TALES OF FANTASY AND FACT

BY

BRANDER MATTHEWS

NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
1896

written in 1894. See last page.

Brander Matthews

SIXTEEN YEARS WITHOUT A BIRTH-DAY

WHILE the journalist deftly dealt with the lobster *à la* Newburg, as it bubbled in the chafing-dish before him, the deep-toned bell of the church at the corner began to strike twelve.

"Give me your plates, quick," he said, "and we'll drink Jack's health before it's to-morrow."

The artist and the soldier and the professor of mathematics did as they were told; and then they filled their glasses.

The journalist, still standing, looked the soldier in the eye, and said: "Jack, this is the first time The Quartet has met since the old school-days, ten years ago and more. That this reunion should take place on your birthday doubles the pleasure of the occasion. We wish you many happy returns of the day!"

Then the artist and the mathematician rose also, and they looked at the soldier, and repeated together, "Many happy returns of the day!"

Whereupon they emptied their glasses and sat down, and the soldier rose to his feet.

"Thank you, boys," he began, "but I think you have already made me enjoy this one birthday three times over. It was yesterday that I was twenty-six, and—"

"But I didn't meet you till last night," interrupted the journalist; "and yesterday was Sunday; and I couldn't get a box for the theatre and find the other half of The Quartet all on Sunday, could I?"

"I'm not complaining because yesterday was my real birthday," the soldier returned, "even if you have now protracted the celebration on to the third day—it's just struck midnight, you know. All I have to say is, that since you have given me a triplicate birthday this time, any future anniversary will have to spread itself over four days if it wants to beat the record, that's all." And he took his seat again.

"Well," said the artist, who had recently returned from Paris, "that won't happen till we

see 'the week of the four Thursdays,' as the French say."

"And we sha'n't see that for a month of Sundays, I guess," the journalist rejoined.

There was a moment of silence, and then the mathematician spoke for the first time.

"A quadruplex birthday will be odd enough, I grant you," he began, "but I don't think it quite as remarkable as the case of the lady who had no birthday for sixteen years after she was born."

The soldier and the artist and the journalist all looked at the professor of mathematics, and they all smiled; but his face remained perfectly grave.

"What's that you say?" asked the journalist. "Sixteen years without a birthday? Isn't that a very large order?"

"Did you know the lady herself?" inquired the soldier.

"She was my grandmother," the mathematician answered. "She had no birthday for the first sixteen years of her life."

"You mean that she did not celebrate her birthdays, I suppose," the artist remarked. "That's nothing. I know lots of families

where they don't keep any anniversaries at all."

"No," persisted the mathematician. "I meant what I said, and precisely what I said. My grandmother did not keep her first fifteen birthdays because she couldn't. She didn't have them to keep. They didn't happen. The first time she had a chance to celebrate her birthday was when she completed her sixteenth year —and I need not tell you that the family made the most of the event."

"This a real grandmother you are talking about," asked the journalist, "and not a fairy godmother?"

"I could understand her going without a birthday till she was four years old," the soldier suggested, "if she was born on the 29th of February."

"That accounts for four years," the mathematician admitted, "since my grandmother *was* born on the 29th of February."

"In what year?" the soldier pursued. "In 1796?"

The professor of mathematics nodded.

"Then that accounts for eight years," said the soldier.

"I don't see that at all," exclaimed the artist.

"It's easy enough," the soldier explained. "The year 1800 isn't a leap-year, you know. We have a leap-year every four years, except the final year of a century—1700, 1800, 1900."

"I didn't know that," said the artist.

"I'd forgotten it," remarked the journalist. "But that gets us over only half of the difficulty. He says his grandmother didn't have a birthday till she was sixteen. We can all see now how it was she went without this annual luxury for the first eight years. But who robbed her of the birthdays she was entitled to when she was eight and twelve. That's what I want to know."

