

**AXEL
MUNTHE**



VAGARIES

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Vagaries

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FROM THE PARIS HORIZON

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In Paris the New Year is awakened by the laughter of children, the dawn of its first day glows in rosy joy on small round cheeks, and lit up by the light from children's sparkling eyes, the curtain rises upon the fairy world of toys.

This world of toys is a faithful miniature of our own, the same perpetual evolution, the same struggle for existence, goes on there as here. Types rise and vanish just as with us; the strongest and best-fitted individuals survive, defying time, whilst the weaker and less gifted are supplanted and die out.

To the former, for instance, belongs the doll, whose individual type centuries may have modified, but whose idea is eternal, whose soul lives on with the imperishable youth of the gods. The doll is thousands of years old; it has been found in the graves of little Roman children, and the archæologists of coming generations will find it amongst the remains of our culture. The children of Pompeii and Herculaneum used to trundle hoops just as you and I did when we were small, and who knows whether the rocking-horse on which we rode as boys is not a lineal descendant of

that proud charger into whose wooden flanks the children of Francis I. dug their heels. The drum is also inaccessible to the variation of time; through centuries it has beaten the Christmas and New Year's day's reveille in the nursery to the battles of the tin-soldiers, and it will continue to beat as long as there are boys' arms to wield the drum-sticks and grown-up people's tympanums to be deafened. The tin-soldier views the future with calm; he will not lay down his arms until the day of the general disarmament, and we are still a long way from universal peace. Neither will the toy-sword disappear; it is the nursery-symbol of the ineradicable vice of our race, the lust for fighting. Foolscap-crowned and bell-ringing harlequins will also defy time; they will exist in the toy-world as long as there are fools in our world. Gold-laced knights with big swords at their sides, curly-locked princesses with satin shoes on dainty feet, stalwart musketeers with top boots and big moustachios—all are types which still hold their own pretty well. The Japanese doll is as yet young, but a brilliant future lies before her.

Amongst the toy-people who are gradually diminishing may be mentioned monks, hobgoblins, and kings—an evil omen for the matter of that. I don't wish to make any one uneasy, but it is a fact that the demand for kings has considerably decreased of late—my studies in toy-anthropology do not allow me the slightest doubt on this subject. It is not for me to try to explain the cause of this serious phenomenon—I understand well that this topic is a painful one, and shall not persist.

Hobgoblins—who in our world are growing more and more ill at ease since the locomotives began to pant

through the forests, and who have sought and found a refuge in the toy-world, in picture-books, and fairy-tales—they begin to decrease, even they; they do not leap any longer with the same wild energy when they are let loose out of their boxes, and they do not know how to inspire the same terrifying respect as before. They are doomed to die; a few generations more and wet-nurses and nursery-maids will be studying physics, and then there will be an end to hobgoblins and Jack-in-the-boxes! For my part I shall regret them.

Our social life expresses itself even through toys, and the rising generation writes the history of its civilisation in the children's books. Our age is the age of scientific inquiry, and its sons have no time for dreams; the generation which is growing up moves in a world of thought totally different from ours. Nowadays Tom Thumb is left to take care of himself in the trackless forest, and poor Robinson Crusoe, with whom we kept such faithful company, is feeling more and more lonely on his desert island with our common friend Friday and the patient goat whose neck we so often patted in our dreams. Nowadays boy-thoughts travel with Phileas Fogg *Round the World in Eighty Days*, or undertake fearlessly a journey to the moon with carefully calculated pace of I don't know how many miles in a second, and their knapsacks stuffed with physical science. Nowadays a little future Edison sits meditating in his nursery laboratory, trying to stun a fly beneath the bell of a little air-pump, or he communicates with his little sister by means of a lilliputian telephone—when we only knew how to besiege toy-fortresses with pop-guns and arrange tin-soldiers'

battles, limiting our scientific inquiries to that bloodless vivisection which consisted in ripping up the stomachs of all our dolls and pulling to pieces everything we came across to find out what was inside. These scientific toys were almost unknown some ten years ago,—these *jouets scientifiques* which now rank so high in toy-shops, and offer perhaps the greatest attraction for the children of the present. *The tranquillity of parents and the education of children* is the device on these toys—yes, there is no doubt that the children's instruction has been thought of, but their imagination, what is to become of that, now that even Christmas presents give lessons in chemistry and physics? And all this artificially increased modern thirst for knowledge, does it not destroy the germ of romance which was implanted in the child's mind? does it not drive away that rosy poetry of dreamland which is the morning glow of the awakening thought? Maybe I am wrong, but it sometimes seems to me that there is less laughter in the nurseries now than before, that the children's faces are growing more earnest. And if I am to be quite frank I must confess that I fight rather shy of these modern toys, and have never bought any of them for my little friends.

