

CLASSICS TO GO
ONCE ON A
TIME



A. A. MILNE

ONCE ON A TIME

A.A. Milne

PREFACE

This book was written in 1915, for the amusement of my wife and myself at a time when life was not very amusing; it was published at the end of 1917; was reviewed, if at all, as one of a parcel, by some brisk uncle from the Tiny Tots Department; and died quietly, without seriously detracting from the interest which was being taken in the World War, then in progress.

It may be that the circumstances in which the book was written have made me unduly fond of it. When, as sometimes happens, I am introduced to a stranger who starts the conversation on the right lines by praising, however insincerely, my books, I always say, "But you have not read the best one." Nine times out of ten it is so. The tenth takes a place in the family calendar; St. Michael or St. Agatha, as the case may be, a red-letter or black-letter saint, according to whether the book was bought or borrowed. But there are few such saints, and both my publisher and I have the feeling (so common to publishers and authors) that there ought to be more. So here comes the book again, in a new dress, with new decorations, yet much, as far as I am concerned, the same book, making the same appeal to me; but, let us hope, a new appeal, this time, to others.

For whom, then, is the book intended? That is the trouble. Unless I can say, "For those, young or old, who like the things which I like," I find it difficult to answer. Is it a children's book? Well, what do we mean by that? Is *The Wind in the Willows* a children's book? Is *Alice in Wonderland*? Is *Treasure Island*? These are masterpieces which we read with pleasure as children, but with how much more pleasure when we are grown-up. In any case

what do we mean by "children"? A boy of three, a girl of six, a boy of ten, a girl of fourteen—are they all to like the same thing? And is a book "suitable for a boy of twelve" any more likely to please a boy of twelve than a modern novel is likely to please a man of thirty-seven; even if the novel be described truly as "suitable for a man of thirty-seven"? I confess that I cannot grapple with these difficult problems.

But I am very sure of this: that no one can write a book which children will like, unless he write it for himself first. That being so, I shall say boldly that this is a story for grown-ups. How grown-up I did not realise until I received a letter from an unknown reader a few weeks after its first publication; a letter which said that he was delighted with my clever satires of the Kaiser, Mr. Lloyd George and Mr. Asquith, but he could not be sure which of the characters were meant to be Mr. Winston Churchill and Mr. Bonar Law. Would I tell him on the enclosed postcard? I replied that they were thinly disguised on the title-page as Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton. In fact, it is not that sort of book.

But, as you see, I am still finding it difficult to explain just what sort of book it is. Perhaps no explanation is necessary. Read in it what you like; read it to whomever you like; be of what age you like; it can only fall into one of two classes. Either you will enjoy it, or you won't.

It is that sort of book.

A. A. Milne.



CONTENTS

I.—The King of Euralia has a Visitor to Breakfast

II.—The Chancellor of Barodia has a Long Walk Home

III.—The King of Euralia Draws his Sword

IV.—The Princess Hyacinth Leaves it to the Countess

V.—Belvane Indulges her Hobby

VI.—There are no Wizards in Barodia

VII.—The Princess Receives a Letter and Writes One

VIII.—Prince Udo Sleeps Badly

IX.—They are Afraid of Udo

X.—Charlotte Patacake Astonishes the Critics

XI.—Watercress Seems to go with the Ears

XII.—We Decide to Write to Udo's Father

XIII.—"Pink" Rhymes with "Think"

XIV.—"Why Can't you be like Wiggs?"

