

Their Dear Little Ghost

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

Table of Contents

<u>Their Dear Little Ghost</u>	1
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THE first time one looked at Elsbeth, one was not prepossessed. She was thin and brown, her nose turned slightly upward, her toes went in just a perceptible degree, and her hair was perfectly straight. But when one looked longer, one perceived that she was a charming little creature. The straight hair was as fine as silk, and hung in funny little braids down her back; there was not a flaw in her soft brown skin; and her mouth was tender and shapely. But her particular charm lay in a look which she habitually had, of seeming to know curious things such as it is not allotted to ordinary persons to know. One felt tempted to say to her:

"What are these beautiful things which you know, and of which others are ignorant? What is it you see with those wise and pellucid eyes? Why is it that everybody loves you?"

Elsbeth was my little godchild, and I knew her better than I knew any other child in the world. But still I could not truthfully say that I was familiar with her, for to me her spirit was like a fair and fragrant road in the midst of which I might walk in peace and joy, but where I was continually to discover something new. The last time I saw her quite well and strong was over in the woods where she had gone with her two little brothers and her nurse to pass the hottest weeks of summer. I followed her, foolish old creature that I was, just to be near her, for I needed to dwell where the sweet aroma of her life could reach me.

One morning, when I came from my room, limping a little, because I am not so young as I used to be, and the lake wind works havoc with me, my little godchild came dancing to me, singing:

"Come with me and I'll show you my places, my places, my places!"

Miriam, when she chanted by the Red Sea, might have been more exultant, but she could not have been more bewitching. Of course I knew what "places" were, because I had once been a little girl myself; but unless you are acquainted with the real meaning of "places," it would be useless to try to explain. Either you know "places" or you do not—just as you understand the meaning of poetry or you do not. There are things in the world which cannot be taught.

Elsbeth's two tiny brothers were present, and I took one by each hand and followed her. No sooner had we got out—of—doors in the woods than a sort of mystery fell upon the world and upon us. We were cautioned to move silently, and we did so, avoiding the crunching of dry twigs.

"The fairies hate noise," whispered my little godchild, her eyes narrowing like a cat's.

"I must get my wand first thing I do," she said, in an awed undertone. "It is useless to try to do anything without a wand."

The tiny boys were profoundly impressed, and, indeed, so was I. I felt that at last I should, if I behaved properly, see the fairies, which had hitherto avoided my materialistic gaze. It was an enchanting moment, for there appeared, just then, to be nothing commonplace about life.

Their Dear Little Ghost

There was a swale near by, and into this the little girl plunged. I could see her red straw hat bobbing about among the tall rushes, and I wondered if there were snakes.

"Do you think there are snakes?" I asked one of the tiny boys.

"If there are," he said with conviction, "they won't dare hurt her."

He convinced me. I feared no more. Presently Elsbeth came out of the swale. In her hand was a brown "cattail," perfectly full and round. She carried it as queens carry their scepters the beautiful queens we dream of in our youth.

"Come," she commanded, and waved the scepter in a fine manner. So we followed, each tiny boy gripping my hand tight. We were all three a trifle awed. Elsbeth led us into a dark underbrush. The branches, as they flew back in our faces, left them wet with dew. A wee path, made by the girl's dear feet, guided our footsteps. Perfumes of elderberry and wild cucumber scented the air. A bird, frightened from its nest, made frantic cries above our heads. The underbrush thickened. Presently the gloom of the hemlocks was over us, and in the midst of the shadowy green a tulip-tree flaunted its leaves. Waves boomed and broke upon the shore below. There was a growing dampness as we went on, treading very lightly. A little green snake ran coquettishly from us. A fat and glossy squirrel chattered at us from a safe height, stroking his whiskers with a complaisant air.

At length we reached the "place." It was a circle of velvet grass, bright as the first blades of spring, delicate as fine sea-ferns. The sunlight, falling down the shaft between the hemlocks, flooded it with a softened light and made the forest round about look like deep purple velvet. My little godchild stood in the midst and raised her wand impressively.

"This is my place," she said, with a sort of wonderful gladness in her tone. "This is where I come to the fairy balls. Do you see them?"

"See what?" whispered one tiny boy.

"The fairies."

There was a silence. The older boy pulled at my skirt.

"Do you see them?" he asked, his voice trembling with expectancy.

"Indeed," I said, "I fear I am too old and wicked to see fairies, and yet are their hats red?"

"They are," laughed my little girl. "Their hats are red, and as small as small!" She held up the pearly nail of her wee finger to give us the correct idea.

"And their shoes are very pointed at the toes?"

"Oh, very pointed!"

"And their garments are green?"

"As green as grass."

"And they blow little horns?"

Their Dear Little Ghost

"The sweetest little horns!"

"I think I see them," I cried.

