

[Gadsby](#)

by [Ernest Vincent Wright](#)

Chapter 1

II

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I

If youth, throughout all history, had had a champion to stand up for it; to show a doubting world that a child can think; and, possibly, do it practically; you wouldn't constantly run across folks today who claim that "a child don't know anything." A child's brain starts functioning at birth; and has, amongst its many infant [convolution](#), thousands of dormant atoms, into which God has put a mystic possibility for noticing an adult's act, and figuring out its [purport](#).

Up to about its primary school days a child thinks, naturally, only of play. But many a form of play contains [disciplinary](#) factors. "You can't do this," or "that puts you out," shows a child that it must think, practically, or fail. Now, if, throughout childhood, a brain has no opposition, it is plain that it will attain a position of "status quo," as with our ordinary animals. Man knows not why a cow, dog or lion was not born with a brain on a par with ours; why such animals cannot add, subtract, or obtain from books and schooling, that paramount position which Man holds today.

But a human brain is not in that class. Constantly throbbing and pulsating, it rapidly forms opinions; attaining an ability of its own; a fact which is startlingly shown by an occasional child "prodigy" in music or school work. And as, with our dumb animals, a child's inability convincingly to impart its thoughts to us, should not class it as ignorant.

Upon this basis I am going to show you how a bunch of bright young folks did find a champion; a man with boys and girls of his own; a man of so dominating and happy individuality that Youth is drawn to him as is a fly to a sugar bowl. It is a story about a small town. It is not a gossipy yarn; nor is it a dry, monotonous account, full of such customary "fill-ins" as "romantic moonlight casting murky shadows down a long, winding country road." Nor will it say anything about tinklings lulling distant folds; robins carolling at twilight, nor any "warm glow of lamplight" from a cabin window. No. It is an account of up-and-doing activity; a vivid portrayal of Youth as it is today; and a practical discarding of that worn-out notion that "a child don't know anything."

Now, any author, from history's dawn, always had that most important aid to writing:—an ability to call upon any word in his dictionary in building up his story. That is, our strict laws as to word construction did not block his path. But in *my* story that mighty obstruction *will* constantly

stand in my path; for many an important, common word I cannot adopt, owing to its orthography.

I shall act as a sort of historian for this small town; associating with its inhabitants, and striving to acquaint you with its youths, in such a way that you can look, knowingly, upon any child, rich or poor; forward or "backward;" your own, or John Smith's, in your community. You will find many young minds aspiring to know how, and WHY such a thing is so. And, if a child shows curiosity in that way, how ridiculous it is for you to snap out: —

"Oh! Don't ask about things too old for you!"

Such a jolt to a young child's mind, craving instruction, is apt so to dull its avidity, as to hold it back in its school work. Try to look upon a child as a small, soft young body and a rapidly growing, constantly inquiring brain. It must grow to maturity slowly. Forcing a child through school by constant night study during hours in which it should run and play, can bring on insomnia; handicapping both brain and body.

Now this small town in our story had grown in just that way:—slowly; in fact, much *too* slowly to stand on a par with many a thousand of its kind in this big, vigorous nation of ours. It was simply stagnating; just as a small mountain brook, coming to a hollow, might stop, and sink from sight, through not having a will to find a way through that obstruction; or around it. You will run across such a dormant town, occasionally; possibly so dormant that only outright isolation by a fast-moving world, will show it its folly. If you will tour Asia, Yucatan, or parts of Africa and Italy, you will find many sad ruins of past kingdoms. Go to [Indo-China](#) and visit its gigantic [Ankhor Vat](#); call at Damascus, Baghdad and [Samarkand](#). What sorrowful lack of ambition many such a community shows in thus discarding such high-class construction! And I say, again, that so will Youth grow dormant, and hold this big, throbbing world back, if no champion backs it up; thus providing it with an opportunity to show its ability for looking forward, and improving unsatisfactory conditions.

So this small town of Branton Hills was lazily snoozing amidst up-and-doing towns, as Youth's Champion, John Gadsby, took hold of it; and shook its dawdling, flabby body until its inhabitants thought a tornado had struck it. Call it tornado, volcano, military onslaught, or what you will, this town found that it had a bunch of kids who had wills that would admit of no snoozing; for that is Youth, on its forward march of inquiry, thought and action.

