

AN UNKNOWN CHILD-POEM

*Murmure indistinct, vague, obscure confus,
brouillé :*

Dieu, le bon vieux grand-père, écoute émerveillé.

HUGO

OF all possible books in this age of waste-paper, the wretched little volume before me, labelled *Gedichte* and bearing the name of a certain "Arm: Altegans," is assuredly one of the unluckiest. Outside the Fatherland it cannot by any chance be known to mortal; and among the author's compatriots I have been unable to discover man, woman, or child who has heard of Altegans, or is aware of the existence of these *Poems* of his. Yet I venture to express the opinion that this scarecrow of a duodecimo, with its worn-out village-printer's type and its dingy paper-bag pages, contains some pas-

About a Little Woman

sages which for suggestiveness and for melody of expression are not unworthy of the exquisite "founts" and hand-made papers of wealthier and, perhaps, less noticeable singers.

Thin as the book is, it contains, as most books do, more than one cares to read; but even some of this superfluous material is in a measure redeemed by its personal bearing. One catches a glimpse of the man; and after reading his "Erster Schulgang"—the one real poem in the collection—I must confess that I felt some little curiosity and interest in regard to the author. One learns, for instance, that in 1868, when the book was printed, he was a winter-green "hoary-head"; that he had lost wife and child long ago, in "the years still touched with morning-red"; though, like Hans Sachs, he had—

An Unknown Child-Poem

*"bending o'er his leather,
Made many a song and shoe together,"—*

the shoe better than the song, but, he adds whimsically, "better perchance because of the song;" that he thought no place in the earth-round could compare with his beloved village of Wieheisstes in the pleasant crag-and-fir region of Schlaraffenland ("Glad am I to have been born in thee, thou heart's-dearest village among the pines;" and here by the way, have we not a reminiscence of Jean Paul, or is the phrase merely a coincidence?); that as a matter of fact, however, he had never during his seventy odd years travelled as many miles as ten from his Wieheisstes; that though confined in a mere nut-shell of a green valley he was a cosmopolite of infinite space; that his heart brimmed over with brotherly love for all men—for all

An Unknown Child-Poem

women especially, and still more especially, poor hoary head! for all children; but truly for all men—regarding even the levity with which they treated his name rather as a token of affectionate familiarity than as an evidence of ill-breeding, and, indeed, humorously addressing himself in more than one of the *gedichte* as “thou Old-Goose.” Which last play of fancy has caused me to question—without, alas! hope of answer now—whether the abbreviated prenomens on the title-page stands for an heroic “Arminius” or for an ironical “Armer” or “Arme,” as one prefers the gender; giving us the net result “Poor Old-Goose!”

• Twenty years and more have elapsed since the aged worker in leather and verse gave the “Erster Schulgang”—“First day at school,” shall we say?—and these personal

An Unknown Child-Poem

confidences to an apathetic Germanian. Doubtless he has, long since, been gathered to his lost ones in the shadow of the gray-stone blue-slatted little church. Poor singing soul, he is deaf to anything that compatriot or “speech-cousin” can say now of him or of his rhymes!

Let me, nevertheless, attempt to make an *impressioniste* transcript of this “Erster Schulgang.” To reproduce the tender, simple music of its verse would be impossible; a mere prose translation would be indeed a—*traduction*.

The poem opens with a wonderful vision of children; delightful as it is unexpected; as romantic in presentment as it is commonplace in fact. All over the world—and all under it, too, when their time comes—the children are trooping to school. The great globe swings round out of the

An Unknown Child-Poem

dark into the sun; there is always morning somewhere; and for ever in this shifting region of the morning-light the good Altegans sees the little ones afoot—shining companies and groups, couples and bright solitary figures; for they all seem to have a soft heavenly light about them!

He sees them in country lanes and rustic villages; on lonely moorlands, where narrow brown foot-tracks thread the expanse of green waste, and occasionally a hawk hovers overhead, or a mountain-ash hangs its scarlet berries above the huge fallen stones set up by the Druids in the old days: he sees them on the hill-sides, in the woods, on the stepping-stones that cross the brook in the glen, along the sea-cliffs and on the wet ribbed sands; trespassing on the railway lines, making short cuts through the corn, sitting in ferry-boats: he

An Unknown Child-Poem

sees them in the crowded streets of smoky cities, in small rocky islands, in places far inland where the sea is known only as a strange tradition.

The morning-side of the planet is alive with them; one hears their pattering footsteps everywhere. And as the vast continents sweep "eastering out of the high shadow which reaches beyond the moon" (here, again, I would have suspected our poet of an unconscious reminiscence of Jean Paul, were it not that I remember Sir Thomas Browne has some similar whimsical phrase), and as new nations, with *their* cities and villages, their fields, woods, mountains and seashores, rise up into the morning-side, lo! fresh troops, and still fresh troops, and yet again fresh troops of "these small school-going people of the dawn!"

How the quaint old man loves to

An Unknown Child-Poem

linger over this radiant swarming of young life! He pauses for a moment to notice this or that group or even some single mite. He marks their various nationalities—the curious little faces of them, as the revolving planet shows him (here he remembers with a smile the coloured wall-maps of the school-room) the red expanse of Europe, the green bulk of America, or the huge yellow territory of the Asiatics. He runs off in a discursive stanza in company with the bird-nesting truant. Like a Greek divinity leaning out of Olympus, he watches a pitched battle between bands of these diminutive Stone-age savages belonging to rival schools. With tender humour he notes the rosy beginning of a childish love-idyll between some small Amazon and a smaller urchin whom she has taken under her protection.