"We think we see them too," said the tiny boys, laughing in perfect glee.

"And you hear their horns, don't you?" my little godchild asked, somewhat anxiously.

"Don't we hear their horns?" I asked the tiny boys.

"We think we hear their horns," they cried. "Don't you think we do?"

"It must be we do," I said. "Aren't we very, very happy?"

We all laughed softly. Then we kissed each other, and Elsbeth led us out, her wand high in the air.

And so my feet found the lost path to Arcady.

The next day I was called to the Pacific coast, and duty kept me there till well into December. A few days before the date set for my return to my home, a letter came from Elsbeth's mother.

"Our little girl is gone into the Unknown," she wrote "that Unknown in which she seemed to be forever trying to pry. We knew she was going, and we told her. She was quite brave, but she begged us to try some way to keep her till after Christmas. 'My presents are not finished yet,' she made moan. 'And I did so want to see what I was going to have. You can't have a very happy Christmas without me, I should think. Can you arrange to keep me somehow till after then?' We could not 'arrange' either with God in heaven or science upon earth, and she is gone."

She was only my little godchild, and I am an old maid, with no business fretting over children, but it seemed as if the medium of light and beauty had been taken from me. Through this crystal soul I had perceived whatever was loveliest. However, what was, was! I returned to my home and took up a course of Egyptian history, and determined to concern myself with nothing this side the Ptolemies.

Her mother has told me how, on Christmas Eve, as usual, she and Elsbeth's father filled the stockings of the little ones, and hung them, where they had always hung, by the fireplace. They had little heart for the task, but they had been prodigal that year in their expenditures, and had heaped upon the two tiny boys all the treasures they thought would appeal to them. They asked themselves how they could have been so insane previously as to exercise economy at Christmas time, and what they meant by not getting Elsbeth the autoharp she had asked for the year before.

"And now " began her father, thinking of harps. But he could not complete this sentence, of course, and the two went on passionately and almost angrily with their task. There were two stockings and two piles of toys. Two stockings only, and only two piles of toys! Two is very little!

They went away and left the darkened room, and after a time they slept after a long time. Perhaps that was about the time the tiny boys awoke, and, putting on their little dressing-gowns and bed slippers, made a dash for the room where the Christmas things were always placed. The older one carried a candle which gave out a feeble light. The other followed behind through the silent house. They were very impatient and eager, but when they reached the door of the sitting-room they stopped, for they saw that another child was before them.

Their Dear Little Ghost

It was a delicate little creature, sitting in her white night-gown, with two rumpled funny braids falling down her back, and she seemed to be weeping. As they watched, she arose, and, putting out one slender finger as a child does when she counts, she made sure over and over again three sad times that there were only two stockings and two piles of toys! Only those and no more.

The little figure looked so familiar that the boys started toward it; but just then, putting up her arm and bowing her face in it, as Elsbeth had been used to do when she wept or was offended, the little thing glided away and went out. That's what the boys said. It went out as a candle goes out.

They ran and woke their parents with the tale, and all the house was searched in a wonderment, and disbelief, and hope, and tumult! But nothing was found. For nights they watched. But there was only the silent house. Only the empty rooms. They told the boys they must have been mistaken. But the boys shook their heads.

"We know our Elsbeth," said they. "It was our Elsbeth, cryin' 'cause she hadn't no stockin' an' no toys, and we would have given her all ours, only she went out jus' went out!"

Alack!

The next Christmas I helped with the little festival. It was none of my affair, but I asked to help, and they let me, and when we were all through there were three stockings and three piles of toys, and in the largest one was all the things that I could think of that my dear child would love. I locked the boys' chamber that night, and I slept on the divan in the parlor off the sitting-room. I slept but little, and the night was very still so windless and white and still that I think I must have heard the slightest noise. Yet I heard none. Had I been in my grave I think my ears would not have remained more unaltered.

Yet when daylight came and I went to unlock the boys' bedchamber door, I saw that the stocking and all the treasures which I had bought for my little godchild were gone. There was not a vestige of them remaining.

Of course we told the boys nothing. As for me, after dinner I went home and buried myself once more in my history, and so interested was I that midnight came without my knowing it. I should not have looked up at all, I suppose, to become aware of the time, had it not been for a faint, sweet sound as of a child striking a stringed instrument. It was so delicate and remote that I hardly heard it, but so joyous and tender that I could not but listen, and when I heard it a second time it seemed as if I caught the echo of a child's laugh. At first I was puzzled. Then I remembered the little autoharp I had placed among the other things in that pile of vanished toys. I said aloud:

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Their Dear Little Ghost

"Farewell, dear little ghost. Go rest. Rest in joy, dear little ghost. Farewell, farewell."

That was years ago, but there has been silence since. Elsbeth was always an obedient little thing.