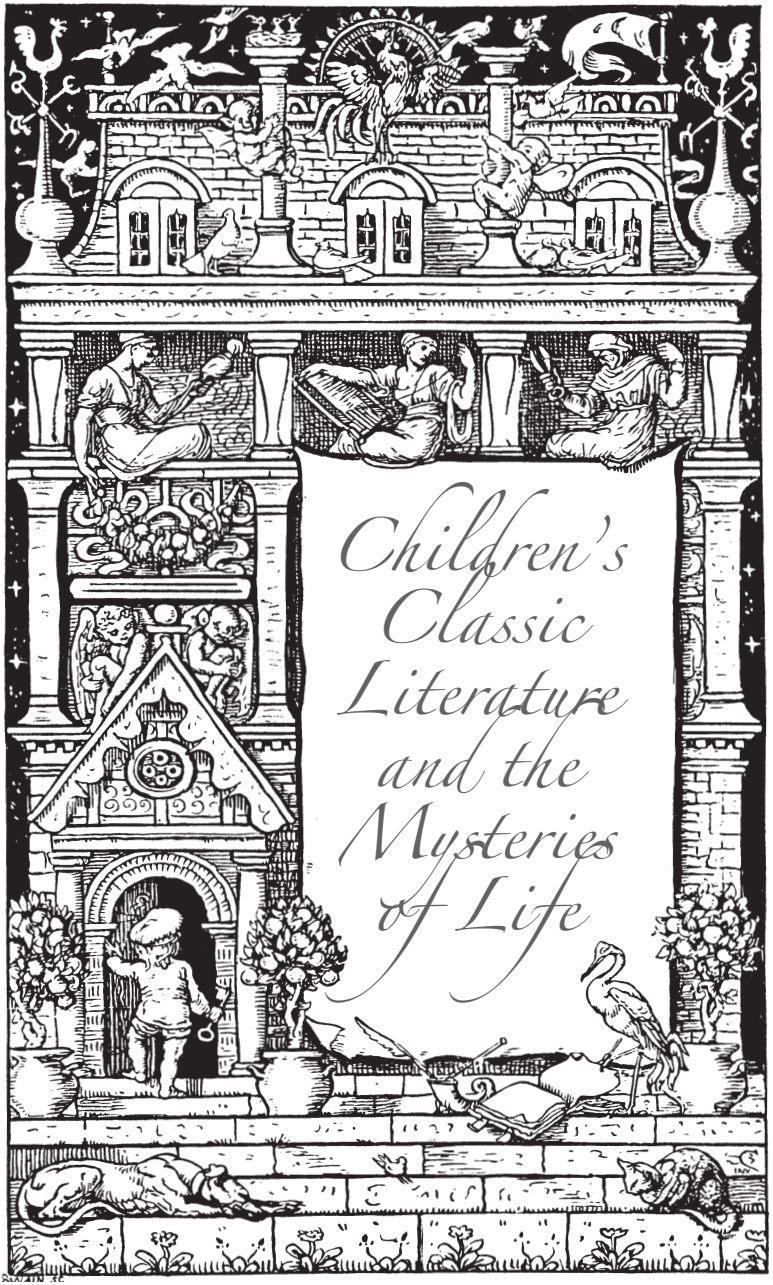
The Mysteries of Life in Children's Literature


Children's
Classic
Literature
and the
Mysteries
of Life

The Mysteries of Life in Children's Literature

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Dedication

TO ALL my beloved Armenian family members who provided me an authentic childhood of play, innocence, and wonder; who instilled in me a love of life, a love of family, and a love of God; who made me feel special, loved, and the apple of their eye; who showed me by their example that loving children is the great business of life; whose generosity, hospitality, and kindness formed my heart; and who taught me how to savor the simple pleasures of life: delicious, home-cooked food, conversation at the dinner table, visits to friends and relatives, the bonds of true friendships, the love of learning, the mirth of games and sports, and the wonder of hearing stories of the miracles of Divine Providence in each person's life.

