

Butler Ellis Parker

The Incubator Baby



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Ellis Parker Butler

The Incubator Baby

I

On the sunniest slope of the garden of Paradise the trees stand in long, pleasant rows. The air is always balmy, and the trees are forever in bloom with pink and white blossoms. From a distance the trees look like apple trees, but, close at hand, you see that the pink and white blossoms are little bows and streamers of ribbon and that the boughs are swaying gently with the weight of many dimpled babies.

Walking up and down beneath the trees are kind old storks, and as they walk they turn their heads, looking upward to see where there may be a sweet pink and white baby ready to be carried away, out of the garden into the big, strange world. It is a vast garden, and there are many trees and many storks, and every moment there is a whirring of strong wings and a stork has passed out of the confines of the garden with the dearest gift that Heaven can give to woman.

The storks are very grave and very careful, but that is because only storks of mature age are allowed to carry the precious babies. The younger storks may stand on one leg and watch their elders, or they may hop awkwardly between the trees to amuse the babies, but they are never permitted to pick the babies from their leafy cradles, nor to attempt such a delicate undertaking as flying away with them into the outside world.

But one day the very youngest of the storks got into mischief and before its elders knew what it was about it had flown into one of the trees. It tried to lift one of the biggest, plumpest, prettiest of the babies, but it was such a small stork it could do no more than make the baby sway to and fro on its branch, so it picked the very smallest baby on the tree, and carried it straight to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Fielding, and left it there rather unexpectedly.

If ever there was a surprised baby it was Marjorie Fielding. She did not care for the Vernon Fielding home in the least. She vastly preferred Paradise; it was far more comfortable, and she had just made a decision to return there immediately, when a very remarkable thing happened. It seemed to Marjorie that the Fieldings cared as little for her as she cared for the atmosphere of their home, for she was rolled in soft cotton, wrapped again and again in flannel cloths, and a large man with soft hands carried her away.

When she awoke she had an impression that she must be back on her own twig in the garden of Paradise. The air was soft and balmy and very warm, but when she opened her eyes everything was strange. There were no trees, no gently swaying branches, and no kindly old storks parading below her. Instead, she gazed into dozens of faces that peered at her curiously. They were faces of men and women, and those in the back rows tried, by twisting and turning and peering through small openings, to get as clear a view as those in the front row had. There were all sorts of faces and they showed all sorts of emotions. Some expressed the most violent curiosity, some were softened by kindly pity, some wore expressions of disappointment as if the show was not as interesting as they had expected, and some showed a certain weak disgust.

Marjorie wondered lazily why they were there. Probably they were some amusement contrived by a mistaken person for her entertainment. If so, she wished the amusement discontinued; it had too many eyes in it.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” she heard one of the faces say. “Before the invention of incubators nearly every one of them died, and now they hardly lose one in ten;” and another said, disdainfully: “And to think I paid me decent money to see dis! I’m easy, I am. Come on, let’s shoot the chutes;” but one face, a sweet face, said:

“Poor, dear, sweet little baby. It makes my heart ache,” and Marjorie liked that face. She fixed her eyes on it and for the first time in her very few hours of life something in her own heart pulled toward a face. She wanted that face to stay there; it was motherly. That was it, the face was motherly, and deep in the small heart of Marjorie there was a desire to be mothered and loved, but the face passed on and never came back again.

From the first day the incubator people were proud of Marjorie. She was the smallest baby of all those in the long row of incubators; “one pound and eight ounces when born,” the placard above her incubator said; but she grew rapidly. When she was sixteen days old she weighed two pounds, and after that you could see her grow. She slept a great deal, and was fed constantly and her crystal palace was like a little hothouse.

For several days, shortly after her arrival, she was greatly worried by a man who seemed to have a desire to flirt with her. He stood near at hand all day, and hardly took his eyes off her, and then only to examine the thermostat that regulated the heat in her nest. He seemed to be more anxious than the nurse that Marjorie should not be baked too brown, and from time to time he made ridiculous passes at her with his hands or screwed his face into peculiar shapes that sought to be amusing. It was most disconcerting.