XV.—There is a Lover Waiting for Hyacinth

XVI.—Belvane Enjoys Herself

XVII.—The King of Barodia Drops the Whisker Habit

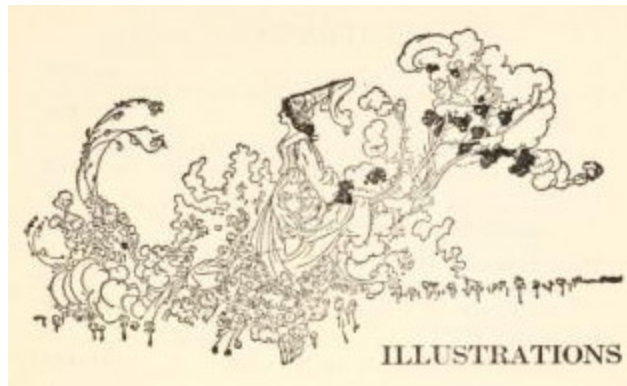
XVIII.—The Veteran of the Forest Entertains Two Very Young People

XIX.—Udo Behaves Like a Gentleman

XX.—Coronel Knows a Good Story when he Hears it

XXI.—A Serpent Coming after Udo

XXII.—The Seventeen Volumes go back Again



ILLUSTRATIONS

A Map of Euralia showing the Adjacent Country of Barodia and the far-distant Araby

He was a Man of Simple Tastes

"Most extraordinary," said the King

He found the King nursing a Bent Whisker and in the very Vilest of Tempers

"Try it on me," cried the Countess

Five Times he had come back to give her his Last Instructions

Armed to the Teeth, Amazon after Amazon marched by

When the Respective Armies returned to Camp they found Their Majesties asleep

The Rabbit was gone, and there was a Fairy in front of her

As Evening fell they came to a Woodman's Cottage at the Foot of a High Hill

"Coronel, here I am," said Udo pathetically, and he stepped out

Twenty-one Minutes later Henrietta Crossbuns was acknowledging a Bag of Gold

Princess Hyacinth gave a Shriek and faltered slowly backwards

"Now we can talk," said Hyacinth

He forgot his Manners, and made a Jump towards her

She glided gracefully behind the Sundial in a Pretty Affectation of Alarm

When anybody of Superior Station or Age came into the Room she rose and curtsied

And then she danced

"Good Morning," said Belvane

The Tent seemed to swim before his Eyes, and he knew no more

She turned round and went off daintily down the Hill

Let me present to you my friend the Duke Coronel

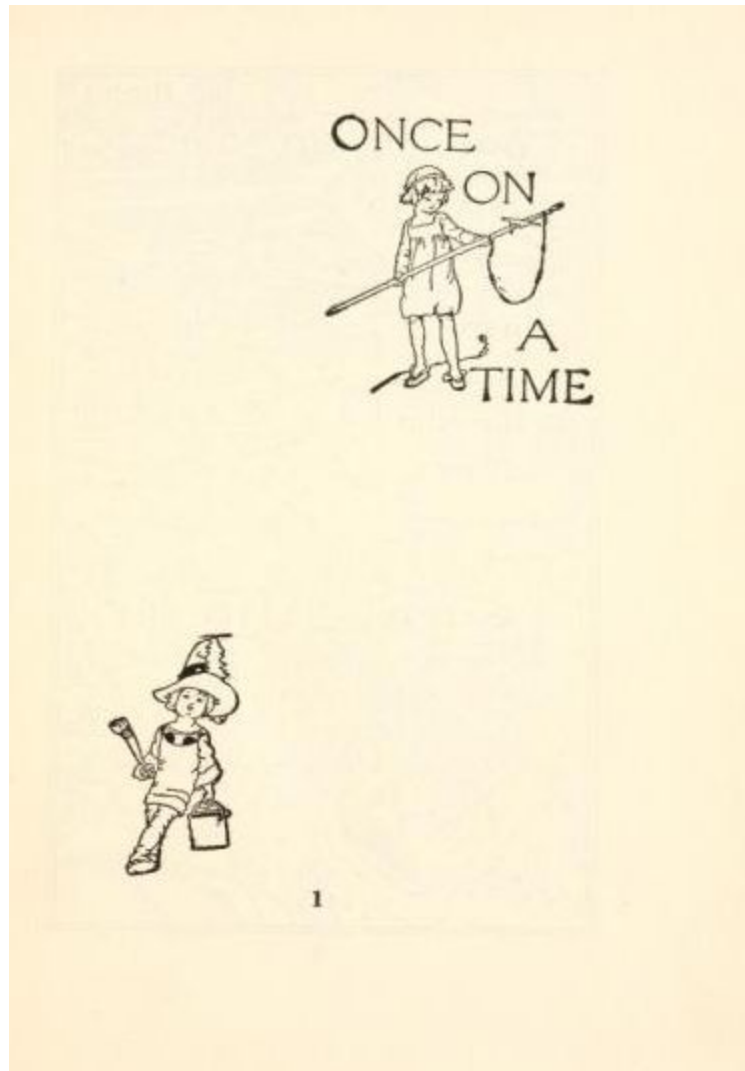
As the Towers of the Castle came in sight, Merriwig drew a Deep Breath of Happiness