To my wife Joyce and my five children—Gregory, Aram, Mark, Tanya, and Peter—who cured me of intellectual abstraction and theoretical speculation; who brought me down to earth in contact with dirty diapers, hungry stomachs, argumentative temperaments, and chaotic households; who drew my attention from gazing at the stars to real persons, existential situations, particular problems, financial exigencies, and the real nature of things; and who made it miraculously possible for me once

again to be a child by becoming a father who loves to play games and sports and read stories as much as any child.

Acknowledgements

ONE of my great teachers in graduate school at the University of Kansas, Dr. Franklyn Nelick, once observed, "When something is truly intended for you, it will come your way more than once." The opportunity to study children's literature came to me more than once. The first time I said no without fully realizing what I was refusing. Having been granted a sabbatical for the spring semester in 1985, I thought of applying for a post-graduate seminar entitled "Evil in Image, Experience, and Idea"—an interdisciplinary study funded by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation with a handsome stipend for the participants. The logistics of uprooting my children from school, looking for a home to rent for a family of six for just five months, and leaving my home in Iowa vacant for the cold winter season when pipes can freeze discouraged me from filling out the application papers which I had received.

On the day of the application deadline, I received a telephone call from the director of the seminar inquiring about my decision: if I were still going to apply for the Mellon fellowship, late applications would be received. (Perhaps there were not enough applicants for all the available places in the seminar?)

In short, I was assured that my chances for acceptance into the seminar were excellent if I completed the formal application forms and returned them as soon as possible. I began to realize that this was meant to be. How often does a college professor on sabbatical receive a telephone call urging him to fill out some papers which will qualify him for an Andrew W. Mellon fellowship and receive a $9,500 stipend? At that time I had taken out a second mortgage on my home to pay for an addition on the house to accommodate my growing family. This gift seemed to fall from heaven. I reconsidered my decision, changed my mind, applied for the grant, and learned that I was accepted for the seminar at the University of Kansas where I had completed my M. A. degree in 1965. All the logistical problems I imagined as obstacles to my sabbatical leave were illusory. A former graduate professor, Dr. Dennis Quinn, who learned of my semester at Kansas, volunteered to look for homes to rent and quickly found one that was ideal for our needs—close to the university and across the street from the Schwegler Elementary School which our children would be attending. If something is truly intended for you, the most complicated dilemmas seem to disappear quickly.

Officially enrolled as an Andrew W. Mellon fellow participating in the seminar on evil, I discovered that the class met only a few times during the week. Even though I wrote a thirty-page paper for the seminar and attended all the guest lectures and paper presentations, I enjoyed the leisure of pursuing other academic interests and desultory reading. Coincidentally (providentially) Dr. Quinn was teaching a class called "Literature for Children" which immediately piqued my interest and motivated me to audit this class—a subject that

had aroused my curiosity because of our young children and our regular habit of reading aloud to them. It did not take long before I realized that the study of children's literature became a labor of love, a subject of far greater fascination for me than the study of evil. All of my spare time that semester was spent reading books that I had never before encountered in my childhood or in my undergraduate and graduate education. What enchantment! Books like *Little Women*, *Little Men* and *Tom Brown's School Days* are as heartwarming, delightful, charming, and illuminating as any of the classics that are normally taught in college-level courses. C. S. Lewis once remarked that not to have read the great books was like never having drunk wine, never having swum in the ocean, and never having been in love—in short, not to have lived in a deep, human way. Not to have read the classics of children's literature, likewise, is to miss one of life's great experiences and to bypass a treasury of life's richest wisdom. That a scholar as erudite as Dr. Quinn, a man of immense learning who regularly teaches the great books of Western civilization, could teach these children's classics with such vibrant enthusiasm and genuine insight, affirmed the profound importance of the formative power of literature in shaping the mind, heart, and conscience of both child and adult alike. As he explained so perfectly in class one day, one of the best ways to understand the mystery of life is to study something as simple as a cell rather than some complex organism like a whale; one of the best ways to learn the truth is to study something as simple as children's literature rather than something as sophisticated as James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It was meant to be that I study "Literature for Children" under a master teacher like Dr. Quinn, a person who inspired my vocation

more than any other person. Here I was, a forty-four-year-old man and professor of English, auditing an undergraduate class and marvelling at the breadth and depth of Dr. Quinn's extraordinary teaching. It was meant to be that I have another chance to learn the things which had escaped me in the past.

