'Ullo! 'Ullo! 'Ere you are again, are you? Welcome 'ome, old top! Sorry I can't give you more attention, but I 've got such a lot to do; just 'ang around until you get ready to go, old sport, and make yourself comfortable."

At fifty my general health is better than it ever was. I have shaken off a bilious headache that was the curse of my youthful days. Proper eyeglasses have corrected an astigmatism that gave me other headaches twenty years ago. With the same glasses I can see as well now as I ever did. My appetite is as good as it ever was. I enjoy everything in life more than I ever did. I am more sure of myself. I know what I can do, and I am not afraid to do it.

At fifty a young man should have just about completed his preparations to begin to live his real life. There are some precocious young fellows who "get their growth" by the time they are forty-five, but I am not one of them. There are some few prodigies who do worthwhile living before forty, but there are not many of them.

At fifty a man begins to live the worth-while life of a man, as distinguished from his life as a mere animal. At fifty he should have his family pretty well built up and complete, his experimental crops sown, and be ready to do his work and to enjoy his life in a hearty, unafraid, efficient manner.

Without checking up the items carefully, and without claiming that some things done by the youngsters are not worth keeping, I venture to say the world would be surprised to find how much of its best in literature, art, the drama, mechanical inventions and so on would remain if everything done by men and women under fifty were eliminated.

At fifty a man is just about mature, in this climate. And he is not a tomato; he does not decay as soon as he is ripe. He stays ripe and sound for many years, and each of his years beyond fifty should be worth five or ten of his earlier unripe years.

To the young fellow of twenty-five it may seem that the man of fifty is an aged and doddering wreck who must have the thought of death constantly in mind. I'll venture to say, judging by myself, that--except when the life-insurance man comes around with his propaganda--the man of fifty never thinks of death at all. Why should he?

Personally, I worried a great deal more about life insurance and what style of coffin I'd like when I was twenty-one than I do now. Now I carry all the life insurance I can afford, as a plain business proposition, and let it go at that. When I was twenty-one I worried about dying at some untimely age and leaving someone or other to starve to death, as per the prospectus. Well, I have become skeptical about people starving to death. I've never yet seen any one do it.

I mention this death business because I am trying to imagine what a young fellow believes a man of fifty thinks of. I know some of them think we fifty-year-olders are decrepit old ruins, dwelling in the past and looking fearfully forward to an early dissolution.

Take my word for it, sonny, no man of fifty, unless he be suffering from some dire disease, thinks of death at all, as applicable to himself. As for myself, seeing how things are going nowadays, I don't give death a thought. For all I know, and all *you* know, before I am ten years older the Great Manager of Things may decide it is time to go back to the old regime, and make men live five hundred or six hundred or nine hundred and sixty-nine years, as they did in the days of Methuselah and Noah. So why should I worry?

At eighty or ninety, I imagine, some men do get a little weary of life and begin to be indifferent to its continuance; but at fifty many things are just beginning to be interesting. Until lately I have been so busy raising a family, and getting a home, and one thing and another, that I have not had time to give proper attention to my golf. I am planning to put in thirty or forty good years improving my game. I have discovered that you cannot avoid faults in your golf unless you know what they are, and you cannot thoroughly know a golf fault until you acquire it. I think I have now acquired all the golf faults there are, and from now on I mean to have a lot of fun getting rid of them.

Another thing I need a lot of time for now is my postage stamp collection. For forty years or so I have sort of fooled along with it, getting acquainted with the general methods and outlines of the sport, and deciding just what to specialize in.

I have now a pretty fair working knowledge, and know what I want to do in that line. I need a lot of time for that; I don't expect to do any very great things at it until I really get some leisure--say when I am eighty or ninety years old--but in the meanwhile I want to pick up a few rarities now and then. To do that I'll have to make a little more money than I have been making, because I have reached a point where the stamps I need run into money rapidly.

And I expect, in the next twenty or thirty years, to spend quite a little on my fishing. After forty years of it I am just beginning to learn how to fish properly. And I want to grow some real flowers. I want to have a tulip bed that will draw people from a hundred miles and make them beg for bulbs. But I have n't been able to get at the tulip affair this year because I have been out touring the country as a platform humorist. There are a half-dozen other things I am planning to do; but all these are subsidiary to my writing, of course.

At fifty I feel that I am about ready to begin my life work as a writer. For the past few years, thirty or forty of them, I have been experimenting around and trying to get my bearings and learn what life really is. I have done some pretty raw, inexperienced stuff, but it has been worth while because a young fellow has to go through the experimental stage. It takes time to decide what one really wants to do, and how he wants to do it. But when a man is fifty, with a long life ahead of him and a fair notion of what he wants to do, he begins to be hopeful.

At fifty, I feel that I am about ready to begin writing the eight or ten novels I have been wanting to write. Amelia E. Barr was about fifty years old when she began writing novels, and she wrote about seventy of them after that. Richardson wrote "Pamela"--some call it the first modern novel--when he was fifty. Daniel De Foe turned to fiction only when he was fifty-five.

