

The Wax Doll

by Greye La Spina

Greye La Spina is one of the original group of Weird Tales writers whose stories helped a good deal to establish that oldest existing fantasy magazine in its formative days of 1923 and 1924. But prior to Weird Tales there was an earlier effort to establish an all-fantasy pulp; one which proved sadly short-lived. This was a magazine called The Thrill Book, published in 1919, which lasted a scant dozen or so semi-monthly numbers. Copies of it are probably the scarcest items in any fantasy collection. "The Wax Doll" appeared in that pioneer magazine, for Miss La Spina was one of its main contributors. It is an eerie tale of a little girl whose sole plaything was a forbidden doll.

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NICE BUTTERWORTH, beloved and only child of Worthy and Zebedee Butterworth. Aged nine years and three weeks. Requiescat in pace."

That is the inscription. As for the first part, it is plain enough; he who runs may read. But for the Latin inscription, there are those in Ellersville who assert that it has not always been true.

While there is nothing *outré* about the tiny marker with its sculptured words, nothing out of the ordinary about the softly sloping mound, covered with living green by the English ivy that has grown closely over it, yet there is something strange about that grave that draws a stranger's attention as would a lodestone and holds it until the story of little Anice Butterworth and the wax doll has transformed idle curiosity into deep wonder and aching pity.

About her grave lie children's toys, some of them quite new and shiny. And chief among them all is a great, weather-beaten wax doll that sits against the headstone gazing vacantly across the burial ground from her post of vantage. Any Ellersville child will tell you they are there for Anice to play with.

Poor little Anice! She has her share of toys now. God only knows with what agony of longing and remorse her bereaved parents put them there for

her eyes to gloat upon, for her unseen fingers to caress. If it be true that our every action brings with it the appropriate reward or castigation, then how terribly have Worthy and Zebedee Butterworth been punished for their blind, willful ignorance of the heart of a little child!

They had their own ideas about bringing up children, did Worthy and Zebedee. Her people had been the kind that never smiled on the Sabbath day for fear God might be offended at their sinful levity. Zebedee's had been the kind that wept over every penny spent and—figuratively speaking—killed the fatted calf over each dollar that came in. The combination of temperaments proved an unfortunate one for the innocent victim of their solicitous love.

From the time she was old enough to take notice, Anice Butterworth had been an object of deep commiseration to Ellersville. She was never seen playing as other children play. She was never permitted a toy. Toys cost good money, her father said. Her mother's reason was deeper laid; if we miserable sinners expect to attain heaven eventually, we must offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken and contrite spirit, she asserted. This was interpreted as a sacrifice of every joy-inspiring emotion of the human heart. Between the two of them, they gave their only child a fine babyhood and little-girlhood!

They loved her, her father and mother. They loved her with an affection that almost terrified them by its strength. But the more they realized its depth, the more they felt assured that it was an idolatrous passion that must be strangled at its birth. The Eastern mother's superstitious terror that her babe's beauty will bring upon it the curse of the Evil Eye was as nothing to the fear of these Christian parents that God would punish their presumption in loving so deeply and tenderly what was, after all, only a thing of the flesh. So they crucified Anice to save her from the wrath of God; crucified her on the cross of their own terrors, and gloated over her misery in a vain belief that they were propitiating the Almighty in her behalf.

Ellersville looked on indignantly but impotently to see the loving little creature crushed slowly and systematically under the juggernaut created by her parents. She was deprived conscientiously of everything that promised to give her pleasure. Her father repeatedly told her that playthings cost too much, which was his own way of refusing her what he felt was harmful to her spiritual welfare. Her mother taught her that God loves those who *fear* Him, and carefully guided those tiny faltering feet into paths of darkness and terror that the Heavenly Father surely never meant for her tender youth to travel. Anice became an old little thing at six years of age, age measured by standards of time, at nine, she was older than the oldest inhabitant of Ellersville, if one judged her age by the gleam of her crushed soul out of inexpressibly pathetic eyes.

It was only natural that people should try to soften the harsh rules the Butterworths had laid down for the little girl, by giving her playthings from time to time. Not that it did much good. Either the toys were returned with frigid courtesy or they disappeared entirely from the face of the earth so far as Anice was concerned. Worthy Butterworth filled every moment

of Anice's time with doleful readings from some fearfully pious book of ancient sermons or with plain sewing, that bane of the life of little girls. Very early Anice had learned to give up attempts to play make-believe by herself; her mother soon learned of this wayward tendency and enforced her ideas upon the child by keeping the poor little creature constantly at her side, busied with her morbid reading or with endless patchwork.