The chance to study children's literature was truly intended for me, and it came my way more than once. I have been teaching it and loving it ever since, and, like everything playful that we do and enjoy for its own sake, for the pure fun of it, "it overflows" as Cardinal Newman says of liberal education. It has overflowed from auditing a course to reading widely on the subject to teaching classes on children's literature to writing this book on *The Mysteries of Life in Children's Literature*. When something is truly meant to be, it comes from the wisdom and love of God whose Divine Providence orders all things for the good of all.

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Preface

THIS book is not a work of research or scholarship in the conventional academic sense. It is a book that is informed by many years of teaching the classics of children's literature to large numbers of students who are generally unfamiliar with this body of knowledge, a treasury of the world's perennial wisdom. It is a book that is founded on love, the joy of reading to my children and rediscovering one's own childhood in the process of cultivating young minds to appreciate the true, the good, and the beautiful. It is a book that is inspired from learning the art of simplicity and keeping alive the child in human nature—the appreciation of the gift of human life, the ability to wonder and imagine, the enjoyment of learning as a form of play through the delight of stories, and the clarity of seeing things truly as they are, that is, as good or evil, right or wrong, true or false. As Ethel Pochocki writes in her introduction to *Once Upon a Time Saints*, "Fairy tales clear the way for sanctity. They are the child's first morality play, clear-cut, no-nonsense black and white, good and evil, life and death—with a bit of fun thrown in to alleviate the pain." In an age that rejects moral absolutes and repudiates the whole idea of

intrinsic evils, children's literature restores the lucid meaning of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and normal and abnormal in categorical terms: "The king is naked!"

This book is intended for those readers who have not forgotten their childhood or ceased to keep alive the child within them. To a child everything begins and ends in mystery as the familiar words remind us: "Once upon a time" and "They lived happily ever after." Between the beginning and the end, however, are other wonders which make life a great adventure story and a spellbinding drama in which mysteries such as wishes coming true, luck arriving as a miracle, and the surprising gift of a home and a family continue to evoke amazement. In an era which profanes everything holy and innocent from the sanctity of a church to the sacredness of human life, children's literature illuminates the beauty of purity and innocence as something heavenly and angelic and depicts human life as a miraculous story: "But how did you come to us, you dear?/ God thought about you,/ And so I am here."

This book is also intended for the humble who have not been corrupted by intellectual pride or pseudo sophistication—for the humble who can seek the kingdom of God like a child. Raising and caring for children are humble activities with repetitious chores and endless routine tasks from changing diapers to constant cooking and cleaning to repeating lessons in manners and morals. Being a parent demands the virtue of self-forgetfulness and a loss of egotism. However, children's literature redeems the humble, the lowly, and the ordinary. Wonderful things happen to simple people, modest homes become kingly castles, and each small kind deed or every humble act of goodness produces wonderful fruits. In an age

which complicates the art of living with a rabid obsession with material goods and creature comforts and which equates the good life with a high standard of living and a quality of life ethic, children's literature teaches the simple truth about human happiness. It is the sum of little things: a loving, stable, permanent home like the homes of Rat, Badger, and Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*; sacrificing, devoted parents like Mr. and Mrs. March in *Little Women*; many brothers and sisters like the large families in both *Little Women* and *Little Men*; true, loyal friends like Tom Brown in *Tom Brown's School Days*; an innocent, carefree childhood abounding in play like the life of Robert Louis Stevenson in *A Child's Garden of Verses*; a bona fide education which cultivates in the young a knowledge of truth, goodness, and beauty like the learning at Plumfield Academy in *Little Men*.

