

Verse in the Nursery

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN A MOTHER AND HER CHILD

THE CHILD Mama, will you join me in my recreation?

THE MOTHER Can you not see, my child, that I am fully occupied?

CHILD Will you then regale me with a story?

MOTHER Your shadow impedes the progress of my needle; pray remove it.

CHILD Mama.

MOTHER Yes, my child.

CHILD Repeat, I beseech you, one of the ballads of your childhood.

MOTHER As you will.

Old Mother Twitchett has but one Eye,

And a long Tail that she can let fly,
And every time she goes over a Gap,

She leaves a Piece of her Tail in the Trap.

CHILD The scansion is erratic, and the sentiment obvious (you refer to the implement in your Hand), and yet I must confess that it is pleasing to me. How can this be so?

MOTHER No doubt because it was composed for such as are of your years.

CHILD That, my dear Mama, I fear to be a fallacy.

MOTHER How so, pray?

CHILD I have it on excellent authority that the greater number of such rhymes were composed by adults for, my dear Mama, Adults.

MOTHER Surely you are mistaken. Who, in the age of our dear late Queen, would have behaved in such a frivolous manner?

CHILD But, Mama, their composition took place several generations earlier.

MOTHER Indeed?

CHILD Yes, many of the ditties we sing in the nursery have their roots

deep in antiquity. For instance, that excellent test for our wits, which begins "Two legs sat upon three legs with one leg on his lap," may be traced back to the *Flores*, where Bede says "Vidi bipedem super tripodem sedentem; cecedit bipes, corruit tripes."

MOTHER And what, my child, is the authority from which you have formulated these astonishing statements?

CHILD The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, Mama.

MOTHER I was unaware that such a publication was in existence.

CHILD It is but newly published, having come before the eyes of the world on September 13, 1951.

MOTHER An unfortunate day, surely, for such an event?

CHILD Why, Mama, you are almost as given to superstition as the simple people from whose incantations so many of our rhymes have sprung.

MOTHER Incantations? I fail to understand you.

CHILD Some of our most innocent rhymes have sprung from the darkest sources. Our chant to the ladybird importuning her to hasten to her burning home, which has its counterpart even on the Continent, is believed to be connected with the worship of ancient gods, while our childish game entitled "London Bridge is Falling Down" has an even blacker history. It is said to be a relic of the rites of human sacrifice in propitiation of the river gods at the laying of the foundation of a bridge.

MOTHER My smelling salts! I am quite overcome.

CHILD There, there, Mama, do not distress yourself. I pray you.

MOTHER But I was so sure that those rhymes children are wont to

'The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes,' edited by Iona and Peter Opie, and published by Geoffrey Cumberlege; the Oxford Press. English price 30/-

prattle at their mother's knees were innocuous. The most I thought of them was that they made slanting allusions to illustrious personages of earlier days.

CHILD That theory was once current. It was advanced in the American publication, *The Real Personages of Mother Goose*, which incontinently transformed Bo-Peep into Mary Queen of Scots, Jack Sprat into Charles I., Old Mother Hubbard and Little Tommy Tucker into Cardinal Wolsey, Simple Simon into James I., and the Lady who rode to Banbury Cross, together with the felines in Hey Diddle Diddle and I Love Little Pussy, into Queen Elizabeth.

MOTHER I confess that I am quite bewildered. How, then, did the rhymes evolve?

CHILD One or two were political compliments; the rest arose from folk-songs and ballads; street-cries and ritual; plays, proverbs and prayers; bar-rack-room and tavern catches, jests, jokes and riddles.

MOTHER Are there none that were truly written for the nursery?

CHILD Few, save lullabies, rhyming alphabets and other infant amusements.

MOTHER Who knows, then, with what vulgar phrases their children's lips have been sullied? To think of it!

CHILD Nay, Mama, rather think not of it, for at the time when these verses came into the nursery they were



read by children who were treated as adults in miniature.

MOTHER Do you refer to the Stuart and early Hanoverian periods?

CHILD Yes, Mama.

MOTHER It is true that the young were treated strangely then. I can recall seeing portraits of them clothed in replicas of adult apparel. Presumably in their treatment as adults they came into contact with the earlier versions of the rhymes we recite today.

CHILD How wisely you speak, Mama. It was indeed so.

MOTHER But those earlier versions, can they have been suitable?

CHILD They were not, Mama, what our generation would call improving, though no doubt they contained within themselves the seed of some crude rule of conduct.

MOTHER Oh!

CHILD Time, however, and ameliorating circumstance—particularly in the century that has just passed—have remodelled the rhymes, softening the harsher portions and pointing the morals, until they may be recited by those of tender years without fear of harm, and even with the hope of benefit.

MOTHER Is there then no such thing as a present-day nursery rhyme?

CHILD It is said that some of the verses of Mr. A. A. Milne, as well as portions of popular songs, are finding a permanent position in children's lore.

MOTHER That is indeed gratifying. But one last question, my child. Will these new rhymes live as do the older ones?

CHILD No doubt. You see, Mama, it is in the tradition of nursery rhymes that they should be transmitted from the very old to the very young, both being classes of persons with considerable leisure. The aged invariably impart to the youthful such rhymes and jingles as they can recall from their youth.

MOTHER Thank you for your information. You have enlightened me considerably.

CHILD Thank you, Mama, for having listened so diligently.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

(Solution to No. 580)



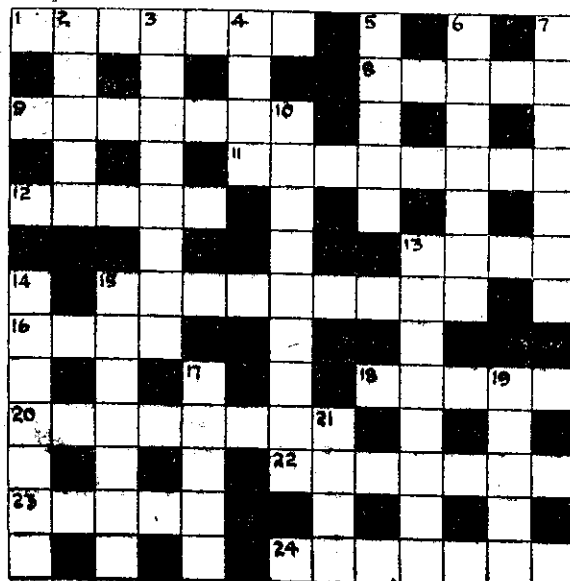
Clues Across

- "You — snakes with double tongue" ("Midsummer Night's Dream," Act 2, Scene 2).
- Proverbially diminished by an increase of 18 across.
- Cinders in order to revoke.
- Overhearing in art about a confused groan.
- Tales become hackneyed.
- A Red Sea port in a dead end.

- Metrical feet consisting of two unaccented syllables followed by one accented syllable.
- Swallow quickly backwards — this will put a stopper in it.
- "—thee Nymph, and bring with thee jest and youthful jollity" (Milton in "L'Allegro").
- Immaculate, and obviously not suffering from measles.
- Savouring.
- "And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to — death" ("Macbeth," Act 5 Scene 5).
- Distinguish in an anagram of 9 across.

Clues Down

- Folded petal?
- Grappling with nautical food and a fish.
- She is to be found in 13 across.
- Coats (anag.).
- Peremptory requests from Dad's men.
- A literary form of dieting.
- His work is all play.



No. 581 (Constructed by R.W.C.)