The same claim for reality which has brought forward these scientific toys is also shown in the multitude of political characters one comes across in the toy-world—Bismarck, with his bloodshot eyes and three tufts of hair; the "Zulu," the "Boer," etc. etc. The famous Tonquin treasures have not yet been brought to light, but we have long ago made acquaintance with the Tonquinese and his long nose like Mons. Jules Ferry; and the recent trouble in

the Balkan states resulted in last year's novelty, *le cri de Bulgare*.^[3]

Do not, however, imagine that the *rôle* of politics in the toy-world is limited to this—it is far more extensive, far more important. I now mean to dwell on this question for a moment or two, and wish to say a few words concerning *the political agitations of the toy-world*.

The political agitations of the toy-world—a weighty, and hitherto rather neglected topic—are like the swell, following the political storms which agitate our own world. The horizon which here opens before the eyes of the observer is, however, too vast to be framed in this small paper. I therefore propose to limit the subject to *the French toy-politics after l'année terrible (1870-71)*.

The war between Germany and France is over long ago, but the toy-world still resounds with the echo of the clash of arms of 1870; fighting still continues with unabated ardour in the lilliputian world, where the Bismarcks and the Moltkes of the German toy-manufactories each Christmas fight new battles with *l'Article de Paris*.

Victorious by virtue of their cheapness, the Germans advance. From the Black Forest descend every Christmas hordes of wooden oxen, sheep, horses, and dogs to measure themselves against the wares of the wood-carvers of the Vosges (*St. Claude, etc. etc.*). From Hamburg, Nuremburg, and Berlin emigrate every winter thousands of dolls to dispute the favour of the buyers with their French colleagues, and every Christmas dense squadrons of spike-helmeted Prussian tin-soldiers cross the Rhine to invade the toy-shops and nurseries of France. The struggle is unequal,

the competition too great. Siebenburgen and Tyrol furnish at will a complete chemist's shop, a plentifully-supplied grocery store, or a well-stocked farm with crops and implements, cows, sheep, and goats grazing on the verdant pasture, for three francs fifty centimes. Hamburg at the same moderate price offers a doll irreproachable to the superficial observer, a doll with glass eyes, curly hair, and one change of clothes, whilst the little Parisienne has already spent double that sum on her toilet alone, and therefore cannot condescend to be yours for less than half a louis d'or. Nuremburg mobilises a whole regiment of tin-soldiers, baggage waggons, and artillery (Krupp model), included, at the same price for which the toy-arsenals of Marais set on foot one single battalion of "Chasseurs d'Afrique."

The situation is gloomy—the French toys retire all along the line.

But France will never be annihilated! And if the depths of a French tin-soldier's soul were sounded, there would be found under the surface of reserve exacted by discipline, the same glorious dreams of revenge which inspired the volunteers raised by Gambetta from out of the earth. The French tin-soldier looks towards the east; he knows that he is still powerless to stop the invasion of the German toy-hordes—he is bound by Article 4 in the Frankfort treaty of peace, but he bides his time.[\[4\]](#)

And Revenge is near. This time also the signal for rising has been given from Belleville, by a Gambetta of the toy-world. Some years ago a poor workman at Belleville got a sudden idea, an idea that since then has engendered an

army which would realise the dream of eternal peace, and keep in check the assembled troops of all Europe were it a question of number alone. He sets on foot 5,000,000 soldiers a year. The origin of these soldiers is humble, but so was Napoleon's. They spring from old sardine boxes. Thrown away on the dust-heap, the sardine box is saved from annihilation by the dust-man, who sells it to a rag-merchant in Belleville or Buttes Chaumont, who in his turn disposes of it to a specialist, who prepares it for the manufactories. The warriors are cut out of the bottom of the box. The lid and sides are used for making guns, railway-carriages, bicycles, etc. etc. All this may seem to you very unimportant at first sight, but there is now in Belleville a large manufactory founded on this idea of utilising old sardine boxes, which occupies no less than two hundred workmen and produces every year over two milliards of tin toys. I went there the other day, and no one suspecting that I was a political correspondent, I was admitted without difficulty to view the gigantic arsenal and its 5,000,000 warriors. The poor workman out of whose head the fully-armed tin-soldiers sprung—*viâ* the sardine box—is now a rich man, and, what is more, an eager and keen-sighted patriot, who in his sphere has deserved well of his country. After retreating for years the French tin-soldiers once more advance; the German spiked-helmets retire every Christmas from the conquered positions in French nurseries, and maybe the time is not far off when the tricolour shall wave over the toy-shops of Berlin—a small *revanche en attendant* the great one.

