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ILLUSTRATION OF
"BIRDIE AND HER PET
DOLL" FROM "BEHIND
THE WHITE BRICK," ST.
NICHOLAS MAGAZINE,
JAN. 1879.



BIRDIE AND HER PET DOLL.

THE NOVELIST, THE MAJOR, AND LITTLE
BIRDIE
*A Knoxville Family Revealed in the Work of
Frances Hodgson Burnett*
By Paul F. Brown

SHE LIVED ALMOST HALF HER LIFE in the foothills of California's San Gabriel Mountains, near Los Angeles. Much of that time she resided on a citrus grove, in a house called Ranchana, having been asked around 1912 to move there and care for the ailing aunt who owned it. Caregiving wasn't her strength, yet she remained nearby, a widow in her mid-40s, and helped the family as much as she could while enjoying some independence—such as driving around town in a car she called “Honey Babe.” Because she also raised peacocks and guinea hens, today some of her surviving relatives believe this is probably how her nickname “Cousin Bird” (or “Aunt Bird,” depending on who you talk to) originated.

In fact, the avian nickname had a much earlier form—Birdie—dating back to her youth in Reconstruction-era Tennessee. Rebecca N. Howe apparently spoke little about this former life to her California kinfolk. Her connections to notable statesmen, educators, and artists are remarkable enough; after all, Knoxville's once-prominent Nicholson Art League was named after her father in the early 1900s. But what makes her Tennessee life so astonishing is that, while in Knoxville, young Rebecca became acquainted with Frances Hodgson Burnett, a gifted writer who would later, amidst international fame, publish a short story about their friendship. The work, “Birdie,” appeared in a widely reviewed 1892 anthology of stories, which Burnett stated were based on real children she had known. Recent research is revealing new clues about the girl called Birdie, her family, and their relationship to Burnett, one of the most popular and prolific authors of the late 19th century.



REBECCA HOWE BEHIND THE WHEEL OF "HONEY BABE," AROUND 1930.

(Courtesy of Thompson Webb.)

Birdie was born Rebecca Nicholson on August 6, 1866, in Columbia, Tennessee. Her parents, Hunter and Charlotte (known as Lottie), each came from prominent families of military officers, lawyers, and legislators. Alfred Osborne Pope Nicholson, Hunter's father, served as a U.S. senator and a chief justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court after editing newspapers in Columbia, Nashville, and Washington, D.C.—where Hunter joined the *Washington Union* staff as associate editor.

Hunter Nicholson (1834–1901) himself practiced law, and was appointed as Tennessee adjutant general under Governor Isham Harris. During the Civil War, he quickly moved up the Confederate ranks, becoming a major in his late 20s, and was present at several decisive battles; he escaped Fort Donelson with two fresh bullet holes in his hat. Although details are scarce, Hunter suffered and recovered from at least one serious battle wound, and also served in Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry. At the war's end, Hunter, like other Confederate officers, faced a federal charge of treason, but a U.S. circuit court dismissed his indictment in 1867

“on plea of amnesty.” By all accounts, Hunter had no trouble regaining his prominence in Tennessee, despite Governor William “Parson” Brownlow’s passionate hatred of Rebels. (Hunter eventually joined the staff of Knoxville’s short-lived *Whig and Register*, purportedly a newspaper that “respectable and leading Democrats of the city” favored; he also helped establish the Fred Ault Bivouac organization for Confederate veterans. Whatever Hunter’s politics, by the end of his life he gained the admiration of at least one former Unionist, newspaper editor Captain William Rule.)

Hunter resumed editorship of the *Columbia Herald*, and increasingly focused his attention on agriculture, the primary industry in Maury County. In 1868, he began editing a new paper called the *Dixie Farmer*, which advertised as “the best WEEKLY PAPER for the Southern Farmer.” The following year in Nashville, Hunter was elected to the board of the Agricultural and Mechanical Association, and he subsequently joined other industry representatives in organizing the Tennessee Agricultural and Mechanical Congress. It was said that Hunter “has a fondness for all animated nature, and an especial affection for the production of the farm, and is a well informed man in almost every branch of learning.” Between his industry and publishing activities, and his political connections in Nashville, Hunter Nicholson was named as the best candidate to head a new school of agriculture.

