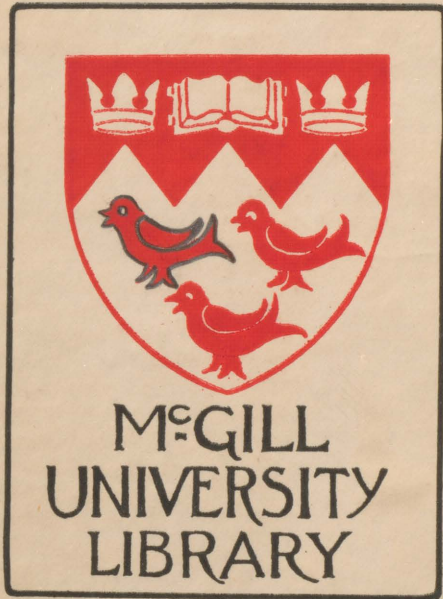




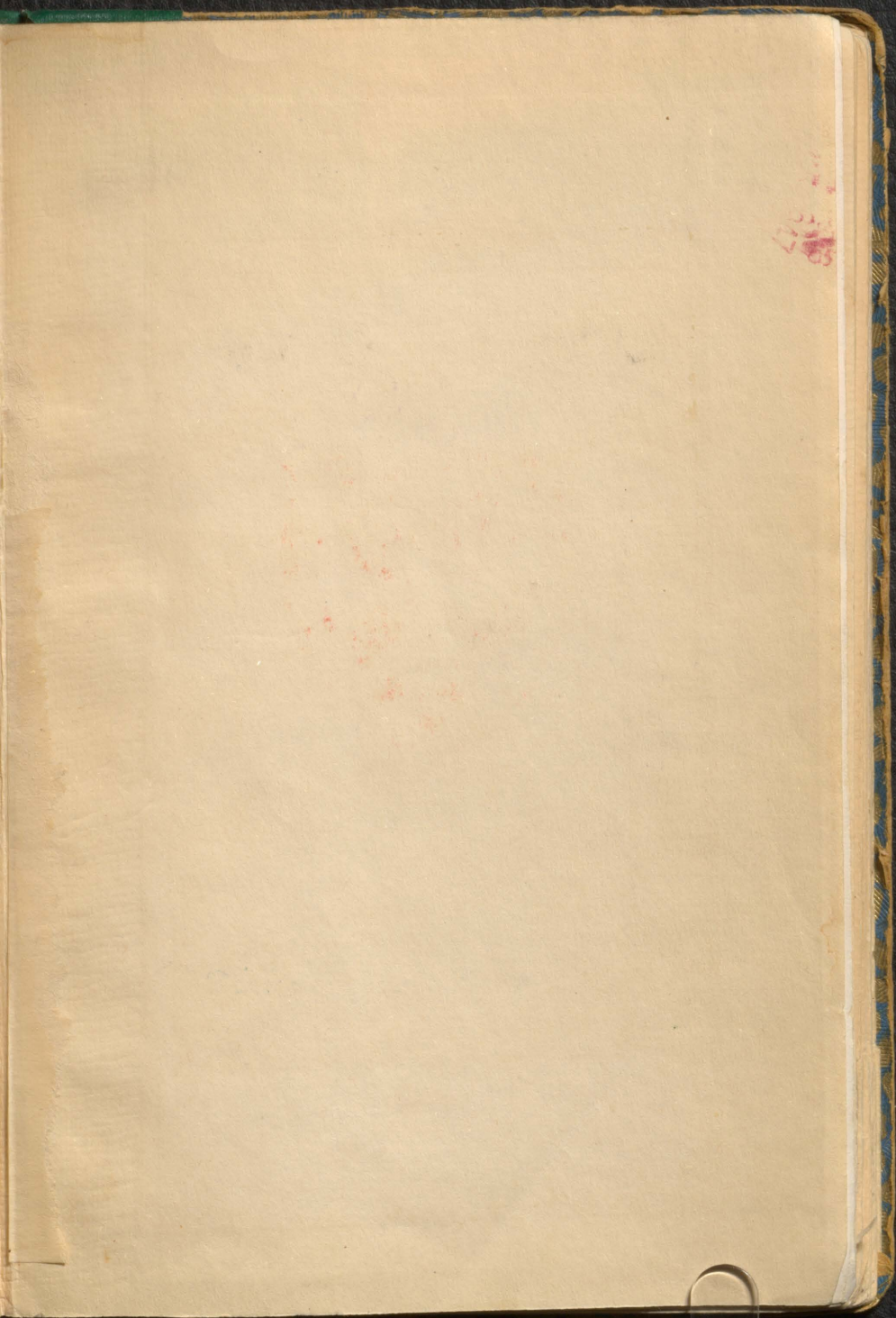
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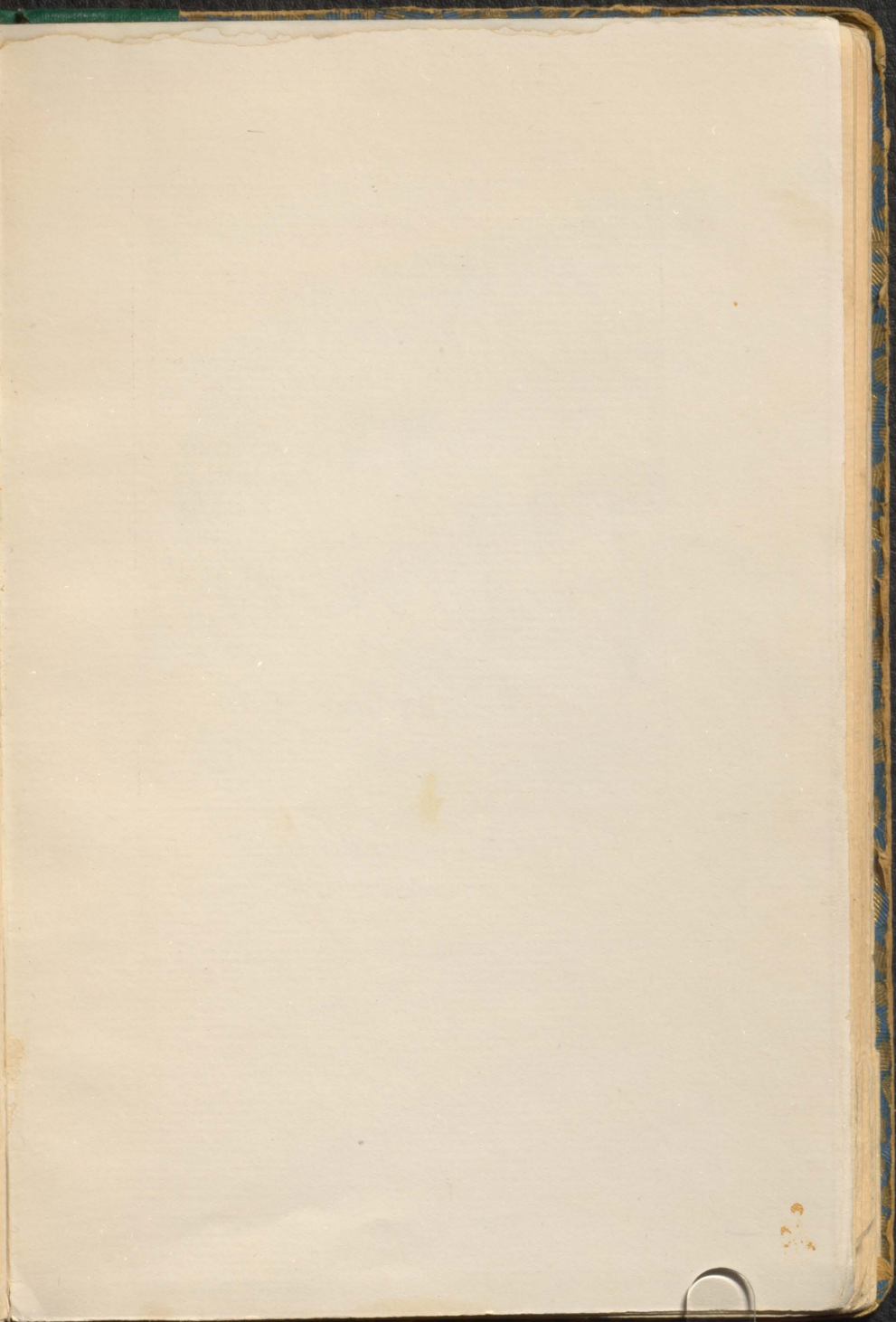
THE POETRY OF NONSENSE

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*First Edition, November 1925*







*The Griffin and the Mock Turtle*

By JOHN TENNIEL

[front



*The  
Poetry of Nonsense*

By  
EMILE CAMMAERTS



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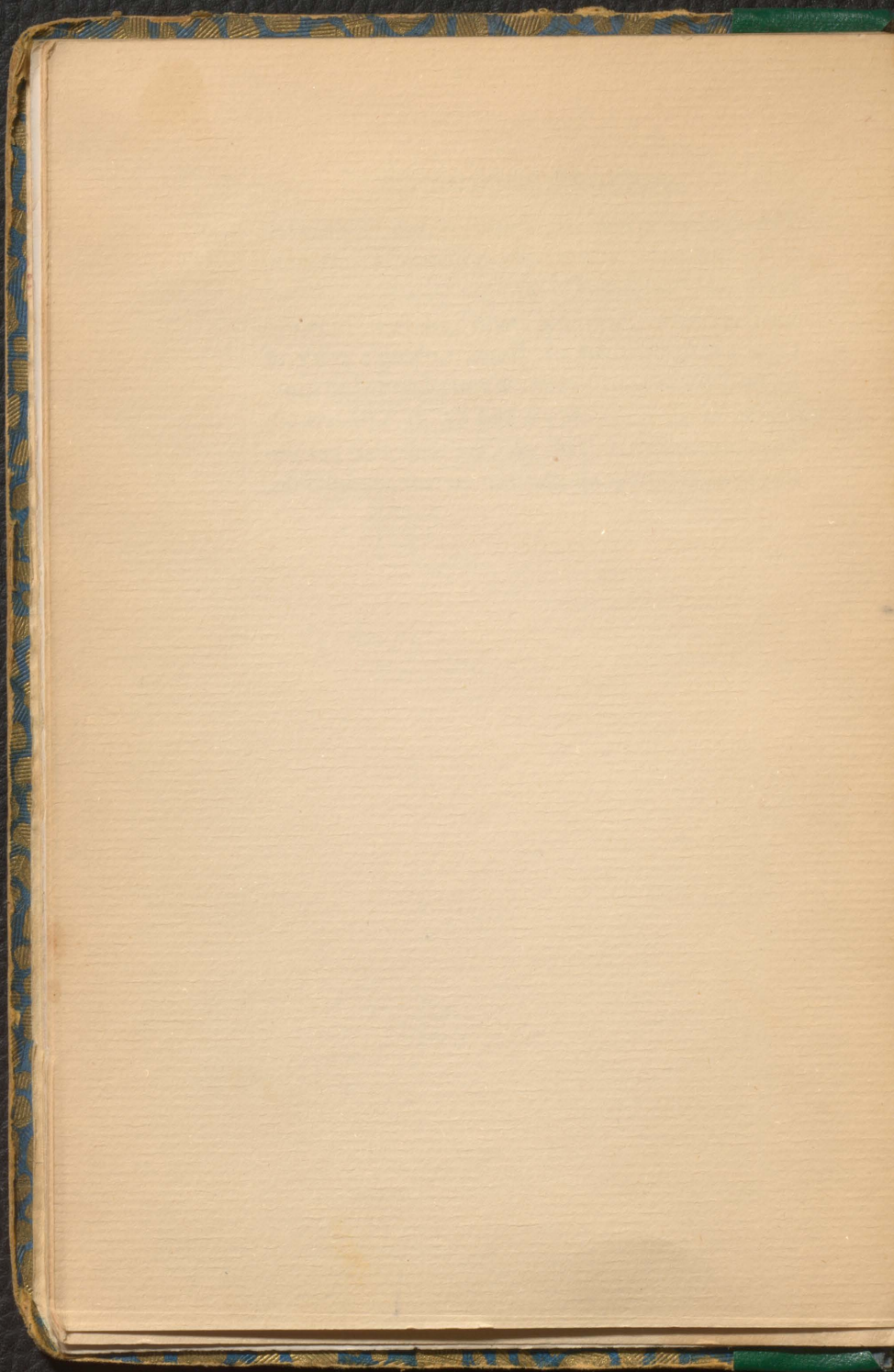
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# THE POETRY OF NONSENSE

## I

### THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

'SHE said it was nonsense. And when your dear mother said it was nonsense, it was nonsense. It only made things disagreeable if you argued it was anything else.'

This definition of Mrs. Preemby, in H. G. Wells' *Christina Alberta's Father*, expresses only too accurately the general opinion about nonsense. It is, in other words, anything which displeases you or any statement with which you do not agree. There are as many nonsenses as there are individual opinions, and it would be a perfectly hopeless task to distinguish between them or to attempt to draw up a list of them. Besides, what is nonsense for one person is very often sense for another, which obviously further complicates matters.

