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THE CHILDREN

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The Children

EAN 8596547362524

DigiCat, 2022

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FELLOW TRAVELLERS WITH A BIRD, I.

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To attend to a living child is to be baffled in your humour, disappointed of your pathos, and set freshly free from all the pre-occupations. You cannot anticipate him. Blackbirds, overheard year by year, do not compose the same phrases; never two leitmotifs alike. Not the tone, but the note alters. So with the uncovenanted ways of a child you keep no tryst. They meet you at another place, after failing you where you tarried; your former experiences, your documents are at fault. You are the fellow traveller of a bird. The bird alights and escapes out of time to your footing.

No man's fancy could be beforehand, for instance, with a girl of four years old who dictated a letter to a distant cousin, with the sweet and unimaginable message: "I hope you enjoy yourself with your loving dolls." A boy, still younger, persuading his mother to come down from the heights and play with him on the floor, but sensible, perhaps, that there was a dignity to be observed none the less, entreated her, "Mother, do be a lady frog." None ever said their good things before these indeliberate authors. Even their own kind—children—have not preceded them. No child in the past ever found the same replies as the girl of five whose father made that appeal to feeling which is doomed to a different, perverse, and unforeseen success. He was rather tired with writing, and had a mind to snare some of the yet uncaptured flock of her sympathies. "Do you know, I have been working hard, darling? I work to buy things for you." "Do you work," she asked, "to buy the lovely puddin's?" Yes, even for these. The subject must have

seemed to her to be worth pursuing. “And do you work to buy the fat? I don’t like fat.”

The sympathies, nevertheless, are there. The same child was to be soothed at night after a weeping dream that a skater had been drowned in the Kensington Round Pond. It was suggested to her that she should forget it by thinking about the one unfailing and gay subject—her wishes. “Do you know,” she said, without loss of time, “what I should like best in all the world? A thundred dolls and a whistle!” Her mother was so overcome by this tremendous numeral, that she could make no offer as to the dolls. But the whistle seemed practicable. “It is for me to whistle for cabs,” said the child, with a sudden moderation, “when I go to parties.” Another morning she came down radiant, “Did you hear a great noise in the miggle of the night? That was me crying. I cried because I dreamt that Cuckoo [a brother] had swallowed a bead into his nose.”

The mere errors of children are unforeseen as nothing is—no, nothing feminine—in this adult world. “I’ve got a lotter than you,” is the word of a very young egotist. An older child says, “I’d better go, bettern’t I, mother?” He calls a little space at the back of a London house, “the backy-garden.” A little creature proffers almost daily the reminder at luncheon—at tart-time: “Father, I hope you will remember that I am the favourite of the crust.” Moreover, if an author set himself to invent the naïf things that children might do in their Christmas plays at home, he would hardly light upon the device of the little *troupe* who, having no footlights, arranged upon the floor a long row of—candle-shades!

“It’s *jolly* dull without you, mother,” says a little girl who—gentlest of the gentle—has a dramatic sense of slang, of which she makes no secret. But she drops her voice somewhat to disguise her feats of metathesis, about which she has doubts and which are involuntary: the “stand-