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THE INVISIBLE PLAYMATE

A STORY OF THE UNSEEN



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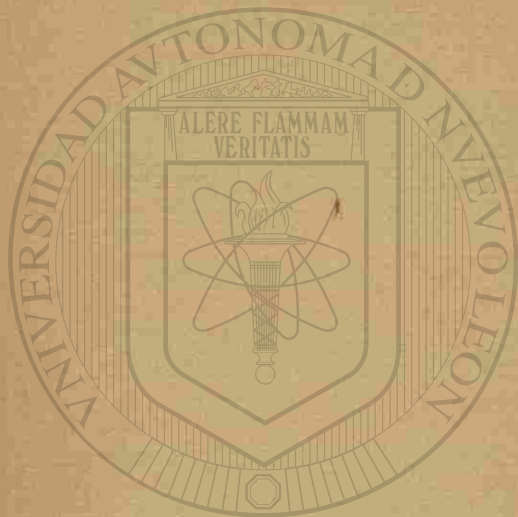
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# The Invisible Playmate

A Story of the Unseen  
With Appendices

By  
William Canton



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NEW YORK  
DUFFIELD & COMPANY

1906



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*Vous voyez sous mon rire mes larmes  
Vieux arbres, n'est-ce pas? et vous n'avez pas cru  
que j'oublierai jamais le petit disparu.*

Hugo



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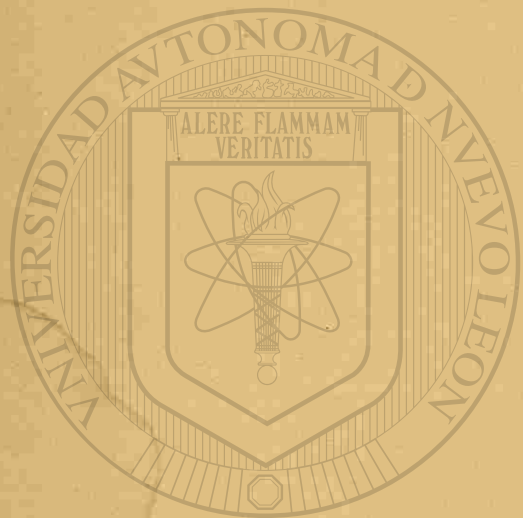
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THE INVISIBLE PLAYMATE



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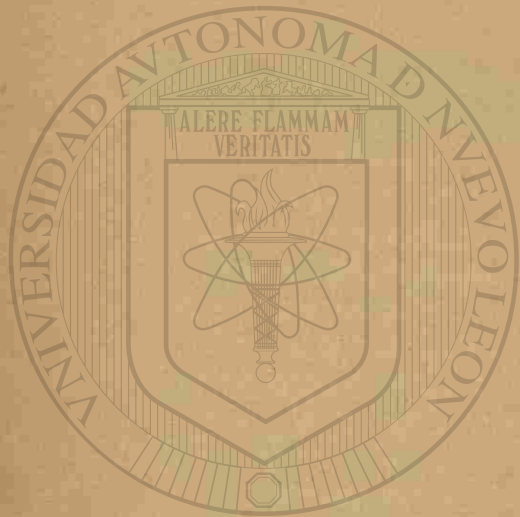
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*God, by God's ways occult,  
May—doth, I will believe—bring back  
All wanderers to a single track.*

BROWNING



THE following pages are taken from a series of letters which I received a year or two ago ; and since no one is now left to be affected by the publication of them it can be no abuse of the writer's confidence to employ them for the purpose I have in view. Only by such extracts can I convey any clear impression of the character of the person most concerned.

To many the chief interest in what follows will centre in the unconscious self-portraiture of the writer. Others may be most attracted by the frank and naïve picture of child-life. And yet a third class of readers may decide that the one passage of any real value is that which describes the



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incident with which the record closes. On these matters, however, any comment from me appears to be unnecessary.

I need only add that the writer of the letters was twice married, and that just before the death of his first wife their only child, a girl, died at the age of six weeks.

"I never could understand why men should be so insantly set on their first-born being a boy. This of ours, I am glad to say, is a girl. I should have been pleased either way, but as a matter of fact I wanted a girl. I don't know why, but somehow with a girl one feels that one has provided against the disillusionment, the discomfort, the homelessness of old age and of mental and physical decrepitude.

"For one thing above all others I

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am grateful: that, so far as I can see, heredity has played no horrible pranks upon us. The poor little mortal is wholesome and shapely from her downy little poll to her little pink toe-nails. She could not have been lovelier if Math had made her out of flowers (or was it Gwydion. You remember the *Mabino-gion*). And she grips hard enough already to remind one of her remote arboreal ancestors. One of God's own ape-lets in the Tree of life!"

"Exultant! No, dear C,—anything but that! Glad as I am, I am morbidly apprehensive and alert to a myriad possibilities of misery. I am all *quick*. I feel as though I had shed my epidermis and had but 'true skin' for every breath and touch of mischance to play upon.

"*I have been through it all before.*

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I was exultant then. I rode a bay trotting-horse, and was proud of heart and wore gloves in my cap. I feel sick at heart when I think how I was wrapped up in *that* child; how in my idolatry of her I clean forgot the savage irony of existence; how, when I was most unsuspecting, most unprepared—unarmed, naked—I was—stabbed from behind!

"I know what you will say. I see the grave look on your face as you read this. Perhaps I ought not to write it. I have never said so much to any one before; but that is what I felt—what I feel.

"Do you think, if I can help it, I shall give any one a chance of surprising me so again? This poor little mite can bring my heart with a leap into my throat, or send it down shivering into my boots—that I can't help—but never so long as I live,

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and dote on her as I may, never shall I again be taken at unawares. I have petrified myself against disaster. Sometimes as I am returning home in the gray dawn, sometimes even when I am putting the latch-key into the lock, I stop and hear an inward voice whispering, 'Baby is dead;' and I reply, 'Then she is dead.' The rest I suppress, ignore, refuse to feel or think. It is not pleasant schooling; but I think it is wise."

To this I presume I must have replied with the usual obvious arguments, for he writes later:

"No; I *don't* think I lose more than I gain. Trust me, I take all I can get: only, I provide against reprisals. Yes; unfortunately all this does sound like Caliban on Setebos. Is that Caliban's fault? Dear man, I know I shock you. I almost shock



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myself; but how can *I* trust? Shall I bargain and say, 'You took the other: ensure me this one, and I will think you good and wise and merciful as a man?' And if I make no bargain, but simply profess belief that 'all was for the best,' will that destroy the memory of all that horror and anguish? Job! The author of 'Job' knew more about astronomy than he knew about fatherhood.

"The anguish and horror were perchance meant for my chastening! Am I a man to be chastened in that way? Or will you say, perhaps but for these you would have been a lost soul by this? To such questionings there is no end. As to selfishness, I will suffer anything for her sake; but how will she profit by my suffering *for the loss of her?*"

After an interval he wrote:

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"You are very good to take so much interest in the Heiress of the Ages. We have experienced some of the ordinary troubles—and let me gravely assure you that this is the single point in which she *does* resemble other children—but she is well at present and growing visibly. The Norse god who heard the growing of the grass and of the wool on the sheep's back would have been stunned with the *tintamare* of her development.

