

TOYDOM, ANCIENT AND MODERN.



IT was a doll that set me wondering about the when, and the what, and the how of Toydom. Such a doll, too! She is the very oldest doll in the world; in form not much unlike a flat wooden bottle, or rather the sole of a shoe, with a small black clay head, ornamented with several dangling rows of clay beads,

which may have been intended for long curls—who knows? As to costume, I cannot quite tell whether the chessboard-like pattern daubed here and there meant anything of the kind. I should think, probably, it did, and had had a much brighter effect on its first appearance in the world of Toydom than it has now. At any rate, of one thing we may be all quite sure, and that is, that this armless, legless, faceless, formless, colourless thing has once rested in soft, loving young arms, has been cuddled, and kissed, and hugged, and beaten, and scratched, and scolded, and put to bed as often as any waxen pet of modern days; has been the delight of some dark-skinned little Egyptian maid who lived in the dim “once upon a time,” when such dolls as these were thought perfection, and Toyland, as we know of it, was an undreamt-of department of Wonderland. The strange doll that I am telling you about was—nay, is—lying grim, and cold, and grimy on one of the shelves in the Egyptian Room of the British Museum, where you can see her any day; and in which building plenty others of the toy family are to be found. But this is the very oldest of them all, poor thing, having seen her best days most likely somewhere about the time when the Pyramids were being built, and having passed the long ages of her wooden non-existence clasped in the mummied arms of that same little daughter of Thebes or Memphis, who loved and prized her charms, and with whom she was buried, with the rest of her favourite toys, according to a custom held dear by most of those ancient people—and of some comparatively modern ones also. Somehow, toys always seem to us to be trifles of to-day, all unworthy of remark or notice, and yet one cannot help feeling that as long as there have been little children to play, fond hands have found things specially

suiting for them to play with. Who knows?—perhaps the first nursed dolly was only a fallen log, or the broken branch of a tree, roughly hacked into shape and wrapped in the soft skin of some wild animal, lately slain by the hunter father, who improvised this rough “baby” to keep his own baby girl quiet. Perhaps this same branch, slyly despoiled of its hairy wraps, was set floating on the calm pool, or was launched on the rippling wave, by baby girl’s teasing brothers, who thus by chance enjoyed the first toy ship—who can tell? At any rate, they would have been very like the rude playthings with which the little South Sea Islanders can amuse themselves to this day, only that their otherwise as log-like dollies have rudely carved and hideous attempts at features, and their uncouth forms are sometimes arrayed in a leafy petticoat, with bright feathers stuck about them for ornaments. Generally, too, the log is hollowed out when the boys adopt it for a canoe, the only toy “boat” little darkie has an idea of, but one that pleases him immensely. On these museum shelves we can find plenty of other queer playthings, that once belonged to the children of ancient Egypt, and Greece, and Rome. Bronze, and wood, and crumbling clay treasures are collected here. The Assyrian shelves show us dolls in terra cotta and even ivory, very much shattered and damaged, no doubt; but who can wonder when we think of them hidden from the light of day during so many centuries? the only wonder is that any trace of them is left to tell of the tastes of the young folks of so long ago. How many thousands of years must have passed since these quaint toys were bought and sold, played with and broken? Yet, as we examine them, we cannot help thinking how very much some of them resemble the common playthings of to-day, and wonder at the variety of toys these long-forgotten little people possessed. For the juvenile Egyptian had birds that pecked, and the feared yet familiar crocodiles that could wriggle and open huge mouths with a snap, and queer bandy-legged beasts that could stand or be dragged along with strings; there were boats to float, and noisy, loud-sounding cymbals to clash, and drums and bells, for these youngsters seem to have been as fond of making a noise as the children of modern Europe are. There were still more ingenious things, for in this same mummy room we shall find a real toy cooking-stove in bronze, with all sorts of useful belongings—metal dishes, pots, pans, and basins—that would delight any little cook to prepare a nursery feast with. This, no doubt, was a property much valued by “Atai,” its once proud possessor, with whom, I suppose, it was buried as a precious thing. It is fortunate for us that this custom was so generally observed, as otherwise we should never have possessed these ancient treasures, or have known that the little Greeks delighted in a special kind of clay doll. Here they are in dozens, generally representing a boy or girl, and called by them a “Neuvospaston.” These things are

