

Noble Boys

When the Atmosphere of Children's Books Was "Thick with Nobility"

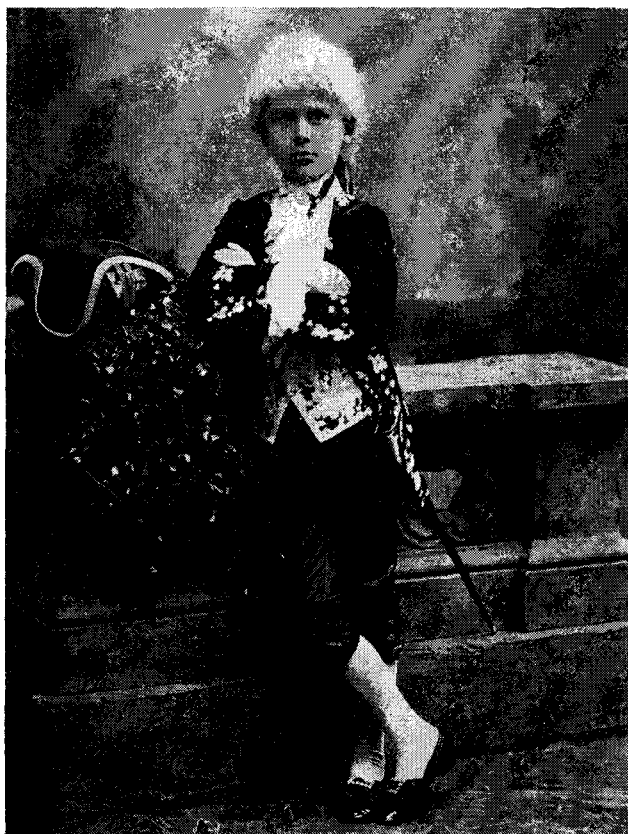
BY CLARENCE DAY

LIKE most children I was taught to admire high ideals in my boyhood. These teachings were well-meant of course, and I took them all in good part. I didn't really admire some of the ideals much, and I made no attempt to live up to them, but at least I regarded such things with a wary respect. Though they sounded to me like standards meant for much better boys than myself, I saw that I too would have to adopt them if I ever became really good, and consequently it interested me to hear about them and filled me with awe—much the same kind of awe I felt at ghost stories, only more far-off and solemn. Meantime they brought home to me the acute disadvantage of goodness, and kept me content with not having any very great moral ambitions.

These doses of high ideals came in various ways, each one unexpected. Sometimes they were administered to me in the form of little talks by my teachers. Sometimes they appeared in a book. On my seventh birthday, for instance, old Mrs. Caister gave me a book called "The Christmas Child," by Mrs. Molesworth. This child's name was Ted, and his history was given at great length from his babyhood to the day he was twelve. I read it all the way through, because a book was a book, but although this one had bright red covers and pictures it was kind of depressing.

It began with a lot of Ted's cunning baby talk. I had to skip some of that. I went on as fast as I could till Ted was seven, like me. But at this point I ran into a long account of his unselfish acts, and about how he joined in "the merry games" of the sons of his father's employees, all of whom respectfully addressed him as "Master Ted" in their play; and then about his going away to school and becoming "a first-rate croquet-player."

According to Mrs. Molesworth, Ted was always "a boy of nice feelings. Not rough and knock-about in his ways like many



FROM THE AUTHOR'S BOYHOOD: Clarence Day, aged about nine, dressed as Lafayette for a costume party.

schoolboys," she added, in what I felt was a reproving tone, directed at me. He did have a fight with another boy named Rex in one chapter, but he felt it was "so horrid" to hit Rex that he ended by kissing him.

Ted worried about this kissing business afterward and went to his mother. "Was that unmanly, Mother?" he asked.

"His mother drew him toward her and looked lovingly into his anxious face. 'Unmanly, my boy? No, indeed,' she said. 'Kindness and goodness can never be unmanly.' And Ted went off to bed."

I was disturbed by this incident. It made goodness seem more foreign to me than ever. But it deeply moved Mrs. Molesworth. She admired Ted so much that she kept saying so, in little asides to her readers. "I think he had a sweet and brave spirit, don't you, children?" she said in this chapter; and she went on to describe how considerate and patient he was, and how "he was *never* guilty of any

rudeness." It was plain that Ted had all the virtues.

Ted died at the end of the book, just before his twelfth birthday. Very good children often did die on the last page, I had noticed. They never had anything violent or awful the matter with them, they just took sick and expired very gently of some vague and unnamed disease.