"Thereto she *noticeth*. So saith her mother; so averreth the nurse, an experienced and unimpeachable witness. Think of it, C! As the human mind is the one reality amid phenomena, this young person is really establishing and giving permanence to certain bits of creation. To that extent the universe is the more solid on her account.

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"Nor are her virtue and excellency confined to noticing; she positively radiates. Where she is, that is the sunny side of the house. I am no longer surprised at the folk-belief about the passing of a maiden making the fields fertile. I observe that in the sheltered places where she is taken for an airing the temperature is the more genial, the trees are in greener leaf, and the red half of the apple is that nearest the road. . . .

"Accept for future use this shrewd discovery from my experience. When a baby is restless and fretful, *hold its hands!* That steadies it. It is not used to the speed at which the earth revolves and the solar system whirls towards the starry aspect of Hercules (half a million miles a day!) Or it may be that coming out of the vortex of atoms it is sub-conscious of some sense of falling through the

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void. The gigantic paternal hands close round the warm, soft, twitching fists, soft as grass, and strong as the everlasting hills.

"I wonder if those worthy old Accadians had any notion of this when they prayed, 'Hold Thou my hands.'"

In several subsequent letters he refers to the growth and the charming ways of the "little quadruped," the "quadrumanous angel," the "bishop" (from an odd resemblance in the pose of the head to the late Bishop of Manchester). One passage must be given:

"It is an 'animal most gracious and benignant,' as Francesca calls Dante. Propped up with cushions, she will sit for half an hour on the rug at my feet while I am writing, content to have her fluffy head



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patted at the end of every second paragraph.

"This evening she and I had the study to ourselves. She on my knee, cosily snuggling within my arm, with a tiny hand clasped about each thumb. We were sitting by the window, and the western sky was filled with a lovely green light, which died out very slowly. It was the strangest and dreamiest of afterglows. She was curiously quiet and contented. As she sat like that, my mind went back to that old life of mine, that past which seemed so many centuries away; and I remembered how that poor little white creature of those unforgettable six weeks sat where *she* was now sitting—so unlike *her*, so white and frail and old-womanish, with her wasted arms crossed before her, and her thin, worn face fading, fading, fading away into

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the everlasting dark. Why does—how *can* things like these happen?

"She would have been nine now if she had lived. How she would have loved this tiny sister!

"You will be amused, perhaps you will be amazed, at my foolishness. When the postman hands you *Rhymes about a Little Woman*\* you will understand what I mean. In trotting up and down with the Immortal in my arms, crooning her to sleep, these rhymes *came*. I did not *make* them; they are a gift of the gods—so honour them! And sing—don't read—them. Seriously, the noticeable thing about them is their unlikeness to fictitious child-poems. I did not print them on that account, of course. But to me it will always

\* See p. 41.

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be a pleasant thing to see, when I am very, very old, that genuine bit of the past. And I like to fancy that some day she will read—with eyes not dry—these nonsense verses that her poor old father used to sing to her in

*“The days before  
God shut the doorways of her head.”*

“You remember what I said about holding the child’s hands? When I went to bed very late last night, the words, ‘Hold Thou my hands,’ kept floating about in my mind, and then there grew on me the most perplexing half-recollection of a lovely air. I could not remember it quite, but it simply haunted me. Then, somehow, these words seemed to grow into it and out of it:

*Hold Thou my hands!  
In grief and joy, in hope and fear,  
Lord, let me feel that Thou art near,  
Hold Thou my hands!*

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*If e'er by doubts  
Of Thy good fatherhood depressed,  
I cannot find in Thee my rest,  
Hold Thou my hands!*

*Hold Thou my hands,—  
These passionate hands too quick to  
smite,  
These hands so eager for delight,—  
Hold Thou my hands!*

*And when at length,  
With darkened eyes and fingers cold,  
I seek some last loved hand to hold,  
Hold Thou my hands!*

“I could endure it no longer, so I woke N [his wife]. I was as gentle, gradual, considerate as possible!—just as if she were waking naturally. And she *re-mon-strat-ed!* ‘The idea of waking any one at three in the morning to bother about a tune!’ Dear, dear!

“Well, it was from ‘The Yeoman of the Guard.’ You will know where by the rhythm and refrain!”



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As the months went by the "benign anthropoid" developed into a "stodgy volatile elephant with a precarious faculty of speech," and her father affected to be engrossed in ethnological and linguistic studies based on observations of her experiments in life and language. I now extract without further interpolation, merely premising that frequent intervals elapsed between the writing of the various passages, and that they themselves are but a small selection from many similar:

"The 'golden ephelant' is unquestionably of Early-English origin. Perpend: we in our degeneracy say 'milk;' she preserves the Anglo-Saxon 'meolc.' Hengist and Horsa would recognize her as a kinswoman. Through the long ages between them and her, the pleasant guttural pronunciation of the ancient pastures has

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been discarded by all but the traditional dairyman, and even he has modified the *o* into *u*. Similarly a 'wheel' is a 'hwéol.' But, indeed, she is more A-S than the Anglo-Saxons themselves. All her verbs end in 'en,' even 'I am-en.'"

"It is singularly interesting to me to watch the way in which she adapts words to her purposes. She uses 'knee' for 'to sit down.' To-day she made me 'knee' in the arm-chair beside her. 'Too big' expresses, comically enough sometimes, all kinds of impossibility. She asked me to play one of her favourite tunes. 'Pappa cannot, dearie.' 'Oh!'—with much surprise—'Too big?'"

"Oh, man, man, what wonderful creatures these bairnies are! Did it

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ever occur to you that they must be the majority of the human race? The men and women combined may be about as numerous, but they must far outnumber the men or the women taken separately, and as all the women and most of the men—bad as they are—side with them, what a political power they might be, if they had their rights! I have been thinking of this swarming of the miniature people, all over the globe, during the last few days. Could one but make a poem of *that!* I tried—and failed. ‘Too big!’ But I did the next best thing—conceived an *Unknown German Child-poem*, and—what think you?—reviewed it.\* If after reading it, the ‘Astrologer’ [a hypercritical young friend] tells you it reminds him of Carlyle, just ask him whether he never, *never* heard of Richter.”

\* See p. 61.

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“She delights in music and drawing. It is curious how sharp she is to recognise things. She picked out a baby in a picture the other day, and discovered a robin among the flowers and leaves high up on a painted panel of the mirror. What a contrast to the grown men of half-savage tribes one reads of, who cannot distinguish a house from a tree in a drawing! She has, too, quite an extraordinary ear for rhyme and rhythm. I find, to my amazement, that she can fill in the rhymes of a nonsense poem of twenty lines—‘What shall we do to be rid of care?’ by the way\*—and when she does not know the words of a verse, she times out the metre with the right number of blanks.