"Born February 29, 1796, the Gregorian calendar deprives her of a birthday in 1800," the soldier said. "But she ought to have had her first chance February 29, 1804. I don't see how—" and he paused in doubt. "Oh!" he cried, suddenly; "where was she living in 1804?"

"Most of the time in Russia," the mathematician answered. "Although the family went to England for a few days early in the year."

"What was the date when they left Russia?" asked the soldier, eagerly.

"They sailed from St. Petersburg in a Russian bark on the 10th of February," answered the professor of mathematics, "and owing to head-winds they did not reach England for a fortnight."

"Exactly," cried the soldier. "That's what I thought. That accounts for it."

"I don't see how," the artist declared; "that is, unless you mean to suggest that the Czar confiscated the little American girl's birthday and sent it to Siberia."

"It's plain enough," the soldier returned. "We have the reformed calendar, the Gregorian calendar, you know, and the Russians haven't. They keep the old Julian calendar, and it's now ten days behind ours. They celebrate Christmas three days after we have begun the new year. So if the little girl left St. Petersburg in a Russian ship on February 10, 1804, by the old reckoning, and was on the water two weeks, she would land in England after March 1st by the new calendar."

"That is to say," the artist inquired, "the little girl came into an English port thinking she

was going to have her birthday the next week, and when she set foot on shore she found out that her birthday was passed the week before. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," answered the soldier; and the mathematician nodded also.

"Then all I have to say," the artist continued, "is that it was a mean trick to play on a child that had been looking forward to her first birthday for eight years — to knock her into the middle of next week in that fashion!"

"And she had to go four years more for her next chance," said the journalist. "Then she would be twelve. But you said she hadn't a birthday till she was sixteen. How did she lose the one she was entitled to in 1808? She wasn't on a Russian ship again, was she?"

"No," the mathematician replied; "she was on an American ship that time."

"On the North Sea?" asked the artist.

"No," was the calm answer; "on the Pacific."

"Sailing east or west?" cried the soldier.

"Sailing east," answered the professor of mathematics, smiling again.

"Then I see how it might happen," the soldier declared.

"Well, I don't," confessed the artist.

The journalist said nothing, as it seemed unprofessional to admit ignorance of anything.

"It is simple enough," the soldier explained. "You see, the world is revolving about the sun steadily, and it is always high noon somewhere on the globe. The day rolls round unceasing, and it is not cut off into twenty-four hours. We happen to have taken the day of Greenwich or Paris as the day of civilization, and we say that it begins earlier in China and later in California; but it is all the same day, we say. Therefore there has to be some place out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where we lose or gain a day—if we are going east, we gain it; if we are going west, we lose it. Now I suppose this little girl of twelve was on her way from some Asiatic port to some American port, and they stopped on their voyage at Honolulu. Perhaps they dropped anchor there just before midnight on their February 28, 1808, thinking that the morrow would be the 29th; but when they were hailed from the shore, just after midnight, they found out that it was already March 1st."

As the soldier finished, he looked at the

mathematician for confirmation of his explanation.

Thus appealed to, the professor of mathematics smiled and nodded, and said: "You have hit it. That's just how it was that my grandmother lost the birthday she ought to have had when she was twelve, and had to go four years more without one."

"And so she really didn't have a birthday till she was sixteen!" the artist observed. "Well, all I can say is, your great-grandfather took too many chances. I don't think he gave the child a fair show. I hope he made it up to her when she was sixteen—that's all!"

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"I say," he began, "that yarn about your grandmother was very interesting. It is an extraordinary combination of coincidences. I can see it in the Sunday paper with a scarehead—

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"But it isn't true," said the professor.

"Not true?" echoed the journalist.

"No," replied the mathematician. "I made it up. I hadn't done my share of the talking, and I didn't want you to think I had nothing to say for myself."

"Not a single word of truth in it?" the journalist returned.

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EDITOR'S DRAWER

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A SURE SIGN.

"Are you superstitious, Mr. Spiffkins?"
"Well—I think it bad luck to be run over by a cable-car."