On Anice's ninth birthday, nevertheless, Ellersville people plucked up sufficient courage to dare cross the path of the juggernaut. They got together and bought a special gift for Anice, a wonderfully beautiful great wax doll, dressed marvellously in silk and laces; a doll to have warmed the heart of even the most pampered little girl. The ladies' sewing circle of the Methodist church collected the money for this present with great privacy and then went in a body to the Butterworth home on Anice's birthday, to present her boldly with the doll.

Worthy could hardly have refused the gift. Her husband had recently given the church a donation, generous for him, toward new pews, and she felt that the doll was by way of being appreciative recognition on the part of the sewing circle. Zebdec could not have refused it if he would; there was something in the attitude of the ladies who presented it that prevented his saying a word of protest. Moreover, it had cost a pretty penny and he knew it. He figured it could be put away against the day when Anice would no longer be tempted by such worldly toys. Yet both the Butterworths were inwardly certain that the possession of this doll would be the complete ruination of their little precious daughter.

During the hours that the members of the sewing circle remained in the house, Anice Butterworth sat in their midst, the marvellous doll in her arms, enjoying such an ecstasy of exaltation as the poor little creature had never experienced in her entire short life. On a low hassock she sat, her feet straight before her on the floor; her little petticoats, painfully sewed, washed and ironed by her own busy child hands, stiffly refusing to be smoothed down decorously enough to give the wonderful doll a comfortable seat. Not that she noticed this objectively; she was too completely wrapped up in the exquisite joy of holding in her own arms, against her thumping little heart, such a plaything as she had never, in her wildest imaginings, dreamed might be hers. To hold it unrebuked—what bliss! What unutterable felicity!

She clung to it, hardly daring a close examination, lest she draw upon herself the disapprobation of her troubled parents. Occasionally she stole a downward glance into the smiling waxen face with an expression of such tender adoration on her own that some of the ladies declared afterward that it was enough to bring tears to one's eyes. One hand stroked the silken skirts caressingly with slow motions of luxurious enjoyment; the other gripped the doll feverishly. For an hour, one excruciatingly beautiful hour, Anice lived such emotions as other children spread over years of childhood experience.

The ladies rose to go. One of them asked her: "What will you name your doll, Anice?"

Without hesitation, but as if she had already cogitated long and seriously upon this difficult subject and had arrived at a firm decision, Anice had replied with a world of affection in her tones:

"Beloved!"

And amid the cautiously exchanged glances, she buried her face deeply, with a sigh of utter contentment, in the silken attire of her treasure.

Anice's ninth birthday became an event of much speculation in Ellersville, as might be surmised. It was for a time believed that the Ladies' Sewing Circle had managed by their gift to alter the attitude of the Butterworths toward the poor little one. Everywhere the wish was expressed that Anice might from then on enjoy some of the innocent pleasures and happinesses of life that other children had so freely as their just portion. But the villagers were yet to learn that they had reckoned without their Butterworths.

Out of deference to the opinions of the ladies who had just left the house, Worthy did not immediately exile the wax doll; she took it firmly from Anice's arms and set it high out of reach upon a mantel. This simple act was not accomplished with ease. For once in her life the little girl resented from the very depths of her being the wrong that she instinctively felt was put upon her. She clung to the beautiful plaything with fierce strength; she actually kicked at her mother with stoutly clad little feet. She screamed and gritted her teeth in mad determination not to be parted from her first and only love. Worthy actually found it necessary to pry the clinging fingers from the silken garments of that disturber of family peace by main force.

The worse Anice behaved, the more strongly was Worthy convinced that in keeping playthings from the child she had acted wisely. If a single hour's association with a mere wax doll could affect Anice so terribly after nine years of careful training, how would she have been behaving, Worthy wondered, had she always been permitted toys? Zebedee agreed fully with his wife in her action and in her conclusions. He went a little further; he took the doll from the mantel, his face dark with a disapproving scowl, and hid it in the garret.