“One is puzzled, all the while, to know how much she *understands*.

\* See p. 47.



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In one of her rhymes she sings,  
'Birds are singing in the bowers.'  
The other day as she was chanting  
it a dog went by, 'That bowers!'  
(bow-wows!) she cried suddenly,  
pointing to the dog."

"To-day she was frightened for  
the first time. We heard her roar-  
ing, 'No, no,' in great wrath in the  
garden. A sparrow had dropped on  
the grass somewhere near her, and  
she was stamping and waving her  
hands in a perfect panic. When she  
found it was not to be driven away,  
she came sweeping in like a little  
elephant, screaming for 'mamma' to  
take up arms against that audacious  
'dicken.' It was really ludicrous to  
see her terrorised by that handful of  
feathers.

"Yet she is not a bit afraid of big  
things. The dog in the kennel barked

### A Story of the Unseen

the first time she went near him.  
'Oh!' she exclaimed, with a little  
laugh of surprise, 'coughing!' Now  
she says, 'He not bark; only say  
good-morning.' She *must* kiss the  
donkey's forehead; she invites the  
mother-hen to shake hands, and the  
other day she was indignant that I  
would not hold a locomotive till she  
'toked it dear head.' She has a  
comfortable notion that things in  
general were intended for her. If  
she wants a cow or a yoke of horses  
with the ploughman for a plaything,  
it is but to 'ask my pappa' and  
have. The wind and the rain and  
the moon 'walking' come out to see  
*her*, and the flowers 'wake up' with  
the same laudable object."

"Yes; a child has a civilising effect.  
I feel that I am less of a bear than I  
was. It is with some men as it is

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with the blackthorn: the little white flower comes out first, and then the whole gnarled faggot breaks into leaf."

"I came to-day across a beautiful little bit from the letters of Marcus Aurelius. 'On my return from Lorium I found my little lady—*dominulam meam*—in a fever; 'later: 'You will be glad to hear that our little one is better and running about the room.' The old Emperor was one of ourselves. Indeed, look at his face in those marble busts in the Museum; he might have been a man of our own generation. It was he, I remember, who wrote, 'One prays—How shall I not lose my little son? Do thou pray thus—How shall I not be afraid to lose him?' Ah, how shall I not be afraid!"

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"We have had our first walk in the dark—a dark crowded with stars. She had never seen it before. It perplexed her, I think, for she stood and looked and said nothing. But it did not frighten her in the least.

"I want her to have some one marvellous thing impressed on her memory—some one ineffable recollection of childhood; and it is to be the darkness associated with shining stars and a safe feeling that her father took her out into it. This is to last all through her life—till the 'great dark' comes; so that when it does come, it shall be with an old familiar sense of fatherhood and starlight.

"You will laugh at me—but oh, no! you will not laugh—when I tell you what a horror haunts me lest I should die before her little brain has been stamped with a vivid memory



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of me—clear as life, never to be obliterated, never even to be blurred. Who was it named Augustine 'the son of the tears of St. Monica'? This child might well be called the daughter of my tears—yet they have not been bitter ones.

"When she did speak—fluently at last—it was to suppose that a good many pipes were being lit up in the celestial spaces! This was both prosy and impossible, yet what could I say? Ah, well! some day she shall learn that the stars are not vestas, and that the dark is only the planetary shadow of a great rock in a blue and weary land—though little cause have I now, of all men, to call it weary! Has that notion of the shadow ever occurred to you? And do you ever think of night on one of the small planetoids, five miles in diameter? That were the shadow

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of a mere boulder; and yet on that boulder, though there can be neither water nor air there, what if there were some unknown form of motherhood, of babyhood, curled up asleep in the darkness?

"But to return to Pinaforifera. Thinking these stars but vestas for the lighting of pipes, what must she do but try to blow them out, as she blows out her 'dad's'! I checked that at once, for i' faith this young person's powers are too miraculous to allow of any trifling with the stellar systems."

"I fear I must weary you with these 'trivial fond records.' Really she is very interesting. 'Ever what you doing?' 'Upon *my* word!' 'Dear iccle c'eature?' 'Poor my hands!'—just as people used to say, 'Good, my lord!'"

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"What heartless little wretches they are after all! Sometimes, when I ask her for a kiss, she puts her head aside and coolly replies, 'I don't want to!' What can you say to that? One must respect her individuality, though she is but a child. Now and again she has her tender moments: 'I shut-a door and leave poor you?' 'Yes, you did, dear.' 'I stay with you!'—which means inexpressible things. You should see the odd coaxing way in which she says, 'My father!' Then this to her doll: 'You cry? I kiss you. You not cry no more.'"

"Upon my life I am growing imbecile under the influence of this Pinaforifera. I met a very old, wrinkled, wizened little woman to-day, and as I looked at her poor dim eyes and weathered face, it flashed

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upon me like an inspiration—'And she, too, was once a rosy, merry little mortal who set some poor silly dad doting!' Then at the station I came across what seemed to me quite an incident—but, there, I have been daft enough to write the matter out in full, and you can read it, if pater-nity and its muddle-headedness do not fill your soul with loathing."\*

"By the way, she has got a new plaything. I do not know what suggested the idea; I don't think it came from any of us. Lately she has taken to nursing an invisible 'iccle gaal' (little girl) whom she wheels about in her toy perambulator, puts carefully to bed, and generally makes much of. This is—'Yourn iccle baby, pappa, old man!' if you please. When I sit down, this accession to

\* See p. 81.



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the family is manifest to her on my right knee; and she sits on my left and calls it a 'nice lovely iccle thing.' When she goes to bed she takes Struwwelpeter, Sambo (a sweet being in black india-rubber), and, of all people, Mrs. Grundy; and when she has been tucked in she makes place for 'yourn iccle baby,' which, of course, I have to give her with due care. It is very odd to see her put her hands together for it, palms upward, and to hear her assurance, 'I not let her fall, pappa.'"

"What droll little brains children have! In Struwwelpeter, as probably you are not aware, naughty Frederic hurts his leg, and has to be put to bed; and

*'The doctor came and shook his head,  
And gave him nasty physic too.'*

This evening, as baby was prancing

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about in her night-dress, her mother told her she would catch cold, and then she would be ill and would have to be put to bed. 'And will the doctor come and shook my head?' she asked eagerly. Of course we laughed outright; but the young person was right for all that. If the doctor was to do any good, it could not conceivably have been by shaking his own head!"

"I told you about her invisible playmate. Both N [his wife] and I have been wondering whether the child is only what is called making-believe, or whether she really sees anything. I suppose you have read Galton's account of the power of 'visualising,' as he calls it; that is, of actually seeing outside of one the appearance of things that exist only in imagination. He says somewhere

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that this faculty is very strongly developed in some young children, who are beset for years with the difficulty of distinguishing between the objective and the subjective. It is hard to say how one should act in a case of this sort. To encourage her in this amusement might lead to some morbid mental condition; to try to suppress it might be equally injurious, for this appears to be a natural faculty, not a disease. Let nature have her own way?