This book is also intended for Catholics, devout Christians, pious Jews, and people of good will from all persuasions who acknowledge the sacredness of life and the hand of Divine Providence in the ordinary experiences of daily life. Children's literature portrays a sacramental view of the world in which natural events and ordinary things signify supernatural realities. In mythology the gods assume human disguise; in folk tales fairies and elves appear from another world; in journeys incredible luck happens; in adventures strange providential coincidences occur; in *At the Back of the North Woods* babies are messengers from heaven. Reality is not one-dimensional, flat, predictable, or easily controlled in children's stories as amazing phenomena occur: the arrival of the North Wind in the form of a beautiful grandmotherly woman, the visit of Pan as the piper at the gates of dawn in *The Wind in the Willows*,

the appearance of a rose-elf who overhears secrets and whispers the hidden truth. In a materialistic, hedonistic culture that flattens reality to the physical, the temporary, and the material, children's literature evokes an original Paradise before Pandora opened the box and a country at the back of the North Wind which children visit in their dreams.

This book is also intended for all true moral conservatives who agree with Abraham Lincoln that conservatism is "adherence to the old and the tried, against the new and untried" and who agree with Russell Kirk's definition of conservatism as "a preservation of the ancient moral traditions of humanity." Children's literature depicts a moral order that is consistent with the concept of natural law in Western civilization and consonant with the Ten Commandments. Lying, cheating, killing and stealing are always immoral. Pride, envy, wrath, and avarice are still deadly sins. Evil is as ugly as a witch or as repulsive as the Medusa, and goodness is as beautiful as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Sin inevitably causes suffering, whether it is Pandora disobediently opening the box or Mr. Toad stealing an automobile. There is no moral ambiguity or moral relativism in children's literature like *Aesop's Fables*, only the unchanging moral law that is true for all people in all times in all places. In a society that espouses multiculturalism and diversity and reduces universal knowledge to fashionable opinions, children's literature affirms the unity of the human race and the oneness of knowledge: all children are as mischievous as Tom Thumb, as capable of melting the heart as Gerda in *The Snow Queen*, as full of wonder as the children who explore the secret garden, and as imaginative and playful as the child in Robert Louis Stevenson's poems. "The child is

father of the man" (each person's childhood shapes his future life) is not a cultural bias but an absolute truth.

Finally, this book is written for everyone who loves wisdom and truth in its purity and simplicity and desires the wisdom of the ages and the proverbial truths that have been transmitted through the living stream of tradition, folklore, poems, fairy tales, myths, allegories, parables, and great adventure stories. For children's classics—along with Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare—belong to that body of knowledge that Matthew Arnold described as "the best that has been thought and said." Just as it is the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes* who dares to announce the self-evident truth which everyone is afraid to utter—"The king is naked"—so too children's literature can reveal truths which escape the pundits and the professors.

CHAPTER I

The Mysteries of Life

THE classics of children's literature cultivate in young minds a sense of wonder, an awareness of the mystery of life, and an awe at the nature of things, the number of things, the way things change, and the way things work. As Russell Kirk has written in *Enemies of Permanent Things*, "The fantastic and the fey, far from being unhealthy for small children, are precisely what a small child needs; under such a stimulus a child's moral imagination quickens. Out of the early tales of wonder comes a sense of awe—and the beginning of philosophy. All things begin and end in mystery." Certain topics which recur in children's literature—for example, wishes coming true—are inherent in the universal experience of all boys and girls, and each of these subjects is an item of endless interest and fascination for both children and adults alike. Why do some wishes come true, and why are other wishes never answered? Why are simpletons and fools, who do not try very hard, lucky? Why is it that a good deed with no motivation for reward or recognition is remembered and bears fruit only when one has completely forgotten about it? How does one explain "the power" of a child, of one so small, gentle, and delicate who can melt a person's heart and

