

When Time Turned.*

BY ETHEL WATTS MUMFORD.



DROPPED in at my friend Dr. Lamison's rooms, for I had been dull and bored all day, and Lamison, partly by reason of his profession, partly because of his own odd humor and keen insight, is a delightful companion. To my disgust he was not alone, but deep in an animated discussion with an elderly gentleman of pleasant appearance. Being in no mood to talk to strangers I was about to make my excuses and retire, but Lamison signed to me to remain. "Let me present my friend Robertson, Mr. Gage," he said politely, as we both bowed with due formality. "Robertson," he continued, addressing me, "you will be interested in what this gentleman has to say on the Philippines — he has spent some years out there."

Mr. Gage smiled reminiscently. "Yes, I spent some little time in the Islands. In fact, I am just on the point of going there now, and am very sorry I shall not see them again."

"What?" I asked. "If you're going, why do you say you will never see the place again?"

Lamison broke in abruptly. "That is a long story. Let's go on with the question we had in hand. You were saying that the Malays are singularly shrewd and cunning."

Mr. Gage brightened visibly. "They are, indeed. Now, when I was in Manila," — and he launched into a highly instructive lecture on the Malay and all his works, talking rapidly and tersely; his phrases full of vigor and originality, his descriptions vivid and picturesque; in fact, it has rarely been my good fortune to listen to so brilliant a conversationalist — though conversation it could hardly be called, for by common consent he had the floor to himself.

Occasionally I asked a question, or Lamison punctuated the discourse with nods of approval as he flicked his cigar ashes on the floor. From the Philippines we wandered to the Chinese empire

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and its destiny. Gage had spent two years in Tientsin and Hong Kong and was as well informed and interesting as man could be. His observation was phenomenal, and his memory likewise, and he had a way of presenting his facts that was positively evocative. I felt, after listening to him, that the recollections were my own, so distinctly did he force his mental pictures into my consciousness. He was eminently moderate in all his views, avoiding extremes and holding a mean of charity and common sense that is, to say the least, unusual.

A flash of lightning that stared suddenly through the windows, and was followed by a terrific thunder clap, made us start and pause. Mr. Gage arose and, going to the window, looked out into the murky night, remarking as he did so on the suddenness and violence of storms in the tropics.

I seized the occasion to nod to Lamison. "What a brilliant chap," I said. "I never heard a man express himself so well and sanely — who is he, anyway?"

"A gentleman and a scholar, also my guest for the present," my host answered. "So you think him well balanced?"

"Eminently so," I said heartily. "Not many men could state the facts of an international feud with such moderation."

Dr. Lamison smiled a strange, grave smile.

Our companion came back from the window whereon the heavy wash of the rain was now playing, and refilled his glass from the pitcher of shandygaff.

"So you are just on the point of making your first trip to the East?" Lamison asked, to my unutterable amazement.

Gage nodded. "Yes. In a few days I shall have decided."

I looked blankly at him.

"Then I suppose you will have your quarrel with the family by next week?" my friend went on.

Gage sighed deeply. "Yes, I shall have to go through with it again. Fortunately the worst stages come first, and I have been feeling the after effects for some days already."

Lamison looked at my confusion with amusement.

"Tell Robertson about it all, old man," he said. "He is perfectly trustworthy, and yours is such an interesting story. To begin with, tell him how old you are."

Gage laughed, a quick boyish chuckle, and sprang up gaily, stretching himself before the sparkling fire. "Just three and twenty," he answered hilariously.

I looked at him carefully. His iron-gray hair, the infinitesimal tracery of lines that covered his face and hands like a fine-spun web, and the slight stiffness of his joints, in spite of his quick and rather graceful movements, bespoke a man in the later fifties. I understood now. He was doubtless one of the curious cases of mania which the doctor was constantly picking up and studying.

"Tell him how it happened," Lamison suggested.

Gage's face grew grave. "It's very sad, part of it — but on the whole I have been blest above all men, for I have lived my life twice over. It was this way" — he sat down once more in the easy chair from which he had risen. "I was devotedly fond of my wife — one of the most charming women in the world, Mr. Robertson; but I lost her. She died, very suddenly, under singularly painful circumstances." His mouth twitched, but he controlled himself. "I was away on business in Washington when the news of her sudden illness reached me. I waited for nothing, but left by the first train. I remember giving ten dollars to the driver of the cab I hailed on my arrival, if he would reach my house in ten minutes. Aside from that the journey is only a blur of strain and horror. My memory becomes clear again with the moment when I saw my doorstep, wet and shining in the rain. I noted the reflected carriage lamp on the streaming pavement. The servant who opened the door at the sound of the stopping of my cab was crying. The house was brilliantly lit and I could hear hurried footsteps on the floor above and catch a glimpse of the blue-clad figure of a trained nurse. I rushed upstairs and into my wife's room. She raised one hand feebly toward me, and a flash of recognition lit up her face for an instant and then faded into waxen blankness. I can't describe that hour — it is too keenly terrible for me to repeat and it is not necessary to the story. At last it was all over, and her dear eyes closed forever, as I thought then. A great emptiness settled upon my brain and heart. Then came a slow tightening and straining sensation somewhere inside the dome of my skull, that seemed as fast as St. Peter's. A snap, sharp as a broken banjo string and perfectly audible, was its

