My Toy Cupboard

By Frances Hodgson Burnett

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IT IS a misleading article of furniture. No unenlightened observer could possibly suspect it of concealing the treasures that it incloses. It presents to the eye the exterior and bearing of a piece of ancientry in English oak, its wood darkened by centuries, and its carvings so primitive as to suggest that they were done with the simplest of tools in the most untrained of hands. It is a cupboard or cabinet suggesting the Jacobean period, and possibly began life in some old manor house or yeoman's chief living-room between three and four hundred years ago. I discovered it in a dealer's shop in a village in Kent, and it found its place in a corner of what was known—and much beloved—as the Red Room in a large country house.

There it lived—doubtless enjoying, when no one was in the room, much enriching intercourse with the other pieces of equally old or even older furniture. Chairs which have been sat upon, tables which have been feasted upon, cabinets which have guarded the possessions intrusted to them by people wearing the changing costumes and living according to the changing customs and mental attitudes of slow-moving centuries, must have much to relate to each other during the long nights when the lights are out, the red fire dying, and the human things asleep in far-off rooms. To steal back and listen from the remoteness of a dark corner would be worth while. But in some mysterious way one's presence would convey itself to the air and the talking would cease.

It had been part of the wide spaces and quaint comfort of the Red Room for some months when it made a suggestion to me. Up to that time it had been very quiet and unassuming and was known only as the Jacobean Cabinet.

To be entirely frank with one's self is to discover frequently that behind one's most picturesquely benign deeds lurks a secret gratification of a perhaps unacknowledged desire. When amiable friends say to me: "How kind it was of you—how thoughtful—how considerate to have thought of the Toy Cupboard," I frequently reply: "No, it was none of these things. I am quite convinced, myself, that the idea was merely an excuse to satisfy my own unholy passion for toys." Then they laugh and I laugh, but there is more truth in the statement than any one of us quite believes.

NOW, the passion referred to is, I believe, secretly shared by many women. It is probably part of the instinct which impels them to look interestedly at dolls, to pick them up with a particular movement and hold them for a moment with a particular expression while they pretend to laugh.

To look into the window of a toyshop today is to see spread before one the realization of all the fairy dreams of a childhood when imagination was called upon to supply everything but a totally inadequate doll with sawdust legs and arms and tightly fitted, staring and unhuman eyes. It was necessary in those years to say in wildly eager moments: "Oh! just suppose there were such things as real dolls' umbrellas, and dolls' brushes and combs, and dolls' necklaces, and waterproof cloaks, and trunks, and parasols!"—with gasps of excited joy at each new impossible idea. Today in any well-supplied toyshop one can find any article a human being uses—made in doll's size. My doll's house has a writing-desk with a telephone on it, a vacuum-cleaner, a carpet-sweeper, a footman in livery, a perfectly good grandpapa and grandmamma, a litter of kittens and a collie dog, besides all the other unnecessaries.

But I proceed with my story too rapidly. I should first have explained how they reached there. It was really the result of the suggestion made by the Jacobean Cabinet when it stood in the Red Room.

Having, without a blush, confessed my passion, it is easy to explain that I invariably stop and look into toyshop windows wheresoever I come upon them—whether in Paris, where they are too deliriously beautiful for words; in London; in little English, German or Italian country towns or villages; anywhere and also everywhere. I plant myself unashamedly before them and disregard all else.

THE day before the Jacobean Cabinet revealed its true character to me I was walking through a village and saw a small shop whose window presented objects before which I paused transfixed. There were a small Japanese tea-table and six small chairs made of bamboo. On the table was a tiny Japanese tea-set of green ware, the teapot with a wicker handle. And around the tea sat a small Japanese family composed of a mamma, a papa and three unextinguishably beautiful Japanese babies, all in dazzling kimonos, and with shaved heads, except the mamma, who wore fans in her hair. It was impossible to resist and pass them by.