Belvane leading the Way with her Finger to her Lips

Merriwig following with an Exaggerated Caution

He was a Pleasant-looking Person, with a Round Clean-shaven Face

Roger Scurvilegs





*He was a Man
of
Simple Tastes*

CHAPTER I

THE KING OF EURALIA HAS A VISITOR TO BREAKFAST

King Merriwig of Euralia sat at breakfast on his castle walls. He lifted the gold cover from the gold dish in front of him, selected a trout and conveyed it carefully to his gold plate. He was a man of simple tastes, but when you have an aunt with the newly acquired gift of turning anything she touches to gold, you must let her practise sometimes. In another age it might have been fretwork.

"Ah," said the King, "here you are, my dear." He searched for his napkin, but the Princess had already kissed him lightly on the top of the head, and was sitting in her place opposite to him.

"Good morning, Father," she said; "I'm a little late, aren't I? I've been riding in the forest."

"Any adventures?" asked the King casually.

"Nothing, except it's a beautiful morning."

"Ah, well, perhaps the country isn't what it was. Now when I was a young man, you simply couldn't go into the forest without an adventure of some sort. The extraordinary things one encountered! Witches, giants, dwarfs—. It was there that I first met your mother," he added thoughtfully.

"I wish I remembered my mother," said Hyacinth.

The King coughed and looked at her a little nervously.

"Seventeen years ago she died, Hyacinth, when you were only six months old. I have been wondering lately whether I haven't been a little remiss in leaving you motherless so long."

The Princess looked puzzled. "But it wasn't your fault, dear, that mother died."

"Oh, no, no, I'm not saying that. As you know, a dragon carried her off and—well, there it was. But supposing"—he looked at her shyly—"I had married again."

The Princess was startled.

"Who?" she asked.

The King peered into his flagon. "Well," he said, "there *are* people."

"If it had been somebody *very* nice," said the Princess wistfully, "it might have been rather lovely."

The King gazed earnestly at the outside of his flagon.

"Why 'might have been?'" he said.

The Princess was still puzzled. "But I'm grown up," she said; "I don't want a mother so much now."

The King turned his flagon round and studied the other side of it.

"A mother's—er—tender hand," he said, "is—er—never——" and then the outrageous thing happened.

It was all because of a birthday present to the King of Barodia, and the present was nothing less than a pair of seven-league boots. The King being a busy man, it was a

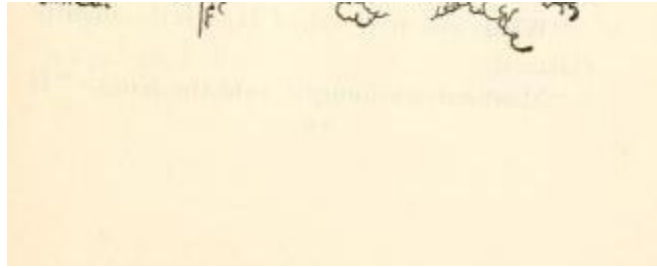
week or more before he had an opportunity of trying those boots. Meanwhile he used to talk about them at meals, and he would polish them up every night before he went to bed. When the great day came for the first trial of them to be made, he took a patronising farewell of his wife and family, ignored the many eager noses pressed against the upper windows of the Palace, and sailed off. The motion, as perhaps you know, is a little disquieting at first, but one soon gets used to it. After that it is fascinating. He had gone some two thousand miles before he realised that there might be a difficulty about finding his way back. The difficulty proved at least as great as he had anticipated. For the rest of that day he toured backwards and forwards across the country; and it was by the merest accident that a very angry King shot in through an open pantry window in the early hours of the morning. He removed his boots and went softly to bed. . . .

