CHILDREN UNDER TEN AND THEIR BOOKS

BY ANNIE CARROLL MOORE

"As wise as a child four years old."

IT was William Butler Yeats who quoted the old Irish proverb and suggested its bearing on the survival of poetry and fairy tales in Ireland. By happy chance the day was St. Patrick's, and when Mr. Yeats had finished reading out of one of Lady Gregory's books, we went back to our desk in the children's room of the Pratt Institute Free Library, with songs of the poets who had dipped their pens deepest in the wisdom and faith, the beauty and fancy of childhood, thrilling our consciousness.

The room was filled with restless children of many races. Little brothers and sisters three, four, and five years old had come with big boys and girls eight, ten, and twelve years old to listen to the stories and poetry with which we were accustomed to celebrate the day and the coming of spring:

> When afther the Winter alarmin'
> The Spring steps in so charmin'
> So smilin' an' arch
> In the middle o' March
> With her hand St. Patrick's arm on!

The verse always heralded the day, taking its place beside an old print of St. Patrick. On the table below, books were opened up and shamrocks grew beside the flowers so often mentioned in stories and poems of springtime—daffodils, the narcissus poetica, a crocus, a violet, or an hepatica nursed into early bloom by an old English gardener, whose cobbler's shop led into a greenhouse. This gardener, for he was a cobbler only by circumstance, "ran away from the shoes" when a lad of twelve; and lived and worked long enough in the gardens of England to carry about with him a rare love of flowers, an expert knowledge of plant life in all its varying forms, and a deep appreciation, born of his own hunger for beauty in boyhood, of the place of nature in any form of education of children. He shared with us the desire to reflect in the children's library of a great city the life of the woods, the streams, the meadows, the hillsides and gardens of a more spacious childhood.

Very early in our work of satisfying children with books, we had discovered how many of the stories and poems known and loved by us as children were meaningless to children who had never seen the country in springtime, and whose parents seemed to have forgotten their childhood. The "nature study" of the schools was as yet unfortified by botanical specimens, or by the expanding resources of the Children's Museum of Brooklyn.

"We have been listening to a poet", we told the children on that St. Patrick's Day, "a poet who says there are still fairies in Ireland." And then Allingham's "Fairies" trooped forth, and from "The Songs of Innocence" William Blake's "Piper", "The Laughing Song", and "The Lamb"; Wordsworth's "March", Celia Thaxter's "Spring", Miss Mulock's "Green Things Growing", Emily Dickinson's "The Grass". We did not hesitate to share Mr. Yeats's own:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

We have never hesitated to share a poem we feel we would have liked as a child. We recall how still the room grew as we read:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

There was a fairy story, of course, and we were ending with "The Jumblies" and other nonsense verses when some one called out:

"'Up the airy mountain
Down the rushy glen'

again!" This time several voices mingled in Allingham's "Fairies".

In that far-off time many libraries still observed an age limit of ten or twelve years, and gravely questioned the propriety of reading aloud to children or telling stories to children in a room from which books were being circulated or consulted in answering the casual questions brought from the schools. The public schools of Brooklyn observed a grade limit. "Children below the third grade do not read well enough to profit from the use of library books," we were told. The system of classroom libraries had not then been introduced. The children in question ranged in age, we found, from five or six to eight, and sometimes even nine years if they were backward in learning to read.

Primers and easy reading-books were by no means as attractive as they are now, and a child who was not a natural reader had very little incentive unless he could range over a number of picture books and illustrated books. What was to be done for these children who had no books at home, or having them felt no desire to open them for their pleasure?

What is to be done for such children anywhere? That thousands of them have been growing up in America, we have only to look at our statistics of illiteracy to learn.

Fortunately for us and for the children of those pioneer days in the history of children's libraries, the director of the Pratt Institute Free Library, Mary Wright Plummer, was a poet—with a deep realization of the needs and the desires of children—as well as a practical administrator and educator of international reputation. Into the plans of the architect for this library she had set a children's room with southern exposure, connected by open archways with the book stacks and open shelves of the circulation department and of the general reading room.

This children's room, the first in the country to be included in an architect's plan, was the first to be furnished with chairs and tables of varying height, the first to consider the right of little children to enjoy books, and their physical comfort in so doing. So far as we know, it was the first library to make the circulation of books subordinate to familiar acquaintance with books and pictures in a free library, and to give picture books by well-known European artists a place on the walls and the shelves of the children's room as well as of its art department. Here Boutet de Monvel's "Jeanne D'Arc" became a children's book.