Many years have elapsed since the enemy placed his heel upon the neck of fallen France, but still to-day Paris is the metropolis of human culture. Competition has led the Article de Paris to a commercial Sedan, and from a financial point of view *le jouet Parisien* no longer belongs to the great powers of the toy-world. But the Paris doll will never admit the superiority of her German rival; she bears the stamp of nobility on her brow, and she means to rule the doll-world as before by right of her undisputed rank and her artistic refinement. It surely needs very little human knowledge to distinguish her at once, the graceful Parisienne with her *fin sourire* and her expressive eyes, from one of the dull beauties of Nuremberg or Hamburg, who, by the stereotyped grin on her carmine lips, and the staring, vacant eyes, immediately reveals her Teutonic origin. Should any hesitation be possible a glance at her feet will suffice—the Parisienne's foot is small and dainty, and she is always shod with a certain coquetry, whilst the daughter of Germany is characteristically careless of her *chaussure*—*tout comme chez nous*, for the matter of that. As for the rest of her wardrobe—to leave the anthropological side of the question—Germany, in spite of her war indemnity of five milliards, is incapable of producing a tasteful doll-toilet; the delicate fingers of a Paris grisette are required for this. It is therefore considered the proper thing among German dolls of fashion to import their dresses from some doll-Worth in Paris. I can even tell you in parenthesis that the really distinguished German dolls not only send to Paris for their dresses but also for their heads. The German doll manufacturers, incapable themselves of producing pretty

and expressive doll faces, buy their dolls' heads by retail from the porcelain factories of Montreux and St. Maurice, where they are modelled by first-rate artists, such as a Carrier-Belleuse and others.

Up till now I have confined myself to the upper classes of doll society, but even amongst the well-to-do middle-class dolls of ten to fifteen francs apiece, the difference between German and French is palpable at first sight. The further one descends into the lower regions of society, in the doll *bourgeoisie*, the less clear becomes the national type. I will undertake, however, to recognise my French friend even amongst dolls of five francs apiece. To determine the nationality of a one-franc doll, it is necessary to possess great preliminary knowledge and much natural aptitude. For the benefit of future explorers in these still obscure regions of anthropology I may here point out an important item in the necessary physical examination—the doll must be shaken. If there is a rattling inside she is probably French, for the Paris grisettes who make these dolls have a habit of putting some pebbles inside them, which, I am told, tends to develop the taste for vivisection amongst the rising generation.

Lower down in the series where the transition type of Darwin is found, where the doll is without either arms or legs, and where every trace of soul has died out from her impassive wooden face, stamped with the same passion-free calm which characterises the marble folk of antiquity, or where an unconscious smile alone glides over the rudimentary features into which the wax has hardened, where the nose is nothing but a prophetic outline, and

where the black eyes are still shaded by the chaotic darkness out of which the first doll rose—there all national distinctions cease, there the embryo doll lives her life of Arcadian simplicity, undisturbed by all political agitations in the land which gave her birth; the doll *à treize sous* does not emigrate, maybe from patriotic motives, maybe from lack of initiative.^[5] Her rôle in life is humble; she belongs to the despised. Her place in the large toy-shops is in a dark corner behind the other dolls, who stretch forth their jointed arms towards better-to-do purchasers, and with gleaming glass eyes and laughing lips appropriate the admiring glances of all the customers. But far away in the deserted streets of the suburbs, where the whole toy-shop consists of a portable table and the public of a crowd of ragged urchins,—there the doll *à treize sous* reigns supreme. By the flickering light of the lantern illuminating the modest fairy-world which Christmas and the New Year display to the children of the poor, there the despised doll becomes beautiful as a queen and is surrounded by her whole court of admirers.

And I myself am one of her admirers. Not one of the fashionable beauties of the Magasin du Louvre has ever made my heart beat one whit the faster; not one of the charming coquettes of the Bon Marché has succeeded in catching me in the net of her blond tresses; but I admit the tender sympathy with which my eyes rest upon the coarse features of the doll *à treize sous*. Every one to his taste—I think she is handsome; I cannot help it. And we have often met; chance leads me frequently across her path. But fancy if it were not chance! fancy if instead it was my undeclared affection which so often guided my steps to these places