whose simple requests cannot be denied? Why is it that "the truth will out" even when it is buried, hidden in the dark, and no witnesses are present? How is it possible that the very hairs of our head are numbered and that the strange coincidences which occur in our lives are not accidental but providential? Why are stories as mysterious as dreams, and why is it that the things which are make-believe sometimes have more reality than everyday experience? How does one explain true friendship, the crossing of the paths of two strangers whose bond becomes one of life's greatest blessings? Why is a simple, modest home the richest of worlds, a castle for a king and a queen? Why is it that seemingly useless things like play, which serve no practical purpose or utilitarian end, are profoundly useful, beneficial, and educational? Why is it that some experiences, like the enjoyment of beauty, have transcendental properties—an inexhaustible, infinite fullness which appears in myriad forms and becomes "a joy forever," never becoming boring or satiating? Why is nature always a source of amazement, a "wonder book" which intrigues children by the color and beauty of the seasons, by the size of mountains and oceans, and by the uncanny instincts and incredible feats of animals? Children's classics explore these mysteries and offer timeless truths and perennial wisdom in answer to these questions.

There is a mystery, a paradox, or miracle in all of these common universal experiences from wishes coming true to being favored with good luck to discovering a lifelong friendship—some elusive truth, some strange law, some unbelievable occurrences—which evoke wonder and contemplation, a way of seeing and knowing which is most natural to children (and angels) in their play and leisure. Contemplation, a form of

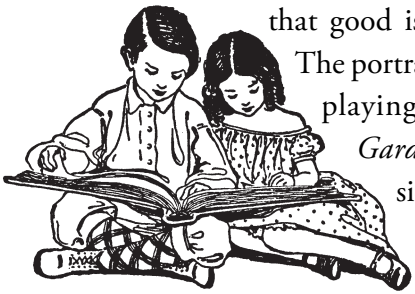
knowledge which ancient philosophers like Boethius defined with the term *intellectus*, is the ability to see and understand all at once, by way of a glance or vision, as opposed to ratio, arriving at knowledge in a logical, methodical step by step procedure. As Joseph Pieper in *Leisure: the Basis of Culture* explains the nature of contemplation, "the highest form of knowledge comes to man like a gift—the sudden illumination, a stroke of genius, true contemplation; it comes effortlessly and without trouble." Contemplative knowing comes from leisure, the free time to play, to wonder, to be quiet, to imagine, to converse, to think, and to ask "why," In other words, childhood with its carefreeness and lightheartedness naturally fosters contemplation, knowledge which is received, according to Pieper, by opening "one's eyes receptively to whatever offers itself to one's vision, and the things seen enter into us, so to speak, without calling for any effort or strain on our part to possess them." Through a child's natural sense of wonder and love of stories the mysteries of life whisper their secrets and "enter into us" unawares. The contemplation of goodness, beauty, or truth—the mystery of the "transcendentals"—appears not only in the thought of Plato or St. Thomas Aquinas but also in children's literature. The exquisite beauty of the rose and the haunting beauty of the nightingale's song in Hans Christian Andersen's stories, "The Swineherd" and "The Nightingale," always touch the heart and move the soul. The generous, hospitable hearts of Baucis and Philemon in Hawthorne's "The Miraculous Pitcher" are as limitless as the miraculous pitcher which can never be emptied of milk. Mary Lennox's desire to know everything about the secret garden in Francis Hodgson Burnett's famous novel and Diamond's desire to go

to the back of the North Wind in George MacDonald's classic reveal the child's natural desire for the truth in all its fullness and splendor. Children's classics demonstrate that, in Joseph Pieper's words, "The simple vision of the *intellectus*, however, contemplation, is not work" but rather the fruit of play—the result of having fun, of exploring nature, of participating in a favorite game, of enjoying a good story.