It was, of course, a lesson to him. He decided that in the future he must proceed by a recognised route, sailing lightly from landmark to landmark. Such a route his Geographers prepared for him—an early morning constitutional, of three hundred miles or so, to be taken ten times before breakfast. He gave himself a week in which to recover his nerve and then started out on the first of them.



*"Most extraordinary,"
said the King*





Now the Kingdom of Euralia adjoined that of Barodia, but whereas Barodia was a flat country, Euralia was a land of hills. It was natural then that the Court Geographers, in search of landmarks, should have looked towards Euralia; and over Euralia accordingly, about the time when cottage and castle alike were breakfasting, the King of Barodia soared and dipped and soared and dipped again.

* * * * *

"A mother's tender hand," said the King of Euralia, "is—er—never—good gracious! What's that?"

There was a sudden rush of air; something came for a moment between his Majesty and the sun; and then all was quiet again.

"What was it?" asked Hyacinth, slightly alarmed.

"Most extraordinary," said the King. "It left in my mind an impression of ginger whiskers and large boots. Do we know anybody like that?"

"The King of Barodia," said Hyacinth, "has red whiskers, but I don't know about his boots."

"But what could he have been doing up there? Unless ____"

There was another rush of wind in the opposite direction; once more the sun was obscured, and this time, plain for a

moment for all to see, appeared the rapidly dwindling back view of the King of Barodia on his way home to breakfast.

Merriwig rose with dignity.

"You're quite right, Hyacinth," he said sternly; "it *was* the King of Barodia."

Hyacinth looked troubled.

"He oughtn't to come over anybody's breakfast table quite so quickly as that. Ought he, Father?"

"A lamentable display of manners, my dear. I shall withdraw now and compose a stiff note to him. The amenities must be observed."

Looking as severe as a naturally jovial face would permit him, and wondering a little if he had pronounced "amenities" right, he strode to the library.

The library was his Majesty's favourite apartment. Here in the mornings he would discuss affairs of state with his Chancellor, or receive any distinguished visitors who were to come to his kingdom in search of adventure. Here in the afternoon, with a copy of *What to say to a Wizard* or some such book taken at random from the shelves, he would give himself up to meditation.

And it was the distinguished visitors of the morning who gave him most to think about in the afternoon. There were at this moment no fewer than seven different Princes engaged upon seven different enterprises, to whom, in the event of a successful conclusion, he had promised the hand of Hyacinth and half his kingdom. No wonder he felt that she needed the guiding hand of a mother.

The stiff note to Barodia was not destined to be written. He was still hesitating between two different kinds of nib, when the door was flung open and the fateful name of the Countess Belvane was announced.

The Countess Belvane! What can I say which will bring home to you that wonderful, terrible, fascinating woman? Mastered as she was by overweening ambition, utterly unscrupulous in her methods of achieving her purpose, none the less her adorable humanity betrayed itself in a passion for diary-keeping and a devotion to the simpler forms of lyrical verse. That she is the villain of the piece I know well; in his *Euralia Past and Present* the eminent historian, Roger Scurvilegs, does not spare her; but that she had her great qualities I should be the last to deny.

She had been writing poetry that morning, and she wore green. She always wore green when the Muse was upon her: a pleasing habit which, whether as a warning or an inspiration, modern poets might do well to imitate. She carried an enormous diary under her arm; and in her mind several alternative ways of putting down her reflections on her way to the Palace.

"Good morning, dear Countess," said the King, rising only too gladly from his nibs; "an early visit."