There are hundreds of writers who did all their work, or most of their best work, after fifty. Oliver Wendell Holmes was forty-eight when he wrote the "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," his first great work. Longfellow wrote "Hiawatha" when he was forty-eight, and much of his best work followed. Whittier wrote "Snow-Bound" and "Maud Muller" at fifty-nine, and continued writing until he was seventy-nine. Tennyson was still writing at eighty-three. "Trilby" was written when Du Maurier was sixty; "Les Miserables" when Victor Hugo was sixty; "Kenilworth" when Scott was sixty, with sixteen novels following it. Reckoning a man's life by years is the biggest sort of flapdoodle. All of a man's worthwhile living may come after he is fifty. Between fifty and fifty-one I may catch my biggest trout, and I expect to do it. After fifty I may write my best stories, and I mean to do it.

In my back yard is a huge white-oak tree. Some tree experts say it is three hundred and fifty years old, some say six hundred, and one has estimated it at eight hundred. It does not make a bit of difference to the tree. It is as young and enthusiastic when spring comes as it was when it was two years old. It puts forth leaves, grows new and tender twigs, bears sound acorns, shelters its colony of bird families, and holds one end of the clothesline just as well as it ever did.

It is a healthier, happier tree at six hundred years of age than thousands of pert young ten-year-olds, and is producing more and better oak leaves. If you went and asked it how it feels to be six hundred years old, it would say, "What do you mean, six hundred years old? What has that got to do with it?" A few hundred years one way or the other mean nothing to a sound, healthy white-oak tree. A few tens of years one way or the other mean nothing to a sound, healthy man.

We know that Homer and Socrates were aged men because certain famous portrait busts have advertised it. But how many know whether Cicero, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, or Pythagoras did their best work before or after fifty? We don't know and we don't care.

Take Noah, for example. At fifty Noah was a comparatively unknown citizen, with a neighborhood reputation for homely virtues, and a nice growing family; but he had cut no very great figure in the world. Some of the younger fellows thought of him now and then as a sort of aged gentleman who was about ready to drop into the grave. Probably they thought it was quite a feather in Noah's cap when one of them stopped him and asked him to write a short paper on the subject, "How it Feels to be Fifty."

"There is a chance for you to produce a wonder," the young fellow said to Noah. "Make the essay just as personal and real and funny as you possibly can. Age is one of the most interesting subjects in the world. Everybody either looks forward to being fifty or back to having been fifty. There is no subject about which human beings think more."

"All right," Noah said. "I'll do it; but you must expect to be disappointed, because I don't *feel* old, or aged, or anything of that sort. I feel young and lively, as if I were just beginning to live--"

"Slush!" said the young fellow. "You're *old*. At fifty you have one foot in the grave. That stands to reason. Now be a nice old fellow and write something that will please the Neighborhood Society. Something about standing on the apex of the hill of life, looking down the farther side, and that sort of thing." So Noah did. He aimed to please. He wrote the essay and said he was now fifty and had but a few years to live, and that he did hate to think of so soon having to part from one and all. The paper made a great hit. It was loudly applauded.

And fifty years after that, Noah was still alive.

And fifty years after *that*, Noah was still alive.

And then another fifty years passed, and Noah was still alive.

And then a hundred years passed, and Noah was still alive.

And two hundred years after *that*, Noah was still alive and going strong.

And it was n't until one hundred years after *that*, that Noah made the big hit of his life by gathering his folks and his live stock into the ark. He was six hundred years two months and seventeen days old when the big rain began that was to make him famous. You can read that in Genesis, 7th chapter, 11th verse. That was just five hundred and fifty years two months and seventeen days after the young fellow asked Noah to write how it felt to be an old man of fifty starting on the downward path.

I think we should all take Noah as a model, and keep a young heart and an eager, forward-looking spirit until we are at least six hundred years two months and seventeen days old. *Our* forty days of glory and greatness and good service may come long after we are fifty--five hundred and fifty years after, for all we know.

I like Noah. He had no surrender in him. Old at fifty? He considered himself a mere baby at fifty! At six hundred he was just getting into his proper stride. He was just ripe to tackle a big job like the flood.

Chapter 9, verse 28: And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years.

Verse 29: And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.

It was about time he died. Nine hundred and fifty years ought to satisfy any man. In my family, barring accidents and diseases, we live to be ninety or ninety-six, and I ask you, frankly, how you can expect me to fret and worry and be agedly philosophical when I am still only a young tart of fifty. It is too much to ask of me.

At fifty, I feel myself just reaching my full powers, mentally and physically; capable of more work and better work, more play and better play, and with so many years of work and play ahead of me that I never so much as think of my age or of being any age. I am keen and eager to get right at the next job I have on hand, and to make it a better piece of work than any I have ever done.

The great expectations are not all on the younger side of fifty. But the great satisfactions are nearly all on the onward side of it. Life is not an up-one-side, down-the-other-side hill. It is a long, winding road, good all the way, and the freshest, brightest flowers and the sweetest, solidest fruit usually grow beyond the fifty-year mile-post.

At twenty my life was a feverish adventure, at thirty it was a problem, at forty it was a labor, at fifty it is a joyful journey well begun.

THE END