"If I rest my foot on my right knee to unlace my boot, she pulls my foot away—'Pappa, you put yourn foot on yourn iccle baby.' She won't sit on my right knee at all until I have pretended to transfer the playmate to the other.

"This girl is going to be a novelist. We have got a rival to the great Mrs. Harris. She has invented

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Mrs. Briss. No one knows who Mrs. Briss is. Sometimes she seems to mean herself; at other times it is clearly an interesting and inscrutable third person."

"The poor wee ape is ill. The doctor doesn't seem to understand what is the matter with her. We must wait a day or two for some development."

"How these ten days and nights have dragged past! Do not ask me about her. I cannot write. I cannot think."

"My poor darling is dead! I hardly know whether I am myself alive. Half of my individuality has left me. I do not know myself.

"Can you believe this? I cannot; and yet I saw it. A little while be-



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fore she died I heard her speaking in an almost inaudible whisper. I knelt down and leaned over her. She looked curiously at me and said faintly: 'Pappa, I not let her fall.' 'Who, dearie?' 'Yourn iccle baby. I gotten her in here.' She moved her wasted little hand as if to lift a fold of the bed-clothes. I raised them gently for her, and she smiled like her old self. How can I tell the rest?

"Close beside her lay that other little one, with its white worn face and its poor arms crossed in that old-womanish fashion in front of her. Its large, suffering eyes looked for a moment into mine, and then my head seemed filled with mist and my ears buzzed.

"*I saw that.* It was not hallucination. It was *there*.

"Just think what it means, if that

### A Story of the Unseen

actually happened. Think what must have been going on in the past, *and I never knew*. I remember, now, she never called it 'mamma's baby'; it was always 'yourn.' Think of the future, now that they are both—what? Gone?

"If it actually happened! I *saw* it. I am sane, strong, in sound health. I saw it—*saw* it—do you understand? And yet how incredible it is!"

Some months passed before I heard again from my friend. In his subsequent letters, which grew rarer and briefer as time went on, he never again referred to his loss or to the incident which he had described.

His silence was singular, for he was naturally very communicative. But what most surprised me was the absolute change of character that

The Invisible Playmate

seemed to have been brought about in an instant—literally in the twinkling of an eye. One glimpse of the Unseen (as he called it) and the embittered recollections of bereavement, the resentment, the distrust, the spirit of revolt were all swept into oblivion. Even the new bereavement had no sting. There was no anguish; there were no words of desolation. The man simply stood at gaze, stunned with amazement.

RHYMES ABOUT A LITTLE  
WOMAN

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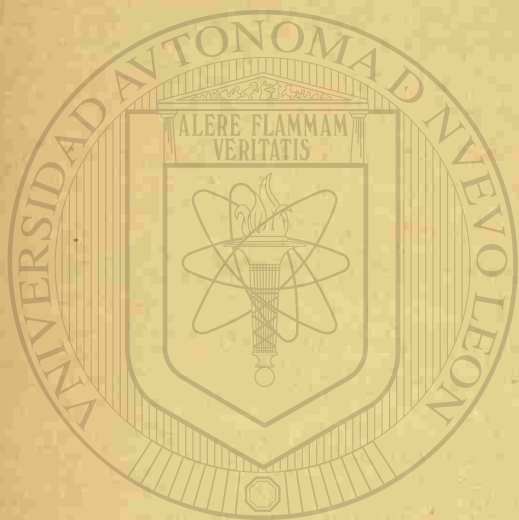
The Invisible Playmate

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RHYMES ABOUT A LITTLE  
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*She is my pride ; my plague : my rest ; my  
rack : my bliss ; my bane :  
She brings me sunshine of the heart ; and  
soft'ning of the brain.*



I.

SHE'S very, very beautiful ; but—  
alas!—

Isn't it a pity that her eyes are glass?  
And her face is only wax, coloured  
up, you know ;  
And her hair is just a fluff of very  
fine tow!

No!—she's *not* a doll. That will  
never do—

Never, never, never, for it is not  
true!

Did they call you a doll? Did they  
say that to *you*?

Oh, your eyes are little heavens of  
an earth made new ;

About a Little Woman

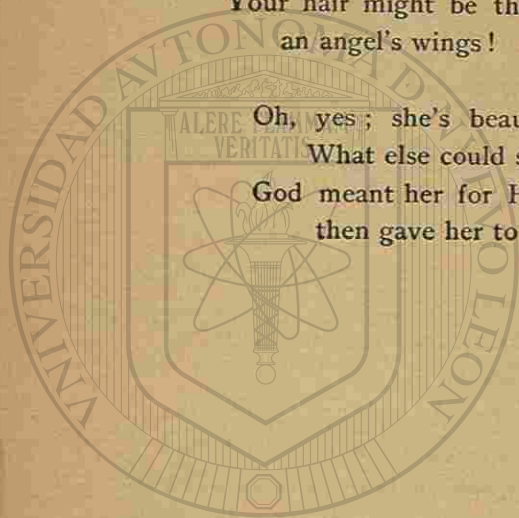
Your face, it is the blossom of mortal  
things;

Your hair might be the down from  
an angel's wings!

Oh, yes; she's beauti-beautiful!

What else could she be?

God meant her for Himself first,  
then gave her to me.



About a Little Woman

II

SHE was a treasure; she was a sweet;  
She was the darling of the Army and  
the Fleet!

When—she—smiled—  
The crews of the line-of-battle ships  
went wild!

When—she—cried—  
Whole regiments reversed their arms  
and sighed!

When she was sick, for her sake  
The Queen took off her crown and  
sobbed as if her heart would  
break.

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About a Little Woman

III

LOOK at her shoulders now they are  
bare;

Are there any signs of feathers grow-  
ing there?

No, not a trace; she cannot fly  
away;

This wingless little angel has been  
sent to stay.

About a Little Woman

IV

WHAT shall we do to be rid of care?  
Pack up her best clothes and pay her  
fare;

Pay her fare and let her go  
By an early train to Jer-I-Cho.

There in Judea she will be  
Slumbering under a green palm-tree;

And the Arabs of the Desert will  
come round

When they see her lying on the  
ground,

And some will say "Did you ever see  
Such a remark-a-bil babee?"

And others, in the language the  
Arabs use,

*"Nous n'avons jamais vu une telle  
pappoose!"*

About a Little Woman

And she will grow and grow ; and  
then

She will marry a chief of the Desert  
men ;

And he will keep her from heat and  
cold,  
And deck her in silk and satin and  
gold—

With bangles for her feet and jewels  
for her hair,  
And other articles that ladies wear !

So pack up her best clothes, and let  
her go  
By an early train to Jer-I-Cho !

Pack up her best clothes, and pay  
her fare ;  
So *we* shall be rid of trouble and  
care !

About a Little Woman

v

TAKE the idol to her shrine ;  
In her cradle lay her !  
Worship her—she is divine ;  
Offer up your prayer !  
She will bless you, bed and board,  
If befittingly adored.