Marjorie tried to appear unconscious of all his antics. When she could not avoid looking at him she stared at him coldly, but that did not seem to dishearten him. Even a cold glance filled him with joy, and once, when she was preparing a little cry and had screwed her face into the prescribed shape, he grasped the attendant by the arm and exclaimed: “She’s smiling! Isn’t she smiling?” Marjorie was quite ashamed, he was so idiotically ecstatic. She learned later that he was her father, and that for some reason fathers have a right to do that sort of thing. In fact, it is rather nice when one gets used to it.

But the great day was the day of her mother’s coming. The nurse had prepared Marjorie for it. “Little girl, your mother is coming to-day.”

Marjorie watched closely for her mother all that day. She scanned the faces that came and went, picking out those she thought might be her mother, but she could not be sure, for they all passed by. All the faces she chose were kind young faces, and she was rather surprised when her mother finally came. She did not recognize her for quite a while.

A tall lady came to the incubator in company with the nurse. She examined the incubator carefully, and asked a great many questions about temperature, the sanitation, alimentation and digestion and other scientific things. She examined the record chart carefully, and asked the nurse if Marjorie’s weight was not increasing less than the proper average, and when the nurse assured her that Marjorie was surpassing the average she objected to that and said that she had no desire for her to grow so rapidly she would be soft and pulpy. Then she examined the nurse carefully and critically regarding her experience with babies, and all the while she made notes in a small memorandum book. She copied everything on the record chart, and asked to have Marjorie weighed, and put the weight down in the little memorandum book.

“I wish to be very careful and exact,” she said, “for I am her mother, and if I do not look after these things no one will,” and Marjorie knew this was her mother. She waited patiently for the preliminaries to be completed so that the real mother business could begin, but her mother must have been very busy that day, for she went away without being really introduced to Marjorie.

Marjorie was disappointed. She had become used to being regarded as an entertainment for the faces that passed by, and she had become accustomed to have the incubator people regard her as a Case – a most interesting Case, to be sure, but still a Case – but she did not like to have her mother look upon her merely as a Statistic.

Her mother came after that, almost daily for a week, and then not so frequently. It was not necessary, for the statistics showed that Marjorie was making progress favorably, and Mrs. Fielding was a very busy woman. She believed in the broad life for women, and a woman broadens her life by stepping out of the home occasionally. The home is better for it. When the woman is not a slave

to the home, the home becomes an ennobled place, and the woman who can step out and bring back culture and knowledge, and broader views of life and things, is the only woman who can raise the home to the level of the man's life. Science and system work wonders in the home, as well as in the office of the business man.

Mrs. Fielding was not a slave to the home. I would sign her certificate of freedom myself. Neither did she look upon Marjorie as a necessary evil. She was glad and proud to be a mother, and she loved Marjorie, and wished to do all that is in a mother's power for her, but she knew that many of the old notions about babies were mistaken ideas. The incubator itself proved that. Science and system are far more efficacious than much of the old-fashioned granny's twaddle. With the help of educated minds Mrs. Fielding meant to give Marjorie an ideal mother's care.

Marjorie didn't care much for the broader life herself. She was incorrigibly like other babies. She wanted to be fed when she was hungry, to sleep when she was sleepy, and to be loved and mothered and petted whenever she was not hungry nor sleepy, and whatever a nickel-plated incubator may be able to do, it is not an adept at kissing. It may exude balmy temperature better than an old-style open fireplace, but it is a failure at wrapping its warm, soft arms around a baby, and pressing its cheek against a tiny, satin cheek. The very cast-ironness of its construction prevents it from lifting the infant high in the air until coos and crows of baby laughter tell of unsystematic, unscientific joy. So Marjorie adopted the fly.

The fly came one day and alighted on the glass door of her crystal case and winked its wings at her, and she blinked her eyes at it, and after that they understood each other perfectly. It knew she wanted to be amused, and it knew it was an amusing fellow. It had a clever trick of shaking hands with itself under its coat tails, and as long as she knew it, it never mentioned a statistic, and altho it walked all over the thermostat, it disdained to look at the figures. Marjorie and the fly became good friends. There was something very human about the fly, far more than about the constantly passing faces of the sightseers, or the prim, statistical nurse, or even the systematic, broadened Mrs. Fielding, and one day it slipped into the incubator and alighted on Marjorie's lips, and kissed her. Shortly after the scandalized nurse assassinated the fly, and Marjorie would have mourned deeply but for a new companion she discovered a little while afterward.

