

# THE CITY OF LAUGHTER: BY CONINGSBY DAWSON



HERE was once a man who was dissatisfied with himself and the age in which he lived. He wanted to describe the world as he believed God had intended it—as he hoped it would become one day. He tried in half-a-dozen ways to describe it. At last, he wrote: “It shall be called the City of Truth—and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing.”

Rather a strange combination of words, *truth* and *playing!* In this strenuous day, we shrug our shoulders. We know that the only road by which truth may be obtained is the road of labor. An unpleasant road! In our youth, we have to be urged along it and lashed along it, like the soldiers of Xerxes, unwilling to go into battle; as we grow older, we get the habit of plodding forward. Some of us are promoted and, in our turn, become whippers for the Army of Progress, flogging the younger generation into the forward march toward the invisible Eldorado.

Every age has had its Better Land, for which it has gone in search. For the Jew, it was the land of truth; for the Greek, the land of beauty; for the Dark Ages, the land of emancipation from the flesh; for the Renaissance, wisdom in the concrete form of loveliness; for the eighteenth century, personal and political liberty; in our day, it is the land of individual material success. For all it has been the dream of happiness, or, religiously phrased, the belief that by pressing ever forward some sudden bend in the road will bring Man within sight of God’s face. The goal of the journey has been variously called. As William Morris puts it, “Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, turns out to be not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.” The name of the thing that is sought may change, but the method of its search has always been fighting. Only to this olden Eastern dreamer, sitting among his vineyards, looking down on a sun-bleached Jewish town, did it occur that the Eldorado might be a City of Laughter, the approaches to which were not roads but lanes of wild flowers and playing.

Incredible! An unacceptable gospel to our way of thinking! Almost as unacceptable as that advice of another Eastern philosopher that we should take no thought for the morrow because the hand that clothed the fields and fed the birds would clothe and feed us. “Gospels of laziness!” we say and shrug our shoulders. Or, trying to be reverent, we hunt for excuses, “Different ages have different conditions and different standards.” Playing, indeed! Take no thought for the

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morrow! If we taught our children the value of idleness where would they be the day after to-morrow? So, when a noted scholar dies at forty, who had boasted that he could work sixteen hours a day, live without exercise and exist on four hours' sleep, we rather tend to applaud him as a hero. He lived in a city; it was said his light was always burning when the last of his students crept into bed; his blind was always up when the earliest of them got back to his studies. This man was so industrious that, when he went on journeys, instead of watching the country, he took his stenographer with him and dictated. He was an exaggerated example of the indomitable American toiler, after which pattern we do our best to mold our children. But how much did he see of the marvel of the world which had been given him to inhabit? Always beyond the horizon there was a fresh landscape and beyond that another and another, spreading away like woven tapestries of magic and girdling the world. He worked—he died worn-out at forty.

The city is to be called the City of Truth—its streets are to be full of boys and girls playing. Nothing is said about the age of the boys and girls. Perhaps some of them are to be eighty; at all events, they are all to be young in spirit—they are to be playing.

**I** LIKE to think of the man who painted such a picture of existence. He had lived within walls, been the counsellor of kings, had seen empires rise, float away and burst like bubbles, had helped to marshal armies and had watched them march out to return in triumph or defeat. He had grown tired of the useless glory of the pageant. He listened for laughter, and heard only the droning sound of work; he looked for playing, and saw only men building and destroying. He went away to his vineyard on the hill and thought. This hurrying to and fro, this selfish capturing and snatching couldn't be what God had meant. It was then that he had the vision of the land to which the world was going—a City of Laughter, where men and women had always the hearts of boys and girls—"the streets of the city shall be full of playing."