About a Little Woman

VI

ON a summer morning, Babsie up a  
tree;

In came a Blackbird, sat on Babsie's  
knee.

Babsie to Blackbird—"Blackbird,  
how you do?"

Blackbird to Babsie—"Babsie, how  
was you?"

"How was *you* in this commodious  
tree—

"How was *you* and all your famu—  
ilu—ee?"

About a Little Woman

VII

THIS is the way the ladies ride—  
Saddle-a-side, saddle-a-side!

This is the way the gentlemen ride—  
Sitting astride, sitting astride!

This is the way the grandmothers  
ride—

Bundled and tied, bundled and tied!

This is the way the babbykins ride—  
Snuggled inside, snuggled inside!

This is the way when they are late,  
They *all* fly over a five-barred gate!

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About a Little Woman

VIII

WE are not wealthy ; but, you see,  
Others are far worse off than we.

Here's a gaberlunzie begging at the  
door—

*If we gave him Babs,* he'd need no  
more!

Oh, she'll fill your cup, and she'll fill  
your can ;

She'll make you happy, happy ! Take  
her, beggar man !

Give a beggar Babsie? Give this  
child away ?

That would leave *us* poor, and poor,  
for ever and a day !

About a Little Woman

*After-thought—*

THE gaberlunzie man is sad ;  
The Babe is far from glee ;  
He with his poverty is plagued—  
And with her poor-teeth \* she !

\* As who should say "poortith."

About a Little Woman

IX

OH, where have you been, and how  
do you do,

And what did you beg, or bor-  
row, or buy

For this little girl with the sash of  
blue?

Why,

A cushie-coo; and a cockatoo;

And a cariboo; and a kangaroo;

And a croodlin' doo; and a quag  
from the Zoo—

And *all* for the girl with the sash of  
blue!

About a Little Woman

X

WHEN she's very thirsty, what does  
she do?

She croons to us in Doric; she mur-  
murs "A-coo!"

Oh, the little Scotch girl, who would  
ever think

She'd want a coo—a whole coo—  
needing but a drink!

Moo, moo!—a coo!

Mammie's gone to market; Mam-  
mie'll soon be here;

Mammie's bought a brindled coo!  
Patience, woman dear!

About a Little Woman

Don't you hear your Crummie lowing  
in the lane?

She's going up to pasture; we'll  
bring her home again!

Moo, moo!—a coo!

Grow sweet, you little wild flowers,  
about our Crummie's feet;

Be glad, you green and patient grass,  
to have our Crummie eat;

And hasten, Crummie, hasten, or  
what shall I do?

For here's a waesome lassie skirlin'  
for a coo!

Moo, moo!—a coo!

A moment yet! The sun is set, and  
all the lanes are red;

And here is Crummie coming to the  
milking shed!

About a Little Woman

Why, mother, mother, don't you hear  
this terrible to-do

*Dépêchez-vous!* A coo—a coo—a  
kingdom for a coo!

Moo, moo!—a coo!



About a Little Woman

XI

WHEN she laughs and waves about  
Her pink small fingers, who can  
doubt

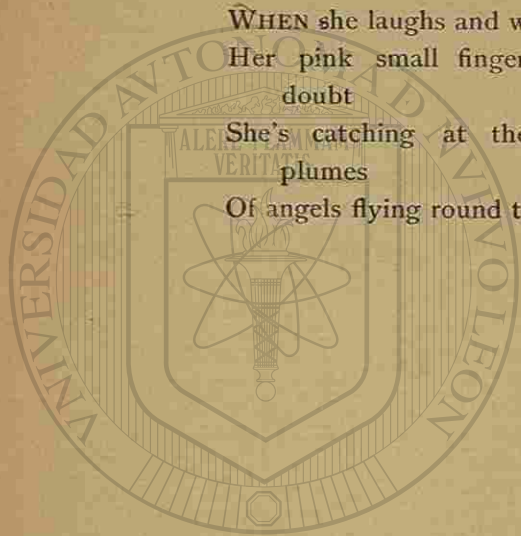
She's catching at the glittering  
plumes

Of angels flying round the rooms?

About a Little Woman

XII

POOR Babbles is dead with sleep;  
Poor Babbles is dead with sleep!  
Eyes she hardly can open keep;  
Lower the gas to a glimmering peep.  
All good angels, hover and keep  
Watch above her—poor Babbles —  
asleep.



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AN UNKNOWN CHILD-POEM



UANL

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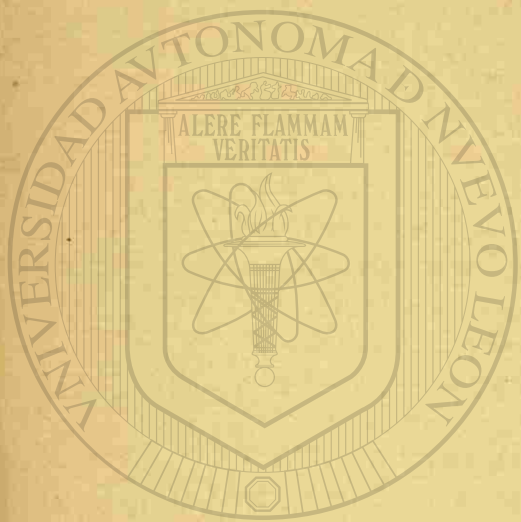
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®

*Murmure indistinct, vague, obscure confus,  
brouillé :*

*Dieu, le bon vieux grand-père, écoute émerveillé.*

HUGO



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OF all possible books in this age of waste-paper, the wretched little volume before me, labelled *Gedichte* and bearing the name of a certain "Arm: Altegans," is assuredly one of the unluckiest. Outside the Fatherland it cannot by any chance be known to mortal; and among the author's compatriots I have been unable to discover man, woman, or child who has heard of Altegans, or is aware of the existence of these *Poems* of his. Yet I venture to express the opinion that this scarecrow of a duodecimo, with its worn-out village-printer's type and its dingy paper-bag pages, contains some pas-



### About a Little Woman

sages which for suggestiveness and for melody of expression are not unworthy of the exquisite "founts" and hand-made papers of wealthier and, perhaps, less noticeable singers.