Agriculture education had received a promising boost in July 1862, when Congress passed the Morrill Act granting states “public lands” for the establishment of agricultural and industrial colleges. Tennessee had an advantage over other Southern states, being the first Confederate state to re-join the Union. And since its Appalachian region had been a center of Union sympathy, East Tennessee University was awarded the land grant in early 1869, allowing university trustees to purchase land “to be used in connection with its Agricultural Department to be by it

established in accordance with a recent act of the Legislature upon that subject.” That April, the university acquired the 285-acre farm of James H. Armstrong, a brother of Drury Armstrong; the property was situated west of the campus and roughly a mile and a half from the courthouse. With new facilities built, and degree and certificate programs offered, the agricultural college opened for the fall semester.

In early December 1869, university trustees elected Hunter as “chair of the Agriculture and Horticulture” department, and just before Christmas he came to Knoxville “on a preliminary visit to the Institution.” The *Knoxville Press and Messenger* reported “that he is much pleased with the Agricultural farm, and thinks it capable of great development and profitable cultivation.”

The following year, Hunter and Lottie moved to Knoxville with their six children: Carrie, Maury, Augustus, Lora, Katie—and Birdie, the second youngest. Most likely, Birdie’s nickname was already in use by then, since such endearments usually begin in early childhood. However, the name’s origin isn’t exactly known; the first printed reference to “Miss Birdie,” one of the “daughters of Prof. Nicholson,” wouldn’t appear in a Knoxville newspaper until 1880, when she was already a teenager.

Courtesy of the university, the Nicholsons would reside on the recently purchased agricultural grounds in a fourteen-room, colonial mansion called River View, originally built by Matthew McClung in 1830. Bricks used in its construction were made of clay from the property. The mansion featured “broad verandas, large halls with [a] solid oak stairway,” and other elaborate woodwork such as the “large built-in china closet by the mantel in the breakfast room.” Detached servants’ quarters, stables, and other outbuildings surrounded the estate.

River View’s vast grounds—stretched between the banks of Third Creek and the Holston (now Tennessee) River, and bisected by the Kingston Turnpike—included “a fine grove of giant oaks,” as well as apple “orchards, grape vines and mulberry trees.”



RIVER VIEW, AS IT APPEARED IN THE 1920s WHEN KNOWN AS THE WASHBURN HOUSE. (McClung Historical Collection.)

Birdie, who turned four that first summer in Knoxville, played with her siblings on those wooded knolls sloping toward the river. In the young girl's imagination, fairies danced there in the moonlight under those great oak trees. And as she grew, she enjoyed strolling the grounds with her father. The short story "Birdie" portrays father and daughter as being "great friends" who "were in the habit of exploring the woods in a happy sort of way together." Hunter shared with her his knowledge of and fondness for nature, and eventually "Birdie really knew many things about birds and insects and rocks and flowers."

The large neighboring lots along the turnpike were home to some of Knoxville's wealthiest families. The Armstrongs owned property just west of the agricultural farm, including the adjacent house called Crescent Bend, which Drury Armstrong had completed in 1834. Robert H. Armstrong, Drury's son, lived less than half a mile west of there with his wife, twin daughters, and son. When he completed his own home in 1858, Robert, being an admirer of Dickens, named it Bleak House after the recently published novel. Besides literature, the Armstrongs loved art, and

Robert's 11-year-old daughter Adelia was already showing a talent for drawing. Years later, as a well-known painter, Adelia would reside down the street at Westwood—now home to the nonprofit Knox Heritage (which has in its collection a letter that Birdie's eldest sister, Carrie, wrote to Adelia's mother in 1873). Adelia would also head the Knoxville Art Club, and help inaugurate its more notable offshoot, the Nicholson Art League.



Meanwhile in 1870, about two miles upriver from River View, a 20-year-old woman in Knoxville proper lived in a smaller, more ramshackle brick house near the bank of the Holston. Her widowed mother died that spring, leaving Fannie Hodgson and her four siblings—all natives of England—without a living parent. Despite their meager incomes, they loved life and art. Fannie wrote stories, acted, and taught music; Herbert made watches, painted, and led a small orchestra; John served drinks at a saloon; Edith and Edwina courted young men who played instruments. The Hodgsons' brick house, which they called Vagabondia Castle, became a center of bohemian activity.