"I will go in and buy them," I said in that sneakingly specious manner in which we always make plausible excuses for our weaknesses. "I can give them to some child."

The unadorned truth was that I did not want to give them to "some child." I wanted them for myself because they were so human and delicious and tiny and quaint, and that part of my being whose childhood belonged to the period when perfection in doll-land had not yet been achieved had never yet been satisfied.

I entered the shop, and finding an enchanting old human there—like a sort of fairy-godmother—I went "must" into her back room and bought a dozen things: the Japanese family; a tiny and perfectly attired nursery-maid wheeling a tiny white and blue perambulator, with a baby just the right size in it; a bath fitted up most satisfactorily with another baby; a piece of pink soap, a sponge, and a towel on a rack; and other articles equally alluring and realistic. When I returned home I carried into the Red Room a collection of little boxes. I looked around the room uncertainly.

"Where shall I put them?" I said. "If one buys half a toyshop one must put it somewhere."

Perhaps the Jacobean Cabinet had been slightly bored that afternoon and really wanted something to do. It looked at me as I glanced toward it. "Give them to me. I'll take care of them," it said.

It was the very place for them. The lower part of it, when its doors were opened, revealed two substantial shelves. I opened the doors and kneeled down. I took out one delightful thing after another and set them in order, arranging a little scene, and while I did so the most satisfactory and logical reasoning argued my case for me.

"WHEN children are brought to see one," I murmured as I set the table for the Japanese family, "they are expected to sit perfectly still and behave beautifully while their elders and betters amuse themselves with gossiping in their ridiculous, grown-up way." I arranged the tiny green cups and saucers and teapot with deliberation and skill. "The poor little things have nothing to do and are bored to death. The unfairness and lack of consideration in grown-up people are really revolting. How should we behave if we were invited to a place and shut entirely out of the conversation? Personally I should behave disgracefully. Why not have things in one's house for the poor little lambs to play with? From this time forward I shall always keep a Toy Cupboard—and this shall be it. The lack of perception shown by the mature in years where children are concerned should be corrected." I summed up the situation with that clearness of the process of ratiocination for which I have always been so remarkable in my own well-founded opinion.

"If it Would Not Seem Unfeeling I Would Buy a New or Improved—Grandpapa"

The piece of English ancientry was no longer, after this most proper conclusion, known as the Jacobean Cabinet, but was boldly called the Toy Cupboard. With an admirable and elevating object in view I bought every toy which allured me, girls' toys and boys' toys. In the girls' toys I confess I find the greater lure, but with a fine spirit I sternly remembered the claims of guns, swords, soldiers and sailors, when dinner service and drawing-room suites upholstered in blue satin were in danger of causing me to forget all else—particularly when they were accompanied by every luxury and convenience a modern dolls' housekeeper could desire. The two shelves of the Toy Cupboard were of both masculine and feminine genders. The upper shelf was devoted to such articles as the stalwart male would regard with scorn, the lower shelf was heaped with the things no self-respecting young female has interest in. But each sex found entertainment.

DOLLS of all sizes, shapes, colors and previous conditions of servitude there were. Dolls bought in Paris and Tenterden, in Amsterdam and Bushey, in the valley of Cortina, in London, and in New York. They were of unassorted sizes. The leading lady was large enough to be taken to Tenterden village, fitted with ready-made winter dresses and coats in the children's department of the chief village shop, and find them none too large; the smallest gentleman was two inches high, and was bought dressed in a perfect Tyrolean costume in Cortina.

The leading lady's name was Lady Rosemary Leveson Gower, because she was oddly like a portrait of the then very little girl daughter of the Duchess of Sutherland. She had soft yellow hair and large dark eyes with long lashes. Her end was sad. She was dropped by a fairylike little person who tried to carry her, and, as she was about her own size, found her too heavy—whereupon Lady Rosemary fell upon the floor and perished of severe concussion of the brain which divided her head in two pieces; and the unearthly reproach of the two large eyes which gazed up at me from the half in which they remained almost caused me to burst into tears. She has since been replaced by another lovely creature whose hair is dark and whose name is Lady Annabel.

