



Truth and beauty - —a fairy story in the tradition of Oscar Wilde

by Jeffrey Leonard Round

Once there was an old man who was soon going to die. Now this old man was very wise and he had lived a very long time. He knew a great deal about almost everything and he knew that he was soon to die but he was not unhappy because he had lived a long and full life. He had seen many sights and done many things during his lifetime and when he died his life would be fulfilled. But there was one thing that bothered the old man that still remained to be done. He wanted to know what happiness was. Once, when he was very young, he had been happy. Then he had set out to do great things during his lifetime and to make much money and to gain many important and influential friends so that in being successful he might be even happier. But now, for all his wisdom and all his accomplishments, he was not happy and he did not know what happiness was. And now he did not know even where to look.

Now one day this old man was lying in bed in his large house on top of a hill. He lay so that he could see the forest and its animals, and beyond the forest the sea, and beyond the sea the sky. Suddenly a bird flew down and lighted on his window sill. This pleased the old man very much for he was nearly always alone and he loved to watch the animals to keep him company.

Now it so happened that this bird, who was a robin no less, could speak the language of people very well, just as most animals can even though you can hardly ever catch one speaking it. But this robin knew that the old man was a very kind and wise person so he spoke to the old man and the old man spoke back to the robin. The old man invited the robin in for tea (Red Rose, of course) and crackers to which invitation the robin readily accepted, except that the robin just had crackers as he was not in the mood for drinking tea so early in the morning.

After crackers the old man told the robin that he was soon to die and that he was not sad but for one thing, which thing was that he knew not the meaning of happiness, the answer for which the old man would give much in return. The robin liked the old man so very much that he said he would tell all the animals of the forest to tell all the people they met about the old man's question. Then the robin thanked the old man for his kindness and the old man thanked the robin for his. As the robin flew out the window into the wide blue ocean of the sky the old man thought that one day soon his soul, too, would fly, though much higher than the robin had ever flown before. Then the old man went back to his bedroom where he lay much of the day reading the wisdom of Confucius and Stephen Leacock.

The next day the old man awoke to a loud clamouring outside his door. He let it in and it turned out to be a rather ebullient middle-aged alderman from a neighbouring village in the country.

"Pardon me, you Honour, but I was so anxious to come and tell you the answer to your question as soon as I heard of it," the middle-aged man gasped, for he had been running.

"And what is the answer?" the old man asked politely, knowing full-well the knowledge of politicians.

"The answer is," the middle-aged alderman began, "that happiness is truth." And so saying, he bowed low to the floor with all the humility and lowliness that a politician can offer.

"And what, may I ask, is truth?" spoke the old man.

"Well, sir," said the middle-aged alderman, "speaking strictly for myself," (for he was), "I'd say that truth is when I tell my constituents what they want and then I give it to them."

"I see," said the old man, for he did. "Then I shall give you all my gold," the old man told the middle-aged man. "And also my autographed copy of Joey Smallwood's, *Why I chose Canada*."

And after having received the same the middle aged alderman left, quite visibly excited, his middle-aged pot belly all aquiver with ecstasy. Then the old man went back to bed and began to read *Arcadian Adventures With The Idle Rich*.

The next morning the old man opened the door to a loud knocking from within. Then he shut it when he realized it had been his stomach knocking. The old man had been contemplating the answer of the middle-aged man to such an extent that he had forgotten to eat.

So he soon sat down to a bowl of Quaker's Muffets, because muffets have no artificial flavourings or additives, and, also, a glass of dried prune juice.

When he finished eating the old man arose and went out into his garden, a place of great beauty and splendour. There were huge willow trees bowing their slender branches to the sun. A small silver stream tumbled joyously down the rocky mountainside, disappearing where it ran through the forest to meet the golden chalice of the sea. Here birds sang continuously in the trees, the lark heralding the morning, the mischievous blue-jay crying raucously in the early afternoon after some other animal's unlikely thievery, and the mournful whippoorwill singing its quiet ballad to the night, their voices blending in an endless concerto of mellifluous sound. To view the garden's magnificence gave the old man such an overwhelming feeling he couldn't describe.

When the old man returned from the garden his ears were beset with a quiet knocking at the front door. Upon opening the door he was confronted by a pale, solemn-faced young man.

"I am an artist, sir, and I have come to inform you of the answer to your question," announced the somber young man.

"Do come in," said the old man, and ushered the pale young man into the setting room and placed him in a chair. The old man was quite overjoyed at this turn of fortune. For artists were known to understand even the soul of man, if nothing else.

"And what is the answer?" the old man questioned, eagerly awaiting the enlightenment he was anticipating.

"The answer to your question," began the artist, standing now, carefully posing himself, hand lightly on breast and chin held pontifically in the air.

"Yes? Yes?" queried the old man impatiently.

"Is that happiness is beauty." And so having said, the young man collapsed into the chair.

The old man thought for a moment.

"And what do you know of beauty?" he finally asked the pale young artist.

"I?" said the artist. "I have suffered much for beauty."

"Ah!" said the old man. "And what is beauty?" he asked.

"Why, my dear sir," the artist almost exclaimed.

"Beauty is a picture, a poem, a symphony, a piece of sculpture. Beauty is something great that has been made by man who is lowly and

insignificant in this great universe. It is something to be admired by many and to endure forever."

"Then," said the old man, "you shall have my house in which you may live and create great works of art that will last forever. And also my subscription to *Arts Canada*."

Overjoyed, the great-artist to be went skipping out of the house and in his gigantic moment of bliss fell over the cliff and drowned in the sea.

The old man still was not satisfied with his answers. He had been truthful all of his life and yet he was not happy. His world had been beautiful always but still he was not happy. Disappointed and weary, the old man went back to bed.

As the old man lay alone in bed in the great house on top of the hill he began to think of the long and spectacular life that lay behind him. And as he lay there musing he became aware of a very sweet and tender voice singing gaily along with the birds in the trees outside in the garden. The old man, curious to know who could be in his garden, got up and went to the window. He looked out into the bright, warm dayling and saw a small child, the most beautiful child the old man had ever seen, singing happily to itself. The child had soft, golden curls and bright, green eyes. It sat playing with the rocks and sticks and sand in the garden. The old man called him.

"Hello, my child," he said softly, so as not to frighten him.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the child.

"Would you like to come in and see my house?" the old man asked.

"Yes, please. I would, sir," consented the child.

When he had come in the child looked all about him.

"It's a lovely house, sir," the child remarked.

"Thank you, my child," said the old man, lying in bed. "And do you think it's as lovely as the garden outside?"

"No, sir," replied the child.

"Oh, but that is not very polite, now is it, my son?" the old man asked kindly.

"I don't know, sir, but it's the truth," the child answered innocently.

"Oh, I see," said the old man, smiling. "And tell me, my child, do you know what truth is?" the old man asked amusedly.

"Well," said the child. "I'm not sure, but when I'm happy, and I know I'm happy, then that is the truth."

The old man felt a tremor run through him.

"And beauty, my young son?" he asked.

"What is beauty?" alert, now, for the answer.

"Being happy," the boy replied.

"And do you know what happiness is?" cried the old man, excited now with every nerve left alive in his old body.

The child thought for a moment, then looked up and said, "happiness is playing in the sun."

The old man's head sank back into the soft, silken pillows.

"One more question, my boy, and then you may leave," said the old man.

"Yes, sir," replied the child.

"If you could have anything you want in this whole world, what would that be?" the old man asked.

"Just to play," said the child. Then he went out into the garden. And the old man died happily ever after.