It was shortly before she was sufficiently incubated to leave her glass prison, and she was fine and plump, and had begun to roll over and bump her head against the glass, surprising herself greatly, for she could not see the glass. If she had stayed a little longer she would have been afraid to move at all, for wherever there was nothing to be seen there might be that hard, smooth wall that hurt her.

She was lying flat on her downy pillow one morning, watching the faces, when something stirred at the foot of the pillow. She raised her head a very little but could see nothing, but as soon as her head fell back the thing moved again. She was sure it moved, and she waited quietly, and again it moved. This time there seemed to be two of the things. It was puzzling, for the nurse never allowed anything interesting inside the case.

Marjorie lay low, and presently, up, up, into her range of vision crept a little pink and white affair with five short, plump branches, and just behind it arose another. She cooed with pleasure.

The things seemed quite tame and unafraid, and they came nearer until they stood quite upright on plump white branches. Marjorie reached out her dimpled hands, which wandered a little uncertainly in the air, wavering to and fro, until one came in contact with one of the plump, mysterious things. She grasped it firmly, and it was soft and pleasant to the touch.

The crowd of faces paused and increased in number. They seemed greatly interested as she tried to catch the thing, and one old man offered to bet she would catch it. He was immensely tickled when she did and grinned delightedly. Marjorie held fast to her captive.

She pondered what she should do with it, and finally decided that it must be edible. She drew it closer to her face, and it resisted and tugged to get away, but she dragged it on relentlessly.

It was a hard fight. The old man coached her, cheering her on to fresh endeavors, and, thus encouraged, she made one great final effort and pulled the soft pink thing into her lips, and the old man laughed long and loud and wiped his eyes.

“Look at her!” he cried. “Just look at her! Ain’t she a picter for you? I knowed she’d get it, she’s grit clean through.” A small boy, excited by the size of the crowd, pushed his way to the front and looked, and then turned away, indignant. “Huh!” he exclaimed scornfully, “‘tain’t nut’in’ but a kid got its toe in its mou’!” During her last days in the incubator Marjorie and her feet became fast friends. All the long period of her loneliness was forgotten in this new companionship. Never were there more accommodating playmates than those two gentle twins, for they seemed to be twins, they were so much alike in size and appearance. They never forced themselves forward. When Marjorie wanted to sleep the feet lay quietly at the foot of the pillow, but the moment she felt like playing they crept upward and stood enticingly in her sight. Sometimes she played with one, and sometimes with the other, and whichever was not needed curled up snugly out of sight and waited patiently until it was needed.

They had glorious times together. Usually she had no trouble in catching a foot when she wanted it, but sometimes they played a little game with her, and dodged about just beyond her reach, coaxing her to catch them, and eluding her hands by the smallest part of an inch, but this only made the fun more riotous, and one of them always ended the game by letting itself be captured.

But one day a wonderful thing happened to Marjorie. The nurse and the manager came to Marjorie’s incubator, and consulted the chart, and weighed Marjorie and pinched her arms and legs to see whether they were firm and solid, and after that the air in the incubator lost a little of its warmth every day, until it was as cool as the air of the great outside world.

Marjorie was playing the foot game when the end came. She had not the least idea that anything of the sort was going to happen. No one thought of consulting her convenience in the matter.

First her father and mother appeared, and she might have known that something unusual was on foot if she had thought about it, for they had never before visited Marjorie simultaneously, but Marjorie was too deeply in the foot game to pay attention to parents. Parents were a necessity, but the foot game was a joy.

The nurse, who often did unaccountable things to Marjorie, did the most unaccountable of all. She took Marjorie from her bed on the soft, pillow and dressed her in stiff new garments, and enfolded her in blankets and capes until she was like a bundle of soft cloths, with only a little peephole for her eyes, and then, with cruelty unthought of, she handed her bodily to Mrs. Fielding. Marjorie objected. She foresaw some trick in all this. She raised her voice and protested, but they covered her face with a soft white veil. Marjorie indignantly went to...

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