## I

## THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

XX

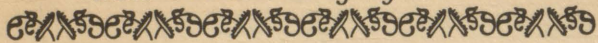
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We are not concerned here with this kind of nonsense; we are only concerned with a certain class of literary work which has not, heretofore, received all the attention it deserves. It is as old and widespread, among European nations, as the oldest ballads and popular stories, and has been brought to a standard of high perfection, in modern times, in England, through the writings of Edward Lear and of Lewis Carroll, whose influence is still strongly felt to-day.

When, in 1846, the artist Lear collected the verses which he had written during his stay at Knowsley, for the enjoyment of the Earl of Derby's grandchildren, he little knew that he had rediscovered a mine of inspiration which had been sorely neglected, and which was destined to yield most valuable productions. In the preface of the third edition of the *Book of Nonsense*, he explained that the first idea of writing geographical limericks was suggested to him by a friend who drew his attention to the nursery rhyme: 'There was an old man of Tobago.'



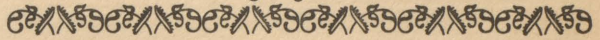
### THE MEANING OF NONSENSE



The connection between modern and old nonsense poetry is thus significantly established. It is to the nursery rhyme that we owe the nonsense songs, and, if it had not been for this 'old man of Tobago,' mankind would have been deprived of thousands and thousands of young and old men, and old and young ladies, hailing from all corners of the earth, from Khartoum to Devizes and from Peru to Norway.

It must not, however, be assumed that nonsense writings may be found only in nursery rhymes or limericks, or that all these poems may claim a place in nonsense literature. As a matter of fact, this privilege can be conferred only on a minority. With few exceptions, all Lear's works are steeped in an atmosphere so fanciful and irresponsible, so grotesque and incongruous, that we cannot fail to recognise in them the true characteristics of Nonsense. No doubt, Lear chose this word as an humble disparagement of his poems and as a plea for the public's indulgence. It has assumed for

THE MEANING OF NONSENSE



us a very different meaning. We do not argue, indeed we know, that Lear's nonsense is not Mrs. Preemby's 'nonsense,' but something else, something which is rather difficult to explain, and which is sorely lacking in the productions of the modern school of limerick writers.

+ Mr. Langford Reed started an interesting argument, in his *Complete Book of Limericks*, concerning the original form of the well-known verse beginning 'There was an old man of Khartoum.' He prefers the version quoted by Dean Inge, which goes on as follows:

Who kept two black sheep in his room:  
'They remind me,' he said,  
'Of two friends who are dead.'

But he would never tell us of whom,  
to that quoted by Father Ronald Knox,  
who gives the variation:

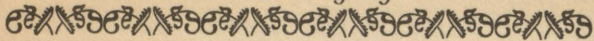
Who kept two tame sheep in a room:  
He said: 'They remind me  
Of one left behind me,

But I cannot remember of whom.'

Father Knox contends that the latter must



THE MEANING OF NONSENSE



be the original version which has been subsequently altered and rationalised into the former, which no doubt makes better sense: 'But,' adds Father Knox, 'the limerick is primarily a vehicle of nonsense.' Mr. Reed's answer to this argument is that the limerick's nonsense must be 'sensible nonsense or nonsensical sense,' and that any amount of absurdity is not necessarily a guarantee of genuineness.

Without going into the details of the discussion with regard to this particular case, any student of limerick verse will at once recognise that authors are divided into two schools—the first, relying entirely for effect on the grotesque picture suggested by the poem and on the incongruous character of its meaning, without attaching undue importance to technical difficulties; the second, staking its all on the witticism disclosed by the last strong line and on the ingenuity of the rhyme. The first will delight in the following verse from the *Book of Nonsense*:

5

x ✓

Learn W ✓

Reed W ↗

Two  
Books  
of  
Nonsense



THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

၆၃။၆၃၆၃။၆၃၆၃။၆၃၆၃။၆၃၆၃။၆၃၆၃။၆၃

There was a young lady of Wales,  
Who caught a large fish without scales.  
When she lifted her hook  
She exclaimed 'Only look !'  
That ecstatic young lady of Wales,

while the second will no doubt prefer Mr. Reed's version written to show 'the improvement obtained by a strong last line bringing with it a fresh rhyme' :

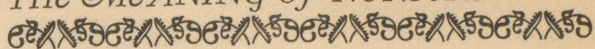
Said a foolish lady of Wales:  
'A smell of escaped gas prevails.'  
Then she searched with a light  
And later, that night,  
Was collected—in seventeen pails.

This modern development of the old limerick may be considered as a progress or as a decadence, according to the critic's point of view, but it must be recognised that the analogy between the two verses is purely superficial and that they are inspired by a totally different spirit. Lear is not concerned with making a strong point or with provoking laughter by the abrupt conclusion of the story. He is quite satisfied





THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

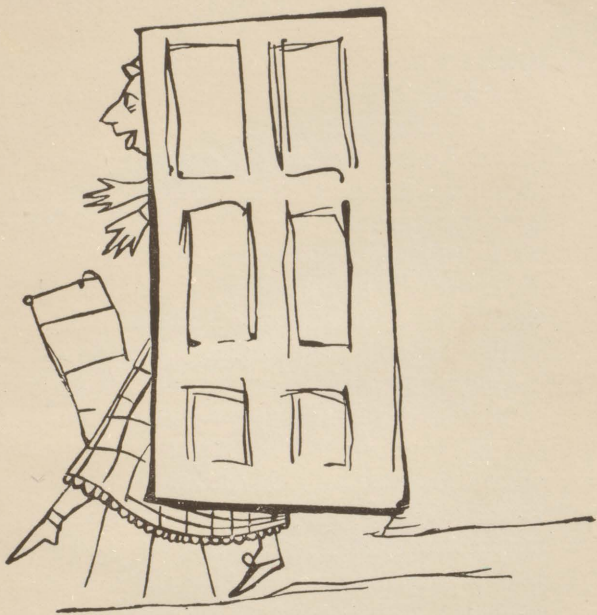


ignored its original meaning and used it merely as an instrument for their epigrams. This remark applies to almost all the verses from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dean Inge, Arnold Bennett and other well-known writers quoted by Mr. Reed. There is a world of difference between Arnold Bennett's 'Young Man of Montrose' who could do without pockets because 'he always paid through the nose,' and Lear's old man who, in order to propitiate a horrible cow, 'sat on a stile and continued to smile.'

It is far easier to say what is *not* nonsense than to say what is. It invariably brings with it a touch of absurdity, but it is not necessarily directed against absurd people. Lear did not intend to laugh either at his old man on the stile or at his old man in the boat who exclaimed: 'I'm afloat, I'm afloat!' He was far more inclined to laugh at himself for telling such stories, or at his audience for listening to them. We do not admire him for his cleverness: we admire him rather for his foolishness, for, if there is a foolish