Anice's sad fall from grace was meted out severe punishment, in allotting which Worthy showed her ingenuity. The child had to read aloud, page after page of Fox's *Martyrs* for days, while her mother passed in and out of the room to which the child had been banished for a week. She was also condemned to rip out and make over an entire patchwork quilt which she had recently finished with innocent pride and satisfaction, as well as infinite labor.

The childish mind rebelled, God knows how bitterly, but in silence. She sat quietly in her high-backed chair and read in toneless monotony the horrors of the early martyrs' sufferings, or bent dull eyes upon the bits of colored cloth which she had ripped apart and must sew together again at her mother's behest.

When the week's punishment was over, her parents missed her one night from her bed, after hearing soft footsteps stealing down the hall. Zebedee intuitively went at once to the garret, the lines of his mouth tightening ominously. He found her there, the small face raised up to his, smiling and

contented; the little arms clasped warmly about the bone of contention which lay against her yearning heart. He stood looking down at her with strange expressions chasing each other across his stern countenance. He returned to bed with the simple observation that she must have walked in her sleep to the garret and that he had tucked a blanket about her and left her there; it would be time enough in the morning, he said, to settle with her. Worthy knew only too well what had taken the child to the garret, but she gave no outward sign of her knowledge; she acquiesced with her husband's decision.

In the morning Anice was parted again from the doll, although she showed herself yet more obstreperous and determined, refusing to be separated from her beloved. The tears, the cries, the pleading, all fell upon unseeing eyes and deaf ears. Such was the love of those two for her future salvation that they damned her earthly happiness completely. By degrees the child became calmer but her expression was one that almost terrified her parents by its unearthly resolution.

"I shall always find my Beloved," she declared, rebellious eyes and compressed lips defying them. "You cannot keep her away from me. We cannot be separated, because she loves me as I love her."

That was in late autumn. Winter came on as it sometimes does, in a sudden, unexpected storm of biting cold, bitter winds, and driving snow. From November suddenness of skies emerged the bleak December weather.

During the days that followed Anice made no further outward signs of the rebellion she had so passionately declared. She sewed her wrinkled little patches together again; she read the horrors of the early martyrs with dull indifference. No word, no sign, escaped her that was connected with the wax doll. Her parents congratulated themselves that she had at last entirely forgotten it. It was not so, however, and they were soon to learn how tragically deep had grown Anice's love for her Beloved.

Zebedee had put the doll in the woodshed, locking it in without further precautions of concealment from the child, whose great dark eyes followed his every movement the day he carried her Beloved away. He remarked to Worthy, almost contemptuously, that he guessed he'd settled that matter for good and all. He was to recall his words afterward with an agony of remorse.

Ellersville can never forget the blizzard that raged for three days that winter, covering the entire countryside with deep drifts. The third night of the storm Worthy Butterworth roused from her sleep and grasped at her husband's shoulder, shaking him to alertness. She thought she had heard a strange noise. Zebedee sat up and listened intently.

It was Anice sobbing in her sleep. She was calling in heart-rending tones: "Beloved! Beloved!"

The mother's heart ached within her but her thoughts of an angry and jealous God restrained and hardened her.

She did go so far as to whisper to her husband, "Do you suppose we can have been wrong about that doll?"

He shook his head emphatically. But even as he denied the possibility of

an error in their combined judgment, he felt that weakening toward the sobbing, dreaming child which proves to us what playthings we ourselves are in the force of our emotions.

They composed themselves to sleep again but their dreams were troubled. So troubled that, although she could not remember what hers had been about, Worthy rose with the first dim light of a white day that broke in through the swirling snow that beat and tore with pale, malevolent fingers at the windows, and went into Anice's room to assure herself that the child was sleeping quietly. Her wild screams brought Zebedee to her side in a flash.

"My baby! Where is my baby?" she shrieked, sudden terror clutching at her heart. "Something is wrong! Something has happened to Anice! Where can she be?"

For the bed was empty of its small occupant.

Her husband strove to quiet her.

"She is probably hiding in the garret again," he assured her, but he knew his words were foolish. The wax doll was not in the garret.

He began to tremble with the vehemence of the emotion that shook Worthy, whose trembling body he was supporting. She looked from the window with dazed, vacant eyes, as though she would pierce by sheer strength of will those blinding flurries of snow.

"God forgive us!" she screamed out suddenly. "She is there!"

She fell, a limp weight, against her husband's breast.