"I would have liked to tell how Ted grew up into such a man as his boyhood promised," Mrs. Molesworth explained. "But, dears, I cannot tell you this, for it was not to be so."

I didn't like books with unhappy endings, but I didn't mind this one. It seemed sad, in a way, and yet suitable. I regarded it with much the same feelings that I later regarded Greek tragedies. The Olympian deities in their hate stacked the cards against Oedipus, and Jehovah and Mrs. Molesworth did the same thing to Ted, out of love. It was a comfort to feel that Heaven neither loved nor hated me yet, and I earnestly hoped that it never would. I felt pretty sure that I could get along all right by myself, if Heaven would ignore my existence and let me alone.

There were very few books of this pious sort on our nursery shelves. Piety was becoming old-fashioned. It was all right but it really didn't seem modern. People talked more about true nobility and noble deed in the eighties. The atmosphere that my generation grew up in was thick with nobility. Not the atmosphere of our homes or the streets of course, but that of our books.

When I was eight or nine I was given a

Next  Week

THE FOUR FALLACIES OF REGIONALISM

By PAUL ROBERT BEATH

THE FOUR ARGUMENTS FOR REGIONALISM

By JOSEPH E. BAKER

book called "Noble Boys." It was by the editor of Peter Parley's Annual, a gentleman named William Martin. Mr. Martin, looking around him in the eighties at the Victorian era, felt a distressing lack of something in the air. He was too up-to-date to go back to piety, but he had so much heart that even that era seemed sometimes to give him a chill. "It is too much the custom in this cool, matter-of-fact age," he said, "to ignore the sympathies and affections." He felt that most books for boys were not elevated enough, and his purpose in compiling his volume was to remedy this.

He started off well, I thought. The first noble boy whose history he brought forward for my emulation was Cyrus of Persia, the great warrior, son of Cambyzes. Among the others were Alexander of Macedon, the Chevalier Bayard, Sir Philip Sidney, the Iron Duke of Wellington, and Garibaldi. All Mr. Martin's selections, he said, were chosen as examples of "the spirit of bold and hazardous enterprise." He was very English about it, however. He detested some of the Scots. I sat down to read his book right after breakfast on Christmas, and by New Year's I had finished Garibaldi and reached the last of his bold heroes, the late respected Prince Consort.

It is a bright summer's morning [Mr. Martin's story of Albert began] and the sunlight gilds the rich foliage of the stately trees which encircle the residence of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg . . . Since the castle clock has struck three there have been anxious watchers within the Schloss, and grooms with horses ready saddled stand in the court-yard. Voices speak in a whisper, but all is hopeful . . . The clock strikes six, and the firing of guns announces the birth of a Prince.

After thus recording Prince Albert's impressive arrival on earth, Mr. Martin went on to say that "ere he had reached his second year, his grandmother wrote to her daughter, the mother of our beloved Queen: 'Little Alberinchen, with his large blue eyes and dimpled cheeks, is bewitching, forward, and quick as a weasel.'" On and on through this noble

youth's infancy I plowed step by step. Mr. Martin remarked that the Prince was in some ways very like Sir Philip Sidney. Sidney was a poet, and Prince Albert he said was fond of music.

Up to this point, although the Prince had done well in his studies, he hadn't performed any heroic deed like the other boys in this book. But now that came too. Early one morning in the young Prince's apartment at Coburg he was awakened by an unpleasant smell. There was smoke in the room. He got out of bed and discovered that one of his rooms was on fire. There was no plumbing of course, and he had nothing to put out the fire with except "two pitchers of water and a jug of camomile tea," but he and his brother and their valet threw these on the fire and then summoned help. The sentry rang the fire-bell, help arrived from all sides, and the smouldering flames were extinguished.

In order to make sure that his readers had not missed the point, or failed in some way to appreciate this as a companion piece to Wellington's Waterloo, Mr. Martin told the story all over again, ending by saying that it was thus that the Prince saved "the noble edifice from destruction, with but two pitchers of water from the washstands and a jug of camomile tea." I don't know just why but I felt that he did right to repeat it. On the next page the Prince married Victoria, and at the bottom of that page he died.