Laughing at  
himself for  
writing about  
laughter at  
advice for  
listening

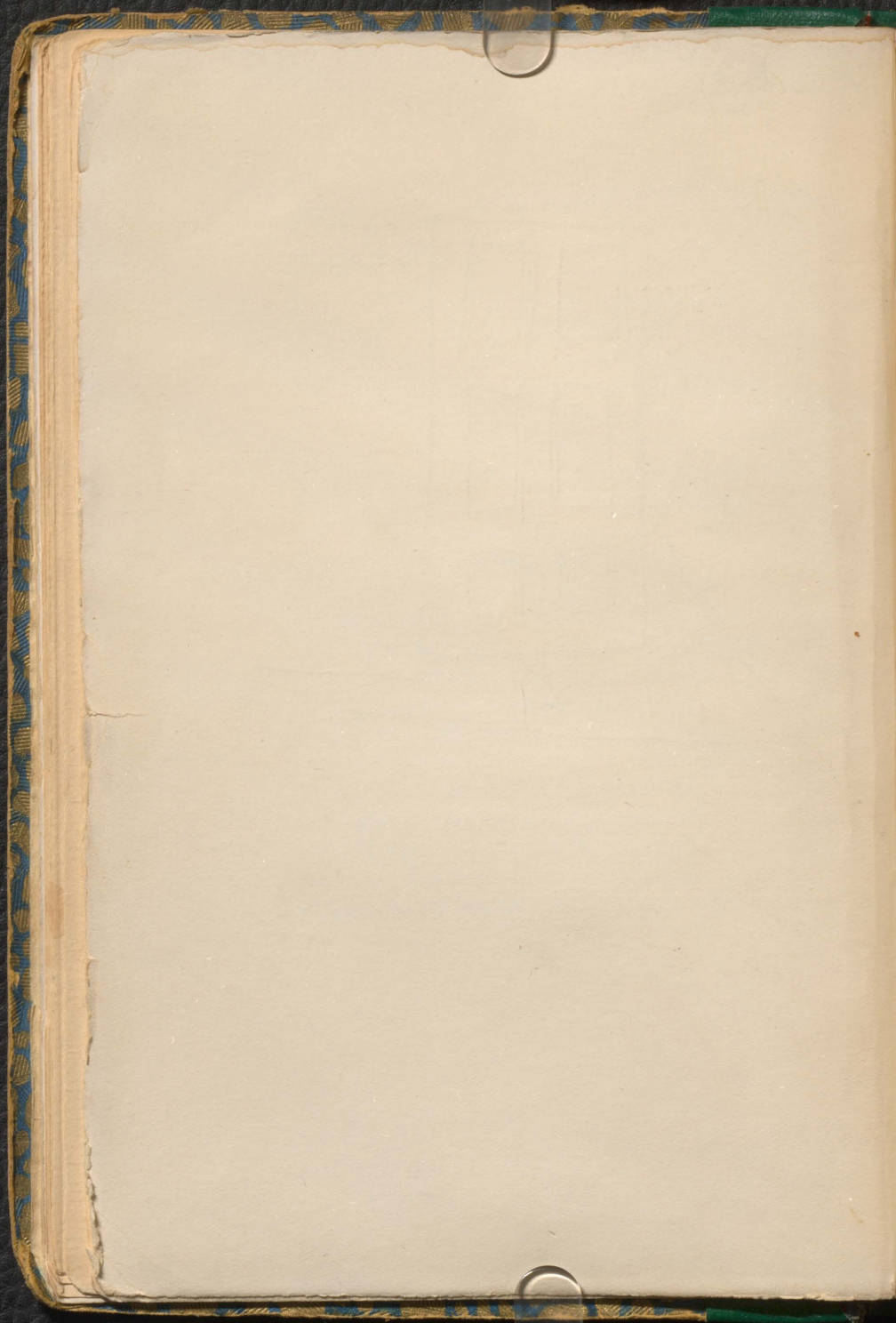




*"There was a Young Lady of Norway"*

By EDWARD LEAR

[face p 8





## THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

~~~~~

way of being clever, there is also a clever way of being foolish. w)

The distinction between nonsense and epigram is easy enough to draw. It is as definite as, even more definite than, the gulf separating humour from wit. There are, however, some dubious cases which we ought to consider before we can obtain a clear idea of what is meant now-a-days by nonsense literature. We may at once eliminate satire or any allusions to the events of the day, but parody and puns cannot be so rashly dealt with. w)

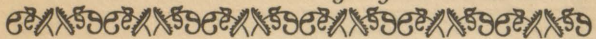
The latter must be appreciated entirely according to their result. Some play on words appeal, or do not appeal, to our intellect; others appeal to our imagination. When the alert wife of 'an indolent Vicar of Bray' brings with her a powerful squirt and says to her spouse: 'Let us spray', such an invitation appears perfectly sensible, as the best means of ridding the garden of green flies. The joke rests entirely on the coincidence between the sound of the words







## THE MEANING OF NONSENSE



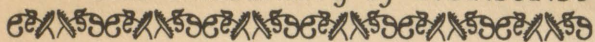
sight, therefore, parody has very little in common with nonsense, and should be considered as a form of satire. When Sir Owen Seaman wrote 'Rudyard Austin,' "an attempt to paraphrase Mr. Kipling's 'Absent-Minded Beggar' for the use of those who prefer what has been called the 'ultra-classical bent of the Poet Laureate,'" he obviously had no intention of emulating Edward Lear. There is no more nonsense in *Cap and Bells* or the *Harvest of Chaff* than in Mr. Stephen Leacock's so-called *Nonsense Novels*. Every one of the Canadian author's stories is unmistakably a parody, a skit on the detective story, the psychic story, the romantic story, the melodramatic story, the Russian story, the Scotch story, the sea story . . . but we search in vain for a touch of pure nonsense in the whole book.

The case is not so clear with certain works of W. S. Gilbert. The sub-title of the *Bab Ballads*, 'Much Sound and little Sense,' was very aptly chosen, for, without being sheer nonsense, some of these songs, such as





THE MEANING OF NONSENSE



in which the reader is led by the first verses to give a wrong interpretation to the story, and discovers his mistake only towards the end. The image suggested by the first lines of 'The Arab':

On, on, my brown Arab, away,  
Thou hast trotted o'er many a mile to-day . . .

affords a striking contrast with the last:

There is brass on thy brow, and thy swarthy hues  
Are due not to nature but to handling shoes;  
And the bit in thy mouth, I regret to see,  
Is a bit of tobacco-pipe—Flee, child, flee!

A similar surprise is provided in the poem entitled 'Motherhood,' in which Calverley reveals to us that the frail burden laid secretly by an anxious mother upon a broken wall, in the high grass, amongst roses and violets, is only an egg laid by a cackling hen. Though these verses cannot be considered properly as nonsense, they are certainly more or less closely connected with it. They are in the situation of cousins who can claim to belong at the same time to the family of nonsense and to the family of witticism. There is,

family of nonsense  
+ witticism





THE MEANING OF NONSENSE

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to ridicule himself. Nonsense poems and stories are perhaps the only literary productions which are entirely impervious to parody. You can criticise them on the ground of weak technique or poor imagination, but you cannot twist their meaning, for the very excellent reason that they are meaningless. They do not tell a connected story; indeed their main purpose is to upset all logic, for they scorn any rational or comprehensible language. Their wild talk culminates in the 'Jabberwock,' which seemed very pretty to Alice, but 'rather hard to understand.' They stand literally on their heads, like Lear's Table and Chair, and look at the world from this new vantage point. Their humour is not the wise humour of Dickens, who loved mankind deeply enough to laugh at its short-comings. It is the wild, exuberant mood of a Christmas party or of a popular carnival in which every reveller loses his identity under his disguise and indulges in the most impossible pranks. It runs in all directions and

✓  
D





## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD

**W**HENEVER we find ourselves at a loss to decide whether or not a poem or a story must be considered as Nonsense, we might do worse than submit this poem or story to a child's appreciation. Almost invariably, his attention will wander when confronted with satire, witticism, or parody, while it will be instinctively attracted by the broad humour of nonsense, if modern education has not yet deteriorated his taste. A healthy child is, by nature, sufficiently imaginative, exuberant and irresponsible to enjoy the visions of Wonderland. He no sooner stores a few ideas or images in his mind than he begins to play with them, bestowing on the animate and inanimate worlds the qualities of man, making servants behave like kings and kings like servants, bringing the moon and the stars close to the fields and the fields

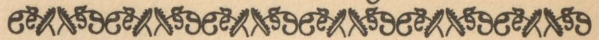








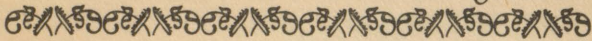
## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



have tried their hand at nonsense literature have recognised their debt to the rhymesters and story-tellers of the past. In her journey through the Looking-Glass, Alice meets again Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Humpty-Dumpty, and the Lion and the Unicorn. Mr. de la Mare's 'Peacock's Pie' reminds us of 'Who killed Cock Robin?' and we meet both Little Bo-Peep and Little Boy Blue in A. A. Milne's *When we were very young*. In *Santa Claus in Summer*, Mr. Compton Mackenzie has recently attempted to link up, in a connected story, a great number of nursery rhymes. He tells us, for instance, that, following Mother Goose's order, Goosey-Gander flung downstairs a greedy landlord who wanted to expel Little Red Riding Hood's mother from her rooms, and to boil her cat Diddle-Dumpty for his dinner. The fine lady who rides to Banbury Cross is no other than Red Riding Hood herself; 'it is obvious that the rings on her fingers could not have been ringing without the bells on her toes, and it is even



NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



more obvious that the bells on her toes could not have been ringing without the rings that were on her fingers.' The author is thus inclined to believe that the little lady did not make her own music, but that it was 'fairy music that only she could hear.'

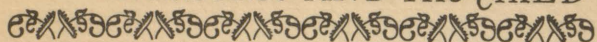
