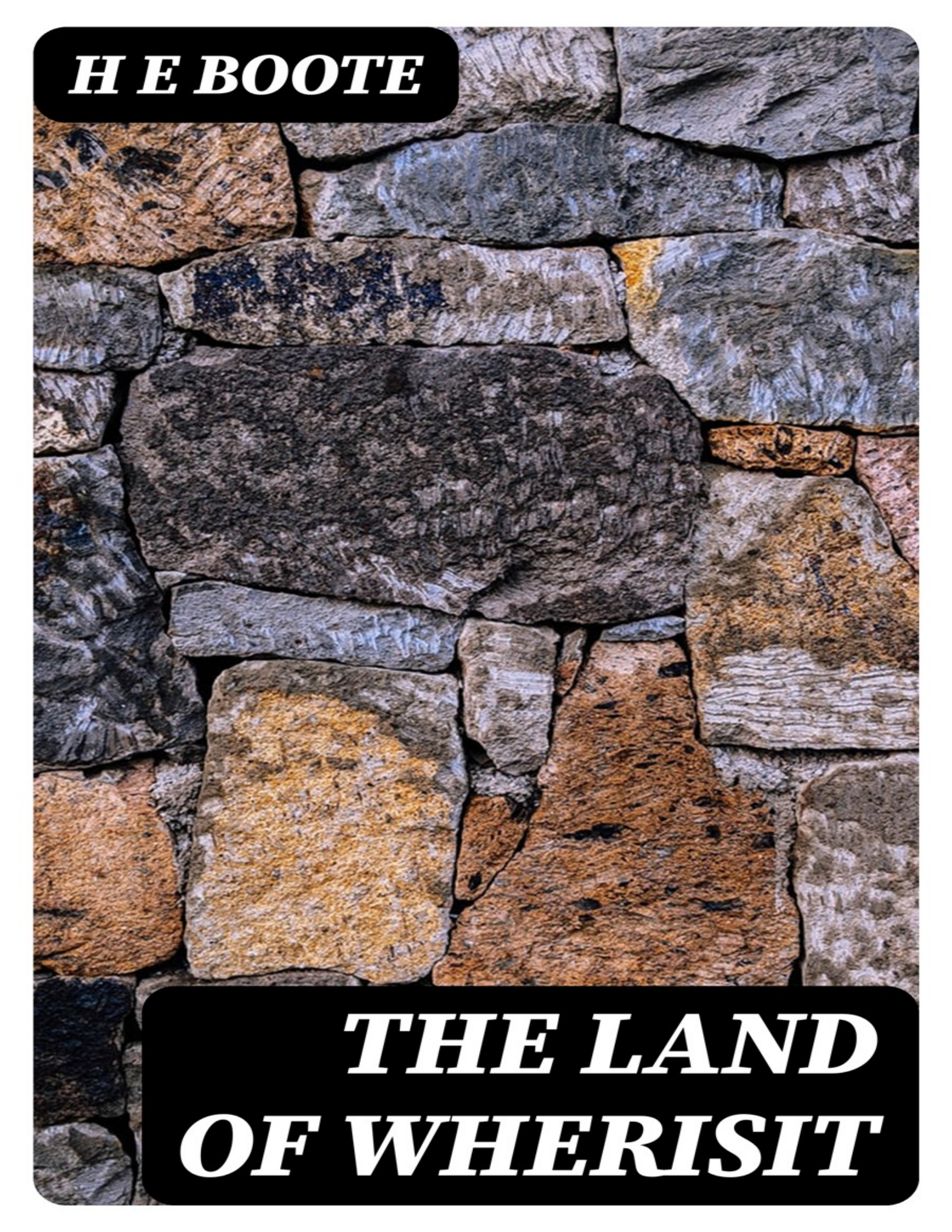




HE BOOTE

***THE LAND
OF WHERISIT***

H E Boote

The Land of Wherisit

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1. God's Joke.

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This book is one of the most Foolish examples of the art of authorship that ever was perpetrated.

If you should read it, you'll find it crammed with the wildest improbabilities and the topsy-turvyest notions. And to make matters worse, the scene of the tales is laid in a Land that is not to be found on any authentic map; while the nearest approach to a date I can give for the queer happenings related is Once Upon a Time.

These preliminary observations may determine you to proceed no further, in which case you are not the Fool I took you to be, and the sooner you are gone the better I shall be pleased, for my Tales would only be wasted upon you.

* * *

The Land of Wherisit, at the period I have mentioned, existed under the providence of a God who was a Great Humorist. He dearly loved a practical joke, and in that dubious line of humour was probably without an equal in the whole wide universe.

