

The A-B-C book

Once there was a man who had written some new rhymes for the A-B-C Book - two lines for each letter, just as in the old A-B-C Book. He believed the old rhymes were too antiquated, that something new was needed, and he thought well indeed of his own rhymes. His new A-B-C Book was still only in handwriting, and already it had been placed beside the old printed one in the great bookcase where there stood many books, both of knowledge and for amusement. But the old A-B-C Book didn't want to be a neighbor to the new one, and therefore had sprung down from the shelf and at the same time had given the new one a push, so that it, as well as the old one, now lay on the floor, with all its loose leaves scattered about.

The old A-B-C Book lay open at the first page - and that is the most important page, for there all the letters, large and small, are displayed. That one page contains on it the essence of all the books that ever were written; it contains the alphabet, that wonderful army of signs which rules the world; truly a marvelous power they have! Everything depends on the order in which they are commanded to stand; they have the power to give life or to kill, to gladden and to sadden. Separately they mean nothing, but marshaled and ranked in word formations, what can they not accomplish! Yes, when God put them into man's thoughts, human strength became inferior to that which lay in the alphabet, and we yielded with a deep bow.

There, then, they lay now, facing upward, and the Cock which was pictured at the big A of the alphabet gleamed with feathers of red, blue, and green. Proudly he puffed himself up and ruffled his plumage, for he knew how important the letters were and that he was the only living thing among them.

When he found the old A-B-C Book had fallen open on the floor, he flapped his wings, flew out, and perched himself on a corner of the bookcase. There he preened himself with his beak and crowed loudly and long. Every single book in the case, all of which would stand day and night, as if in a trance when nobody was reading them, was roused by his trumpet call. Then the Cock spoke out loudly and clearly about the way the worthy old A-B-C Book had been insulted.

"Everything has to be new and different nowadays," he

said. "Everything has to be advanced. Children are so wise that they can read before they have even learned the alphabet. 'They should have something new!' said the man who wrote those new verses sprawling there on the floor. I know them all by heart; he admires them so much that I have heard him read them aloud more than ten times over. No, I prefer my own, the good old rhymes with Xanthus for X, and with the pictures that belong to them! I'll fight for them and crow for them! Every book in the case here knows them very well. Now I'll read aloud these new rhymes. I'll try to read them patiently, and I know we'll all agree they're worthless.

A - Adam

Had Adam obeyed, he'd not have had to leave
The Garden where first dwelt he and Eve.

B - Bank; Bee

The Bank is a place where you put your money;
The Bee is an insect that gathers honey.

"Now that verse I find profoundly insipid!" said the
Cock. "But I'll read on.

C - Columbus

Columbus sailed the ocean to the distant shore,
And then the earth became twice as big as before.

D - Denmark

About the kingdom of Denmark, there's a saying
which goes

God's hand protects it, as every Dane knows.

"That many people will consider beautiful," said the
Cock. "But I don't. I see nothing beautiful about it. But
I'll go on.

E - Elephant

The Elephant has a heavy step,
Though young in heart and full of pep.

F - Face

The Moon above feels at its best
When an eclipse gives its Face a rest.

G - Goat

It is easier to sail a boat
Than to teach manners to a Goat!

H - Hurrah

Hurrah is a word we often hear;
How often does the deed merit such cheer?

"How will a child understand that!" said the Cock. "I
suppose they'll put on the title page, 'A-B-C Book for

Big People and Little People'; but the big people have something else to do besides read the rhymes in A-B-C Books, and the little people won't be able to understand them. There is a limit to everything. But to continue:

J - Job

We have a Job to do on earth
Till earth becomes our final berth.
"Now, that's crude!" said the Cock.

K - Kitten

When Kittens grow up we call them cats
And hope they'll catch our mice and rats.

L - Lion

The savage Lion has much more sense
Than the arty critic's stinging offense!
"How are you going to explain that one to children?"
said the Cock.

M - Morning Sun

The golden Morning sun arose,
But not because of the cock's crows.
"Now he's getting personal!" said the Cock. "But then
I'm in excellent company. I'm in company with the
sun. Let's go on.

N - Negro

Black is a Negro, black as Night,
And we cannot wash him white!

O - Olive Leaf

The best of leaves - you know its name?
The dove's Olive leaf - of Bible fame.

P - Peace

That Peace may ever reign, far and near,
Is indeed a hope we all hold dear.

Q - Queen; Quack

A Queen is a lady of royal position.
A Quack is a fake and not a physician.

R - Round

One may be Round and well extended,
But that doesn't mean one is well descended!

S - Swine

Be not a braggart; be honest and true,
Though many Swine in the forest belong to you!
"Will you permit me to crow!" said the Cock. "It tries
your strength, reading so much; I must catch my
breath." And then he crowed, shrill as a trumpet of
brass, and it was a great pleasure to listen to - for the
Cock. "I'll go on.

T - Teakettle; Tea Urn

The Teakettle in the kitchen will always belong,
And yet to the Tea urn it gives its song.

U - Universe

Our Universe will always be,
Through ages to eternity.

"Now that is meant to be deep!" said the Cock. "It's so
deep I can't get to the bottom of it!

W - Washerwoman

A Washerwoman will wash and scrub
Until there's nothing left but the tub!

"Now, it's certainly impossible that he can have found
anything new for X.

X - Xantippe

In the sea of marriage are rocks of strife,
As Socrates found with Xantippe, his wife.

"He would have to take Xantippe! Xanthus is much
better.

Y - Ygdrasil

Under Ygdrasil tree the gods sat every day;
But the tree is dead and the gods have gone away.

"Now we are almost through," said the Cock. "That's a
relief. I'll continue on.

Z - Zephyr

Zephyr, in Danish, is a west wind so cold
It penetrates fur and skin, we're told.

"That's that. But that's not the end of it. Now it will be
printed and then it will be read. It will be offered in
place of the noble old rhymes in my book. What says
this assembly - learned and not so learned, single
volumes and collected works? What says the alphabet?
I have spoken; now let the others act."

The books stood still, and the bookcase stood still; but
the Cock flew back to his place at the capital A in the
old A-B-C Book and looked proudly around. "I have
spoken well, and I have crowed well. The new A-B-C
Book can't do anything like that. It will certainly die;
in fact, it's dead already, for it has no Cock!"

* * *