There is a certain danger in thus interpreting the fanciful images of the nursery and in associating them with the magic of fairyland. These bells of the fine lady of Banbury Cross are heard by every child; they are far more familiar to him than elves or fairies, and it is almost a sacrilege to silence them. Mr. Compton Mackenzie's method of explaining the old rhymes must certainly be preferred to that of certain critics who have been engaged in the heart-breaking task of elucidating them scientifically and of discovering their cosmopolitan origin. It is more healthy to argue that a cow was able to jump over the moon because a wicked witch flung her net over it and dragged it to earth, than to declare that the cow is a bull and that its pranks are justified







## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



evidently not merely to excite the child's imagination. They had first of all to lull the baby to sleep, to humour him while he was being bathed, to keep him on their knees so long as he could not walk safely about the room, and to provide a musical accompaniment to his first dances and games. Our books of nursery rhymes contain, therefore, a number of songs in which a touch of nonsense is frequently introduced, as in 'Ride a Cock-horse to Banbury Cross' or 'Rock-a-bye Baby, on the tree-tops,' but which are first of all intended to fulfil a very useful and reasonable mission. It does not very much matter whether the baby's cradle is 'green' or not, or whether his daddy will succeed in providing him with a 'rabbit skin,' as long as the necessary effect is promptly attained. The same remark applies to such rhymes as: 'Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man,' or 'Rub-a-dub dub, three men in a tub,' which are devoid of all double meaning, in spite of the unwarranted attack on the 'butcher, the baker, and candle-stick



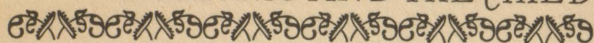
## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD

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maker.' If, in some circumstances, any stick is good enough to beat a dog, in similar circumstances any song will be good enough to pacify a child. For the same reason, we must eliminate such game songs as: 'This is the way the ladies ride,' 'Here we go round the mulberry bush,' and 'See-saw, Margery Daw,' which belong more to music than to literature, for it does not much matter what the child sings when he plays or when he dances, so long as he sings in tune and in rhythm. If the nursery poets had showered their brightest images in these songs, their efforts would have been wasted, the child's attention being too much absorbed by his physical exertions to appreciate them. It is only when rest time has come that the poet may find his opportunity of singing stories. All these stories are by no means nonsense, for fancy must remain, even for the child, a kind of luxury to be indulged in at certain times and on certain occasions. The number of little girls who, like 'Betty blue,' 'lose their



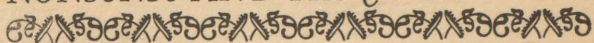
## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



holiday shoes' is countless. There is nothing fanciful or nonsensical in going 'to market, to market, to buy a plum-cake,' to 'tumble down the hill' like Jack and Jill, to kiss the girls like Georgie Porgie, or to arrive late at school 'a dillar, a dollar, a ten o'clock scholar.' All these incidents belong to the child's every-day life and do not require any effort of imagination.

Nonsense steps in gradually, first through the animal story, then through the confusion of all classes and values, finally through the creation of such wild images that they defy all classification. The animal stories must not be mistaken for fables, for they convey no moral, no hidden meaning concerning the devious ways of men. While La Fontaine disguises the people of his time under the features of various animals, the nursery poet disguises animals under the features of men. There is nothing humorous in meeting a man disguised as a frog, but there is something distinctly funny at seeing a frog going a-courting a mouse, waving

## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



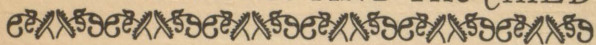
an opera-hat. We should not appreciate the metamorphosis of a ship's captain into a duck and of his sailors into white mice, but we gaze with wonder at the 'golden mast' and the 'silken sails' of a nursery ship 'with comfits in the cabin and apples in the hold.' The mere suggestion that a man could behave like a fly is repulsive to us, but we are delighted to hear—fiddle-de-dee, fiddle-de-dee—that 'the fly has married the humble-bee.'

Though perfectly sound, the spirit of the nursery rhyme is somewhat confusing. Animals are raised to the rank of men, but kings and queens behave just like common people. Old King Cole 'called for his pipe and his bowl,' the Queen of Hearts 'made some tarts,' and King Arthur adds a chapter to the Arthurian legend by stealing 'three pecks of barley meal to make a bag-pudding.'

The King and Queen did eat thereof,  
And noble men besides;  
And what they could not eat that night,  
The Queen next morning fried.



## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



Both statements that the King should be a thief and the Queen a good housewife seemed to the poet equally unjustified, and therefore, ludicrous. We enter the realm of Topsy-turvydom, in which cockle-shells grow in the garden, barbers shave pigs, and lions and unicorns are fed on bread and plum-cake; where singing blackbirds fly out of every pie, and where the dish runs away with the spoon. It is a quaint and unwieldy land in which amazing surprises occur:

If all the world was apple-pie,  
And all the sea was ink,  
And all the trees were bread and cheese,  
What should we have to drink?

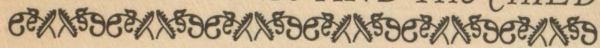
It is the Never-never-land discovered by Peter Pan which can be disclosed only to those who, like him, have refused to grow up. ✓

Why should nonsense, it may well be asked, stimulate our imagination? Why should the nonsense story rival the fairy tale in our children's books? Why should





## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



while he fetched the missing cheese, or he might have ignored his loss altogether and gone on shedding cheeses on his way to Nottingham, and arrive empty-handed; or he might have picked up his cheeses again and again as they fell, without fastening up his wallet, until they became uneatable. He happens to choose the original method of sending all his cheeses down the hill to fetch the missing one, ordering them, at the same time, to meet him at the market-place, but a great deal of the pleasure we take in the story is derived from the fact that all these alternatives flit through our mind while we read it. There are, as a matter of fact, many delightful ways of being foolish, while there is only one dull way of being sensible. The same feeling of freedom is obtained if once you allow supernatural influence to exert itself. The fairy godmother sends Cinderella to the ball: she might just as well have sent the Prince to her house. She hides her ugly rags under beautiful silken dresses: she might just as

cheese  
story

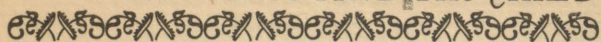
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NONSENSE AND THE CHILD