From the low windows, children and grown people looked out upon a terraced playground down which the children rolled and tumbled in summer and coasted in winter—for the

trustees of this institution had played as boys in the neighborhood and had forgotten none of their interests. Their desire for this children's library was that it should grow to seem a homelike and familiar place to the children of the city. The Brooklyn Public Library, with its unique Brownsville Children's Branch Library, had not yet come into existence. Many of the children walked miles for their books, or in turn paid car-fare for one boy that he might select books for a group of his friends.

It clearly would not do to circulate books of which we had no first-hand knowledge and recent experience. We were left free to take our own way in bringing books and children of all ages together. We chose the way leading back to our own childhood and its first interests in reading. It may take a long time to get an emotional grasp of the child we used to be, and an intellectual perception of any one of several varieties we might have become in a later generation; but the chase is exhilarating and we recommend the effort to all parents, teachers, and librarians who would really know books in their relation to growing children.

I was not a bookish child, I discovered, although I had always cared to read. I have no recollection of any process or method by which I learned to read, but I hold a very vivid recollection of the first book from which I read. It was a large print edition of the Gospel of St. John. The time was early evening and I went to bed thrilled with the discovery, and the beauty of the words. I told no one until I could read well. I may have been five or even six years old, I have never been sure, but I recall very definitely that I brought to the reading of poetry, the psalms, and the prophets, strong impressions of the beauty of the country about me. Beyond Mt. Washington lay the world, just out of sight, and beyond the low horizon line to the southeast lay the sea. I had seen the sea, but I had not seen the world, and I was always wondering about it.

This sense of wonder and mystery, the beauty of nature, the passing from night to day, the speaking voices of the people about me, the sound of music, are present in my earliest recollections. I had a keen interest in pictures and I was always seeing things in pictures. I had no gift for drawing and the mechanics of writing was extremely difficult for me. I shall never be able to unearth a manuscript written before the age of ten. My early literary compositions were all scribbled and dispatched by post. I never had a doubt that what I whispered as I scribbled was read by the cousin or brother to whom it was sent. Writing, like going to school, was a social experience full of news of people and of what they said and did. Never did I write out of deeper emotions. I hated goodness in books and the tendency to get everybody to behave alike, in life or in books.

The invitation to read was all over the house, and on stormy days I roamed the rooms, following my brothers from library to attic, seeing what the books were like, often watching them reading and trying to read their books. The bound volumes of "St. Nicholas", "Our Young Folks", and "Harper's Magazine" were always in the offing and long before I could read I was familiar with their illustrations.

I did not care to be read to, except by my father, who read just as he talked and seemed to like the same

books and pictures I did. "The Nursery" was his favorite magazine, I firmly believed not because he said it was, but because he seemed so interested in it. I associate with his reading the most beautiful parts of the Bible, Æsop's "Fables" interspersed with proverbs, nonsense verses, old songs and hymns, a great deal of poetry, stories out of the lives of great men, and many stories of child life. He had a keen sense of dramatic values, a power of mimicry of animals and human beings, a strong sense of humor, and an intimate knowledge of men in their various forms of social and political organization. Moreover, he possessed the rare faculty of complete identification with the emotional life of childhood in all its stages of growth and change, and the imagination to know when to create a diversion. Since my intuitions have been at all times keener than my powers of external observation, I identified myself in turn with the childhood of my father. I seemed to have known him well as a little boy. That I was like him in certain qualities of mind I was to learn in maturity; that I shared his emotional life, I knew as well at four or five years old as at his death, when I was twenty.

We make no apology for dipping back into our childhood and the childhood of our work, in this introductory consideration of the reading of children under ten years old. We warn the reader it will not tell him just the book to read or to buy for the child he is interested in. We have never liked the idea of selecting "best books" for anybody,—least of all for a child who is trying out the reading habit, we dare not set an age limit for the reading of a book. But we feel no hesitation in bringing together a group of books, which we shall describe as "Some First Books" and a second group that we shall call "Some Later Books". These lists will appear in the February number of THE BOOKMAN.

There have been many and important changes since 1900 in the attitude toward the younger children in schools and libraries. Not only is there a great deal more story-telling and reading of poetry in both institutions; but school principals and teachers of vision, who have always been readers and lovers of books, have made it possible for classes of school children to come to public libraries for a larger view of the countries about which they are studying, or just to read books and see pictures in an environment which is known to invite reading.

There are to be still greater changes following close upon the war in all countries. Children are from birth to have better physical conditions. Mentally and spiritually they must live in a larger world than the generation that has preceded them. There are those who hold that children should have no books until long after they are ten years old. We do not propose to argue the question, but rather to give books their natural place in the expanding lives of the children we see about us.