If you stop to think of it, you will find that it is customary for our "grown-up" brain to cast off many of its functions of its youth; and to think only of what it calls "topics of maturity." Amongst such discards is many a form of happy play; many a muscular activity such as walking, running, climbing; thus totally missing that alluring "joy of living" of childhood. If you wish a vacation from financial affairs, just go out and play with Youth. Play "blind-man's buff," "hop-

scotch," "ring toss," and football. Go out to a charming woodland spot on a picnic with a bright, happy, vivacious group. Sit down at a corn roast; a marshmallow toast; join in singing popular songs; drink a quart of good, rich milk; burrow into that big lunch box; and all such things as banks, stocks, and family bills, will vanish on fairy wings, into oblivion.

But this is not a claim that Man should stay always youthful. Supposing that [that famous Spaniard](#), landing upon Florida's coral strands, had found that mythical [Fountain of Youth](#); what a calamity for mankind! A world without maturity of thought; without man's full-grown muscular ability to construct mighty buildings, railroads and ships; a world without authors, doctors, savants, musicians; nothing but Youth! I can think of but a solitary approval of such a condition; for such a horror as war would not,—could not occur; for a child is, naturally, a small bunch of sympathy. I know that boys will "scrap;" also that "spats" will occur amongst girls; but, at such a monstrosity as killings by bombing towns, sinking ships, or mass annihilation of marching troops, childhood would stand aghast. Not a tiny bird would fall; nor would any form of gun nor facility for manufacturing it, insult that almost Holy purity of youthful thought. Anybody who knows that wracking sorrow brought upon a child by a dying puppy or cat, knows that childhood can show us that our fighting, our policy of "[a tooth for a tooth](#)," is abominably wrong.

So, now to start our story:—

Branton Hills was a small town in a rich agricultural district; and having many a possibility for growth. But, through a sort of smug satisfaction with conditions of long ago, had no thought of improving such important adjuncts as roads; putting up public buildings, nor laying out parks; in fact a dormant, slowly dying community. So satisfactory was its status that it had no form of transportation to surrounding towns but by railroad, or "old Dobbin." Now, any town thus isolating its inhabitants, will invariably find this big, busy world passing it by; glancing at it, curiously, as at an odd animal at a circus; and, you will find, caring not a whit about its condition. Naturally, a town should grow. You can look upon it as a child; which, through natural conditions, should attain manhood; and add to its surrounding thriving districts its products of farm, shop, or factory. It should show a spirit of association with surrounding towns; crawl out of its lair, and find how backward it is.

Now, in all such towns, you will find, occasionally, an individual born with that sort of brain which, knowing that his town is backward, longs to start things toward improving it; not only its living conditions, but adding an institution or two, such as any *city*, big or small, maintains, gratis, for its inhabitants. But so forward looking a man finds that trying to instill any such notions into a town's ruling body is about as satisfactory as butting against a brick wall. Such "Boards" as you find ruling many a small town, function from such a soporific rut that any hint

of digging cash from its cast iron strong box with its big brass padlock, will fall upon minds as rigid as rock.

Branton Hills *had* such a man, to whom such rigidity was as annoying as a thorn in his foot. Continuous trials brought only continual thornpricks; until, finally, a brilliant plan took form as John Gadsby found Branton Hills' High School pupils waking up to Branton Hills' sloth. Gadsby continually found this bright young bunch asking:—

"Aw! Why is this town so slow? It's nothing but a dry twig!!"

"Ha!" said Gadsby; "A dry twig! That's it! Many a living, blossoming branch all around us, and this solitary dry twig, with a tag hanging from it, on which you will find: 'Branton Hills; A twig too lazy to grow!'"

Now this put a "hunch" in Gadsby's brain, causing him to say: "A High School pupil is not a child, now. Naturally a High School boy has not a man's qualifications; nor has a High School girl womanly maturity. But such kids, born in this swiftly moving day, think out many a notion which will work, but which would pass our dads and granddads in cold disdain. Just as ships pass at night. But supposing that such ships should show a light in passing; or blow a horn; or, if—if—if— By Golly! I'll do it!"