He laid her on Anice's bed. He did not dare take time to bring her back to merciless consciousness, for now something pulled at him with invisible fingers that would not be denied. He let himself be led.

Out of the kitchen door into the shrieking, howling storm he went, the bitter cold penetrating his very heart, chilling it so that it beat slowly and sluggishly as though some power from without were striving to stop its beating. Down the pathway he plunged blindly, fighting for every step against the surging of that mighty wind, terrified apprehensions growing upon him with every forward step. His leaden feet dragged him back when he tried to pull them through the deep drifts that in three days and nights had changed the entire aspect of the countryside. On he went, to the woodshed where, but a short two weeks ago he had hidden the wax doll away from the longing child heart that had loved it so tenderly, from the gentle hands that would have caressed it so lovingly.

It was there he found his child, as he knew he would. White as the snow that clung in frozen clods to her thin little nightdress; pale as the pallor of that dead morning, she half reclined, half knelt as if in supplication, against the door that kept her away from her Beloved. Upon the childish face was a frozen appeal; in the wide-open staring eyes an entreaty. They were the more pathetic and heartrending because Zebedee knew their meaning well, and knew that it had gone unanswered.

The father gathered up that poor little body and held it tightly to him as though to cool the fires of burning grief that consumed him. He fought his way grimly back to the house.

Worthy stood at the door to receive him. Mercifully had the knowledge come to her of the tragic death of her child. It did not stagger her now as with a sudden blow; she knew well what had befallen. She stood there, dumbly holding out her arms for that precious little body.

It was natural and inevitable that they should have tried everything their brains could devise, in mad and hopeless attempts to call back the spirit of their only child to its deserted habitation. All was vain. They knew it even while they worked over the cold, lifeless body. But their unutterable grief, hoping against the evidence of their senses, drove them on until they reached the moment when they had to admit to each other with despairing glances that their efforts were futile. Anice had slipped quietly away from them in the terror of that surging storm of howling wind and driving snow, never to return.

Their grief was terrible, but they repressed it as they had always forced themselves to repress the tenderer emotions of their hearts. The Lord had given. The Lord had taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Of their own instrumentality in this taking away, did they ever think at all? Who knows?

Dumbly, numbly, they went about their daily tasks. Then Zebedee hitched up and went for the undertaker through the wild gusts of wind that whipped him as he drove, while the mother sat dry-eyed by the body of her only child.

The storm had died down when the day of Anice's funeral came, so that the morning dawned shining upon a spotlessly beautiful world, in harmony with the pure soul that had taken flight. They made her grave where you can see it now, and a few days afterwards the headstone, so pitiful in its pathetic brevity and the condensed tragedy of its inscription, marked her resting place. They left her then, to repose in peace. But did she? Opinion even in Ellersville is divided on that point.

Zebedee did not go near the woodshed until actually forced by the necessity for firewood. Then he unlocked the door. He dared not face the silent reproach in the fixed smile of the wax doll, reminding him of the loved child who had gone from him forever. When he came out with an armful of wood, a strange expression was etched on his face, an expression of mingled incredulity and horror and dismay. He said nothing to Worthy at the time.

"I'm imagining things," he muttered to himself.

But the next time wood was needed, he managed to be beyond his wife's call, so that she had to go for it herself. When she returned, he said to her with an air of repressed excitement:

"Where—where was the doll?"

"On the shelf," she replied, wonderingly, looking at him with query in her sad eyes.

"Were there—were there boxes—piled under the shelf—as if—someone small had tried to climb up—to the doll?" he faltered shamefacedly, his eyes avoiding hers.

She stopped short on her way to the wood-box near the stove to regard him with searching face.

"Just what do you mean?" she demanded nervously.

"Nothing! Nothing," he cried quickly, as if denying an allegation made.

She withdrew her eyes but stood for a long moment with knit brows before she proceeded disheartenedly with her work.

The following day it was Worthy who went first, early in the morning, to get stovewood. She had gone with a purpose, because she had lain awake all night hearing—perhaps she had been fanciful, morbid, in her thoughts—the sound as of a child's voice crooning. It even seemed to her that she had distinguished words.

"Beloved! Beloved!" the voice seemed murmuring plaintively.

