



TOPICS OF THE TIME

With Regard to Age.

THE incoming of the new year, about the time when this is written, would seem to make the subject of age a timely Topic. Perhaps it is natural that the less age a person has, the less vitally interested he is in the subject. And yet, on the other hand, the more age a person has, and the more interested he is in the subject, the less agreeable its contemplation and discussion seem to be. The young, as a rule, can talk about age, even old age, without any sense of unpleasantness, because the young, while they expect to live forever, do not expect ever to be old. To the young the state of old age is unthinkable. Young people like to play with the idea of old age. Young poets are apt to write verses about it; but the interest on their part is a matter of sentimentalism rather than of true sentiment.

After writing thus far there comes to memory a story printed in this magazine for March, 1876. Mr. Edward Bellamy, in the days before he was transformed from an imaginative artist into an earnest propagandist,—when he was writing those delightful and original stories which we dare say he now regards as comparatively a waste of powers, save as they gave him his training for the ingenious works which carry his «message» to such an immense number of readers,—in those old days Mr. Bellamy wrote a little story in which he shows the usual attitude of youth toward the idea of old age, and also the disturbing effect of that idea when circumstances have brought it home to young minds in a novel and pressing way. A group of young people belonging to the social club of a New England village resolve to have an «old folks' party.» The plan was to dress so as to resemble what they expected to look like fifty years hence. They were to study up their demeanor to correspond with what they expected to be and feel like at that time. As Henry, the originator of the happy thought, put it, they would just call on Mary next Wednesday evening to talk over old times, and recall what they could, if anything, of their vanished youth, and the days when they belonged to the social club at C——. It was to be a sort of ghost party—«ghosts of the future, instead of ghosts of the past.» There is a touch, by the way, of the coming Bellamy in the remark of one of the characters: «Ghosts of the future are the only sort worth heeding. Apparitions of things past are a very unpractical sort of demonology, in my opinion, compared with apparitions of things to come.»

There was great amusement at the old folk's party. The boys and girls entered into the idea with heartiness and ingenuity. But their parts had been so well studied, and were so well played, that after the thing had gone on awhile «the pathos and melancholy of the retrospections in which they were indulging became real.» All felt that if it was acting now, it was but the rehearsal of a coming reality. So when, finally, Mary went to the

piano and sang, to an air in a minor key, «The days that are no more,» the girls found themselves crying. Suddenly Henry sprang to his feet, tore off his wig, letting the brown hair fall over his forehead, and cried: «Thank God, thank God, it is only a dream.» Instantly the transformation was effected, and the boys and girls were waltzing in the «maddest round that ever was danced.» After an exhausted pause, they noticed that the one real grandmother at the party was smiling through tears. About her they gathered with affectionate caresses, weeping again because they could not take the old lady back with them into youth.

But would the old lady have wished to go back—unless they could have revived for her the companions of her own young days? To this same old lady they had come for costumes, and to ask her to go with them to the party and, as a matter of fact, also to observe the peculiarities of old age; and she had said to one of them, as if she «saw right through» her: «I suppose, my child, you think being old a sort of misfortune, like being hunchbacked or blind, and are afraid of hurting my feelings; but you needn't be. The good Lord has made it so that at whichever end of life we are the other end looks pretty uninteresting; and if it won't hurt your feelings to have somebody in the party who has got through all the troubles you have yet before you I should be glad to come.» Was it bravado on the old lady's part? Was it the habit of an unselfish lifetime, to make the girls cheerful by pretending that she herself was cheerful? Or was she content? Who knows, except the old women and the old men themselves?

Notwithstanding Charles Dudley Warner's contention that fiction, or at least some fiction, is stranger than truth, there is enough strangeness in truth to account for the familiar proverb. Something has just come to our notice that has an inverted resemblance to Mr. Bellamy's story. (We wish Mr. Bellamy would put it in his note-book.) A «veteran» of the Army of the Potomac, one of the youngest officers in that army, by the way—dropped in the other day, and told us that his friends were about to celebrate his eighteenth birthday. It seems that, just before the exact date of that birthday, a Confederate projectile plowed a hole along the top of his head,—you can lay your finger in the furrow now,—and left him in no condition for festivity. He was for a long time more dead than alive, and funereal honors would have been more appropriate at the time than any other ceremonies. It was the only birthday of his fifty odd which had passed without celebration, and his friends thought that it was a pity that his heroism should stand in the way of a proper birthday feast, even if this should have been unavoidably delayed a third of a century. We do not know just how the «occasion» is to be «improved.» We hope the veteran will remember to forget everything that has come to pass since he recovered consciousness in the very stress and agony of the

great war. As it happens, his hair is still dark, and he can look the part to singular perfection. We can see the fire and determination in his eye as he addresses the assembled company; we can see him as he urges «the boys» to stand by the flag, and «honest old Abe,» and the imperiled Union. And these grizzle-beards about him, do they partake of the illusion? Though, most of them, so much older, is it not as easy for them as for him to throw off, in their minds, the accidents of age, and again, with breathless frenzy, «up and at them» through storm of whistling bullets and howling shells?