And so Gadsby sat on his blossom-bound porch on a mild Spring morning, thinking and smoking. Smoking can calm a man down; and his thoughts had so long and so constantly clung to this plan of his that a cool outlook as to its promulgation was not only important, but paramount. So, as his cigar was whirling and puffing rings aloft; and as groups of bright, happy boys and girls trod past, to school, his plan rapidly took form as follows:—

"Youth! What is it? Simply a start. A start of what? Why, of that most astounding of all human functions; thought. But man didn't start his brain working. No. All that an adult can claim is a continuation, or an amplification of thoughts, dormant in his youth. Although a child's brain can absorb instruction with an ability far surpassing that of a grown man; and, although such a young brain is bound by rigid limits, it contains a capacity for constantly craving additional facts. So, in our backward Branton Hills, I just *know* that I can find boys and girls who can show our old moss-back Town Hall big-wigs a thing or two. Why! On Town Hall night, just go and sit in that room and find out just how stupid and stubborn a Council, (put *into* Town Hall, you know, through popular ballot!), can act. Say that a road is badly worn. Shall it stay so? Up jumps Old Bill Simpkins claiming that it is a townsman's duty to fix up his wagon springs if that road is too rough for him!"

As Gadsby sat thinking thus, his plan was rapidly growing; and, in a month, was actually starting to work. How? You'll know shortly; but first, you should know this John Gadsby; a man of "around fifty;" a family man, and known throughout Branton Hills for his high standard of honor

and altruism on any kind of an occasion for public good. A loyal churchman, Gadsby was a man who, though admitting that an occasional fault in our daily acts is bound to occur, had taught his two boys and a pair of girls that, though folks do slip from what Scriptural authors call that "straight and narrow path," it will not pay to risk your own Soul by slipping, just so that you can laugh at your ability in staying out of prison; for Gadsby, having grown up in Branton Hills, could point to many such man or woman. So, with such firm convictions in his mind, this upstanding man was constantly striving so to act that no complaint from man, woman or child should bring a word of disapproval. In his mind, what a man might do was that man's affair only and could stain no Soul but his own. And his altruism taught that it is not difficult to find many ways in which to bring joy to such as cannot, through physical disability, go out to look for it; and that only a small bit of joy, brought to a shut-in will carry with it such a warmth as can flow only from acts of human sympathy.

For many days Gadsby had thought of ways in which folks with a goodly bank account could aid in building up this rapidly backsliding town of Branton Hills. But, how to show that class what a contribution could do? In this town, full of [capitalists](#) and [philanthropists](#) contributing, off and on, for shipping warming pans to [Zulus](#), Gadsby saw a solution. In whom? Why, in just that bunch of bright, happy school kids, back from many a visit to a *city*, and noting its ability in improving its living conditions. So Gadsby thought of thus carrying an inkling to such capitalists as to how this stagnating town could claim a big spot upon our national map, which is now shown only in small, insignificant print.

As a start, Branton Hills' "Daily Post" would carry a long story, outlining a list of factors for improving conditions. This it did; but it will always stay as a blot upon high minds and proud blood that not a man or woman amongst such capitalists saw, in his plan, any call for dormant funds. But did that stop Gadsby? Can you stop a rising wind? Hardly! So Gadsby took into council about forty boys of his vicinity and built up an Organization of Youth. Also about as many girls who had known what it is, [compulsory](#) to pass up many a picnic, or various forms of sport, through a lack of public park land. So this strong, vigorous combination of both youth and untiring activity, avidly took up Gadsby's plan; for nothing so stirs up a youthful mind as an opportunity for accomplishing anything that adults cannot do. And did Gadsby *know* Youth? I'll say so! His two sons and girls, now in High or Grammar school, had taught him a thing or two; principal amongst which was that all-dominating fact that, at a not too far distant day, our young folks will occupy important vocational and also political positions, and will look back upon this, *our* day; smiling kindly at our way of doing things. So, to say that many a Branton Hills "King of Capital" got a bit [huffy](#) as a High School stripling was proving how stubborn a rich man is if his dollars don't aid so vast an opportunity for doing good, would put it mildly! Such downright *gall* by a half-grown kid to inform *him*; an outstanding light on Branton Hills' tax list, that this town was sliding down hill; and would soon land in an abyss of national oblivion! And our

Organization girls! *How* Branton Hills' rich old widows and plump [matron](#) did sniff in disdain as a group of High School pupils brought forth straightforward claims that cash paving a road, is doing good practical work, but, in filling up a strong box, is worth nothing to our town.

