

Artist and Child

FUNNYBONE ALLEY. By ALFRED KREYMBORG. Illustrated by BORIS ARTZYBASHEFF. New York: The Macaulay Company. 1927.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

PERHAPS just because he has often seen himself in the aspect of benignant age, as the absent-minded meerschau-puffing philosopher of the cluttered study, with certain shy musical propensities, the childlikeness of Alfred Kreymborg has always been patent; childlikeness being a very different thing from childishness. We associate Kreymborg's poetry and drama with playfulness, though this very playfulness has often approached profundity. To the mature he has usually addressed the poetry of an elf, extracting, with apparent diffidence, canny amusement from ironical life. Himself like a character out of Hans Christian Andersen (at least, as he appears in his work) he has often viewed existence singularly as Andersen viewed it. That is not all of Kreymborg, as no one aspect is all of any artist so versatile, but it is so great a part of him that it seems only natural that he has now presented us with a book for children.

His book will be read with absorption and delight by certain children of all ages; chiefly by those in whose brains a fretting starlight of fancy persists. Matter-of-fact children (and despite the sentimental view, there are many such), and matter-of-fact elders—well, concerning these I cannot prophesy. For Kreymborg has naturally not written what is known in the barbarous terminology of our time as a "juvenile." Rather here is exactly the same Kreymborg of many of his poems and many of his little dramas, embarked upon prose narration—not upon biographical narrative as in his "Troubadour," but upon an entirely imaginative tale. The imagination of Artzybasheff, the illustrator, has successfully supplemented the author's in color and line.

"Funnybone Alley" is a string of loosely related whimsical episodes afloat in a poetic and nonsensical atmosphere which is often charming in the extreme. On the other hand it seems to me that the vigor of invention sometimes flags. And in the interpolated verse, while much of it is ambrosia to the nonsense-verse lover, as well as being "brimmed with nimbler meanings up," verbal or metrical slovenliness sometimes treads upon the heels of spontaneity. To take a single instance, the first six couplets of "Enter the Cat" are so entirely satisfactory that the remaining four seem a distinct pity. And elsewhere Kreymborg proves that in the main he is hardly a jingle-master—quite, indeed, as Vachel Lindsay is not; though both can be deft on occasion. On the other hand, the true poet is ever present both in the verse and in the prose of this tale, conjuring, in the latter, with such statements as:

They always danced best of all to the most familiar echos. Like "The Sidewalks of New York." Since they could well nigh feel, if not see, the patterns left by former children for them to fit in and out of. Even when they stepped outside the pattern. And played or danced sharp or flat.

I speak of the content of that paragraph. Mr. Kreymborg will not agree with me, but I cannot wholly approve of the syntax. Such syntax often occurs in the book, and I am aware that it is modern usage; but though it may be used effectively as an occasional device, I feel that it hampers rhythm in prose as often as it stimulates. Yet I know that long, unbroken sentences afflict young readers.

The gallery of characters in "Funnybone Alley" is a delightful assortment, Kreymborg's nomenclature usually fortunate, and



Drawing by Boris Artzybasheff for "Gay-neck," by Dhan Gopal Mukerji

such a chapter as "What the Fishman Taught Them" seems to me fascinating writing for children. The book is rich in homely detail invested with glamour.



On Condescension

EVERYONE will agree that there is something wrong with children's books. They are thin stuff, poor fare. If your youngsters had to subsist on the year's output alone, they would die of anæmia or a mild but persistent ptomaine. This failure is of course due to a number of things which make no one as happy as kings—space forbids a closer inspection. However, there is usually a basic something wrong, given which other things cannot be right. Mass-thinking is the most popular scapegoat nowadays, and certainly it lies near the bottom of this as of most literary tangles. But we think we see in addition to the evils of standardization a root-trouble more irritating because more personal, a hindrance not on the part of the essentially indifferent populace, but on the parts of those personally interested, authors, publishers, buyers. Italics almost always creep under the word "children's"—"He writes children's serials." "She's not a children's reviewer." "Yes, it's a good children's book"—italics invisible to the eye but only too audible to the inner ear. We are sure that they come from an Attitude with a capital A. An attitude of condescension. And now our trouble is out. Of course the quality of children's books is thin. No one is going to put his best stuff into an inferior article.