Children's classics depict the world as a child's kingdom of play teeming with treasures beyond number. In the famous line from Robert Louis Stevenson, "The world is so filled with a number of things, / I think we should all be as happy as kings." The mysteries of life are as much a part of this abundance as the river, the wind, the shadow, and the fire which capture the imagination of the child in Stevenson's poems. In children's literature these mysteries are forms of wealth that enrich the minds, hearts, and souls of the young with the proverbial wisdom of the ages. The knowledge that wishes can come true—for example, Cinderella's desire to go to the ball—gives hope to a child. The realization that luck favors the simple, the humble, and the innocent inspires the good news that wonderful things happen to very ordinary people. The recognition that Mother Nature provides endless sources of pleasure for children throughout the four seasons lifts the spirit and reassures the child that when one joyful adventure or season ends, another happy experience begins. In Robert Louis Stevenson's words:

> Sing a song of seasons!
> Something bright in all!
> Flowers in the summer,
> Fires in the fall!

The moral from Aesop that no good deed goes unrewarded or wasted or Hans Andersen's metaphor of the good deed as a seed buried in the ground instill in the young the law of sowing and reaping and the promise of a fruitful harvest. The discovery that truth by its very nature seeks the light of day and hates the darkness—for example, a rose-elf whispering the truth about a murder in Andersen's "The Rose Elf"—affirms that good is more powerful than evil. The portrait of the child who is always playing in Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*—playing outside and inside, playing with friends and playing alone, playing all day outdoors and playing at night in bed—reminds us that we are created and designed for happiness. The realization that the world can never be depleted of beauty which is always renewing the earth and revitalizing the human spirit as the nightingale does for the emperor in Anderson's "The Nightingale" makes creation a miraculous work of art that reflects the glory of God. The view of the home as "a world" filled with hospitality, laughter, and peace in *The Wind and the Willows* and the recognition of the family as a divine institution in Alcott's *Little Women* ("I do think that families are the most beautiful things in all the world") instill gratitude and appreciation for all the blessings of the home and family. In *Tom Brown's School Days* the discovery that there are true friends in the world—"other selves" who share the same ideals and aspirations, who allow us to enjoy life more or endure life better—overcomes the sense of alienation and loneliness that the world inflicts on us. The enjoyment of



stories which enlarge a child's mind and experience is like a boy's looking out his window at night in George MacDonald's *At the Back North Woods* and beholding the breath-taking celestial world of moon and stars—a story resembling a window to a transcendent world and a link between the divine and the human realms. In *The Princess and the Goblin* the awareness that life's journeys are not just meanderings and wanderings but full of design and purpose gives meaning to a person's life and indicates a providential plan that orders all things to the common good. When King Midas is shocked to learn that his magical golden touch has changed his charming, loving daughter to a statue of gold, we learn the preciousness of human life and cherish the gift of children. These mysteries of life, then, a storehouse of perennial wisdom and moral insight about the universal truths that govern human experience, nourish the human spirit with manna from heaven.

To borrow a phrase from Samuel Johnson, the noble purpose of literature is to allow us to enjoy life more or to endure life better. Children's classics which illuminate the mysteries of life both increase our capacity for joy and strengthen our patience and perseverance. They whet our appetite for life and instill a love of the noble, the heroic, and the courageous. They make us rejoice in our childhood and the simple, innocent pleasures which form a lifetime of fond memories, and they remind us that, though we are older, our childhood remains within us and comes alive as we enjoy the company of the young or revel in our children and grandchildren. There is comfort in knowing that, in Robert Louis Stevenson's words, time, "While flowing fast away, leaves love behind." Our lives make a difference in the lives of others. That wishes are answered,

that luck is real, that dreams are not too good to be true, that heroes conquer monsters, that little tailors defeat giants all testify to a world governed by a Divine Providence, not by might, cunning, or chance. That the world is "so filled with a number of things"—fun, friendship, stories, homes, families, adventures—acknowledges that life's deepest sources of happiness are for everyone. That the simple outwit the cunning, that the weak defeat the strong, that the humble are exalted, that children in their innocence have a "power" which makes men and beasts serve them reassure us that, in Don Quixote's words, "where there is life, there is hope." In Hawthorne's "The Paradise of Children" Hope—the last creature left in Pandora's box after the children have opened the lid—explains, "I promise never to desert you. There may come times and seasons, now and then, when you will think that I have utterly vanished. But again, and again, and again, when perhaps you least dream of it, you shall see the glimmer of my wings on the ceiling of your cottage. Yes, my dear children, and I know something very good and beautiful that is to be given you hereafter."