Oh, that class of [nabob](#)! How thoroughly Gadsby *did* know its [parsimony](#)!! And how thoroughly did this hard-planning man know just what a constant onslaught by Youth could do. So, in about a month, his "Organization" had "waylaid," so to say, practically half of Branton Hills' cash kings; and had so won out, through that commonly known "pull" upon an adult by a child asking for what plainly is worthy, that his mail brought not only cash, but two rich landlords put at his disposal, tracts of land "for any form of occupancy which can, in any way, aid our town." This land Gadsby's Organization promptly put into growing farm products for gratis distribution to Branton Hills' poor; and that burning craving of Youth for activity soon had it sprouting corn, squash, potato, onion and asparagus crops; and, to "doll it up a bit," put in a patch of blossoming plants.

Naturally any man is happy at a satisfactory culmination of his plans and so, as Gadsby found that public philanthropy was but an affair of plain, ordinary approach, it did not call for much brain work to find that, possibly also, a way might turn up for putting handicraft instruction in Branton Hills' schools; for schooling, according to him, did not consist only of books and blackboards. Hands, also should know how to construct various practical things in woodwork, plumbing, blacksmithing, masonry, and so forth; with thorough instruction in sanitation, and that most important of all youthful activity, gymnastics. For girls such a school could instruct in cooking, suit making, hat making, fancy work, art and loom-work; in fact, about any handicraft that a girl might wish to study, and which is not in our standard school curriculum. But as Gadsby thought of such a school, no way for backing it financially was in sight. Town funds naturally, should carry it along; but town funds and Town Councils do not always form what you might call [synonym](#). So it was compulsory that cash should actually "drop into his lap," via a continuation of [solicitation](#) by his now grandly functioning Organization of Youth. So, out again trod that bunch of bright, happy kids, putting forth such plain, straightforward facts as to what Manual Training would do for Branton Hills, that many saw it in that light. But you will always find a group, or individual complaining that such things would "automatically dawn" on boys and girls without any training. Old Bill Simpkins was loud in his [antagonism](#) to what was a "crazy plan to dip into our town funds just to allow boys to saw up good wood, and girls to burn up good flour, trying to cook biscuits." Kids, according to him, should go to work in Branton Hills' shopping district, and profit by it.

"Bah! Why not start a class to show goldfish how to waltz! I didn't go to any such school; and what am I now? A *Councilman*! I can't saw a board straight, nor fry a potato chip; but I can show you folks how to hang onto your town funds."

Old Bill was a notorious grouch; but our Organization occasionally did find a totally varying mood. Old Lady Flanagan, with four boys in school, and a husband many days too drunk to work, was loud in approval.

“Whoops! That’s phwat I calls a grand thing! Worra, worra! I wish Old Man Flanagan had had sich an opporchunity. But that ignorant old clod don’t know nuthin’ but boozin’, tobacco shmokin’ and ditch-diggin’. And you know that our Council ain’t a-payin’ for no ditch-scoopin’ right now. So *I’ll* shout for that school! For my boys can find out how to fix that barn door our old cow laid down against.”

Ha, ha! What a circus our Organization had with such varying moods and outlooks! But, finally such a school was built; instructors brought in from surrounding towns; and Gadsby was as happy as a cat with a ball of yarn.

As Branton Hills found out what it can accomplish if it starts out with vigor and a will to win, our Organization thought of laying out a big park; furnishing an opportunity for small tots to romp and play on grassy plots; a park for all sorts of sports, picnics, and so forth; sand lots for babyhood; cozy arbors for girls who might wish to study, or talk. (You might, possibly, find a girl who *can* talk, you know!); also shady nooks and winding paths for old folks who might find comfort in such. Gadsby thought that a park is truly a most important adjunct to any community; for, if a growing population has no out-door spot at which its glooms, slumps and morbid thoughts can vanish upon wings of sunlight, amidst bright colorings of shrubs and sky, it may sink into a grouchy, faultfinding, squabbling group; and making such a showing for surrounding towns as to hold back any gain in population or valuation. Gadsby had a goodly plot of land in a grand location for a park and sold it to Branton Hills for a dollar; that stingy Council to lay it out according to his plans. And *how* his Organization did applaud him for this, his first “solo work!”