The implication is that children's books are a different and inferior breed, pigmies with a silly squint; not the simple, subtle, utterly priceless darlings of our book-race that one might expect to find

A sign-painter, a street band, a performance at a toy theatre, the appearance of an organ-grinder, all these and many other phenomena that are capitalized Events in



Illustration by Elizabeth MacKinstry for Rachel Field's "The Magic Pawnshop"

the world of the child, are described with beautifully humorous fantasy; and the philosophy underlining the course of events glows with the poet's essential kindness. His satire is light and gay and "Solemnity Street" much in need of it.

I hope I have not given the impression that the verse that performs turn and turn about with prose is by any means a mistake. It is often most ingenious and lends the spice of variety to the whole concoction. Finally, I find the queer dream atmosphere of "Funnybone Alley" both haunting and impressed with the individuality of the author. There is in the volume no "writing down" to the child; and it cumulatively acquaints the child with the true meaning of the word "artist." This last, so far as I know, has never been done so successfully before.

A Prize Story

THE TRADE WIND. By CORNELIA MEIGS. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1927. \$2 net.

THIS book now rests securely on the Beacon Hill Bookshelf, chosen from almost four hundred manuscripts submitted for the Bookshelf's prize—all of which means much thought on the subject of literature for the young. The \$2,000 was finally awarded to "The Trade Wind" because of its "vibrant atmosphere, its picturesque life, and its strong appeal to the creative imagination." Indeed, if the imaginative pitch of the first fifty pages could have been sustained the growing girl (for girls like ad-

on the shelf amidst grown-up volumes.

Now, the facts about the really good children's books flatly contradict such an implication. The older favorites were written not for children at all but for unsophisticated man, witness "Pilgrim's Progress." And the newer standby is certainly a true child of its author's brain, springing from a joy of youthfulness that has survived in that brain, and written not really for children but, like all good writing, primarily for self-expression, witness "Huckleberry Finn." There can be no fundamental separation of type, since the child is eternally father of the man. The best "children's books" are read by children because of suitable material and methods, but they express the world's youth.

With condescension comes laxness. Anything will do to try on the child. What a paradox in an age of youth triumphant and education rampant, with one out of three mothers helping to run a progressive school! Of course, there are the happy exceptions. And in general much is being done, but, alas! in nine cases out of ten with an apologetic shrug. Let us beware! We are conferring an inferiority complex on our children's books as hard as we can, and everyone knows nowadays what an inferiority complex can do when it gets a head-start. Pretty soon these books will indeed be a race of pygmies—already most of them are badly stunted.

Anyhow, we intend to make no apologies whatsoever when we ask leading literary critics to review children's books—and we beg our readers to note the absence of italics in the word "children's"!

venture) or boy would have had a lasting thrill. Our first thought was accompanied by a thrill: "Here is a book that equals 'Drums'!" We rejoiced that a book for youth should fly straight, free of the arbitrary limits of the imagination that usually cramp a juvenile writer's material and style. The young mind is superior to ours in the power of transmuting life. Perhaps it is a sneaking inferiority-complex that ties our thought in didactic knots in the presence of youth. In the first chapter a boy with a mind full of sea-romance passed down from his father, who returned to the sea and was lost in it after years on shore, looks out of his window above the bay on a night of rain and thinks sadly that nothing ever happens. Presto! A flash of lightning reveals "six or seven men coming along the path which slanted across the garden, men with sea-beaten faces, this one with a red handkerchief tied around his head, that one with an unshathed cutlass in his hand. The noise of the rain drowned the crunching of their heavy boots. . . ." Immediately the spirit of David's father urged me to read as it urged David to run the seas.