Thin as the book is, it contains, as most books do, more than one cares to read; but even some of this superfluous material is in a measure redeemed by its personal bearing. One catches a glimpse of the man; and after reading his "Erster Schulgang"—the one real poem in the collection—I must confess that I felt some little curiosity and interest in regard to the author. One learns, for instance, that in 1868, when the book was printed, he was a winter-green "hoary-head"; that he had lost wife and child long ago, in "the years still touched with morning-red"; though, like Hans Sachs, he had—

### An Unknown Child-Poem

*"bending o'er his leather,  
Made many a song and shoe together,"—*

the shoe better than the song, but, he adds whimsically, "better perchance because of the song;" that he thought no place in the earth-round could compare with his beloved village of Wieheisstes in the pleasant crag-and-fir region of Schlaraffenland ("Glad am I to have been born in thee, thou heart's-dearest village among the pines;" and here by the way, have we not a reminiscence of Jean Paul, or is the phrase merely a coincidence?); that as a matter of fact, however, he had never during his seventy odd years travelled as many miles as ten from his Wieheisstes; that though confined in a mere nut-shell of a green valley he was a cosmopolite of infinite space; that his heart brimmed over with brotherly love for all men—for all

### An Unknown Child-Poem

women especially, and still more especially, poor hoary head! for all children; but truly for all men—regarding even the levity with which they treated his name rather as a token of affectionate familiarity than as an evidence of ill-breeding, and, indeed, humorously addressing himself in more than one of the *gedichte* as “thou Old-Goose.” Which last play of fancy has caused me to question—without, alas! hope of answer now—whether the abbreviated prenomens on the title-page stands for an heroic “Arminius” or for an ironical “Armer” or “Arme,” as one prefers the gender; giving us the net result “Poor Old-Goose!”

• Twenty years and more have elapsed since the aged worker in leather and verse gave the “Erster Schulgang”—“First day at school,” shall we say?—and these personal

### An Unknown Child-Poem

confidences to an apathetic German. Doubtless he has, long since, been gathered to his lost ones in the shadow of the gray-stone blue-slatted little church. Poor singing soul, he is deaf to anything that compatriot or “speech-cousin” can say now of him or of his rhymes!

Let me, nevertheless, attempt to make an *impressioniste* transcript of this “Erster Schulgang.” To reproduce the tender, simple music of its verse would be impossible; a mere prose translation would be indeed a—*traduction*.

The poem opens with a wonderful vision of children; delightful as it is unexpected; as romantic in presentment as it is commonplace in fact. All over the world—and all under it, too, when their time comes—the children are trooping to school. The great globe swings round out of the



### An Unknown Child-Poem

dark into the sun; there is always morning somewhere; and for ever in this shifting region of the morning-light the good Altegans sees the little ones afoot—shining companies and groups, couples and bright solitary figures; for they all seem to have a soft heavenly light about them!

He sees them in country lanes and rustic villages; on lonely moorlands, where narrow brown foot-tracks thread the expanse of green waste, and occasionally a hawk hovers overhead, or a mountain-ash hangs its scarlet berries above the huge fallen stones set up by the Druids in the old days: he sees them on the hill-sides, in the woods, on the stepping-stones that cross the brook in the glen, along the sea-cliffs and on the wet ribbed sands; trespassing on the railway lines, making short cuts through the corn, sitting in ferry-boats: he

### An Unknown Child-Poem

sees them in the crowded streets of smoky cities, in small rocky islands, in places far inland where the sea is known only as a strange tradition.

The morning-side of the planet is alive with them; one hears their pattering footsteps everywhere. And as the vast continents sweep "eastering out of the high shadow which reaches beyond the moon" (here, again, I would have suspected our poet of an unconscious reminiscence of Jean Paul, were it not that I remember Sir Thomas Browne has some similar whimsical phrase), and as new nations, with *their* cities and villages, their fields, woods, mountains and seashores, rise up into the morning-side, lo! fresh troops, and still fresh troops, and yet again fresh troops of "these small school-going people of the dawn!"

How the quaint old man loves to



### An Unknown Child-Poem

linger over this radiant swarming of young life! He pauses for a moment to notice this or that group or even some single mite. He marks their various nationalities—the curious little faces of them, as the revolving planet shows him (here he remembers with a smile the coloured wall-maps of the school-room) the red expanse of Europe, the green bulk of America, or the huge yellow territory of the Asiatics. He runs off in a discursive stanza in company with the bird-nesting truant. Like a Greek divinity leaning out of Olympus, he watches a pitched battle between bands of these diminutive Stone-age savages belonging to rival schools. With tender humour he notes the rosy beginning of a childish love-idyll between some small Amazon and a smaller urchin whom she has taken under her protection.

### An Unknown Child-Poem

What are weather and season to this incessant panorama of childhood? The pigmy people trudge through the snow on moor and hillside; wade down flooded roads; are not to be daunted by wind or rain, frost or the white smother of "millers and bakers at fisticuffs." Most beautiful picture of all, he sees them travelling schoolward by that late moonlight which now and again in the winter months precedes the tardy dawn.

Had the "Erster Schulgang" ended here, I cannot but think the poem would have been worth preserving. This vision, however, is but a prelude, and as a prelude it is perhaps disproportionately long. A blue-eyed, flaxen-haired German mädchen of four is the heroine of this "First day at school"—Altegan's own little maiden, perchance, in the

### An Unknown Child-Poem

years that were; but of this there is no evidence.

What an eventful day in each one's life, he moralises, is this first day at school—no other day more truly momentous; and yet how few of us have any recollection of it!

That first school-going is the most daring of all adventures, the most romantic of all marvellous quests. Palæocrystic voyages, searches for north-west passages, wanderings in the dwarf-peopled forests of dusky continents are trifling matters compared with this. This is the veritable quest for the Sangreal! "Each smallest lad as he crosses the home-threshold that morning is a Columbus steering to a new world, to golden Indies that truly lie—at last—beyond the sunset. He is a little Ulysses outward-bound on a long voyage, wherethrough help him, thou dear

### An Unknown Child-Poem

Heaven, past the Calypso Isles and Harpy-shores lest he perish miserably!"

And thus, continues Altegans, after a page or two of such simple philosophizing, little "blue-eyed flax-head" goes forth, with well-stored satchel and primer, and with a mother's kiss; gleeful, it may be; reluctant, perchance; into the world, nay into the universe, nay into the illimitable cosmos beyond these flaming star-walls; for of all future knowing and loving, and serving and revolt against service, is not this the actual beginning?

Very prettily does he picture the trot of the small feet along the narrow pathway through the fields where the old Adam—the "red earth" of the furrows, he means—is still visible through the soft green blades of the spring corn; the walk along the lanes



### An Unknown Child-Poem

with their high hedges, and banks of wild flowers, and overhanging clouds of leaf and blossom; the arrival at the rustic schoolhouse; the crowd of strange faces; the buzz and noise of conning and repetition.

And then, behold! as the timid new scholar sits on the well-polished bench, now glancing about at her unknown comrades, now trying to recollect the names and shapes of the letters in her primer, the schoolhouse vanishes into transparent air, and the good Altegans perceives that his little maiden is no longer sitting among German fields!

Instead of the young corn, papyrus-reeds are growing tall and thick; the palm has replaced the northern pine; Nilus, that ancient river, is flowing past; far away in the distance he descries the peaks of the Pyramids, while behind the child rises a huge

### An Unknown Child-Poem

granite obelisk sculptured from apex to base with hieroglyphic characters. For, he asks by way of explaining this startling dissolving view, does not every child when it learns the alphabet sit in the shadow of the sculptured "needle-pillars" of Egypt the ancient?