about six inches long, the head and body being all in one piece down to the knees; but the legs and arms are separate, and tied on by bits of string passed through holes drilled for the purpose, the great treat being for the child to dangle the figure and make it dance and hop, by pulling the string. One cannot help believing this must have been the venerable ancestor of our modern dancing punches and clowns, or they may have been derived from the Roman "Sigillaria," a favourite toy of the same kind, which the young Italians patronised everywhere. We must not linger too long in this department of the old world of toys, but pass on to the modern days, when bronze, ivory, and clay are changed to wax and china, to papier mâché and india-rubber, passing from ancient Egypt, and Greece, and Rome, to modern Europe, yet lingering on our way to peep at the poor little cheerless Esquimaux, as they dangle their seals, ducks, and sea-birds, cut out of spare walrus-tusks, or the scarecrow-like bone doll which they love. All these, should they die young, will be laid on their graves in a "toy bag," which love and superstition will hold sacred as long as any fragment of it remains to tell of some lost darling at rest. The high-born little Mahometan lady is better off, for she owns many dolls, and much money is spent on adorning them. We are told they have dresses and real jewels, sometimes worth much money, and are treated more like babies than dollies, for large parties of little folks are sometimes assembled to frolic in their honour; or it may be one is married, and there is a kind of grand nursery festival which lasts for days; or sometimes one dies, and all the other dolls go into the deepest white. They are not lovely pink-skinned and blue-eyed dollies, of course, because they are Indians, made of wood, and painted dark brown; but they *are* dolls, and so most dear to their happy owners, as is the round bald-headed Chinese, and almond-eyed nodding Japanese pet—this last, by-the-by, can usually say, "He, he, he," and, when well-to-do as to her owner, is carried about in a palanquin; she gives real tea-parties, where by deputy she drinks tea, served in toy tea-cups, on real Japanese trays, on which are laid chopsticks, and table-napkins of paper. Altogether, she is treated just like a real live Japanese young lady—a proud position to hold in Toyland, you will think; but, alas! all greatness has its penalties, and the day the real live young lady who owns her is married, which generally comes all too soon in that country,

the poor dolls, dressed in their finery, are all placed in a heap, with tea-cups, trays, and belongings, and burned, to the music of crackers, squibs, and fireworks popping in every direction. Talking of wonderful toys, Japan is the place in which to see all sorts of comical and ingenious contrivances of the sort. Odd little men, and fat brown women, that nod their round heads and move their long eyes; splendidly coloured birds, composed of raw silk; painted bats and shuttles, carved ivory cups and balls, arrows, masks, animals that make sounds, and kites like bats and huge birds flying above our heads; glass balls filled with tiny tortoises that shake and quiver as the ball rolls along; humming-tops with trays inside them, which all come out and spin round when the top is set humming; wonderful cheap story-books, all purple and orange, red and gold, besides a thousand other things I must not linger to mention, are sold in wayside booths at a very low price. But passing by all these, let us speak of the toys and the toy-makers of Europe, among which the French hold the foremost place for beauty of design, the Germans for cheapness, and the English for durability. For the better understanding of our subject, let us notice the different places from whence some special kinds of toys are brought, for almost every sort has its own particular makers and place of manufactory. For instance, Berlin is acknowledged to be unsurpassed in all kinds of "war toys," as they are called in the trade, such as strong, well-finished metal soldiers, coloured to represent the troops of all nations; and well do our boys know those oblong boxes with glass lids, in which repose, on a bed of shavings and yellow paper, any number of infantry, artillery, and cavalry officers and men closely jumbled together on the neatly-mounted cannon, and toy-pistols, pop-guns, and swords, that can all be used, the miniature carriages and gaily-tented fields, with which they can go through a close imitation of real warfare. These are the favourite toys among the fair-haired Prussian ladies, though Berlin furnishes them with many of a more peaceable description, and the girls love especially that peculiar, gaily-painted kind, made partly of cardboard and partly of metal and wood, with which they can represent all sorts of fairy tales, "Puss in Boots," or scenes from history, or made-up tales—a species of the clever "Kindergarten" toy, for combining pleasure with instruction, for which this part of the world is quite famous.