All knowledge, all achievement which is worth the having, is attained in the spirit of playing, and not of work. A sweeping statement! But true if you consider it. Every work of art is a work of play. Was a great book ever written which was not undertaken in the child-spirit of adventure? Compare Boswell's "Life of Johnson" with the hack biographies compiled by other men. Boswell was a naughty child, eavesdropping when he ought to have been in bed. He hid under tables to hear what his master was saying; he spied through keyholes to catch him undisguised. He was the make-

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believe explorer of a continental personality which was determined not to be explored.

*Which was determined not to be explored!* There began the adventure. If Boswell had waited till his friend was dead and had set about writing his biography in a solemn atmosphere of duty, compiling memories and hearsay facts, like a laborious ant—who would care to read what he has written? It was the impertinence, the excursionist curiosity, the holiday merriment of the man that made him write a Robinson Crusoe life record of a very fat lexicographer—a record full of hairbreadth escapes for the biographer.

Play may be the best kind of work—the difference between work and play is a difference in training and mental attitude. Teach a child to play sadly and call his play work—you make him a laborer who toils even when he is playing.

The mistake which most of our educators are making is to stamp upon play the brand of drudgery. I remember a preposterous little book that used to be found with the Bible beside English beds; it was entitled, "Blessed be Drudgery." Puritanical cant! Drudgery was never blessed and nothing could ever make it blessed. The same kind of cant that found blessedness in pain and ugliness and all the other penalties of man's folly! Go to Nature. See what haste she makes to cover up faults and barrenness—she tries to make greenness everywhere. A tree dies. Moss and creepers climb about it. A river bursts its banks and scars the landscape. Flowers grow up to hide the havoc. Ugliness and drudgery are no part of God's plan for his world. If Man insists on inventing them, God leaves Man to do the explaining. Boys and girls playing in a green City of Laughter—that was what God meant.

Contrast this with the kind of world that we are giving to our children. Fields are rife with flowers and full of birds. Do we give them eyes to see them? Instead, we herd them in a walled-in world. We teach them about Nature with withered specimens and from text-books. Their learning would be play if we allowed them to pluck the flowers themselves. Every child loves animals—we make them read about them in Natural Histories written by pedants. We change their love into work.

**T**HERE was a book from which, as a child, I was taught to read. It was called, "Reading Without Tears." I shed plenty of tears over it and learned very little in the stuffy schoolroom, stooped over a sunlit desk while the flies drummed against the shining window-panes. But by myself, sitting cross-legged with Grimm's Fairy-Tales in the nursery, how much I learned! I picked up reading

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without knowing it, because I was doing it of my own choice. The same way with arithmetic. I hated it until some play-person told me that it was nothing more than an endless battle between King Addition and King Subtraction—then I grew interested. Education should be a directing and not a compelling.

The instincts of the child are the instincts of the savage. Every boy and girl in growing up lives through, in his or herself, the entire process of evolution that forms the history of the race. There is the love of the open, the kinship with the animals, the desire for loveliness, the herd-spirit curiously combined with a fierce sense of the right to independence. Just as the savage lived in a play-world and made his great discoveries, which advanced the world's progress, in a spirit of playing, so does the child. But our modern educators try to hurry the child's development through these early stages by hothouse processes. Competitive examinations and the fear of failure soon rob the child of its confidence, light-heartedness and originality.

The last two centuries have been occupied with social battles for the Rights of Man. In this twentieth century, the battle has only just commenced for the Rights of the Child. Its right to green places; its right to select what it loves in the world; above all, its right to exercise its imagination—to learn by playing.

Gray faces everywhere! Men and women who know nothing but how to earn bread! In the crouching tread of cities the sound of the fear of life and the terror of death! And yet always between the stone cities lies the green City of Laughter, where work is play, where birds sing as they build their nests and rivers flow silver through meadows, certain of the sea and unhurrying.

The day is coming when, one by one, our wise men like the old Eastern dreamer will steal out from the walls of work into the grassy Metropolis of Laughter. There the work will still go on, but unknowingly. No one will be old; the streets of that city will be full of boys and girls playing.