be not only useless but harmful. We can either fly from the house of Common-sense or turn it upside down, but we cannot do both things at the same time. On fine days, the children prefer playing in the garden, though the nursery is their great refuge in winter, when they apply themselves conscientiously to wipe away from it every trace of tidiness. Every upturned table becomes a ship, every stick becomes an oar, chairs are harnessed like prancing horses. The spirit of Nonsense reigns supreme until the evil hour when, exhausted by his work, the child falls asleep and some grown-up restores order where chaos has prevailed.

We might be allowed to choose this opportunity to dispel a misunderstanding which is rather deeply rooted in the minds of certain people who are apt to identify the so-called real world with Common-sense, and the Fairy-world with Nonsense. Such a misunderstanding is bound to lead to deplorable confusion. All poets know

but nonsense  
is an imposed  
order in the  
affairs













## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD

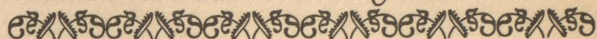
OXFORD, ON THE RIVER: 'I REMEMBER THAT ONE DAY I PESTERED HIM UNTIL I MADE HIM PROMISE TO WRITE THE STORY DOWN.'

Oxford, on the river: 'I remember that one day I pestered him until I made him promise to write the story down.'

The child has preserved intact all the imaginative power which life has somewhat weakened in the poet, but he lacks the latter's power of self-expression. Their intimate association is the essential condition for the creation of good nonsense prose and poetry. The poet listens to the child, and, when translating his little friend's thoughts into grown-up language, fondles the illusion that he has recovered his child-like soul. He thinks that he is writing mostly for children, while they need perhaps his inspiration less than grown-ups. While enjoying his efforts with remarkable indulgence, they must find just as much satisfaction in their own dreams. It is not the child, it is the sensible man, who urgently requires the comforts and blessings of Nonsense, and it is generally he who enjoys them most. Some people imagine that they have disposed of Ruskin's writings



## NONSENSE AND THE CHILD

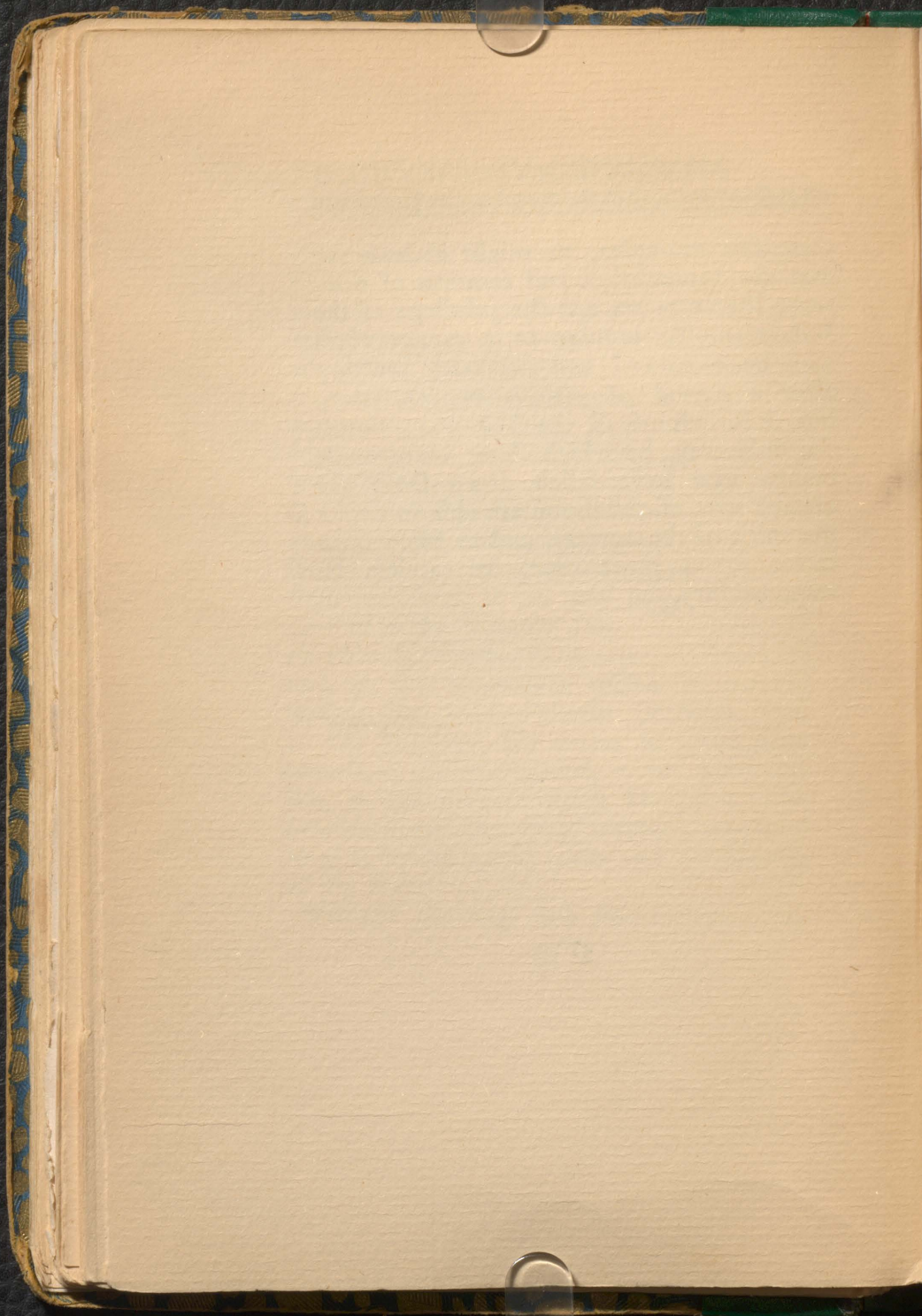


after stamping him as a pompous preacher. If this were true, why should we have placed the *Book of Nonsense* beside Homer and Dante, as an essential instrument of education? The *Complete Book of Limericks* includes a special chapter reserved for clerical limericks, and it is not without some surprise that one finds, amongst the keenest amateurs of nonsense literature, the names of prominent men who, by their character and their calling, might have been inclined to scorn, or at least ignore, such a flippant hobby. If we may judge from his preface to the *Nonsense Songs*, Lear attached far more importance to his scientific drawings and to the landscapes which he painted during his Mediterranean journeys than to his writings. He seems to have been almost as serious-minded, in his every-day life, as the mathematician Dodgson, who beside some mathematical treatises, happened to give to the world, *Alice* and *The Hunting of the Snark*.

Without drawing rash conclusions from









## NONSENSE AND POETRY

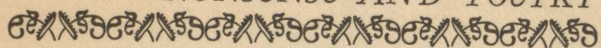
LIKE all other types of literature, Nonsense expresses itself either in prose or in verse. Beside the ancient folk-tales we can place the old nursery rhymes; beside the modern stories of Lear and Carroll, their songs and lyrics. When story-tellers, like Kipling or Chesterton, indulge in some nonsense writing, they almost invariably burst out into song in the middle or at the end of the story. Indeed, nonsense seems particularly conducive to rhythm and to rhyme, even more than the solemn themes of life and death. Prose walks too slowly for it; it needs the wings of rhyme and the dance of rhythm. Like the jester in the old Courts, it moves to the tinkling sound of bells.

The first impression, after reading a certain number of nonsense poems, is that both the matter and the form are entirely fanciful and that they are without good rhyme or sound reason. We find some rhymes, of





## NONSENSE AND POETRY



rhyming power. All his words must obey his inspiration, without being subservient to it.

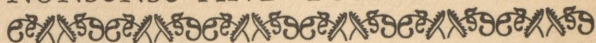
Practically every nursery rhyme shows a deliberate contempt of this rule. The rhyme, not the thought, becomes the source of inspiration, and the singer builds his story around it. Once the poet has sung 'Barber, barber, shave a pig,' there is no escaping the image of the 'wig,' and if once you find that four-and-twenty hairs are 'enough' to make it, you may as well give the barber a 'pinch of snuff' as a reward. The rhymester who sang the first line was evidently in search of some grotesque image, but the rhyme helped him to find it. His imagination ran after the pig or the wig, clinging to their tails, and was thus led to discover the story's abrupt conclusion. It is for some very good reason that Jack-a-Nory, and no other, is the hero of a certain 'story,' that the 'fine lady' rides her 'white horse' to Banbury Cross, rather than in any other village, and that our pockets are full of







## NONSENSE AND POETRY



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'And would probably give me the rho  
Matiz!' said the Kangaroo.

There is no liberty which the poet will not take. The more liberties he takes, the better his nonsense. He uses a perfect orgy of refrains, repetitions, new words apparently meaningless, new beings never heard of before. The refrain of Lear's 'Pelican Chorus' is still within the range of our understanding:

Ploffskin, Pluffskin, Pelican jee!  
We think no birds so happy as we;  
Plumpskin, Ploshkin, Pelican jill!  
We thought so then and we think so still;

but you cannot listen without dismay to the refrain of the Jumblies' song:

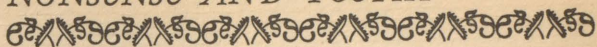
Far and few, far and few,  
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;  
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,  
And they went to sea in a sieve.

Here again the dominating influence of the rhyme is blatantly evident. The existence of the Jumblies once granted, the two first lines may be found in any popular ballad,





## NONSENSE AND POETRY



Such boldness of language is absent from the old nursery rhymes; it is curious to notice how popular poets refrain from using what we should be inclined to call the 'nursery slang.' They mention neither 'trousies,' nor 'tootsies,' nor the thousand diminutives and endearments which must have been in existence in their time as well as in ours. They only exceptionally mention 'Baby Bunting' or ask:

Dance a baby diddit,  
What can its mother do with it?

It would be interesting to trace, in the art of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, the gradual development of Nonsense from the spirit of the nursery rhymes into that of poetic phantasmagoria. Lear was certainly the initiator of the movement, since he published his *Book of Nonsense* as early as 1846, but his *Nonsense Songs and Stories*, which show far greater power, appeared only twenty-five years later, some time after Alice had discovered Wonderland. Lear's inspiration is perhaps bolder; he

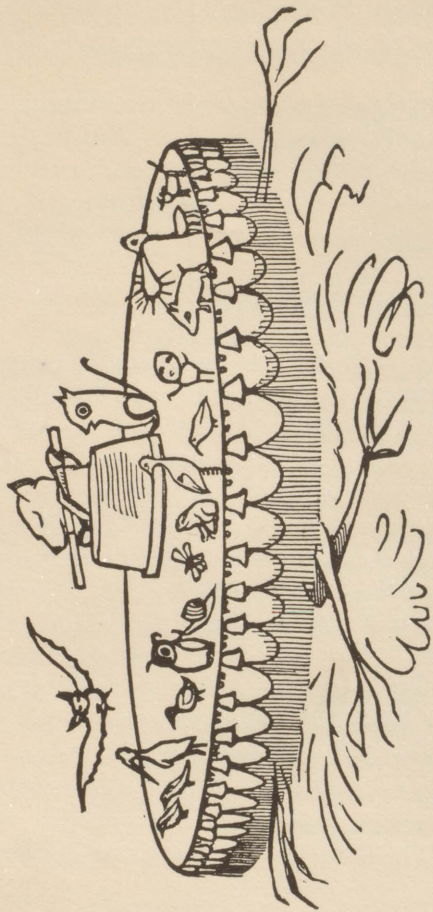








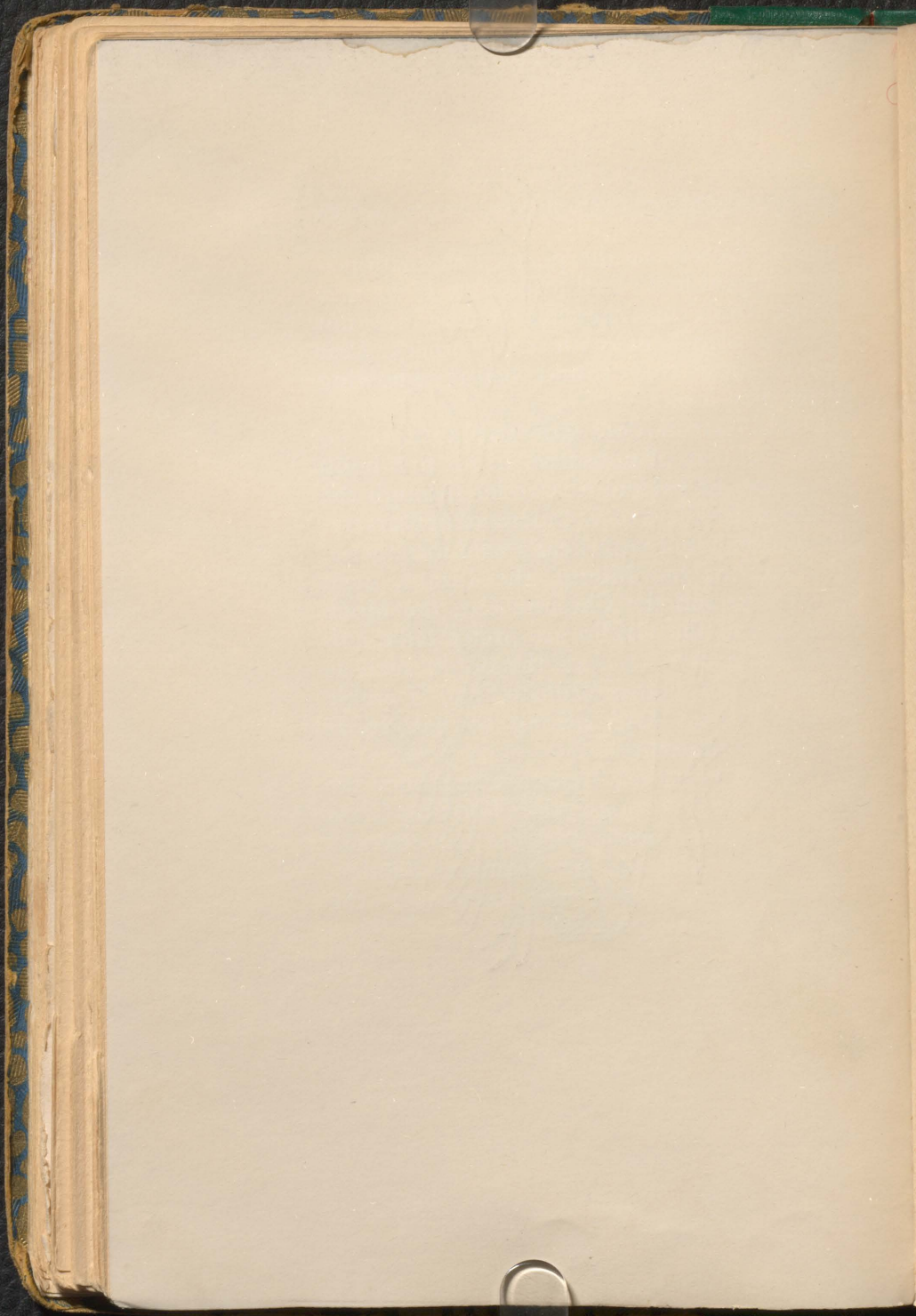




"The Quangle Wangle's Hat"