These are some of the ways children's classics—literature which is both wine and medicine—restore our love for the gift of life, heal our broken spirits, and strengthen our will to live and overcome adversity.

Ultimately, children's classics depict life itself as the great mystery, "the wildest of adventures" as G. K. Chesterton describes it, observing that "The supreme adventure is being born." To be born like the baby in *At the Back of the North Wind* ("Where did you come from, baby dear?/ Out of the everywhere into the here); to be born into a family where our mother and father "do lie in wait for us and leap out on us, like

brigands from a bush" as Chesterton says; to be a child and, like Robert Louis Stevenson, feel like a wealthy monarch in his kingdom ("The world is so filled with a number of things, I think we should all be as happy as kings"); to fall in love with life and explore it as a beautiful garden intended for the happiness of children like Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*; to discover the profound depths of goodness in the human heart in characters like Baucis and Philemon whose giving resembles the fountains of milk which pour from the miraculous pitcher which never empties; and to be surprised again and again with unexpected gifts and blessings in the form of friends, luck, love, and the miracles of Divine Providence—all of these make life itself a classical myth, a fairy tale, an adventure story, and a novel. In myths the gods assume human disguise and use their mysterious powers to alter the course of events; in fairy tales magical beings like elves and talking animals cause wonderful things to happen to simple people; in adventure stories the role of luck and Divine Providence never ceases to be amazing; and in a novel we wonder what will happen next, and the ending is never anticipated at the beginning. Like these narratives, children's classics also capture this great mystery of life's drama and reveal over and over again that life is, in Chesterton's words, "full of fiery possibilities": Hope appearing in Pandora's box, a gallant little tailor defeating giants and winning the princess, dreams and wishes coming true, good coming out of evil, a kind good deed leading to a lifetime of happiness, mysterious strangers appearing at odd times and unusual places to break a spell and rescue someone from danger, and sudden glimpses of heaven in the appearance of the Piper at the gates of dawn and in the arrival of the North Wind.

The vision of the mysteries of life in children's literature compares with an episode in *At the Back of the North Wind* where one of the children, Nan, experiences a strange dream: she finds herself in a summer house gazing out a window at the bright light of the moon when the door of the house opens and the man in the moon comes to take her inside the moon itself, which appears as a little house. When they enter the house of the moon, the man shows Nan the many windows which all have ladders and instructs her, "Your work will be to keep the windows bright." He explains:

> "There are ladders all about. You've only got to go out the door, and climb about. There are a great many windows you haven't seen yet, and some of them look into places you don't know anything about."

Children's classics are like the ladders. They lead to the windows in the house of the moon, lifting the mind to a vision of the stars. The windows themselves, which Nan must polish and clean with her dusters, compare with the mind and the eye which must be kept pure in order to see and know. The sights Nan beholds after climbing the ladder and dusting the windows are glimpses into life's mysteries: "But what a grand sight it was! The stars were all over my head, so bright and so near that I could almost lay hold of them." Because there are many windows, each one offers a vision into one of life's mysteries, numerous as the stars, to which there is no end: ". . . and I saw the blue sky and the clouds, and such lots of stars, all so big, and shining as hard as ever they could!"

The chapters which follow require climbing up a ladder provided by children's stories, dusting the mind, cleaning the

eyes, or polishing the glasses, and looking through the different windows to glimpse some of those stars called the mysteries of life: wishes, luck, play, friendship, stories, children, the home and family, nature, Divine Providence, goodness, truth, and beauty.