"You don't mind, your Majesty?" said the Countess anxiously. "There was a point in our conversation yesterday about which I was not quite certain——"

"What were we talking about yesterday?"

"Oh, your Majesty," said the Countess, "affairs of state," and she gave him that wicked, innocent, impudent, and entirely scandalous look which he never could resist, and you couldn't either for that matter.

"Affairs of state, of course," smiled the King.

"Why, I made a special note of it in my diary."

She laid down the enormous volume and turned lightly over the pages.

"Here we are! '*Thursday*. His Majesty did me the honour to consult me about the future of his daughter, the Princess Hyacinth. Remained to tea and was very——' I can't quite make this word out."

"Let *me* look," said the King, his rubicund face becoming yet more rubicund. "It looks like 'charming,'" he said casually.

"Fancy!" said Belvane. "Fancy my writing that! I put down just what comes into my head at the time, you know." She made a gesture with her hand indicative of some one who puts down just what comes into her head at the time, and returned to her diary. "'Remained to tea, and was very charming. Mused afterwards on the mutability of life!'" She looked up at him with wide-open eyes. "I often muse when I'm alone," she said.

The King still hovered over the diary.

"Have you any more entries like—like that last one? May I look?"

"Oh, your Majesty! I'm afraid it's *quite* private." She closed the book quickly.

"I just thought I saw some poetry," said the King.

"Just a little ode to a favourite linnet. It wouldn't interest your Majesty."

"I adore poetry," said the King, who had himself written a rhymed couplet which could be said either forwards or backwards, and in the latter position was useful for removing enchantments. According to the eminent historian, Roger Scurvilegs, it had some vogue in Euralia and went like this:

*"Bo, boll, bill, bole.
Wo, woll, will, wole."*

A pleasing idea, temperately expressed.

The Countess, of course, was only pretending. Really she was longing to read it. "It's quite a little thing," she said.

*"Hail to thee, blithe linnet,
Bird thou clearly art,
That from bush or in it
Pourest thy full heart!
And leads the feathered choir in song
Taking the treble part."*

"Beautiful," said the King, and one must agree with him. Many years after, another poet called Shelley plagiarised the idea, but handled it in a more artificial, and, to my way of thinking, decidedly inferior manner.

"Was it a real bird?" said the King.

"An old favourite."

"Was it pleased about it?"

"Alas, your Majesty, it died without hearing it."

"Poor bird!" said his Majesty; "I think it would have liked it."

Meanwhile Hyacinth, innocent of the nearness of a mother, remained on the castle walls and tried to get on with her breakfast. But she made little progress with it. After all, it *is* annoying continually to look up from your bacon, or whatever it is, and see a foreign monarch passing overhead. Eighteen more times the King of Barodia took Hyacinth in his stride. At the end of the performance, feeling rather giddy, she went down to her father.

She found him alone in the library, a foolish smile upon his face, but no sign of a letter to Barodia in front of him.

"Have you sent the Note yet?" she asked.

"Note? Note?" he said, bewildered, "what—oh, you mean the Stiff Note to the King of Barodia? I'm just planning it, my love. The exact shade of stiffness, combined with courtesy, is a little difficult to hit."

"I shouldn't be too courteous," said Hyacinth; "he came over eighteen more times after you'd gone."

"Eighteen, eighteen, eight—my dear, it's outrageous."

"I've never had such a crowded breakfast before."

"It's positively insulting, Hyacinth. This is no occasion for Notes. We will talk to him in a language that he will understand."

And he went out to speak to the Captain of his Archers.



CHAPTER II

THE CHANCELLOR OF BARODIA HAS A LONG WALK HOME

Once more it was early morning on the castle walls.

The King sat at his breakfast table, a company of archers drawn up in front of him.

"Now you all understand," he said. "When the King of Baro—when a certain—well, when I say 'when,' I want you all to fire your arrows into the air. You are to take no aim; you are just to shoot your arrows upwards, and—er—I want to see who gets highest. Should anything—er—should anything brush up against them on their way—not of course that it's likely—well, in that case—er—in that case something will—er—brush up against them. After all, what *should?*"

"Quite so, Sire," said the Captain, "or rather, not at all."