By EDWARD LEAR

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## NONSENSE AND POETRY

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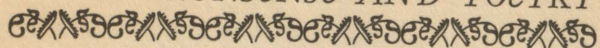
etymology. They will understand that 'brillig' can only mean four o'clock, since it is 'the time when you begin broiling things for dinner.' They will wonder how they ever failed to grasp at first the meaning of such easy 'portmanteau-words,' such as 'slithy,' formed by combining lithe and slimy, and 'mimsy' (flimsy and miserable). In this song, as in the *Hunting of the Snark*, Lewis Carroll showed that he could follow Lear to the remotest limits of nonsense poetry.

There is still any amount of work to be done in Wonderland, and the exploration of this new world has scarcely begun. The Pole, however, seems to have been discovered. It lies in the somewhat inaccessible region where the human tongue loses all meaning. Anywhere else, under milder climates, a thousand riddles remain to be solved, the ways of chess-men and cards, animals and toys, of surprising new creatures never dreamed of before, but we are still able to understand each other





## NONSENSE AND POETRY



associated with popular ballads. Some nursery rhymes, such as 'Tom, Tom, the Piper's son,' move with the lilt of ancient ballads and even borrow their refrain. It is not without some surprise that one meets such words as 'Over the hills and far away' in the song of the Elfin Knight:

My plaid awa', my plaid awa',  
And o'er the hill and far awa',  
And far awa' to Norrowa,  
My plaid shall not be blown awa'.

Commentators are often puzzled by the strangeness of some nursery rhymes' refrain which have no relation whatever with the story such as:

With a rowley, powley, gammon and spinach,  
Heigh ho, says Anthony Rowley,

accompanying the story of the 'Frog who would a-woeing go.' Just as incongruous lines may be found at the end of each verse of the most gruesome and tragic ballads such as 'The Twa Sisters' or the 'Three Ravens':

## NONSENSE AND POETRY

deXk96eXk96eXk96eXk96eXk96eXk96eXk96

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
Downe adowne, hay down, hay downe;  
There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
With a downe.

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
They were as blacke as they might be.  
With a downe derrie, derrie, derrie, downe,  
downe.

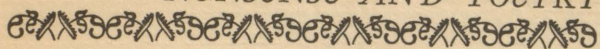
There is practically no difference, as far as the refrain is concerned, between this verse and the first lines of the nursery rhyme known as 'The Carrion Crow':

A Carrion Crow sat on an oak,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle, hi ding do,  
Watching a tailor make a cloak.  
Sing heigh, sing ho, the carrion crow,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle, hi ding do.

The ballad-singer tells us that the ravens will take their breakfast 'in yonder green field' in which a knight lies 'slain under his shield,' while the nursery-rhymester relates how the tailor, wanting to shoot the crow, misses his mark and shoots his own sow instead. It is difficult to conceive two conclusions more strongly opposed, but a



## NONSENSE AND POETRY



similar refrain runs through both of them as a kind of musical accompaniment.

It is not for us to solve the riddle of the refrain. Mr. G. L. Kittredge, in his introduction to Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, sums up a good deal of what has been written on this obscure subject when he tells us that the refrain is manifestly 'a point of connection between the ballad and the throng,' and that it could never have been invented by the 'solitary, brooding author of our modern conditions.' It 'presupposes a crowd of singers and dancers' and belongs therefore essentially to popular poetry, whether comic or tragic. We are more concerned with the fact that almost all modern nonsense-poets, such as Lear, Carroll, and Gilbert, far from ignoring the old refrains, make a very frequent use of it, and that their lyrics seem to appeal strongly to the crowd. The same thing occurs whenever the author of a music-hall ditty strikes a genuine nonsensical note, as, for instance, in the case

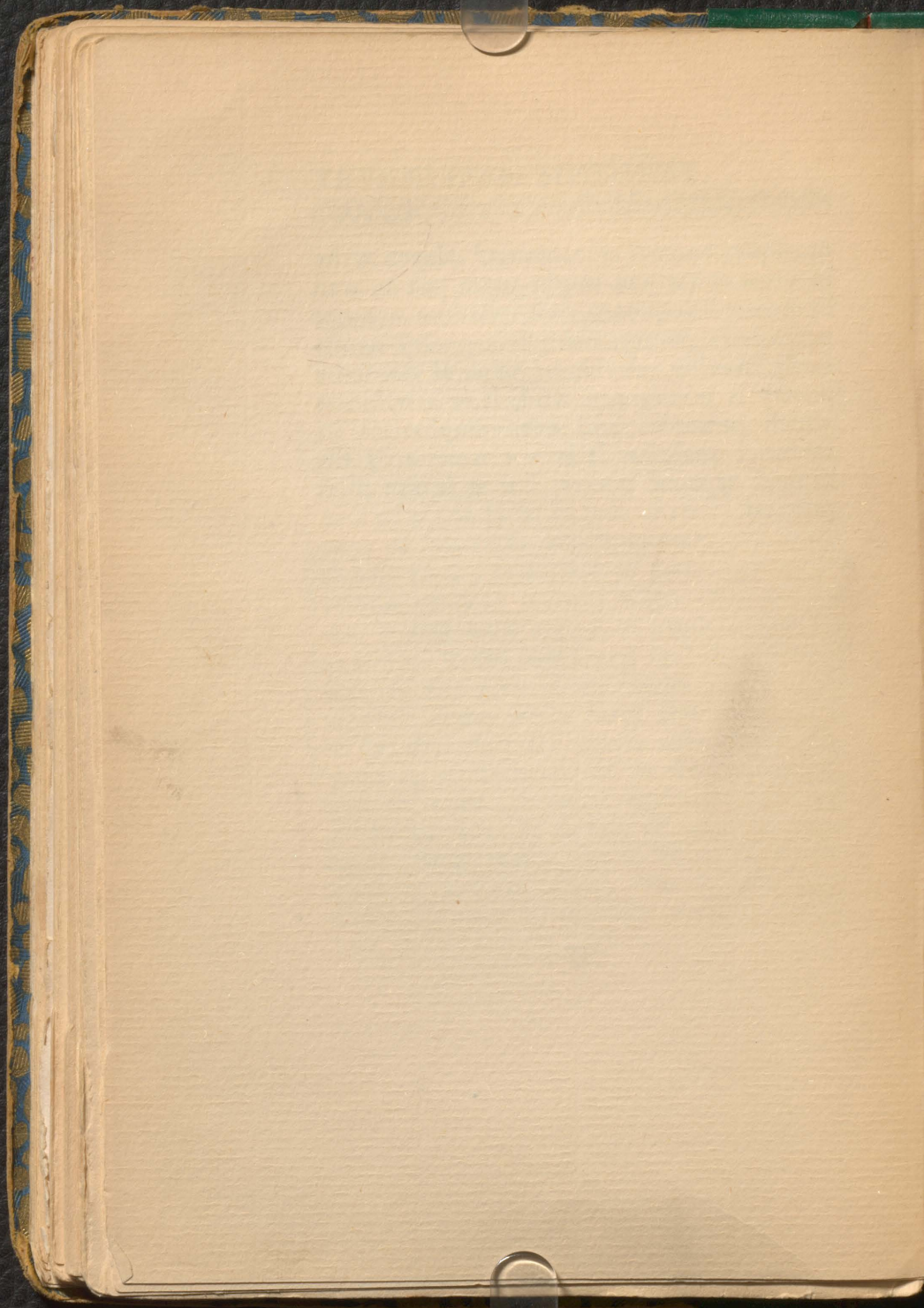




## NONSENSE AND POETRY

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musique, encore et toujours.' Never write in verse what you might write just as well in prose. Eloquence, wit, wisdom are not necessarily poetry; neither is poetry necessarily moving, clever, or wise. If nonsense poetry is poetry run wild, it is a wildness which preserves and even emphasises its essential qualities. It is not necessarily the highest type of poetry, but it is the most poetical.





## IV

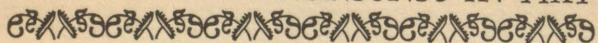
## NONSENSE IN ART

IT may seem worthy of remark that most nonsense writers are inclined to illustrate their own work. We can understand that Edward Lear should have entrusted to nobody else the illustration of his *Book of Nonsense* and of his *Nonsense Songs*. He was a draughtsman and a painter of some talent and reputation, well-equipped to undertake this task. The fact that a mathematician like Lewis Carroll drew a series of sketches for the original manuscript book which developed afterwards into *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is more significant. This facsimile of the original book appeared in 1886, twenty years after the publication of *Alice* with the well-known illustrations by John Tenniel. Carroll's sketches show that he had certainly not mastered the art of drawing to the same extent as the art of writing, but they are in many ways better adapted to his text than





## NONSENSE IN ART



attracts the artist's attention more than does sensible literature. The fact that the same question may be asked with regard to fairy tales may help us to answer it. Both nursery rhymes and fairy tales appeal to the imagination. Unlike realistic stories, which leave less scope for originality and invention, they may be interpreted in a hundred ways, all equally suggestive and stimulating. The very conciseness of the nursery rhyme must be helpful to the artist. He is free to enlarge upon what the short verse merely indicates, just as a composer may develop a popular theme when writing variations around it.

*non-sense  
attracting  
artist  
more*

The simplest lines, such as:

There was an old woman  
Lived under a hill,  
And if she's not gone  
She lives there still

may suggest a score of images according to the genius of the interpreter. Arthur Rackham's 'old woman' is a good witch,



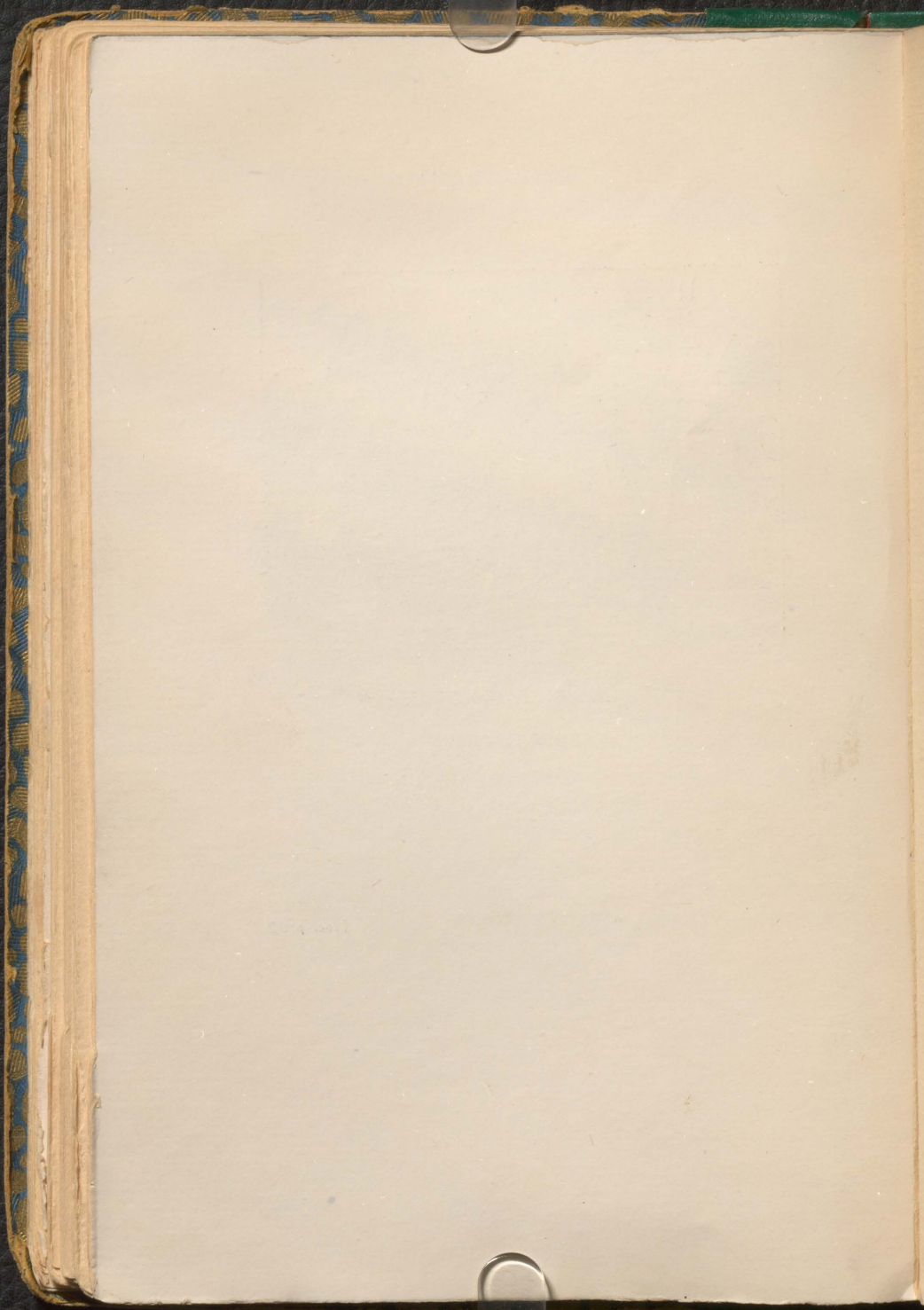




*"You are old, Father William"*

By JOHN TENNIEL

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NONSENSE IN ART

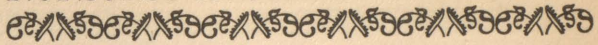
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illustrates the third verse of his skit on  
'You are old, Father William':

'You are old,' said the youth, 'as I mentioned before,  
And have grown uncommonly fat;  
Yet you turned a back somersault in at the door—  
Pray, what is the reason of that?'