All through eternity, before the creation of Wherisit, he had occupied himself thinking out practical jokes and, as a matter of fact, had brought Wherisit and its people into existence with no other object than to put those jokes into execution.

For eons and eons he had been satisfied to enjoy them in imagination; for millions and millions of years he had chuckled at the thought of them, and desired no other pleasure.

Then suddenly the idea flashed into his mind: How much funnier it would be to see the jokes performed—to actually watch them in operation, instead of merely gloating over them in theory! Wherisit was created straight away, and populated with a highly civilised race of men; and God gave it a Social System that tickled his fancy immensely, for everything in it was as it should not be—Vice laughed aloud and had a glorious time, and Virtue went about with a glum face, looking like a convicted criminal.

For a period that I can only describe as Ever So Long, God revelled in this practical joke. To behold Truth standing on her head, and all the people running after Falsehood to kiss the hem of her robe, was a sight so comical that he roared with delight, and the noise of his mirth was so great that the devils in the world's stokehole left off shovelling to ask one another in surprise what the row was all about.

Then this humorous deity sprang on Wherisit the primest joke of the lot.

"Listen, my creatures!" he cried. "I have a grand conundrum to put to you."

"Oh, let us hear it!" rose in chorus to his throne the voices of the people.

"It is this," said God. "Who is the Most Powerful Person amongst you?"

And he hid his face in the clouds, for it was not meet that his creatures should observe their Maker grinning.

* * *

The King of Wherisit was mightily pleased when he heard the conundrum propounded.

"Who is the Most Powerful Person?" he repeated. "Why, I AM, to be sure!"

No sooner did he give this answer than he found himself in a strange city, in the midst of a race of men who knew him not. He felt very tired, as though he had walked a great distance, and was so hungry that he knocked at the door of a house and begged for food.

"In this city they only eat who earn," said the man who opened the door. "What can you do?"

Now the King had been taught to regard it as beneath his dignity to earn anything whatever, so he drew himself up proudly, and declared that he could do nothing.

"Then there's no food here for you," said the man; and slammed the door in his face.

Wherever the King went he had the same mortifying experience. No one was the least impressed by the crown upon his head and the rich clothes that he wore.

So desperately hungry did he become that he accosted a pieman and offered his crown for a hot pie, the savoury smell of which tormented him with a passionate desire.

"That thing's no good," said the pieman, glancing contemptuously at the crown, and passed on, calling out his wares.

The King sat down in a quiet spot and burst into tears.

No sooner did he do so than he was back in his palace at Wherisit, seated before the sweetest meal he had ever tasted.

"Who is the Most Powerful Person in the world?" said the voice of God.

And the King did not answer. His mouth was full; but that was not the only reason for his silence.

* * *

Then the Right Reverend Dr. Pomp, D.D., High Priest of Wherisit, swelling with sacerdotal pride, stepped from the great altar, saying:

"I, O God, am surely the Most Powerful Person under heaven!"

The words had hardly passed his lips before he, too, found himself in that strange city where no one eats who has not earned, as weary and as hungry as the King had been.

Humbly he begged at the door of a house. Asked what he did that entitled him to food, he replied: "I speak God's truth."

"In this city," he was told, "God's truth speaks for itself." And the door was slammed on HIM.

The famished and despairing prelate broke down completely, and the Practical Joker in the sky, laughing to himself, brought him back to the episcopal residence, where

the cooks were soon running round in the episcopal kitchen, preparing the sort of dinner that a prelate loves.

"Who is the Most Powerful Person in the world?" said God. The High Priest was dumb.

But the Moneylord spoke up and said, "Even I, O God!"

Immediately, like his predecessors in pride, he was in the strange city, and in similar evil case—very, very hungry, and every bone in body aching with weariness.

Like them, too, he knocked at a door and besought food.

"What can you do to earn it?" he was asked.

"Find capital to employ labour," he replied.

"In this city labour employs capital," said his interrogator. And the slamming of the door was the sound of doom to the unfortunate Moneylord.

But again the watching God above did not press the joke too far, and the Moneylord, back in the Land of Wherisit, with obsequious servants ministering to the cravings of his stomach, soon got over his misadventure.

When, however, God once more said. "Who is the Most Powerful Person in the world?" the man of capital discreetly held his tongue.

Indeed, no one now put forward a claim, and this was not attributable to modesty, but to the fear which the experiences of the King, the High Priest and the Moneylord had produced.

"Well," said God, laughing to himself behind the clouds, "since you are all so silent, I will tell who is the Most Powerful Person in the world. It is that man, there, whom you have crucified!"