Where could this simple village shoemaker have picked up this crumb of knowledge? It seems only yesterday that Professor Max Müller thought it a matter of sufficient novelty to tell us that "whenever we wrote an *a* or a *b* or a *c*, we wrote what was originally a hieroglyphic picture. Our L is the crouching lion; our F the cerates, a serpent with two horns; our H the Egyptian picture of a sieve."

"O thou tenderest newly-blossomed little soul-and-body, thou



### An Unknown Child-Poem

freshest-formed flower-image of man,"  
exclaims the emotional Altegens,  
"how strange to see thee shining  
with this newness in the shadow of  
the old, old brain-travail, the old, old  
wisdom of a world dead and buried  
centuries ago; how strange to see  
thee, thou tiny prospective ancestress,  
struggling with the omnipotent tra-  
dition of antiquity!

"For, of a truth, of all things in  
this world-round there is nothing  
more marvellous than those carven  
characters, than the many-vocabled  
colonies which have descended from  
them, and which have peopled the  
earth with so much speech and  
thought, so much joy and sorrow, so  
much hope and despair.

"Beware of these, thou little child,  
for they are strong to kill and strong  
to save! Verily, they are living  
things, stronger than powers and

### An Unknown Child-Poem

principalities. When Moses dropped  
the stone tablets, the wise Rabbis  
say the letters flew to and fro in the  
air; the visible form alone was  
broken, but the divine law remains  
intact forever. They are, indeed  
alive—they are the visible shapes of  
what thou canst not see, of what can  
never die.

"Heed well these strong ones—  
Aleph the Ox, the golden cherub  
whose mighty wings spread athwart  
the Temple of Solomon, the winged  
bull that men worshipped in As-  
syria; him and all his fellows heed  
thou carefully! They are the lords  
of the earth, the tyrants of the souls  
of men. No one can escape them  
save him alone who hath mastered  
them. He whom they master is  
lost, for 'the letter killeth.' But  
these things thou dost not yet un-  
derstand."

### An Unknown Child-Poem

"Close now thy book, little learner.  
How Socrates and Solomon would  
have marvelled to hear the things  
that thou shalt learn! Close thy  
book; clap thy hands gladly on the  
outgoing (*Scottice* skaling) song;  
hie thee home! Thy dear mother  
awaits thee, and thy good gray  
grandfather will look down on thee  
with shrewd and kindly eyes, and  
question thee gaily. Run home,  
thou guileless scholarling; thy  
mother's hands are fain of thee."

A little abruptly perhaps, unless  
we recollect that a half is greater  
than the whole, the simple poet flies  
off at a tangent from his theme, and  
muses to his own heart:

"And we, too, are children; this,  
our first long day at school. Oh,  
gentle hand, be fain for us when we  
come home at eventide; question us

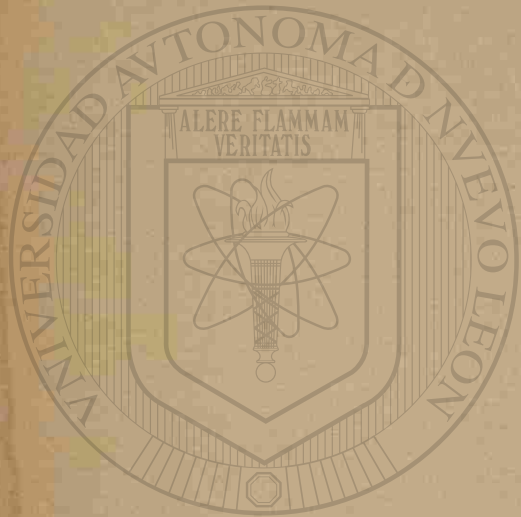
### An Unknown Child-Poem

tenderly, Thou good Father, Thou  
ancient One of days."

So the "Erster Schulgang" closes.

It may be that through tempera-  
ment or personal associations I have  
over-valued it. The reader must  
judge. In any case, you dead, un-  
known, gentle-hearted Old-Goose, it  
has been a pleasant task to me to  
visit in fancy your beloved village  
of Wieheisstes in the romantic crag-  
and-fir region of Schlaraffenland, and  
to write these pages about your  
poem and yourself.

AT A WAYSIDE STATION



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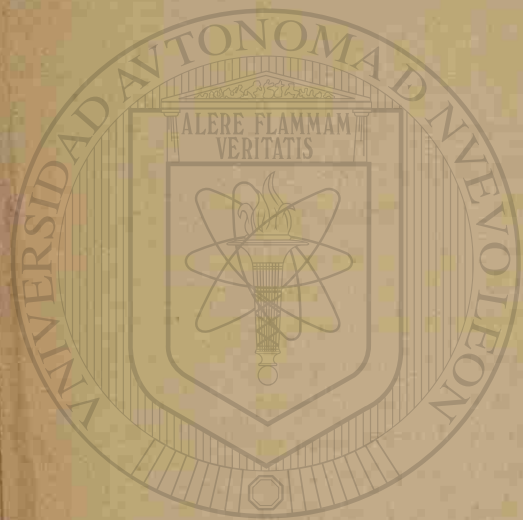
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*L'adorable hasard d'être père est tombé  
Sur ma tête, et m'a fait une douce féture.*

HUGO



"GOOD-BYE, my darling!"

The voice shot out cheerily from the window of a second-class carriage at a small suburban station. The speaker evidently did not care a pin who heard him. He was a bustling, rubicund, white-whiskered and white-waistcoated little man of about sixty. As I glanced in his direction I saw that his wife—a faded blue-eyed woman, with a genius for reserve—was placidly settling herself in her seat.

Perception of these details was instantaneous.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

### At a Wayside Station

The reply, in a clear, fresh voice, was almost startling in its promptitude.

I looked round; and then for the next minute and a half, I laughed quietly to myself.

For, first of all, the bright little girl, the flower of the flock, the small, radiant beauty to whom that voice should have belonged, was a maiden of five-and-thirty, hopelessly uncomely, and irredeemably high-coloured.

The unmistakable age, the unprepossessing appearance, were thrown into ludicrous contrast by the girlish coyness and bashfulness of her demeanour. When her eyes were not raised to her father's face, they were cast down with a demureness that was altogether irresistible.

The little man mopped his bald scalp, hurriedly arranged some of

### At a Wayside Station

his belongings in the rack, abruptly darted out another bird-like look, and repeated his farewell.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

It was as though he had touched the spring of a dutiful automaton.

The carriage doors were slammed, the guard whistled, the driver signalled, the train started.

"Good-bye, my darling!"

"Good-bye, papa!"

Comic as the whole scene was, its conclusion was a relief. One felt that if "Good-bye, my darling," had been repeated a hundred times, "Good-bye, papa," would have been sprung out in response with the same prompt, pleasant inflection, the same bright, ridiculous, mechanical precision.

She tripped, with the vivacity of coquettish maidenhood, for a few



### At a Wayside Station

paces along the platform beside the carriage window, stood still a moment, watching the carriages as they swept around the curve, and then, resuming her air of unapproachable reserve, ascended the station steps.