he shows us the old man accomplishing this feat while handing the amazed youth a sample of the ointment which had kept his limbs 'very supple.' The two principal characters stand alone in the picture, and the burlesque incident is played, so to speak, without scenery. John Tenniel, in the corresponding picture, describes the interior of a Jacobean cottage and makes a point of showing us every detail of the furniture, but he forgets the box of ointment. In breaking the bonds of reason, the poet opens up an unlimited field to the artist's fancy, and the latter seizes this opportunity all the more willingly since he feels that it does not really much matter how the subject is treated so long as some fun is derived from its treatment.

## NONSENSE IN ART

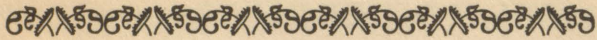


It may, indeed, be argued that the same circumstances which favour the influence of rhythm and music in nonsense poetry stimulate the inspiration of the artist when dealing with nonsense literature. The very vagueness which tends to convert nonsense rhymes into a jingle of meaningless words prompts the illustrator to fix at least one of the many images which are suggested to him by these words, and to describe with his pencil what the author has been unwilling to describe by his pen.

When looking through a great number of illustrations of this kind, we are struck by the fact that the most talented artists are often inclined to substitute their own personality for that of the poet's, and to miss the nonsensical quality of the verse. Walter Crane, for instance, is apt to overlook the grotesque aspect of some nursery rhymes, and to treat them, more or less, in the style of Kate Greenaway, as a series of pretty poetical fairy tales. We miss, in *The Baby's Opera* and *The Baby's Bouquet*, the grotesque



## NONSENSE IN ART



abruptness inherent in nonsense, which does not suit the smooth style of Pre-raphaelitism. The majority of modern illustrators seem to have been led astray in the same way. Their illustrations may be delightful in themselves, but they are seldom adequate to the text, for they lack its primitive and almost aggressive simplicity. 'Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle' does not suggest a kind of animal idyll, in a flowery field, in front of an old cottage covered with creepers, or a sombre nightmare under the veil of dark, threatening clouds, but a mad exuberance, a purely joyful boisterousness which induces animals and inanimate objects to forget all natural laws and to indulge in what we may be allowed to call a lark. We have never seen an adequate illustration of this classic, but we fancy that if the old rhymester had been able, like some modern nonsense poets, to describe what the lines suggested to him, he would have shown us, in his rough, child-like style, a diminutive cow, jumping







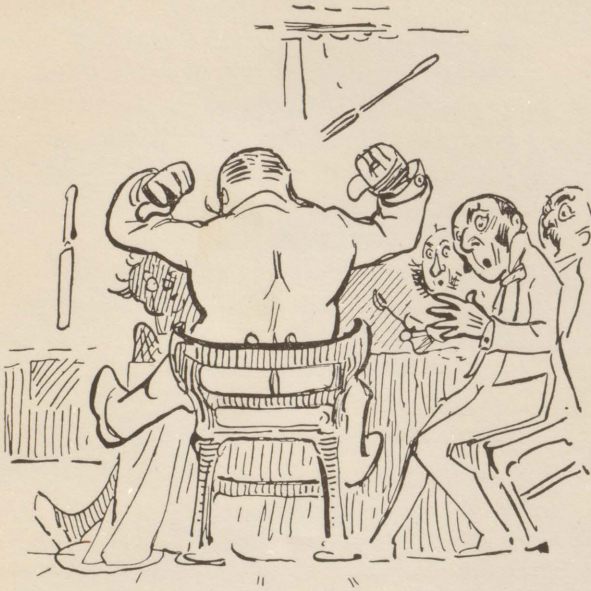
## NONSENSE IN ART

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his characters express amazement, they have a way of flinging their arms behind their backs which can only be compared to the crude efforts of early mediæval painters. This peculiar gesture, together with the constant practice of the goose-step by his figures, is as characteristic of Lear the artist, as the lilt of his limericks and the grotesque rhymes of his songs are characteristic of Lear the poet, and the enormous success of the *Book of Nonsense* was no doubt due to the intense satisfaction and sincere artistic pleasure derived from the perfect harmony existing between the illustrations and the text.

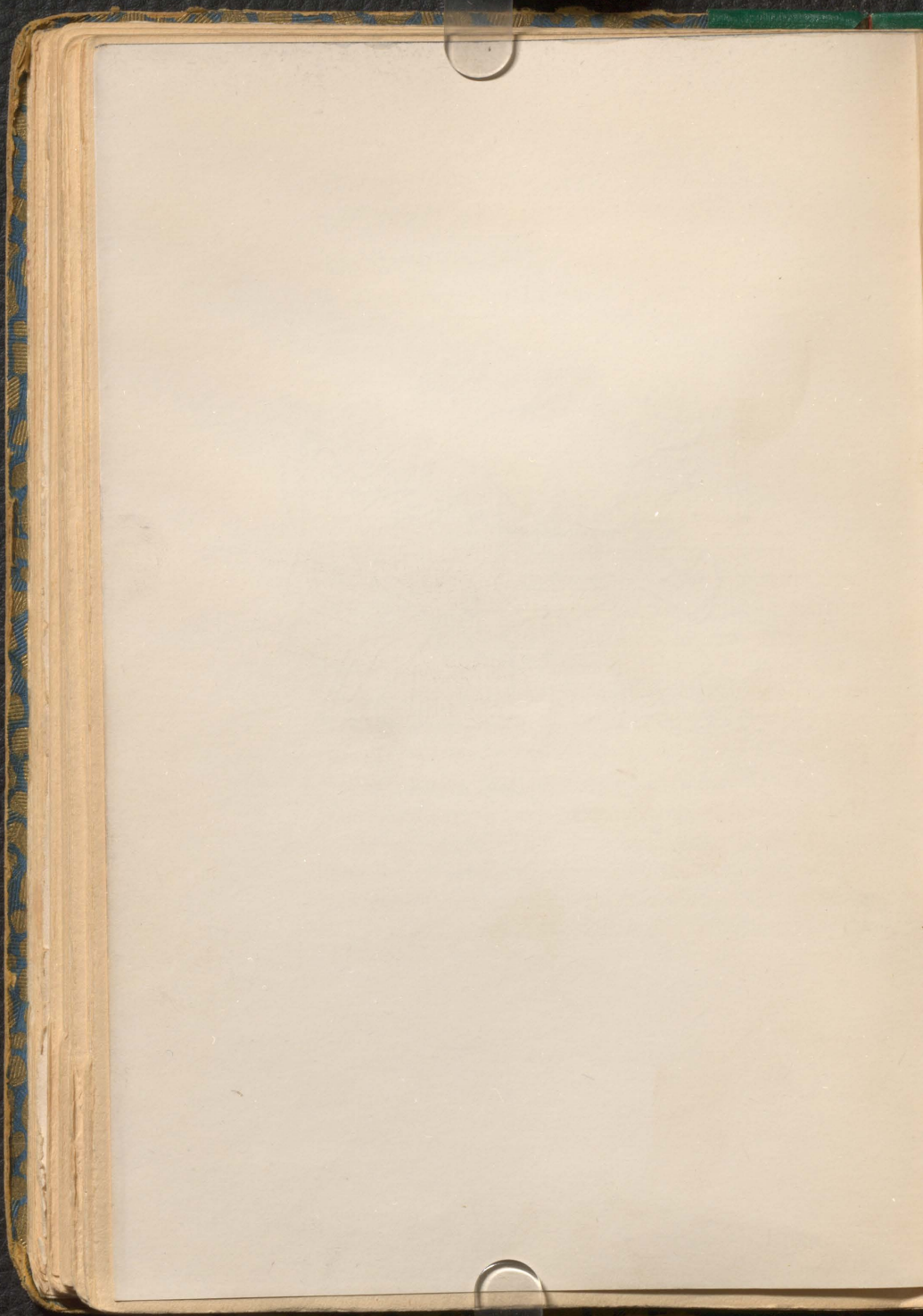
The power of Lewis Carroll was more limited, and it remains an open question whether he would have been able to illustrate adequately the two books on 'Alice' if he had followed the impulse which led him to illustrate the first. The quality of his sketches is very unequal, but when he succeeds, as in the four drawings illustrating the ballad of 'Old Father William,' his





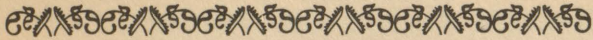
*"It looked bad when the Duke of Fife . . ."*

[face p. 68





## NONSENSE IN ART



technique follows Lear's very closely, and he remains faithful to the spirit of grotesque simplicity which distinguishes his master's works and which we might be allowed to call 'the Nonsense style in Art.'

For there certainly seems to be a nonsense style in art as there is a nonsense style in poetry. The vigorous sketches with which Chesterton illustrates the quatrains of E. Clerihew's *Biography for Beginners* affords another striking example of this. The violent movement with which the Duke of Fife upsets the table arrangements in the sketch illustrating the verse:

It looked bad when the Duke of Fife  
Left off using a knife;  
But people began to talk  
When he left off using a fork

is not merely caricature, but belongs far more, in its crude simplicity, to the art of nonsense drawing. We might give further examples, such as the illustrations made by Mr. Harry Graham for his own *Ruthless*

NONSENSE IN ART

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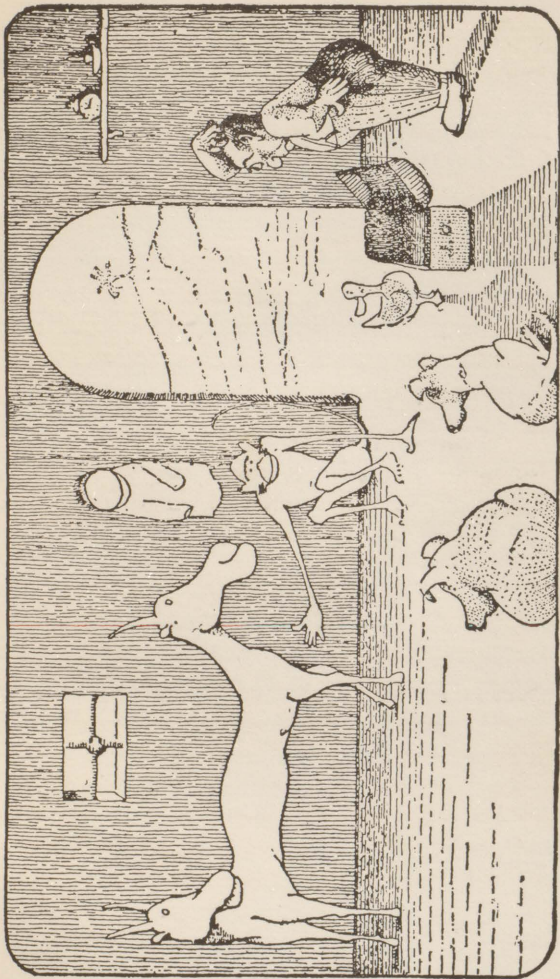
*Rhymes for Heartless Homes*, and the delightful sketches with which Mr. Hugh Lofting brightens the stupendous adventures of Doctor Dolittle. There is the same difference between these drawings and caricature as there is between parody and nonsense verse. The essence of caricature and parody is criticism and satire, which are totally absent from nonsense in art as well as in letters.

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It may well be asked why crude and sometimes clumsy drawings should be considered as more adequate than the more finished productions of the professional artist; but it must never be forgotten that, although there is a great deal of sense in certain nonsense, just as there is a good deal of method in certain madness, nonsense would cease to be nonsense if it took itself seriously. There must necessarily be a certain unfinished quality in all the works it inspires. It cannot be elaborate or well thought out; it must be, or at least seem to be, improvised on the spur of the moment. Any second thought, any lengthy preparation, would

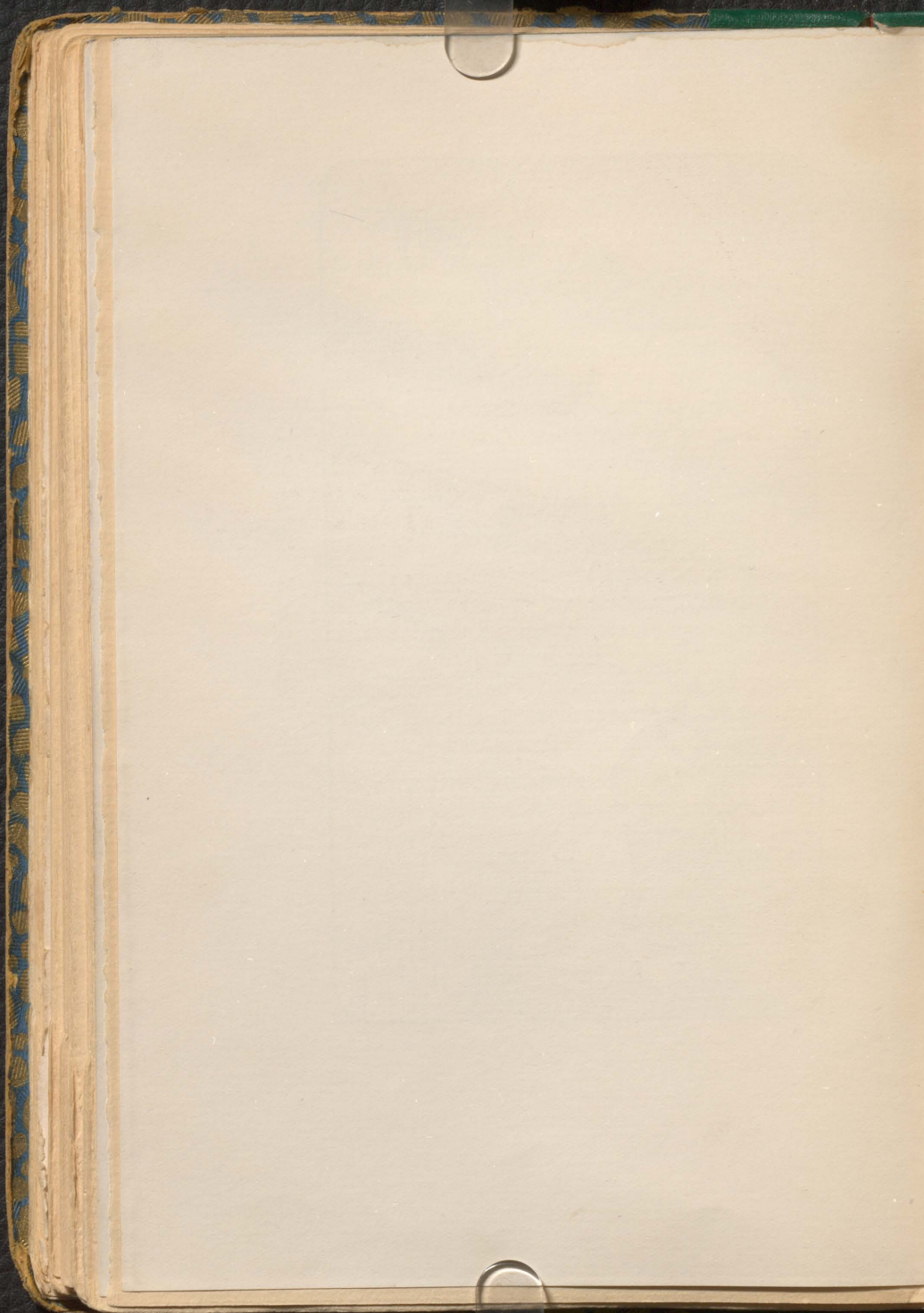
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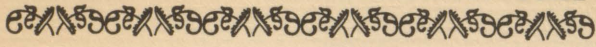
*The Discovery of the Pushmi-pullyu*

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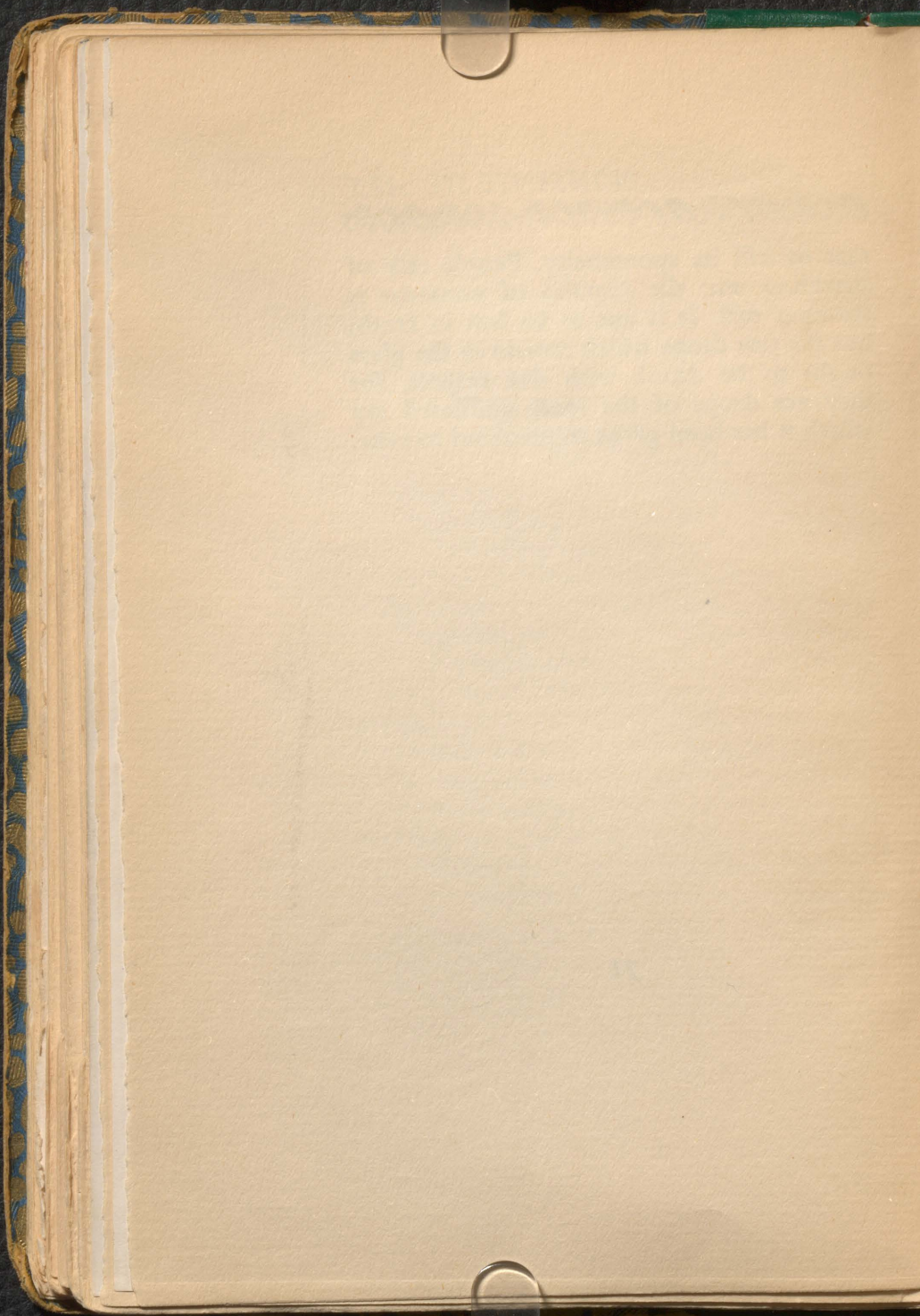




NONSENSE IN ART



mar or kill its spontaneity. People talk of sparkling wit: the impulse of nonsense is stronger still. It is apt to be lost in froth, but the few drops which remain in the glass ought to be drunk with due respect, for they are drops of the most undiluted joy which it has been given to mankind to taste.





## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND

THE study of Nonsense literature is only in its infancy. We can, however, foresee the time when, far from being set aside as a trivial subject, it will be considered as one of the most valuable contributions of the art of writing to the development and happiness of mankind, and will be respected as such. The few examples which we have quoted at random, in the previous chapters, may already have drawn the reader's attention to the important part played by Nonsense in the history of English literature. Nowhere else in Europe do we witness a movement so popular and so widespread as that started by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll in the Victorian Era. A few isolated writers may have tried their hand at nonsense writing in other countries, but their efforts remained without response and passed merely as the outcome of eccentric minds to be relegated