But schools and parks do not fulfill all of a town’s calls. Many minds of varying kinds will long for an opportunity for finding out things not ordinarily taught in school. So Branton Hills’ Public Library was found too small. As it was now in a small back room in our High School, it should occupy its own building; down town, and handy for all; and with additional thousands of books and maps. Now, if you think Gadsby and his youthful assistants stood [aghast](#) at such a gigantic proposition, you just don’t know Youth, as it is today. But to whom could Youth look for so big an outlay as a library building would cost? Books also cost; librarians and janitors draw pay. So, with light, warmth, and all-round comforts, it was a task to stump a full-grown politician; to say nothing of a plain, ordinary townsman and a bunch of kids. So Gadsby thought of taking two bright boys and two smart girls to Washington, to call upon a man in a high position, who had got it through Branton Hills’ popular ballot. Now, any politician is a convincing orator. (That is, you know, all that politics consists of!); and this big man, in contact with a visiting capitalist,

looking for a handout for his own district, got a donation of a thousand dollars. But that wouldn't *start* a public library; to say nothing of maintaining it. So, back in Branton Hills, again, our Organization was out, as usual, on its war-path.

Branton Hills' philanthropy was now showing signs of [monotony](#); so our Organization had to work its linguistic ability and captivating tricks full blast, until that thousand dollars had so grown that a library was built upon a vacant lot which had grown nothing but grass; and only a poor quality of it, at that; and many a child and adult quickly found ways of profitably passing odd hours.

Naturally Old Bill Simpkins was snooping around, sniffing and snorting at any signs of making Branton Hills "look cityish," (a word originating in Bill's vocabulary.)

"Huh!! I didn't put in any foolish hours with books in my happy childhood in this good old town! But I got along all right; and am now having my say in its Town Hall doings. Books!! Pooh! Maps! BAH!! It's silly to squat in a hot room squinting at a lot of print! If you want to know about a thing, go to work in a shop or factory of that kind, and find out about it first-hand."

"But, Bill," said Gadsby, "shops want a man who knows what to do without having to stop to train him."

"Oh, that's all bosh! If a boss shows a man what a tool is for; and if that man is any good, at all, why bring up this stuff you call training? That man grabs a tool, works 'til noon; knocks off for an hour; works 'til—"

At this point in Bill's blow-up an Italian Councilman was passing, and put in his oar, with:—

"Ha, Bill! You thinka your man can worka all right, firsta day, huh? You talka crazy so much as a fool! I laugha tinkin' of you startin' on a patcha for my boota! You lasta just a half hour. Thisa library all righta. This town too mucha what I call tight-wad!"

Oh, hum!! It's a tough job making old dogs do tricks. But our Organization was now holding almost daily sittings, and soon a bright girl thought of having band music in that now popular park. And *what* do you think that stingy Council did? It actually built a most fantastic band-stand; got a contract with a first-class band, and all without so much as a Councilman fainting away!! So, finally, on a hot July Sunday, two solid hours of grand harmony brought joy to many a poor Soul who had not for many a day, known that balm of comfort which can "air out our brains' dusty corridors," and bring such happy thrills, as Music, that charming Fairy, which knows no human words, can bring. Around that [gaudy](#) band-stand, at two-thirty on that first Sunday, sat or stood as happy a [throng](#) of old and young as any man could wish for; and Gadsby and his "gang" got hand-clasps and hand-claps, from all. A good band, you know, not only can stir and thrill you; for it can play a soft crooning lullaby, a lilting waltz or polka; or, with its wood

winds, bring forth old songs of our childhood, ballads of courting days, or hymns and carols of Christmas; and can suit all sorts of folks, in all sorts of moods; for a Spaniard, Dutchman or Russian can find similar joy with a man from Italy, Norway or far away Brazil.