Believing that there is no such person as "the average child" under ten years old, we are prepared to learn from children as widely different and environed as Daisy Ashford and Miss Edgeworth's "Rosamond". Ever since "The Young Visiters" was published, we have wanted to pay tribute to Mrs. Ashford, or whoever was responsible for the preservation of the record of Daisy's spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness. Rosamond's mother

would have persuaded her to consign the precious volume to the flames if she could have left her alone long enough to get it written. There has never been the slightest doubt in our minds that Daisy Ashford wrote the book and wrote it when she was nine years old, spelling and all. We share Mr. Herford's feeling about Barrie's preface and tell everybody to read it last. The author, we think, need not have read many novels. The "idear" was the thing and her unswerving development of it is an incentive to all who would write. Moreover, we look upon its publication, and the lively criticism attending it, as one more indication that we are entering upon a freer and more illuminating period of communication with childhood and children.

Is Hugh Walpole's "Jeremy" autobiographic? We do not know and we shall not press the question. We do know that he could not have written it without first putting himself in Jeremy's place. Of all the children we have lately found in books, Nicky and Michael in "The Tree of Heaven", and Mary Olivier seem to us to have been drawn by the most unerring hand. May Sinclair has made us think long and hard. It is high time the contemporary novelists who have the understanding and intuition began to create more child characters.

The publication of Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" marked the discovery of childhood. Poetry and childhood emerged at the same time to claim their naturalization papers—in poetry, at the hands of Wordsworth; in prose, in the novels of Dickens. Too rarely, up to the present time, has a child been brought into a novel to take his place in life. It is a good omen for the novel as well as for education in general to have him enter. As early as 1902 the Swedish Government had the foresight to commission the most distinguished novelist of the country to write a book for children. Selma Lagerlöf gave three years to the preparation of her background of scientific fact and poetic fancy for "The Wonderful Adventures of Nils". "Nils Holgersson" was written for Swedish children of nine years and older, but we know a little American girl between five and six who says she likes it better than any book she has ever heard read. We read "David Blaize and the Blue Door" to this same little girl and her sister "going on eight", down in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in September. Their younger sister, not yet "four years old" but "as wise", was captivated, as were the other two, by Mr. Ford's pictures, and she listened to parts of the story.

Friendship with David was established immediately. We knew it would be with children. We took a week to read the book and could write a whole article about it, since Mr. Benson is quite manifestly one of the contemporary novelists who has been dipping back into the dreams and fancies, the sense and nonsense, of his childhood.

The eldest of the three little girls is devoted to "Punch", and has been for two or three years. Her interest in cartoons—she has been mercifully spared the "comics" of the Sunday newspapers — is suggestive. Why shouldn't some contemporary illustrators dip back into their childhood like the novelists? Tony Sarg's clever drawings for a very poor little story so charmed these children—who have a natural taste for the humor that emanates from the artist, regardless of text—as to suggest no end of possibilities.

In that fascinating life of Kate

Greenaway, which should never be allowed to go out of print, there is a skit by Randolph Caldecott, done after the manner of Kate Greenaway, that is both amusing and revealing to children and grownups who like to look at pictures. There is also much evidence of Kate Greenaway's early delight in cartoons.

We began with the wisdom and the sense of beauty inherent in childhood, and we would end with a plea for humor. For humor with some standard of imaginative conception, accuracy of drawing, and suitability of subject. We have long believed that humor should be given its due in the education of children. The solemnity of the process of education has made too easy the way that leads to the vulgarization of art and the prostitution of fancy. To the picture books, the cartoons, and the drawings—to which children under ten years old are exposed—no less surely than to imaginative writing, must we look for the development of that sound streak of humor which gets one behind "the Blue Door" at any age. Randolph Caldecott did not hang up the key to "the Blue Door" on the other side. He passed it on to Leslie Brooke in England who still unlocks it for the children of America.

Songs of Innocence. By William Blake. John Lane Co.

*Poems. By William Butler Yeats. London. T. Fisher Unwin.

*Verses. By Mary Wright Plummer. Privately printed.

Jeanne d'Arc. By M. Boutet de Monvel. Plon-Nourrit et Cie.

The Bible. Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Æsop's Fables. Edited by Joseph Jacobs. The Macmillan Co.

*The Young Visiters. By Daisy Ashford. George H. Doran Company.

*Jeremy. By Hugh Walpole. George H. Doran Company.

*The Tree of Heaven. By May Sinclair. The Macmillan Co.

*Mary Olivier: A Life. By May Sinclair. The Macmillan Co.

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils. By Selma Lagerlöf. Doubleday Page and Co.

David Blaize and the Blue Door. By E. F. Benson. George H. Doran Company.

*Kate Greenaway. By M. H. Spielmann and G. S. Layard. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Picture Books. By Randolph Caldecott. Frederick Warne and Co.

The Golden Goose. By Leslie Brooke. Frederick Warne and Co.

*For the adult reader.