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THE LITTLE PRINCE.

By Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Translated by Katherine Woods. . . . 91 pp. . . . New York: Reynal and Hitchcock. . . . \$2.

Reviewed by
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IN ALL fairy tales—and I mean fairy tales and not tarradiddles—the writer sooner or later gives away his secret. Sometimes he does it deliberately, sometimes unconsciously. But give it away he must, for that is a law of the fairy tale's being—you must provide the key. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, in his new book "The Little Prince," has honorably obeyed the law. He makes us wait for the secret no longer than the second chapter.

"So I lived my life alone," he says, "without any one I could really talk to." There it is. A clear and unequivocal statement, a confession as bitter as aloes and familiar as the day. Most of us live our lives alone without anybody we can really talk to. We eat the indigestible stuff of our own hearts in silence, for we have not learnt to find the hidden companion within ourselves. Poets, and writers of fairy tales, are luckier. It may be that the substance of their minds is less dense than that of other men. Or perhaps they are more willing to slough its protective outer husk in order to get down to the essential bone. I don't know. I am only sure that you have to be bare and naked in some ultimate sense before you can hear the secret princely voice. Moreover, it is imperative that the prince should speak first. The etiquette of fairy tales and the court circles of the heart demand it. You may not command that voice. It will speak only to the ear that is humbly tuned to listen.

"Draw me a sheep!" cried St. Exupéry's prince in the silence of the desert. And so the friendship began.

Yet for us, if not for the author, there had been earlier intimations of his coming acquaintance with that royal boy. Was there not "The Wild Garden" with its proud delicate princesses and the snakes beneath the dinner table? And the sleeping child in the last chapter of "Wind, Sand and Stars," that small Mozart indwelling in all men, whom all men consistently murder. Here, surely, were the first seeds of "The Little Prince." Indeed, it seems to me that each of his books has been a path leading across the sand dunes to the prince's citadel. Whatever happens hereafter in St. Exupéry's external world will be clarified and sweetened for him by the memory of this desert meeting.

I cannot tell whether it is a book for children. Not that it matters, for children are like sponges. They soak into their pores the essence of any book they read, whether they understand it or not. "The Little Prince" certainly has the three essentials required by children's books. It is true in the most inward sense, it offers no explanations and it has a moral. But this particular moral attaches the book to the grown-up world rather than the nursery. To be understood it needs a heart stretched to the utmost by suffering and love, the kind of a heart that, luckily, is not often found in children. "Tame me," says the little fox to the prince, "so that I may accept the ties of love and be, for one single person, unique in all the world." "Mine," says the fox, "is a very simple secret. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Indeed, yes. But children quite naturally see with the heart, the essential is clearly visible to them. The little fox will move them simply by be-

ing a fox. They will not need his secret until they have forgotten it and have to find it again. I think, therefore, that "The Little Prince" will shine upon children with a sidewise gleam. It will strike them in some place that is not the mind and glow there until the time comes for them to comprehend it.

Yet even in saying this I am conscious of drawing a line between grown-ups and children, in the same way that St. Exupéry himself has done. And I do not believe that line exists. It is as imaginary as the equator. Yet separate camps are here declared and the author stands with the children. He leans upon the barricades, gently and ironically sniping at the grown-ups, confident that the children are standing by to pass the ammunition. Yet children themselves draw no such line. They are too wise. They do not feel any more derisive toward grown-ups than they do toward animals. The child very seldom sits in judgment. To him the grown-ups are objects of wonder, often, even, of pity. He sees them as creatures not deliberately guilty but trapped, rather, by fatal circumstance. "When I am older," he thinks to himself, "I shall be much wiser than they. It is astonishing to me and not a little sad that they have been through so much and yet know so little. I shall deal better with life."

We cannot go back to the world of childhood. We are too tall now and must stay with our own kind. But perhaps there is a way of going forward to it. Or better still, of bearing it along with us; carrying the lost child in our arms so that we may measure all things in terms of that innocence. Every-

thing St. Exupéry writes has that sense of heightened life that can be achieved only when the child is still held by the hand. In "The Little Prince" he has given the boy a habitation—Asteroid B-612—and a title. But the burning, freezing, golden face must have been with him as long as memory.

delicately, with impish irony, the prince's journey is traced from star to star; his universe is mapped by St. Exupéry's own charming illustrations. He seeks his dream among the meteors but it is not until he arrives upon the planet, Earth, that his heart begins to glow. As he wanders in the empty desert there come to him the things he sought—the man, the fox and the serpent. . . . of them out of his own nature brings him a gift—the man a drawing of a sheep, the fox a tamed and faithful heart, and the serpent the cruel loving stroke that frees him from mortality and returns him to his star. That is all. The gentle allegory is compressed into a few clear, colored pages. A short book, but long enough to remind us that we are all involved in its meaning. We, too, like the fox, have need to be tamed by love; we, too, must return to the desert to find our lonely princes. All fairy tales are portents, and life continually renews them in us. We have no need to mourn for the Brothers Grimm when fairy tales like "The Little Prince" may still be heard from the lips of airmen and all who steer by the stars.