She told herself that she must check her vain imaginings, born of brooding over Anice's tragic death. She realized that the event of that last night of the blizzard had wrought up her nerves to finest tension. But she felt she must satisfy herself once for all that her fancies were absolutely unfounded, so that her reason could in future rebuke her wandering imagination.

Therefore she went with faltering but determined step to the woodshed and opened the door, the key to which she had herself retained since the preceding day. Yesterday she had removed a number of wooden boxes from under the shelf where the doll lay, and pushed them to the other side of the shed. This morning, as she peered into the semi-darkness, she saw distinctly *that the boxes were back under the shelf, piled one upon the other, as a child might place them who desired to reach the shelf above. And further, the wax doll which yesterday her own eyes had seen lying on the shelf, was now sitting against the wall on the floor of the shed at the foot of the boxes.*

Worthy did not advance a foot across the threshold. She stood without, stupefied. Strange and dreadful thoughts assailed her and beat down upon her. She could not bear it, all at once, and fled back into the house. She made Zebedee go for the wood without telling him why she had failed to bring it. Then she went into the rarely used front room, shut the door, and remained alone there the rest of the morning.

Her husband did not disturb her. Too well he knew why she had gone away by herself. He, too, had seen the pile of boxes under the shelf, put there by other hands than his or hers; put there as if a child had piled them up to reach the shelf where had lain the forbidden plaything. He brought back wood but when he came into the kitchen again he was paler than he had ever been in his life and was trembling in every limb. The wood fell unheeded from his nerveless hands upon the floor, and he sank weakly into a chair, struggling with difficulty to compose his distressful thoughts.

Winter passed on with chill and dragging tread. Late spring found the Butterworths grayer, more worn, more wan, than even the loss of a beloved child would seem to indicate. The uncanny secret that had become a part of their lives was pulling them down both mentally and physically. By May, Worthy had grown so weak that Zebedee hitched up one morning and hurriedly drove to get the doctor.

Serena Lovejoy saw him pass and surmised his errand, for her farm adjoined the Butterworth place. She ran across the private road between the

two farms and made an unexpected visit to Worthy. At first glance Serena divined that here was no malady of body but the gnawing canker of mental sickness. Halfway measures never suited her, so she abruptly opened the subject to her hostess.

"Better tell me about it, Worthy," she said with direct simplicity. "I half believe I know, already, what is troubling you. Perhaps I can find the way out."

Worthy looked long and deeply into the gravely tender eyes of her neighbor.

"Perhaps you can," she considered. Then with sudden sharp pain wracking her soul: "Serena, she is not at rest in her grave! My poor little baby comes back every night, to play with her wax doll!"

"Poor baby!" murmured Serena understandingly. She was credited in Ellersville with being a secess. "Go on, poor soul. Tell me the rest."

"I cannot bear it," wailed the wretched Worthy, her hands pressed agonizedly to her temples. "There is no night that I can sleep. Always I hear her voice calling 'Beloved!' What can I do—what can I do—to give peace to my baby's soul?"

She broke down, sobbing into her hands hysterically.

Serena regarded her with mingled pity and reproach. She shook her head slowly. Then she put a gentle hand on the weeping mother's shoulder.

"Stop crying and listen to me," she commanded. "Give me the key to the woodshed. I promise you, Worthy, you will hear no crying tonight."

It was as she said. That night the bereaved parents slept as they had not slept for months. Worthy went across the road the next morning to ask Serena how such peace had been wrought.

"Go down to the burial ground, to Anice's grave," Serena responded quietly. "I think then you will understand."

And so it was that Worthy Butterworth received the bitterest lesson of all her repressed life.

Sitting against the little headstone that marked the grave of "Anice Butterworth, aged nine years and three weeks," was the gaily dressed plaything that had been the innocent cause of the tragedy. Smiling fixedly, blue glass eyes meaningless under fringed lids, the wax doll waited patiently for night to bring its playmate back. Anice had not far to go to find her Beloved, any more.

As the graves of Indian chiefs are loaded with the good things of life that their spirits may attend upon the phantom of the dead, so today the grave of Anice is never without a new toy, reverently and with bitter remorse left there by the hands of her parents.

And the Christmas tree with its wonderful adornments, that each Yuletide presides over the Sunday School room of the Methodist Church, is the annual gift of Zebedee and Worthy Butterworth in the name of Anice, to the children of Ellersville.

And Anice Requiescat in pace.