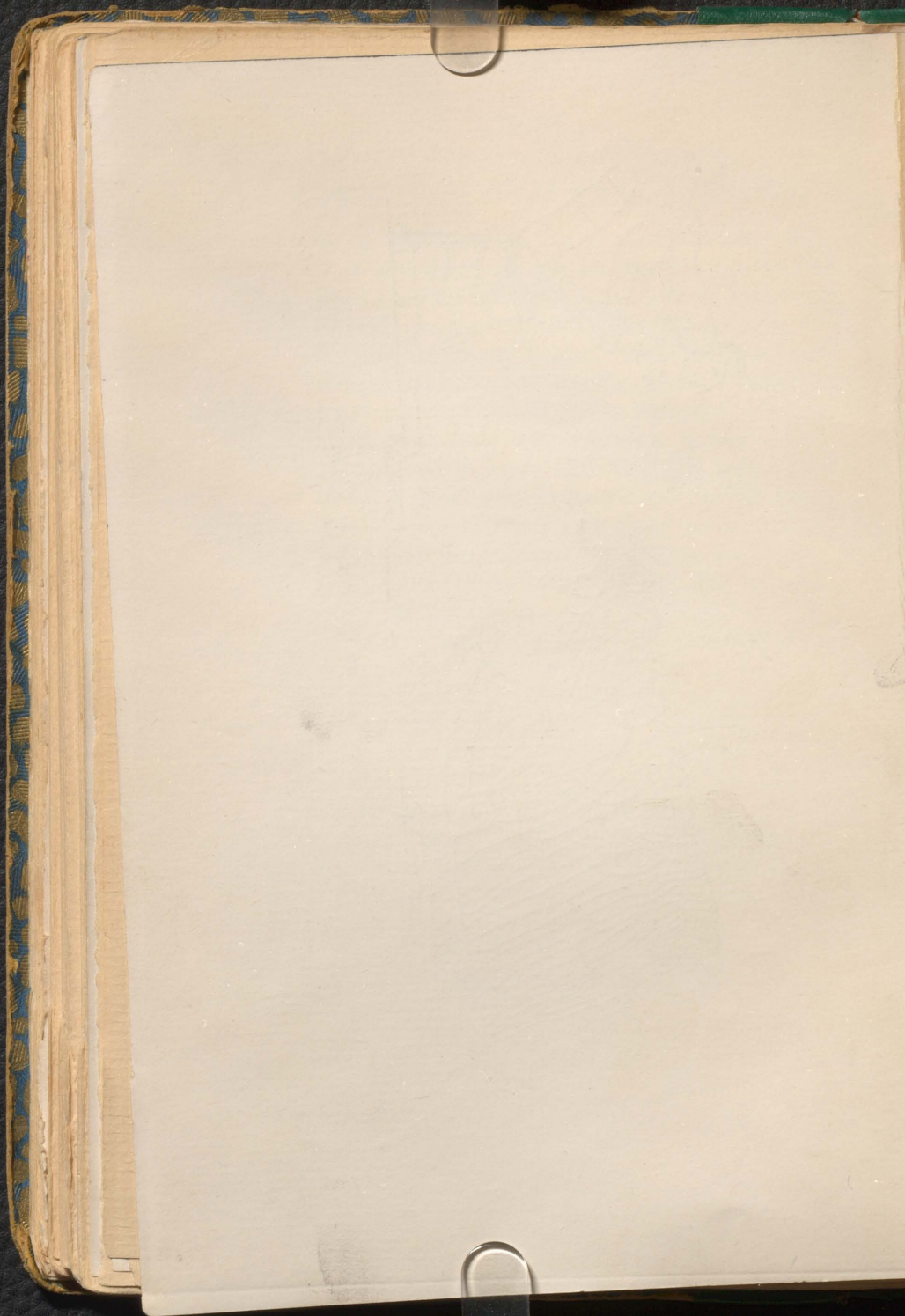






*"There was an Old Person of Rhodes,"*

[face p. 74







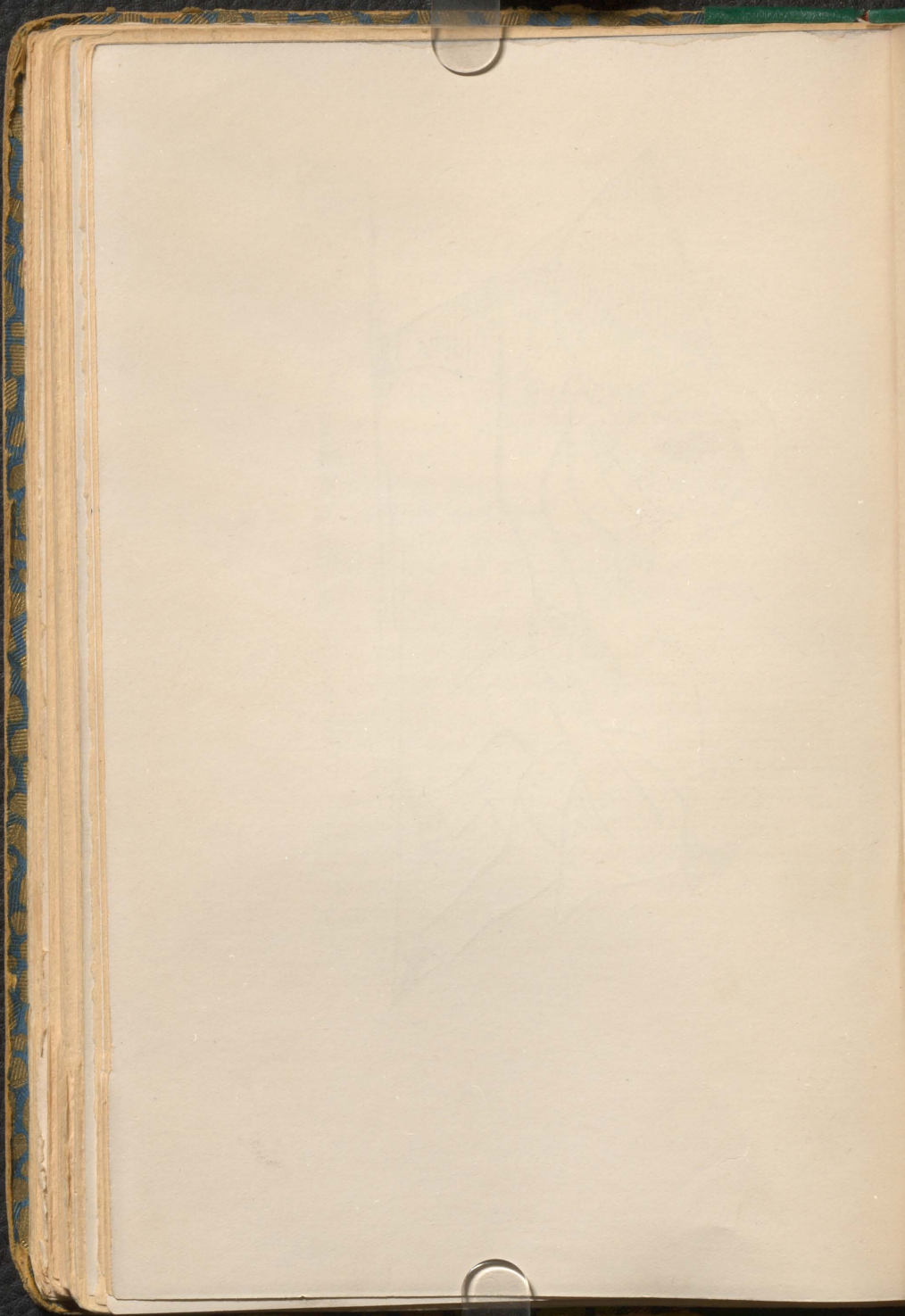






“There was an Old Man of th’ Abruzzi”

[face p. 76











## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND

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have been fostered by some foreigner, puzzled by the solemn importance given by most seriously minded people, in this country, to all sorts of games, which would be considered abroad, by the same class of people, merely as a mild relaxation, which may be occasionally indulged in, but which can on no account excite great enthusiasm.

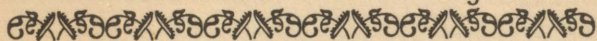
We dare not venture too far in a domain which is, after all, purely conjectural, for we might be accused of 'rushing in where angels fear to tread'; but there is ample evidence to show that, while Nonsense is practically neglected in other countries, English writers have always taken delight in it, and that this delight has been shared by their public.

My attention has been recently drawn by a friend to a curious little pamphlet, published in 1875, by a writer who calls himself A. M. Nitramof, on *The French Originals of the English Nursery Rhymes*. It is dedicated to Lady Ashburnham, and the author, in an introductory letter dated from Warsaw,





## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND



Jonathan Oldbuck and to Dr. Dryasdust, of York, to understand the joke; the most superficial knowledge of French grammar and versification is sufficient. The author's versions of 'Sing-a-Song of Sixpence' and 'Little Bo-Peep' are perhaps less awkward, but, on the whole, he succeeds in showing that the most absurd premises can only lead to the most absurd conclusions.

There is a certain amount of nonsense in all popular verses and stories, and it would be easy to quote some French and German nursery rhymes, such as 'Compère Guillery' and 'Wiede-Wiede-Wenne heiszt meine Truthenne,' which are inspired by the Nonsense spirit; but their number is strictly limited. Generally speaking, nursery rhymes are not so widely imaginative abroad as in England. They accompany the child's first steps and the child's first dances (the French are specially rich in 'Rondes'), but only exceptionally intrude upon Topsy-turvydom.

The comparison is still more conclusive





## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND

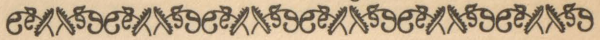
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ought to be made between them, and that there is no grosser mistake than to confuse an epigram with a nonsense rhyme. It may be added that they are really opposed and that they lie at the two poles of the human soul. There is an unfathomable gulf between the disdainful sneer provoked by the one, and the uproarious laughter provoked by the other, between the painful sting of witticism and the cheerful buffeting of nonsense. They are in the same relation to each other as a needle and a bubble, and the bubble of nonsense can be pricked only too easily if we choose to call a joke poor, or bad, because it is harmless.

Nonsense does not seem to have flourished even in the so-called 'Nonsense Club' haunted by Cowper. It was conspicuously absent from Dr. Johnson's circle of friends if Boswell's record of their conversation is complete and trustworthy. 'John Gilpin' and Goldsmith's 'Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog' are but poor and half-hearted specimens of the style. The only example



## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND

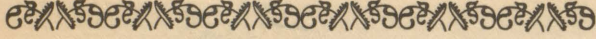


of sheer nonsense which seems to have been worthy of record is Samuel Foote's well-known lines beginning: 'So she went to the garden to cut a cabbage leaf' and ending: 'and they all fell playing catch-as-catch-can till the gunpowder ran out of the heels of their boots.' It is significant of the spirit of the period that Foote did not write this masterpiece to delight his contemporaries but merely to expose Macklin who, in the course of a lecture, had claimed that, on one reading, he could learn anything by heart. They show us now that Foote had a wonderful imagination, but they showed only, at the time, that his rival had a bad memory.

It is strange to notice that Nonsense came back to England with renewed strength and vitality in the wake of the Romantic Movement. Byron and Shelley did not indulge in this type of literature, and were rather inclined, when in a lighter mood, to adopt a satirical style, but their influence was, nevertheless, opposed to witticism. Nonsense reappeared when they had cleared



NONSENSE AND ENGLAND



the ground of its dangerous opponent. The association of the names of Lear and Carroll with those of Ruskin and Tennyson seems at first almost paradoxical, but there is nevertheless a certain connection between the attitude of mind of the old and modern Romanticists and that of Nonsense writers. They make the same appeal to the imagination; they rely on the picture more than on the word, and on sentiment more than on intellect. Nonsense stands, with regard to Romanticism, very much in the same position as Satire and Epigram, with regard to Classicism.

When dealing with nonsense in poetry, we endeavoured to show that it was essentially poetical because essentially musical. It is usually agreed, I believe, that no poets carried so far the art of creating music with words as did the English poets, and more especially the English poets of the nineteenth century. Is it possible to associate this fact with the fact that Nonsense has been cultivated in England more than

*Nonsense  
+ Romanticism  
✓ Romanticism*

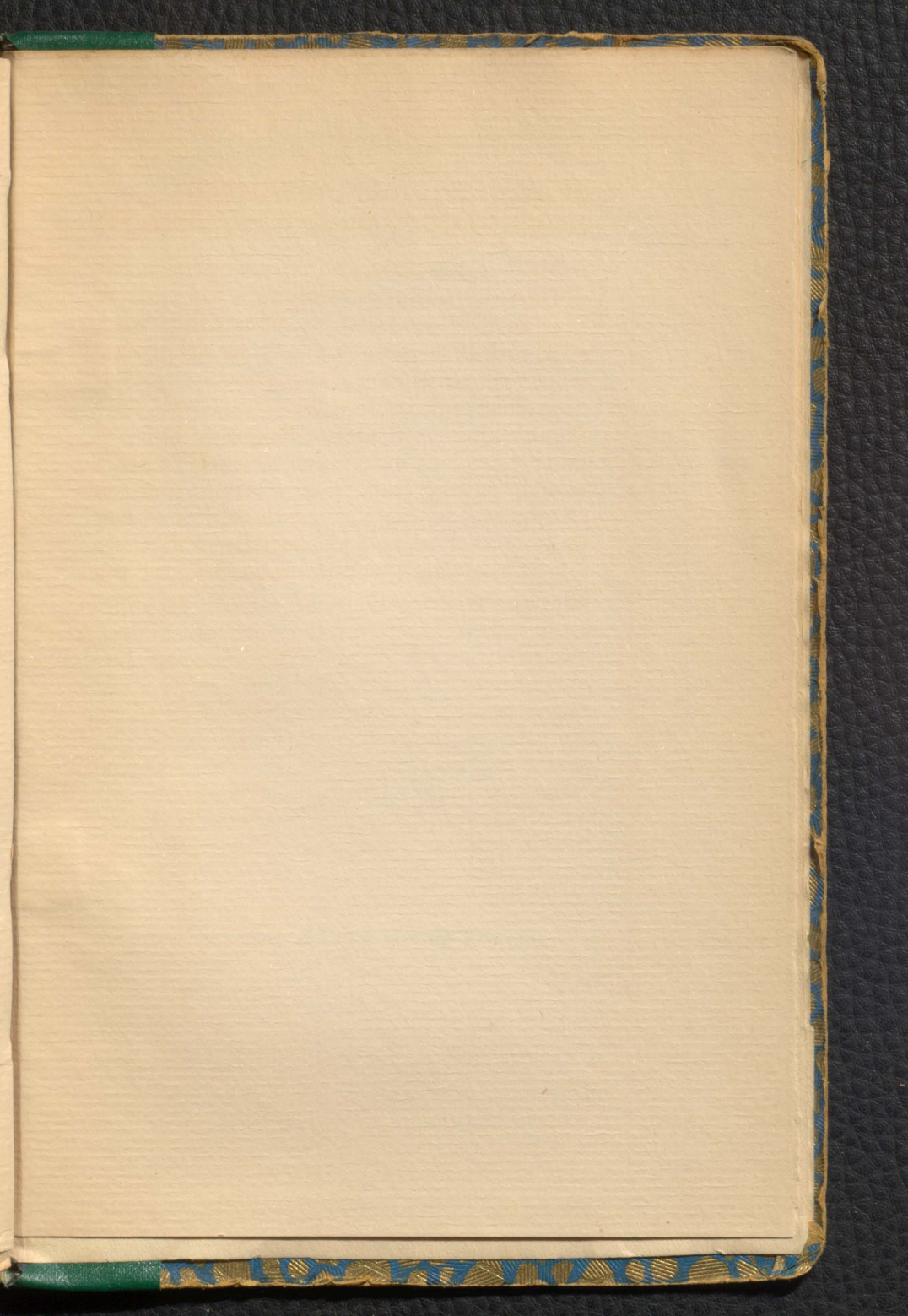
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## NONSENSE AND ENGLAND

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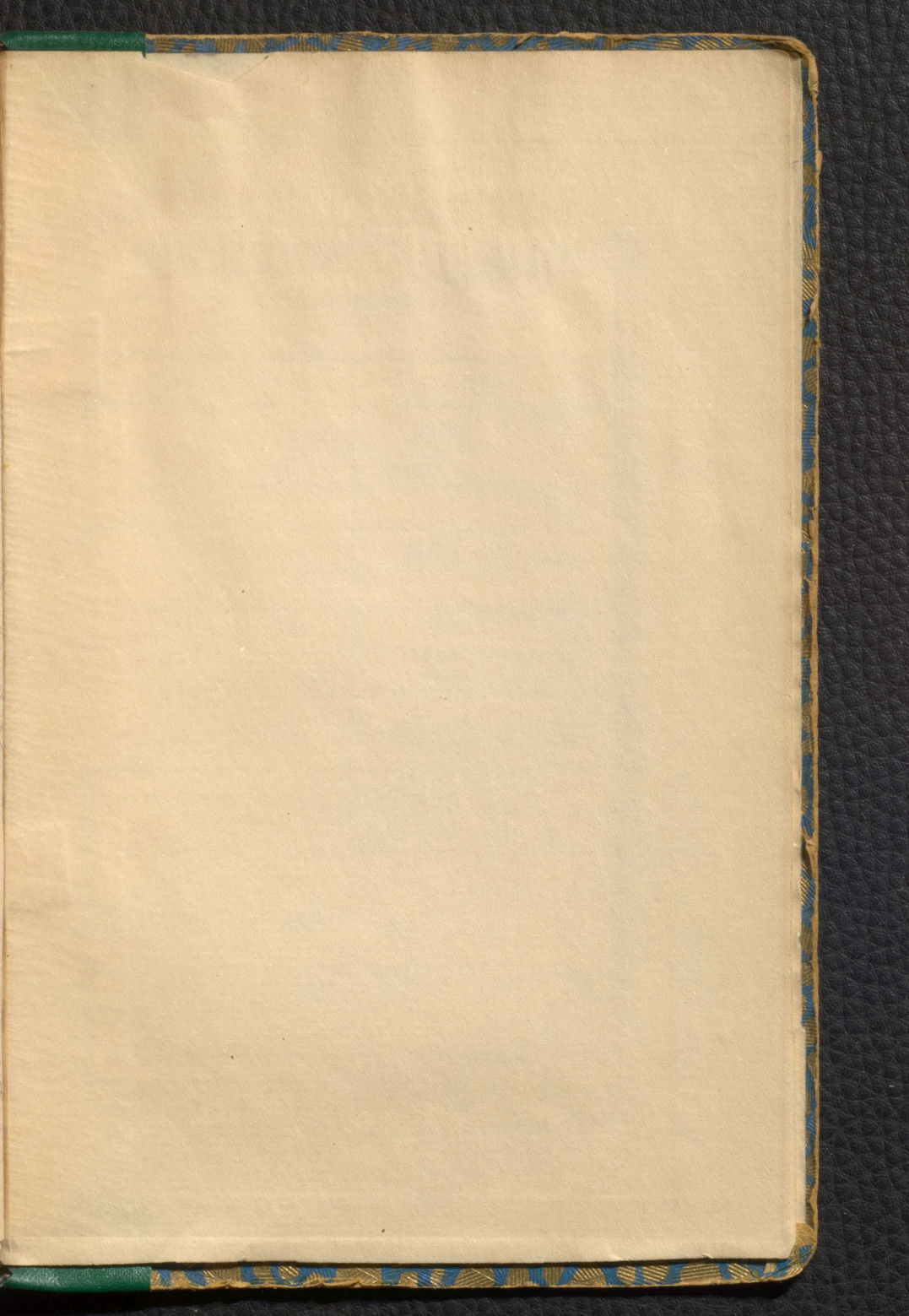
in any other country, more particularly during the Victorian Era? Is it possible to hint that, if Nonsense is poetry run wild, such wildness is more likely to occur in a country where poetry is highly developed? Nonsense poets may be compared with the children we see, with paper hats on their heads and wooden swords in their hands, cutting capers in front of a band. Ought we to express astonishment when finding that they are specially boisterous where the band is most powerful and the rhythm most compelling?





*Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd., Bradford and London.*





DATE DUE

| DATE DUE          |                  |
|-------------------|------------------|
| DUE               | RETURNED         |
| 1982 JAN 1 1982   | 1987 FEB 14 1987 |
| 1982 FEB 1 6 1982 | 1982 FEB 3 1983  |
| 1982 DEC 13 1982  | 1983 DEC 5 1983  |
| 1985 JUL 10 1985  | 1985 JUL 10 1985 |
| 1986 MAY 5 1986   |                  |
| 1987 JUN 2 1987   | 1985 JUN 9 1985  |
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