Of one thing we may be sure: that most people who are called old feel younger, and therefore may be said to be younger, than they are called. And one reason why most people feel younger in their middle and old age than others regard them is that the first impression is the deepest, and our first impression of ourselves is that we are young. Not that every one does not have at various times a strong sense of age; but this sense may come upon one with as great force in youth as in advanced years. A friend, not young, once told us that he had never had the realization of advancing age thrust upon him with more powerful effect than when, over thirty years before, he entered a barber-shop, and with fear and shame offered his virgin mustache to the remorseless blade. It seemed as if «youth, the dream,» had indeed departed. The same self-observant psychologist remembered another sobering and disillusioning plunge into something like old age. His salary had been raised; he was no longer to be the struggling, and therefore perhaps somewhat interesting, young economist that he had believed himself destined always to be. Our friend said that it was singular, in this case, how soon the melancholy of accomplishment and of age-in-youth disappeared under the growing conviction that his unexpectedly large income was in reality not half large enough to meet his absolutely necessary expenses.

The attitude of Mr. Bellamy's young people toward the old is well-nigh universal in the Occidental world, whatever may be the feeling in the Orient; and perhaps we do not fully understand the psychology of the Orient. It is impossible for an old person to argue away the feeling of a young person toward an old person. It is an attitude of affection, of respect, of awe, of all sorts of sentiments, according to individuality; but in relation to the one quality of age, the younger gives «the look from above downward,» just as the grandmother in Mr. Bellamy's story suspected. The young person may not be fully aware of this attitude on his own part; and the older person may be philosophical about it, and think little of it, as he should; but, as a rule, it is there.

What good would it do for the old person to say: «My young friend, you take a very unphilosophical position with regard to my age. I am merely myself, which includes all that youth which you now have, and a good deal more besides. I simply have succeeded in keeping alive. You know what Tennyson says about (the glory of going on, and still to be.) Well, unless you are deprived of this glory, you will soon have passed through that brief experience of youth with which every life begins. And, besides, I may be a good deal younger than you suppose. For age is relative. Men and women nominally of the same age are by no means truly so. Every life is a clock, wound up to go so many hours, and

then to stop, so far as this world is concerned. One human machine is wound up to run, barring accident, say fifty years; another seventy years; another ninety or a hundred years. Suppose that three men were born on the same day, and you asked each of them, forty years after birth, how old he was; would forty years old be the correct answer in each case? Of course not; and it is the injustice of such calculations that makes most women and many men sensitive on the subject of their age. Popular arithmetic is deficient in this particular. You need not smile. Go and ask some biologist if I am not right. It is the amount of initial vitality that counts. You think you are twenty years younger than I am, and you look down upon me from your altitude of youth. As a matter of scientific fact—in the strict measurement of vitalities—you may be six months older than I am. There is enough that is tragic about age without complicating the subject with conventional inaccuracies. Yes; perhaps I am hovering about the seventies. There is nothing in that to frighten any but the plenary inspirationist and strict constructionist; for sanitary science, medicine, and surgery long ago antiquated the psalmist's baleful (threescore years and ten.) Any actuary can tell you that human longevity is increasing. And, besides, as the commander said to his troops in the thick of the battle, does a man want (to live forever?)»

One of the «Heroes who Fight Fire.»

THE mention by Mr. Riis, in his article on «Heroes who Fight Fire,» of the heroic death of Battalion Chief Bresnan, in December of 1894, brings to mind the career of a typical New York fireman of our day. In the days before the establishment of the new Fire Department there were «heroes who fought fire»; but these heroes had a singular tendency not only to fight fire, but to fight anything in sight. Those were the days when a fire was dreaded by the community, not merely for the destruction of property by fire and water, but on account of the lively rivalry sometimes engendered. In fact, it is said that the fire sometimes had to wait for proper attention while the companies were giving their minds and fists to the decision of the more important question of precedence.

The old volunteer system became as unbearable as it was exciting and interesting, and the paid and disciplined department took its place. There were good and capable men in the old department, for all its faults. In the new department arose to authority men like the present able Chief Hugh Bonner, like Battalion Chief Ahearn, mentioned by Mr. Riis, and like the late Battalion Chief John J. Bresnan. It has long been, as a whole, a department of which our city is right to be proud. It has often been studied and imitated by other cities, though the recent experience of London seems to show that all it is capable of teaching as to organization, management, and methods has not been taken sufficiently to heart there.

Bresnan had two characteristics in his profession: he was scientific and minute in his interest in and knowledge of detail, and he was a quick and utterly fearless leader when it came to a direct attack upon the fire enemy. He knew all about all parts of the apparatus for fire-extinguishment—he had, indeed, made several useful inventions of details in this line. He knew a fire as a botanist knows a flower—seed and