climax. Then I steadied myself and looked about. Nothing had changed. The room was still, for the others had gone and we were left alone together — my wife and I. The silence was awful. Only the clock ticked louder and louder and louder till it beat like a drum. Then I glanced at the timepiece, an ordinary little porcelain thing that my wife kept by her on the medicine table, and a cold fear gripped me as I looked, for I realized that something wonderful and terrible was happening. With each tick the second hand jerked one second *backwards* — the hands were moving around the clock face from right to left. I started, and almost at the same instant I felt the hand I held in mine grow relaxed and warm. I gave a cry. The door opened. The nurse, who had been the last to leave the chamber of death, came in. I saw her do exactly what she had done before — but reversed. Then my sister backed in from the opposite side, exactly as she had walked out, and turning, showed me her tear-stained, convulsed face with the very movement with which she had left us. The others came in; it was a strange phenomenon. The doctor was there now, standing at the head of the bed. I looked at the clock. It was ticking and the hands slowly turning backwards. All at once I realized what had happened. Time had turned.

“I gasped when the thing dawned on me, it was so stupendous. But I saw my sweet wife’s eyelids flutter, I saw her breath coming with difficulty, and I suffered once more with all my soul that terrible death agony. She turned toward me and lifted her hand with the gesture I had seen as I entered the room. In spite of myself I rose, and left her. I went down the stairs — the servant was there — I passed out into the street, to find the cab that had brought me standing before the door. I backed in. The horse trotted backward all the way to the station and I found myself on the train speeding backwards to the city I had left to come post haste to my darling’s bedside.

“My reason shivered in my skull. If I could not sift this matter I knew I should go mad. The thing was strange past all endurance. So I sat in the train that was carrying me over the miles so recently covered, and considered. A dawn of delight came to me. It would not be so long before all this horror would have doubly passed. I would have to go to the hotel and receive

that terrifying, crushing telegram announcing Isabelle's illness once more. Then I should go over the business that had called me on to Washington, but after that I should go back to my wife to find her strong and well, to live over again the happy years of our married life, to watch her growing daily younger, while I grew young with her. What matter that little tiffs re-occurred — they were so few, and the joy of those years so infinitely great. And that, Mr. Robertson, is just what happened."

He went on, after a pause, in which he seemed lost in happy reverie. "In a week I had grown somewhat accustomed to doing over again the things I had done, only reversed; it seemed almost a matter of course; and, after all, I cared little, for I knew I was soon going to find Isabelle, to be greeted by her good-bye kiss, the same with which she had bid me Godspeed on the fatal journey. I could hardly hold my impatience as, at last, I backed up to the house, and when I saw her standing on the porch as I had last seen her, well and strong, dressed in the pretty gray cloth so becoming to her bright complexion and copper-colored hair, I could have cried with joy. She greeted me as I expected, with good-byes, but my heart sang with delight as we went into the house together. I put down my dress-suit case, and we ate luncheon together, beginning with dessert and ending with the delicate omelette she had prepared herself, in honor of my unusual freedom to lunch with her. We went over our old conversations. I was longing to tell her of my delight in her presence, of my gratitude for the extraordinary reversal of nature that gave her back to me, but I could not, I was under bondage of the past. I could only say what I had said, do what I had done.

"Luncheon over — or rather, correctly speaking, before it had begun — I bade her good-bye in my heart, but greeted her in my speech and went down to the treadmill round of my office work. My recent bereavement made me so tender of her presence, so hungry for the sight of her that my very soul longed to expand itself in loving words and acts; I yearned to do and say a thousand affectionate things, but I could only do as I had done. I began to appreciate how I had let our relations become commonplace, and I hated myself for it. I saw a thousand ways in which I could have made her happier, or spared her pain, yet I could not

take advantage of my new realization of my love of her. Ah, it takes such an experience as mine to make a man understand what he has missed and what he might have been. But even if I could not be to her what I so dearly longed to show myself, yet in my heart no gesture of hers went unnoted, no tone of her voice unloved. She delighted me wholly and completely, and the caresses that I gave her in seeming perfunctoriness, and the words seemingly mere habits of expression, were really the outlet of my soul's yearning to her. We were very happy. For years we were constantly together, and never was wife so appreciated. Then a great fear began to grip my heart. I remember it came suddenly, in the very midst of the little feast we were having to celebrate the first year of our wedded life — our 'first anniversary.' I realized that soon, in the very joy of our honeymoon I must anticipate our separation — the wedding would take place, next we would be engaged, then mere acquaintances, and after that — oh, desolation — it would be before I met her, and I should never see her again.