where I knew I should meet my sweetheart! fancy if I were falling in love at last! At all events I haven't said anything to her, nor has she ever said a word to me either of encouragement or rebuff. But, as I said before, we often meet at the houses of mutual friends, and sometimes, especially at Christmas and New Year, have we come together there. My visit does not impress them very much, but what happiness does not the doll spread around her! Realising my subordinate rôle I willingly bow before the superior social talents of my companion, and silently in a corner by myself I enjoy her success. I don't know how she manages it, but she has hardly crossed the threshold before it seems to grow brighter inside the dark garret where live the children of destitution. The light radiates from the sparkling eyes of the little ones, glimmers in a faint smile on the pale cheek of the sick brother, and falls like a halo round the bald head of the doll. The little fellow crawling on the floor suddenly ceases his sobbing; he forgets that he is hungry, forgets that he is cold, and with radiant joy he stretches out his arms to welcome the unexpected guest. And later at night, when it is time for me to go away, when the children of the rich have danced themselves tired round the Christmas tree, when the soldier's bugle has sounded in the boys' nursery, and when the little girls' smart dolls have been put to sleep each in their dainty bed—then little sister up in the garret tenderly wraps mother's ragged shawl round her beloved doll, for the night is cold and the doll has nothing on; and so they fall asleep side by side together, the pauper doll and her grateful little admirer.

Despised and ridiculed by us grown-up people, whose eyes have been led astray by the modern demand for realism, it is nevertheless a fact that the doll *à treize sous* in the freshness of her primitive naïveté approaches nearer the ideal than the costly beauties of the Louvre and Bon Marché, who have reached the highest summit of refinement. We grown-up people have lost the faculty of understanding this from the moment we lost the simplicity of our childhood, but our teacher in this, as in many other things, is the little chap who still crawls about on the floor. Put a smart doll of fashion side by side with a simple pauper doll whose shape is as yet barely human, and you will see that the child usually stretches out his arms towards the latter. It sounds like a paradox, but it is a fact that you can easily verify for yourself; these cheap toys are, as a rule, preferred even by the children of the rich—that is to say, so long as they are real children and unconscious of the value of money. Later on, when they have acquired this knowledge, they are driven out from the Eden of childhood, their eyes are opened to the nakedness of the pauper doll, and what I have just said ceases to be true.

But the "political agitations"—what has become of them? Far away from all political storms and quarrels, my thoughts have fled to the garret idyll of the pauper doll; I have tried to sketch her as she has so often revealed herself to me; I have lifted a corner of the veil of unmerited oblivion which conceals her humble existence, there where she lives to bring joy to those whom the world rears to sorrow. I have done so as a tribute of gratitude for the pure joy which she

has so often given me also, although I am myself too old to play with dolls. But, thank God, I am not too old to look on!

The doll is not old, and old age will never touch her—she will never grow old; she dies young, even as the hero, beloved of the gods. She dies young, and the first few weeks of the New Year have hardly passed away before she wends her way to the strange Elysian fields, where all that survives of broken toys sleeps under the shade of withered Christmas trees.

FOR THOSE WHO LOVE MUSIC

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I had engaged him by the year. Twice a week he came and went through his whole répertoire, and lately, out of sympathy for me, he would play the Miserere of the *Trovatore*, which was his show piece, twice over. He stood there in the middle of the street looking steadfastly up at my windows while he played, and when he had finished he would take off his hat with a "Addio Signor!"

It is well known that the barrel-organ, like the violin, gets a fuller and more sympathetic tone the older it is. The old artist had an excellent instrument, not of the modern noisy type which imitates a whole orchestra with flutes and bells and beats of drums, but a melancholy old-fashioned barrel-organ which knew how to lend a dreamy mystery to the gayest allegretto, and in whose proudest tempo di Marcia

there sounded an unmistakable undertone of resignation. And in the tenderer pieces of the répertoire, where the melody, muffled and staggering like a cracked old human voice, groped its way amongst the rusty pipes of the treble, then there was a trembling in the bass like suppressed sobs. Now and then the voice of the tired organ failed it completely, and then the old man would resignedly turn the handle during some bars of rest more touching in their eloquent silence than any music.

True, the instrument was itself very expressive, but the old man had surely his share in the sensation of melancholy which came over me whenever I heard his music. He had his beat in the poor quarter behind the Jardin des Plantes, and many times during my solitary rambles up there had I stopped and taken my place among the scanty audience of ragged street boys which surrounded him.

We made acquaintance one misty dark autumn day. I sat on a bench under the fading trees, which in vain had tried to deck the gloomy square with a little summer, and now hopelessly suffered their leaves to fall; and, like a melancholy accompaniment to my dreamy thoughts, the old barrel-organ in the slum close by coughed out the aria from the last act of the Traviata: "Addio del passato bei sogni ridenti!"

I startled as the music stopped. The old man had gone through his whole répertoire, and after a despairing inspection of his audience he resignedly tucked the monkey under his cloak and prepared to depart. I have always liked barrel-organs, and I have a sufficiently correct ear to distinguish good music from bad; so I went up and thanked