"Very well. To your places."

Each archer fitted an arrow to his bow and took up his position. A look-out man had been posted. Everything was ready.

The King was decidedly nervous. He wandered from one archer to another asking after this man's wife and family, praising the polish on that man's quiver, or advising him to stand with his back a little more to the sun. Now and then he would hurry off to the look-out man on a distant turret, point out Barodia on the horizon to him, and hurry back again.

The look-out knew all about it.

"Royalty over," he bellowed suddenly.

"When!" roared the King, and a cloud of arrows shot into the air.

"Well done!" cried Hyacinth, clapping her hands. "I mean, how could you? You might have hurt him."

"Hyacinth," said the King, turning suddenly; "you here?"

"I have just come up. Did you hit him?"

"Hit who?"

"The King of Barodia, of course."

"The King of—— My dear child, what could the King of Barodia be doing here? My archers were aiming at a hawk that they saw in the distance." He beckoned to the Captain. "Did you hit that hawk?" he asked.

"With one shot only, Sire. In the whisk—in the tail feathers."

The King turned to Hyacinth.

"With one shot only in the whisk—in the tail feathers," he said. "What was it, my dear, that you were saying about the King of Barodia?"

"Oh, Father, you are bad. You hit the poor man right in the whisker."

"His Majesty of Barodia! And in the whisker! My dear child, this is terrible! But what can he have been doing up

there? Dear, dear, this is really most unfortunate. I must compose a note of apology about this."

"I should leave the first note to him," said Hyacinth.

"Yes, yes, you're right. No doubt he will wish to explain how he came to be there. Just a moment, dear."

He went over to his archers, who were drawn up in line again.

"You may take your men down now," he said to the Captain.

"Yes, your Majesty."

His Majesty looked quickly round the castle walls, and then leant confidentially towards the Captain.

"Er—which was the man who—er"— he fingered his cheek—"er—quite so. The one on the left? Ah, yes." He went to the man on the left and put a bag of gold into his hand.

"You have a very good style with the bow, my man. Your wrist action is excellent. I have never seen an arrow go so high."

The company saluted and withdrew. The King and Hyacinth sat down to breakfast.

"A little mullet, my dear?" he said.

* * * * *

The Hereditary Grand Chancellor of Barodia never forgot that morning, nor did he allow his wife to forget it. His opening, "That reminds me, dear, of the day when——"

though the signal of departure for any guests, allowed no escape for his family. They had to have it.

And indeed it was a busy day for him. Summoned to the Palace at nine o'clock, he found the King nursing a bent whisker and in the very vilest of tempers. His Majesty was for war at once, the Chancellor leant towards the Stiff Note.

"At least, your Majesty," he begged, "let me consult the precedents first."

"There is no precedent," said the King coldly, "for such an outrage as this."

"Not precisely, Sire; but similar unfortunate occurrences have—occurred."

"It was worse than an occurrence."

"I should have said an outrage, your Majesty. Your late lamented grandfather was unfortunate enough to come beneath the spell of the King of Araby, under which he was compelled—or perhaps I should say preferred—to go about on his hands and knees for several weeks. Your Majesty may recall how the people in their great loyalty adopted a similar mode of progression. Now although your Majesty's case is not precisely on all fours——"

"Not at all on all fours," said the King coldly.

"An unfortunate metaphor; I should say that although your Majesty's case is not parallel, the procedure adopted in your revered grandfather's case——"

"I don't care what *you* do with your whiskers; I don't care what *anybody* does with his whiskers," said the King, still

soothing his own tenderly; "I want the King of Euralia's blood." He looked round the Court. "To any one who will bring me the head of the King, I will give the hand of my daughter in marriage."

There was a profound silence. . . .

"Which daughter?" said a cautious voice at last.

"The eldest," said the King.

There was another profound silence. . . .