Alack! When David is actually off on the bounding wave, he becomes no longer the wistfully expectant David we know well already, but a boy on an adventure, any boy. Not any adventure. For this tale passes skilfully through outlandish fleets and about unfriendly harbors below the equator. The period is fascinating: life on the ocean never held more circumstantial picturesqueness than in the pirate-chasing, buccaneering, revenue-running days directly before the Revolution. There is no dull adventure in this book. Also, it may be added, no verbiage, no bunk, and the characters are solidly executed. Nevertheless, in company with David we do not get quite the thrill that the first chapters led us to expect; and only at the end do we recapture first-hand romance, when the gorgeous Pegasus sinks, and the winged horse, her figurehead, "in a final plunge, went under and was drowned forever in a smother of green water and white foam." To our mind at least, the appeal to the creative imagination, which after all comes from a creative imagination vividly at work, is not any too strong.

In short, "The Trade Wind" will be outstanding in the juvenile year because of its entire soundness and its partial vibrancy. But it misses the place in the ranks of books in general which any book, for young or old, that lives all through its being, can claim! However, we are more than grateful to writer and publisher and Bookshelf for giving our children an interesting and able piece of work, and such criticism as we offer is in fact a compliment.

Six and a Bull's-eye

NOW WE ARE SIX. By A. A. MILNE. With decorations by ERNEST H. SHEPARD. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1927. \$2.

Reviewed by LEE WILSON DODD

BE very careful, Mr. Reviewer, or you will find yourself being tempted to say that "Now We Are Six" isn't quite so good, quite so spontaneously charming, as "When We Were Very Young!" Three things will tempt you to say this, and not one of them is a credit to critical human nature. For, first, you will begin reading this book entirely prejudiced in favor of another book—unreasonably jealous for that other book, if the truth were known. And, second, instead of yielding yourself to this book, you will be telling yourself that nobody can hit the bullseye twice in succession—not even so delightful and clever a man as Mr. Milne. And, third and worst, you will feel that a little delicately patronizing disparagement of "Now We Are Six" may make your review more entertaining in itself than a mere repetition of the indis-



Drawing by E. H. Shepard for "Now We Are Six," by A. A. Milne

criminate praise you heaped upon "When We Were Very Young." So watch your step thoughtfully, Mr. Reviewer.

Well, then, the truth is (as one reviewer sees it after long and self-denying reflection)—"er-h'r'm"—the truth is, that "Now We Are Six" is a second unquestionable bullseye for Mr. Milne. Not all the verses of "When We Were Very Young" were equally alluring. Half a dozen or so of the jingles in that famous volume were, like little Anne Darlington, to whom the present collection is dedicated, "so speshal." The King's Breakfast, The Three Little Foxes, what James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree said to his errant mother; best of all, perhaps, Market Square, with the dying fall of its refrain, so funnily and tenderly wistful, "But they hadn't got a rabbit, not anywhere there!" Such things curled right in under one's ribs, to remain there warm and comfy—with just enough animating tickle—to the end of one's days. But there were other verses—a good many, indeed—pleasant enough in their way, which we have all easily forgotten. And this, I believe, will prove to be quite as true of "Now We Are Six."

Who, for example, having once read it, is going to disremember

If I were a bear,
And a big bear too,
I shouldn't much care
If it froze or snow—

or the Little Black Hen, who

"They want me to lay them
An egg for tea.
If they were Emperors,
If they were Kings,
I'm much too busy
To lay them things."

And I submit, further, that Busy and Sneezles and Binker and Twice Times and Explained and Forgiven and The Good Little Girl will soon twingle themselves into the heads and hearts of all companionable grown-ups and children. ("Twingle," by the way, is a brand new portmanteau-word, and it means to sing and twinkle simultaneously).

As for Mr. Shepard, look at his little boy in bed with a cold—just look at him!—and be grateful for ever after to Mr. Shepard.

And yet. . . . And yet, in spite of all caution I must regretfully confess. . . . But must I? Must I, really? No; I'll be hanged if I will!

(Continued on page 214)

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