

Butler Ellis Parker

How It Feels to Be Fifty



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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*

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