THE lower part of the Toy Cupboard became too crowded and the small upper cupboard was gradually filled.

When it was brought, four years ago, to Long Island everything it contained was distributed to enraptured recipients in Kent. Then came the inspiration of dividing the two shelves into four, papering their walls and furnishing them luxuriously as rooms. The lower half became a Dolls' House. It contains a drawing-room hung with pale green brocade, a combined nursery and bedroom with chintz on the walls, a dining-room of massive, leather-upholstered furniture, and a kitchen replete with luxury and modern convenience.

In the drawing-room ladies are always either playing on the piano or writing invitations at the desk with the telephone on it, or pouring out tea for visitors.

In the dining-room various members of the family are always dining, the footman is always serving them from the sideboard, a parlor maid in a white cap and apron is perpetually handing things to some one who won't take them, the collie dog stands waiting to be fed by the grandpapa, who never feeds him, and the table is spread with the richest viands and rarest hothouse fruits (done in plaster of Paris), the joints and gravies highly browned and glazed, the oranges and grapes relatively the size of cannon balls. No one ever eats anything, so the housekeeping bills are small.

In the nursery children of different sizes are continually ready for a walk or a perambulator or bed, and a nurse never ceases giving a totally undressed baby a bath (you can turn on a real shower if you pour water into a thing at the top, but it sometimes wets the nursery-maid and the carpet, and always wets your clean frock, if you are six).

A RATHER severe cook, with a bunch of keys at her waist, prepares banquets in the kitchen and inspects varieties of vegetables piled on a table in new bowls and baskets. The cat at her feet and the kittens in a basket. She pays no attention whatever to the vacuum-cleaner, the carpet-sweeper, the h and the wringer, which are ostentatiously grouped in kitchen. This must be mere pride of po one uses them House is new fall to my who is a good which case she usually drops on her knees before the Toy Cupboard, sticks her little head inside and has a housecleaning, from which she emerges glowing and triumphant.

There are small persons whose method is to turn things upside down, putting the footman into bed with measles in the nursery, and giving balls in the kitchen at which the grandpapa seems expected to dance with the cook; but the majority, kneeling with large, excited eyes, in lovely flushed silence only broken by delightful busy whispers, have parties or put things in order.

When small loves are brought to see me and I observe a certain look of great fortitude, which really means, "What in the name of *le bon Dieu* is a person to do, after being polite, until it is time to go?" I take the nearest hand unceremoniously and say: "You come over here and let us look inside the Toy Cupboard." And when we stand before the unpromising piece of furniture, whose exterior conceals so severely the fact that it is anything more than a Jacobean Cabinet, I throw wide open the primitively carved doors, turn on a swinging electric light and reveal the ecstatic truth. The little gasps I have heard at such times, the involuntary chuckles, the expressive gurgles without words, have always expressed exactly what I wished them to express—that boredom is no longer to be feared even in the society of persons of exaggerated size who laugh at incomprehensible jokes and speak an unknown tongue.

I HAVE built houses and furnished them, I have made gardens in various countries and reveled in them, I have written quite a number of things, but I do not think that anything I have done has been more amusing and satisfactory than the Toy Cupboard.

I am pleased to add that it requires entirely refurnishing and that before me lies the opportunity of buying a number of articles I have not bought before. If it would not seem unfeeling I would buy a new or improved—grandpapa. The one I have rejoiced in for three years has a most satisfactory and benevolent bald head, but there is an inadequacy in the matter of legs which causes him at times to fall off his chair when he is at the dining-table. The finish of domestic elegance is impaired by a grandpapa who at any moment may, without warning, fall from his seat on a collie dog who might be annoyed and bite him. Still, one's better feelings cause one to realize that it would not be easy to depose an almost perfectly good grandpapa without wounding him deeply.

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