FESTOONS OF FISHES

LESS LONELY. *By Alfred Kreymborg. 12mo. 110 pages. Harcourt, Brace and Company. $1.75.*

THERE is much of the 18th century spirit in Alfred Kreymborg, but the fact is generally overlooked; for the reason, I suppose, that his verse contains none of the stage properties which we associate with the rococo. There are no cockatoos, apes, ivory, blackamoors, or elegant adulteries in Watteau's best manner. Indeed, the period of Watteau is hardly the one he suggests. His proper age is the third quarter of the century, along with Chardin, Le Neveu de Rameau, The Deserted Village, the building of the model dairy at Versailles. It was a period of reaction toward small intimate things. The Opera itself became a nursery where, in their boxes between the acts, the great ladies of the time would suckle their children to expose their love for Rousseau and the humbler virtues. They had found the climax of sophistication.

There is a similar feeling in the best of Kreymborg's free verse. One might easily compare it to the false-Chinese panels of the period with their precise charm and landscapes without perspective; or to the furniture with its festoons of wooden roses; or again to someone playing, *molto vivace* on a tinkling clavecin, a dance piece by Jean-Philippe Rameau. Always its simplicity seems to occur at the end of a long line of complicated tradition: a rare compliment when one considers that the tradition was created by Kreymborg himself.

His free verse must be judged by its own standards, and the fact makes judgement dangerous: the best one can do is comment or explain. Thus, one observes that his rhythms are those of familiar speech, his lines short, and that in general they give the effect of rapidity and grace. His favourite device is a repetition which takes the place of rhyme:

> "don't call these things, kisses—
> mouth-kisses, hand-kisses,

elbow, knee and toe,
and let it go at that!—"

"And let it go at that!" There is always this deprecatory note, this return to our muttons or recurrent apology to life, which has been so widely praised as Kreymborg's "whimsicality." Too often its effect has been to limit his vision. His ecstasies rise only to what historians of 18th century literature have called the *ciel-plafond*, the sky in the ceiling, but he can find immense continents within these plaster horizons. His world is one of familiar objects—books, thimbles, rings, and monocles—which he endows not only with life, but the most delicate perceptions. More accurately it is the world of fancy and emotion created by these objects: a world under the miscroscope with capillary paths of sensation leading everywhere. About the emotional range of Kreymborg's free verse there is something astonishing, but the method of approach is limited, and it must have been this feeling of restriction which caused him, finally, to experiment with the traditional English verse forms.

Perhaps it was the conservatism of approaching middle age. I doubt this, for when a poet has spent his life in experiment with free rhythms, the iambs or anapests of the older forms are not reaction, but a new adventure. More likely it was the Italian sky, so favourable to every type of classicism. He was living on Lake Maggiore when he wrote the thirty sonnets which, with an introductory group of poems in other traditional forms and a final group of free-verse Rondos, compose the present volume.

Less Lonely is not the best of his books, but it has caused the most discussion. Even before it was published, when the sonnets began to appear in magazines, it was definitely announced that free verse was out of style. For there are critics who approach poetry, like dressmaking, with much talk of Currents and Spring Tendencies, reporting with fervour its Auteuils and Longchamps. There are others of less flexible intelligence who hate every modernism as a disturbing sign of life in arts they prefer to study as a dead language. Verse without rhymes or capitals is their special antipathy. When Kreymborg's sonnets appeared they were able at last, in all their literary supplements, to classify free verse with Bryanism and Alexander's Ragtime Band.

The Rondos at the end of Kreymborg's volume have grace and life enough to disprove such a thesis; indeed I value them much more highly than his sonnets. Not that the sonnets are written with too little art or do violence to an established form; their fault is rather the opposite. They observe too many maxims too carefully, like guests in a strange house who have studied their books of etiquette. Or stated more baldly, Kreymborg's sonnets are too regularly iambic. By containing too many monosyllables they lose the nuances of accent. Their rhymes also are too precise, lacking those slight variations in sound which are most pleasing to the ear. The caesuras are weak and there is not a just proportion of run-over lines. The result is that his sonnets lack resonance and, in spite of the exact daring of their images, are difficult to remember.

These are purely technical comments which would be impossible in the case of his free verse, and are justified here only by the fact that of all English forms it is the sonnet which requires the most exact attention to technique, the most subtle taste in technical violations. Moreover such criticism is of a dangerous type; it does not always apply.

For although Kreymborg's mannerisms are certainly a weakness in sonnets like the five on Savonarola Burning, where he is attempting a traditional dignity, there are others where they cease to be faults, or mannerisms even, and become pure style. They help him to write quick, limpid verses which are a proper vehicle for some of his favourite subjects. When he speaks of household matters or exposes a mild philosophy in phrases which seem to issue between puffs at a briar pipe, his words take fire, drift upwards in a ring of smoke:

> "Suppose they fashion keys of inquiry,
> Unlock the rooms and corridors of dream . . ."

> ". . . stones . . . like those the earth must yield
> To keep the corners of the sea aground . . ."

> "Among the coral crypts that hold the sea,
> Festoons of fishes weave insanity."

These lines are by a poet, and the critics were unjust who treated Kreymborg as a mannequin, a weathervane, or a goose flying low to announce a mild winter. His sonnets were a personal adventure, a stage in his career. They were not completely successful, but they left him with a few splendid verses, gathered like edelweiss and wreathed above the mantelpiece as the souvenir of other horizons.

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