

### The Invisible Playmate

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.

### A Story of the Unseen

“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

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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  
't'oked 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—*domnulan 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

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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



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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