A WORLD FOR CHILDREN

THE HOBBIT or There and Back Again.
By J. R. R. TOLKIEN. Allen and Unwin.
7s. 6d.

The publishers claim that "The Hobbit," though very unlike "Alice," resembles it in being the work of a professor at play. A more important truth is that both belong to a very small class of books which have nothing in common save that each admits us to a world of its own—a world that seems to have been going on before we stumbled into it but which, once found by the right reader, becomes indispensable to him. Its place is with "Alice," "Flatland," "Phantastes," "The Wind in the Willows."

To define the world of "The Hobbit" is, of course, impossible, because it is new. You cannot anticipate it before you go there, as you cannot forget it once you have gone. The author's admirable illustrations and maps of Mirkwood and Gobblingate and Esgaroth give one an inkling—and so do the names of dwarf and dragon that catch our eyes as we first ruffle the pages. But there are dwarfs and dwarfs, and no common recipe for children's stories will give you creatures so rooted in their own soil and history as those of Professor Tolkien—who obviously knows much more about them than he needs for this tale. Still less will the common recipe prepare us for the curious shift from the matter-of-fact beginnings of his story ("hobbits are small people, smaller than dwarfs—and they have no beards—but very much larger than Lilliputians") to the saga-like tone of the later chapters ("It is in my mind to ask what share of their inheritance you would have paid had you found the hoard unguarded"). You must read for yourself to find out how inevitable the change is and how it keeps pace with the hero's journey. Though all is marvellous, nothing is arbitrary: all the inhabitants of Wilderland seem to have the same unquestionable right to their existence as those of our own world, though the fortunate child who meets them will have no notion—and his unlearned elders not much more—of the deep sources in our blood and tradition from which they spring.

For it must be understood that this is a children's book only in the sense that the first of many readings can be undertaken in the nursery. "Alice" is read gravely by children and with laughter by grown-ups: "The Hobbit," on the other hand, will be funniest to its youngest readers, and only years later, at a tenth or twentieth reading, will they begin to realize what deft scholarship and profound reflection have gone to make everything in it so ripe, so friendly, and in its own way so true. Prediction is dangerous: but "The Hobbit" may well prove a classic.
A World for Children.
Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples Lewis).
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