The effect of Mr. Martin and Mrs. Molesworth was to create in the back of my mind a Valhalla, peopled by lofty but shadowy figures, Wellington, Prince Albert and Sidney, Garibaldi and Ted. I never dreamed of taking a critical attitude toward these figures. The only thing was that no matter how much I read about them I felt empty inside. They were as resplendent and as striking as the wax-works in the Eden Musée, and I looked

at their effigies one by one, with solemn respect, but they had been dead a long time. I never thought of Gulliver or Robinson Crusoe as dead.

I had heard a good deal about a writer named Horatio Alger who wrote books

for boys. One day a cousin of mine, Parmly Clapp, offered to lend me a few. They were easy to read and they came into my life at just the right moment. I had become convinced that splendor and holiness were out of my line. Alger opened my eyes to a brand new attraction—the ways in which boys could earn money.

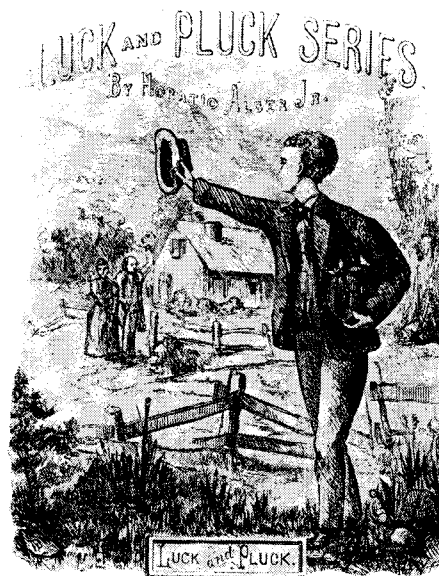
I was fascinated by that idea. If I could only earn steady wages I could buy lots of new things. I already had all the

food that I wanted—except chocolate caramels—and as to better clothes I was indifferent, but I needed more lead soldiers and some rare stamps and a printing-press badly.

A long train was running at moderate speed over a Wisconsin railroad. Among the passengers was a stout, gentlemanly-looking boy, who looked much more than sixteen, although he had not yet reached that age. On the seat beside him was a large carpet bag.

That is the way that "Strive and Succeed" by Horatio Alger began. According to the preface this book was "reprinted from the pages of *Young Israel*, a New York juvenile magazine." It wasn't only the young Israelites who liked Alger however, it was young Yankees too. I suppose that a youth with a soul above business wouldn't have cared much for a story like "Cash Boy," with its honest and hard-working hero, but my soul wasn't that kind. I also read "Bound to Rise," "Slow and Sure," and "Paul the Peddler." The boys Alger introduced me to were level-headed youngsters, not dreamers, and they seemed to be right on my level, or not too much above it. They were manly, but in a sensible way; they were brave but they also were practical; and they didn't make me uncomfortable by devoting themselves to honor and glory. I didn't reread them as I did Gulliver, their interests were a little too narrow, but they were more my own kind than Alexander of Macedon. They were business-like heroes.

The foregoing article was one of the last essays to be written by Mr. Day before his death. It was ultimately to have formed part of a series on his youth.



An Alger illustration (1870).



A Clarence Day drawing of himself, as a boy, reading a sad poem to his brothers. From "After All" (Knopf).

Delphic Apollo in Illinois

ACROSS SPOON RIVER. By Edgar Lee Masters. New York: Farrar & Rinehart. 1936. \$3.50.

Reviewed by BERNARD DeVOTO

THESE is a strong temptation to describe Mr. Masters's autobiography as a life of Felix Fay written by Theodore Dreiser. The protagonist is Mr. Dell's immortal moon-calf in awkward revolt against himself and his environment, and he is also a character from a Dreiser novel—of the middle period, when such characters, swimming in a metaphysical solution half Herbert Spencer and half Elbert Hubbard, finally grounded on an *ewig-Weibliche* that turned out to be Mrs. Eddy. The comparison is clinched when you turn from content to manner. "To this day I reprove myself for not making love to her, for not taking her hand fondly, for not encircling her voluptuous waist." "There we made merry with talk, and with the improvisation of ballads serious and obscene." "Laughing amorousness that pranked and withheld its bestowal for the most æsthetic conditions carried me away." "So I was confronted with this contumelious falsehood." Surely that voice is Mr. Dreiser's!

Such a characterization, however, though true to the surface qualities of "Across Spoon River," would profoundly misrepresent it. It is, after all, the autobiography of a man who wrote one of the decisive books of our time, and it reveals a good deal about that book, especially about parts of it that have been ambiguous. Furthermore, at its worst no less than at its best, it is part of the very tissue of its times and place. Reading it, you encounter much inept prose and ineptitudes of intelligence and personality as well, but you get besides a first-hand experience of high Victorianism dying in the Middle West in the shadow of a pioneer culture already dead. When Mr. Masters wrote his life of Vachel Lindsay, an *ex parte* pleading, he had a great deal to say about native myths and symbols developing in the prairies. The value of his new book is that his own experience is immensely true to them, even when he does not suspect it.