Located on the southwest corner of Front and Henley streets, and leased from newspaper publisher Hiram Barry, this house was tiny compared with Birdie's estate. And it was unfortunately situated within noseshot of the gas works, which piped coal gas into homes, businesses, and streetlights throughout Knoxville. But the Hodgsons were no less stimulated by their surroundings than the Nicholsons were. Fannie and siblings boated on the moonlit river, and strolled with friends along its banks. Once as she stood gazing across the Holston, Fannie invented a Native American love story to entertain some young girls, one of whom later remembered it in remarkable detail.

Fannie's story, as retold by Ada Campbell Larew, began: "When Knoxville was just a settlement, a Cherokee Indian tribe



VAGABONDIA CASTLE, CENTER AT TOP, AS SEEN FROM ACROSS THE
TENNESSEE RIVER, AT THE CORNER OF FRONT AND HENLEY STREETS,
IN A 1865 PANORAMIC PHOTOGRAPH OF KNOXVILLE (DETAIL).
(McClung Historical Collection.)

camped down the river a short distance and another tribe was stationed a mile or more down the river. One of the braves, a handsome youth of the latter camp, loved a maiden of the other tribe, and would often come up the river in his canoe to woo the maiden.” As she told the story, which involved the maiden’s tribe being attacked by whites and the young brave attempting to rescue her, Fannie may have imagined the action occurring along the stretch of river between Vagabondia Castle and the agricultural college farm—or perhaps just around the next bend, near Looney’s Island, where Drury Armstrong had indeed spotted a Cherokee encampment as late as the 1840s.

By 1870, Fannie already had several stories, ones she wrote in town, published in two national women’s magazines, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and *Peterson’s Magazine*. Fannie had sold these stories, and thus began her career, while living at the Hodgsons’ previous home off Clinton Road, just beyond the city. In order to submit the stories, she enlisted the help of a neighbor—a schoolteacher who agreed to mail off the earliest manuscripts for

her. (Census records show a schoolteacher named James Hamilton living in that vicinity in 1870.) It would not be the last time Fannie requested help from a local professor.

In years to come she would fictionalize her Knoxville experiences and relationships in works like *Vagabondia: A Love Story*—a novel which, though set in London, depicts scenes based on Fannie’s life with her siblings at Vagabondia Castle.



The agriculture college was having a rough start. While state funds had enabled the purchase of the farm property, university trustees were still awaiting interest payments from the state for university bonds. Lacking full funding, trustees reduced the university faculty and asked remaining professors to cover duties outside their departments. Hunter Nicholson, for one, was now training military cadets in addition to chairing the department of agriculture and horticulture. To make matters worse, Hunter’s budget would not allow him to operate the farm as planned, and instead he leased out the field to local tenant farmers who could afford to cultivate it. Not until 1871 did the college have the property “surveyed and laid off into lots, preparatory to the beginning of rotation of crops,” seemingly in a rush for something to show representatives from Nashville that fall.

On November 24 (the day Fannie Hodgson turned 22 and prepared to perform in *She Stoops to Conquer* with the Thespian Society that evening), a committee from the Tennessee General Assembly arrived to inspect the college farm and buildings to assess whether East Tennessee University had met all stipulations of the state’s agricultural college grant. Hunter led the legislators through the agricultural buildings and over its grounds. Despite the embarrassing “traces of dilapidation and war’s devastation” on the main campus, as the *Daily Press and Herald* noted, the committee was overall satisfied, and its positive report secured the agricultural college funds for the university.

Hunter had pushed for a rigorous, academic program for agriculture students, but also believed that scientific pursuits should not exclude “the cultivation of the beautiful”—flowers and plants that are pleasing to behold. In an April 1870 lecture, he had told his students, “While we are earnest in the practice of the useful, those things which make smooth the rough corners of life must not be neglected.”

After surviving the horrors of war, Hunter may have imagined that life’s roughest corners were behind him. But one night in February 1872, his family suffered the first of several tragedies when its youngest member, four-year-old Katie, died of some unknown cause. Two days later, Hunter and Lottie and their remaining children gathered with friends at St. John’s Episcopal for the funeral service, after which the small casket was carried to Gray Cemetery.

St. John’s was East Tennessee’s oldest Episcopal congregation—the denomination had assembled in Knoxville as early as 1826, and officially formed the parish in 1844. The Rev. Humes, Hunter’s boss at the university, had first served as rector of St. John’s in 1846, the year the first church building was completed on the corner of Crooked (Walnut) and Cumberland. Although Lottie had not been raised Episcopalian, she joined the Church after marrying Hunter, and their move to Knoxville initiated the family’s association with St. John’s. New to town in 1870, the Nicholsons may have been there on March 25 for the funeral of Eliza Hodgson—the 53-year-old English widow who had attended St. John’s and was buried at Gray Cemetery. Whatever the case, there’s little doubt that news of the Nicholsons’ continuing grief reached the Hodgson siblings.