An Unknown Child-Poem

What are weather and season to this incessant panorama of childhood? The pigmy people trudge through the snow on moor and hillside; wade down flooded roads; are not to be daunted by wind or rain, frost or the white smother of "millers and bakers at fisticuffs." Most beautiful picture of all, he sees them travelling schoolward by that late moonlight which now and again in the winter months precedes the tardy dawn.

Had the "Erster Schulgang" ended here, I cannot but think the poem would have been worth preserving. This vision, however, is but a prelude, and as a prelude it is perhaps disproportionately long. A blue-eyed, flaxen-haired German mädchen of four is the heroine of this "First day at school"—Altegan's own little maiden, perchance, in the

An Unknown Child-Poem

years that were ; but of this there is no evidence.

What an eventful day in each one's life, he moralises, is this first day at school—no other day more truly momentous ; and yet how few of us have any recollection of it !

That first school-going is the most daring of all adventures, the most romantic of all marvellous quests. Palæocrystic voyages, searches for north-west passages, wanderings in the dwarf-peopled forests of dusky continents are trifling matters compared with this. This is the veritable quest for the Sangreal ! “ Each smallest lad as he crosses the home-threshold that morning is a Columbus steering to a new world, to golden Indies that truly lie—at last—beyond the sunset. He is a little Ulysses outward-bound on a long voyage, wherethrough help him, thou dear

An Unknown Child-Poem

Heaven, past the Calypso Isles and Harpy-shores lest he perish miserably !”

And thus, continues Altegans, after a page or two of such simple philosophizing, little “ blue-eyed flax-head ” goes forth, with well-stored satchel and primer, and with a mother's kiss ; gleeful, it may be ; reluctant, perchance ; into the world, nay into the universe, nay into the illimitable cosmos beyond these flaming star-walls ; for of all future knowing and loving, and serving and revolt against service, is not this the actual beginning ?

Very prettily does he picture the trot of the small feet along the narrow pathway through the fields where the old Adam—the “ red earth ” of the furrows, he means—is still visible through the soft green blades of the spring corn ; the walk along the lanes

An Unknown Child-Poem

with their high hedges, and banks of wild flowers, and overhanging clouds of leaf and blossom; the arrival at the rustic schoolhouse; the crowd of strange faces; the buzz and noise of conning and repetition.

And then, behold! as the timid new scholar sits on the well-polished bench, now glancing about at her unknown comrades, now trying to recollect the names and shapes of the letters in her primer, the schoolhouse vanishes into transparent air, and the good Altegans perceives that his little maiden is no longer sitting among German fields!

Instead of the young corn, papyrus-reeds are growing tall and thick; the palm has replaced the northern pine; Nilus, that ancient river, is flowing past; far away in the distance he descries the peaks of the Pyramids, while behind the child rises a huge

An Unknown Child-Poem

granite obelisk sculptured from apex to base with hieroglyphic characters. For, he asks by way of explaining this startling dissolving view, does not every child when it learns the alphabet sit in the shadow of the sculptured "needle-pillars" of Egypt the ancient?

Where could this simple village shoemaker have picked up this crumb of knowledge? It seems only yesterday that Professor Max Müller thought it a matter of sufficient novelty to tell us that "whenever we wrote an *a* or a *b* or a *c*, we wrote what was originally a hieroglyphic picture. Our *L* is the crouching lion; our *F* the cerates, a serpent with two horns; our *H* the Egyptian picture of a sieve."

"O thou tenderest newly-blossomed little soul-and-body, thou

An Unknown Child-Poem

freshest-formed flower-image of man," exclaims the emotional Altegans, "how strange to see thee shining with this newness in the shadow of the old, old brain-travail, the old, old wisdom of a world dead and buried centuries ago; how strange to see thee, thou tiny prospective ancestress, struggling with the omnipotent tradition of antiquity!

"For, of a truth, of all things in this world-round there is nothing more marvellous than those carven characters, than the many-vocabled colonies which have descended from them, and which have peopled the earth with so much speech and thought, so much joy and sorrow, so much hope and despair.

"Beware of these, thoulittle child, for they are strong to kill and strong to save! Verily, they are living things, stronger than powers and

An Unknown Child-Poem

principalities. When Moses dropped the stone tablets, the wise Rabbis say the letters flew to and fro in the air; the visible form alone was broken, but the divine law remains intact forever. They are, indeed alive—they are the visible shapes of what thou canst not see, of what can never die.

"Heed well these strong ones—Aleph the Ox, the golden cherub whose mighty wings spread athwart the Temple of Solomon, the winged bull that men worshipped in Assyria; him and all his fellows heed thou carefully! They are the lords of the earth, the tyrants of the souls of men. No one can escape them save him alone who hath mastered them. He whom they master is lost, for 'the letter killeth.' But these things thou dost not yet understand."

An Unknown Child-Poem

"Close now thy book, little learner. How Socrates and Solomon would have marvelled to hear the things that thou shalt learn! Close thy book; clap thy hands gladly on the outgoing (*Scottice* skaling) song; hie thee home! Thy dear mother awaits thee, and thy good gray grandfather will look down on thee with shrewd and kindly eyes, and question thee gaily. Run home, thou guileless scholarling; thy mother's hands are fain of thee."

A little abruptly perhaps, unless we recollect that a half is greater than the whole, the simple poet flies off at a tangent from his theme, and muses to his own heart:

"And we, too, are children; this, our first long day at school. Oh, gentle hand, be fain for us when we come home at eventide; question us

An Unknown Child-Poem

tenderly, Thou good Father, Thou ancient One of days."

So the "Erster Schulgang" closes.

It may be that through temperament or personal associations I have over-valued it. The reader must judge. In any case, you dead, unknown, gentle-hearted Old-Goose, it has been a pleasant task to me to visit in fancy your beloved village of Wieheisstes in the romantic crag-and-fir region of Schlaraffenland, and to write these pages about your poem and yourself.