In the last epitaph of "The Spoon River Anthology," Webster Ford, who is Mr. Masters, meets the Delphic Apollo. On the page before it there is a discharge of rhetoric straight out of the McGuffey readers, and a few pages later the "Epilogue" brings the great book to a close in a mixture of bathos and bad verse hardly equalled since Lydia Sigourney. Delphic Apollo in an Illinois river-bottom, frequent McGuffey rant, frequent McGuffey idealism, much verse not only dull but actively bad, one extraordinarily fine and influential book, and a fierce, heroic, blind, and indiscriminating dedication to all of them alike—that is Mr. Masters in his other books and in his autobiography. There is comedy, pathos, and even tragedy in this story of how

one of many thousand prairie Miltons refused to be mute and by force of great will, handicapped by a hundred personal disqualifications, and at the price of shattered nerves and a lifelong feeling of defeat, lifted himself out of ingloriousness. The prairie symbols are all there: the boy transfixed by the ideal of poetry and ridiculed for his sissy dreams, the printer's case, the small town newspaper, the village liter-

ary and scientific societies, the secret fraternity of the dreamers, the high school teacher sublimating a lifetime's despair in the hope that some day one of her pupils will be a poet, years of practising law with the mind full of poetry, midnight reading in science and reform. And other symbols: the victorious G. A. R., the vestiges of the Copperhead philosophy, the apocryphal Lincolniana, the court house gang, the local option movement, Altgeld, the Knights of Labor, the gold Democrats, Bryan, the Philipines, government by injunction, Chicago's "Yellow Book" period, and the rise of poetry in an organ of the single tax.

All of them are completely true to the time and place. But observe Mr. Masters active in the midst of them—and trying to distil them in a poetry whose symbols were Persephone, Clytemnestra, the Grææ, Félise, Faustine, Helen of Troy, Tennyson's Maud, and Delphic Apollo. Mr. Masters remains true to his native culture, even, in that McGuffey betrayed

him—that in a heart-wrenching five times seven years' servitude for Rachel, he tried to impose on the prairies an alien rhetoric and a mythology inconceivably inappropriate to them. And he goes on thinking that he was right, that all his other work is as good as "Spoon River," that much of it even is better. But it is only here and there in the mass of his poetry that one touches something poignant or even graceful. The rest is mediocre—the fire struck once but it did not strike again. Why? As a biographer he concluded that Vachel Lindsay failed, finally, because of his Campbellite visions. But the evangelical prophet Alexander Campbell is infinitely nearer to Spoon River than Delphic Apollo, and Lindsay also had Johnny Appleseed and Buffalo Bill and the log cabin and the stage coach and Huck Finn. It may be that Mr. Sandburg is nearer still, appealing not to the symbol but to the thing itself, to the cornhuskers, to the people, yes. At any rate, somewhere in that heroic and frustrate misconception, in Mr. Masters's communion with his brother the god who was a Greek god, is the reason why he wrote only one book that has any importance. That book may have been modeled on the Greek Anthology, though it does not resemble it much, but it burst through its model's mythology and through McGuffey and the high school teacher's dreams of Keats, and came out on an actual hillside, looking across a cemetery to Spoon River itself.

An Exciting Story of Civil War Fugitives

AROUSE AND BEWARE. By MacKinlay Kantor. New York: Coward-McCann. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GARRETT MATTINGLY

MOST of the best tales are about journeys, and of these the most exciting are usually about flights. Give this book a safe if modest place in that illustrious list. It tells how two Yankee soldiers, escaping from Belle Island in March of 1864, made their way northward to the Union lines on the Rapidan in company with a woman who had as pressing reasons as their own for getting away from Richmond. Though its essence may have been wrung from a hundred halting narratives of actual escapes from Libby, Belle Island, Andersonville, mouldering now in forgotten reminiscences and regimental histories, this story is as fresh as if it had never been told before. And its realism needs no support from the appended bibliography. Indeed, one wonders whether the author's assurance that the day to day record of climatic conditions in Goochland, Orange, and Spottsylvania counties is guaranteed authentic by officials of the



EDGAR LEE MASTERS AT 25