"I lived that year, our second honeymoon, and the last of our life together, torn between the joy of my returned happiness and the terrible knowledge of my coming loss. The wedding day came and I could have cried out in my agony, but I could give my pain no voice. I had no tears, only smiles and laughter that must be gone through with, though my heart was breaking. Imagine it if you can, sirs. Was ever a man so tried? Then came the period of our engagement, when I knew we were drifting slowly and surely apart — and the happiness and misery of that time was, perhaps, the hardest of all to bear, even worse than the actual slow separation, though after my declaration, when our relations were formal and distant, it broke my heart to see her, whom I had loved so long, treat me as a mere acquaintance; and with it was the awful knowledge that there was no future hope, no possibility of our meeting, on this earth at least. The poignant day of my first meeting with her arrived at last. I saw her, as I had seen her then, so many years before, lighting that conventional ballroom with her presence, a radiant vision, all gold and rose, her tall, graceful figure gowned in soft, filmy drapery. I saw her with all my heart and soul, with all the pent-up memories of my twice lived life, for I remembered it was the first, and

knew it was the last time I should see her. She vanished and I was left alone. For some time afterwards, although I was living over my cheerful, happy-go-lucky bachelor days, I was internally of a suicidal turn of mind, even on my return journeys in the East. I could not resign myself to losing this girl that, according to reversed time, I had never met. But youth is gay, and its recuperative powers strong, and I am growing steadily younger, you see. Then, too, other loves came and went, or rather went and came, and in spite of myself I am able to contemplate my double past with the buoyancy of my second youth. Yet it is all very strange, and recently unaccountable intervals have intruded into my life, such as this evening, for instance. You, gentlemen, are not a part of my boyish past, and yet you seem to be interpolated into my otherwise coherently backward existence. This has been happening for some time, and grows more marked. You may be dreams of my old life that I had forgotten, but I am at a loss to account for it fully. For instance—how could I have foretold then what the future had in store? and yet in one sense that is what I am doing now, in telling you my experience. You must admit that it is confusing.”

Gage’s story had fairly made me dizzy. I admitted that it was confusing. I hardly knew what to think. I even turned an anxious eye on the clock over the fireplace to assure myself that its hands still moved from left to right. As I faced it, Lamison regarded me with his amused but sympathetic eye.

“I hope to interpolate myself a great deal into your world, Gage,” he said. “It’s time you stopped in your mad career of growing younger. I don’t want you on my hands when you become a troublesome stripling, or even when you have to unlearn your college education.”

Gage laughed. “It will be rather hard, but I did enjoy my Harvard days, before I had that row with the family. Whew! How the old man did blow me up! And when I think I have to hear all that over again, it makes me sick.” He paused again, and assisted his courage from the cheering pitcher. “Another thing that worries me,” he went on, “is this: Have you noticed that, although all the happenings of my life seem to follow in well ordered reverse sequence, what I *say* does *not*? For instance,

by all rights I should repeat my sentences verbatim backwards. 'I am glad to see you,' in reversed language would be, 'You see to glad am I.' Now, in all my years of reversed experiences, although the order of conversation progresses backwards, the sentences themselves make perfect forward sense. This drives me to distraction."

The whole impossible proposition danced before me, but Lamison was evidently delighted.

"Good! Gage, splendid! You are making progress — your logic is returning. I am unspeakably glad."

Gage looked at him wonderingly. "Why should you? It is only more confusing. Ah, well, I should not be unhappy if it were not for the awful prospect of being a baby again. That revolts me, like becoming senile. It is such a horrible thing to become a squirming, senseless infant — it makes me shiver, it keeps me from sleeping, it is a menace too ugly and loathsome to be endured. Fancy it, gentlemen, the ignominy of it — the hideous helplessness."

"We'll find a way to prevent that," Lamison said soothingly. "You are better already. It won't be long before we set it all straight. Come, come, be a man —" for Gage suddenly flung himself on the table, his face buried in his hands, moaning slowly,

"I don't want to be a baby — I don't want to be a baby."

This exhibition was so pitiful that I turned to Lamison, almost with tears in my eyes. "Is there any hope for him?" I asked.

Lamison nodded. "Yes, he'll pull through. A condition brought on by overwork and the sudden death of his wife, of whom he was devotedly fond. You see how he is beginning to realize the discrepancies in his imaginary life. He will come out all right — in time."

Gage now had himself under control and sat up shamefacedly.

"Don't mind me, Mr. Robertson," he said. "I don't often break down this way, and I wouldn't have you imagine for one instant that I regret my life. I could not have asked a greater boon of Fate than those happy years restored to me, when time had turned."

He rose gravely, excused himself and left us, and we sat silent and deeply thoughtful, staring into the red embers of the fire.