The reaction was as sudden as it was unexpected. The ripple of her white muslin dress had scarcely vanished before I felt both ashamed and sorry that I had been so much amused. The whole situation assumed a different aspect, and I acknowledged with remorse that I had been a cruel and despicable onlooker. The humour of the incident had mastered me; the pathos of it now stared me in the face.

As I thought of her unpleasing colour, of her ineligible uncomeliness, of her five-and-thirty unmarried years, I wondered how I could have ever had the heart to laugh at what

### At a Wayside Station

might well have been a cause for tears.

The pity of it! That sweet fresh voice—and it *was* singularly sweet and fresh—seemed the one charm left of the years of a woman's charms and a woman's chances. The harmless prim ways and little coy tricks of manner, so old-fashioned and out of place, seemed to belong to the epoch of powder and patches. They were irrefutable evidence of the seclusion in which he had lived—of the little world of home which had never been invaded by any rash, handsome, self-confident young man.

As I thought of the garrulous pride and affection of her father, I knew that she must be womanly and lovable in a thousand ways that a stranger could not guess at. If no one else in the world had any need of her, she was at least *his* darling; but, ah! the



### At a Wayside Station

pity of the unfulfilled mission, of the beautiful possibilities unrealised, of the honour and holiness of motherhood denied. She would never have any little being to call "*her darling*," to rear in love and sorrow, in solicitude and joy; never one even to lose

*"When God draws a new angel so  
Through a house of a man up to His";*

—to lose and yet know it is not lost, to surrender and yet feel it is safe for ever; preserved beyond change and the estrangement of the years and the sad transformations of temperament — a sinless babe for evermore.

"Good-bye, my darling!" How strangely, how tranquilly, with what little sense of change must the years have gone by for father and daughter! One could not but conjecture whether he saw her now as she actually appeared in my eyes, or whether she

### At a Wayside Station

was still to him the small, inexpressibly lovely creature of thirty years ago. Love plays curious tricks with our senses. No man ever yet married an ugly woman, and time is slow to wrinkle a beloved face. To him, doubtless, she was yet a child, and at forty or fifty she would be a child still.

Then I thought of her as an infant in her cradle, and I saw the faded, reserved woman and the florid little man, a youthful couple, leaning over it, full of the happiness and wonder that come with the first baby. I thought of the endearing helplessness of those early weeks; of the anguish of the first baby troubles; of the scares and terrors, of the prayers and thankfulness; of the delight in the first smile; of the blissful delusions that their little angel had begun to notice, that she had tried to speak, that she had recognised some one; of

### At a Wayside Station

the inexplicable brightness which made their home, the rooms, the garden, the very street seem a bit of heaven which had fallen to earth; of the foolish father buying the little one toys, perhaps even a book, which she would not be able to handle for many a day to come; of the more practical mother who exhausted her ingenuity in hoods and frocks, bootees, and dainty vanities of lace and ribbon.

I thought of the little woman when she first began to toddle; of her resolute efforts to carry weights almost as heavy as herself; of her inarticulate volubility; of the marvellous growth of intelligence—the quickness to understand, associated with the inability to express herself; of her indefatigable imitative faculty; and of the delight of her father in all these.

Then, as years went by, I saw how

### At a Wayside Station

she had become essential to his happiness, how all his thoughts encompassed her, how she influenced him, how much better a man she made him; and as still the years elapsed, I took into account her ambitions, her day-dreams, her outlook into the world of men and women, and I wondered whether she, too, had her half-completed romance, of which, perchance, no one—not even her father, had an inkling. How near they were to each other; and yet, after all, how far apart in many things they might still be!

Her father's darling! Just Heaven! if we have to give account of every foolish word, for how much senseless and cruel laughter shall we have to make reckoning? For, as I let my thoughts drift to and fro about these matters, I remembered the thousands who have many children but no dar-



At a Wayside Station

ling; the mothers whose hearts have been broken, the fathers whose grey hairs have been brought down in sorrow to the grave; and I mused on those in whom faith and hope have been kept alive by prayer and the merciful recollection of a never-to-be-forgotten childhood.

When I reached home I took down the volume in which one of our poets\* has spoken in tenderest pathos of these last in the beautiful verses entitled—

TWO SONS.

*I have two sons, Wife—  
Two and yet the same;  
One his wild way runs, Wife,  
Bringing us to shame.*

*The one is bearded, sunburnt, grim, and  
fights across the sea;  
The other is a little child who sits upon  
your knee.*

\* Robert Buchanan.

At a Wayside Station

*One is fierce and bold, Wife,  
As the wayward deep;  
Him no arms could hold, Wife,  
Him no breast could keep.  
He has tried our hearts for many a year,  
not broken them; for he  
Is still the sinless little one that sits upon  
your knee.*

*One may fall in fight, Wife—  
Is he not our son?  
Pray with all your might, Wife,  
For the wayward one;  
Pray for the dark, rough soldier who  
fights across the sea,  
Because you love the little shade who  
smiles upon your knee.*

*One across the foam, Wife,  
As I speak may fall;  
But this one at home, Wife,  
Cannot die at all.  
They both are only one, and how thankful  
should we be  
We cannot lose the darling son who sits  
upon your knee.*

This one cannot die at all! To  
how many has this bright little



### At a Wayside Station

shadow of the vanished years been an enduring solace and an undying hope! And if God's love be no less than that of an earthly father, what mercies, what long-suffering, what infinite pity may we grown-up, wilful and wayward children not owe to His loving memory of our sinless infancy! But for those happy parents who, as the years have gone by, have never failed to see the "sinless little one," now in the girl or boy, now in the young man or maiden, and now in these no longer young but still darlings, what a gracious providence has encompassed their lives!

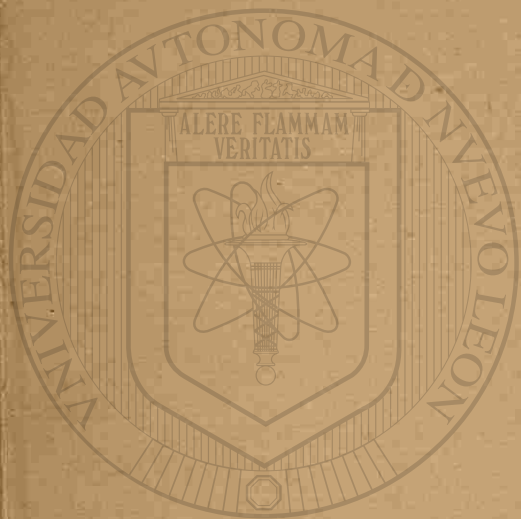
When I had smiled in witless amusement I had not thought of all this; and even now it had not occurred to me that this could have been no rare and exceptional case—that there must be many such dar-

### At a Wayside Station

lings in the world. That same evening, however, as I glanced over the paper, I came across the following notice in the column of "Births, Deaths, and Marriages":

"In memoriam, Louisa S—, who died suddenly on August 22, aged 40; my youngest, most beloved, and affectionate daughter."

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