At the start of 1873, Fannie Hodgson was halfway through a European holiday, visiting relatives in England and sightseeing there and in Paris. The new year should have been a joyful one for the Nicholsons back in Knoxville. On January 3, Lottie gave birth to another girl, and christened her Lottie Stone—her own maiden name. But over the next few days there were

complications for both mother and infant. And as the gravity of her condition became a certainty, mother Lottie bid her husband and children farewell. “One by one she called her darlings to her side and gave them sweet charges, which they will remember in other days amid the associations that cluster around the image of their dear departed,” a writer for the *Knoxville Daily Chronicle* stated. After “assuring her friends that death had lost its terrors,” Hunter’s wife died at 11:40 on the morning of January 7, at the house called River View. She was 39.

Officiated in part by the Rev. Humes, the funeral service at St. John’s the following afternoon was, according to the *Daily Press and Herald*, “sorrowful” and “affecting”: “Soon after the pall-bearers had borne their precious burden into the church, while the solemn music of the funeral dirge reverberated throughout the sacred edifice, the infant daughter, the babe for whom Mrs. Nicholson had given up her life, was baptized.” Following the service, “the funeral cortege wended its way to Gray Cemetery, where the remains were interred with the beautiful ceremony of the Episcopal Church.” The stone later erected at Lottie Nicholson’s grave read “HER HIGHBORN KINSMAN CAME AND TOOK HER AWAY”—a modified line from “Annabel Lee,” an 1850 poem by Edgar Allan Poe.

We don’t know the causes of death, nor do we know which of Knoxville’s doctors attended Hunter’s ailing wife and daughter. We only know that the infant Lottie was also “taken away,” just 14 days after birth, and laid to rest at Gray Cemetery on January 18, 1873. Birdie Nicholson, who would turn seven in August, again became the youngest of the family’s five surviving children.

Fannie Hodgson returned to East Tennessee late that summer after 15 months in Europe, and on September 17, she married Dr. Swan Burnett, a Knoxville physician. The couple rented a house on Temperance Hill, just east of downtown. She had been back

roughly a month when, somewhere in the city, her sash was reportedly stolen by a Liz Williams, whom the *Daily Press and Herald* described as “the most notorious sneak thief in the city.” But otherwise the new “Mrs. Dr. Burnett” resumed regular work and social activities in Knoxville. She also volunteered with the Benevolent Association, and that fall was placed on a committee to collect donations from businesses and residents located “between Gay street and First Creek, and Main and Cumberland streets”—a two-block area that included the year-old Staub’s Opera House.

As Fannie later wrote in “Birdie,” it was around this time that she was friends with a girl whose family lived beyond city limits: “She was a little girl I knew when first I was married, and I shall always remember her as she was then, when she was 7 years old and we were intimate acquaintances.” Fannie indicated that their first meeting occurred one day when “I had driven out to see Birdie’s mamma at the charming house in the country where they lived.” Fannie apparently

simplified, or fudged, the timeline a bit, as Birdie’s mamma had been dead about eight months when Fannie married Swan. If indeed Fannie called on Lottie at River View, it must have occurred prior to Fannie leaving for Europe in June 1872. And if that was indeed the case, Katie Nicholson’s death late that February may be what prompted Fannie’s visit. But the circumstances remain unknown.

Birdie’s country house, Fannie wrote, was located “a few miles” from town and called “Riverside.” Writing several years after the events at River View, Fannie can be forgiven for not



**LOTTIE HUNTER'S
GRAVESTONE AT OLD
GRAY CEMETERY.**

(Courtesy of Benjamin
Whitehead.)

getting the house's name and distance from town exactly right, though it's likely she was deliberately vague in her descriptions. Still, most of her details align with what we know about the Nicholsons. She wrote, for example, that Birdie's father, "The Major,' who had been a Confederate officer, had become a Professor in a well-known Southern university."

According to her account, Fannie was talking with the parents when Birdie entered the room, and the girl immediately captivated the writer: "She was a *very* pretty child. . . . She was very slight . . . she had fine brown hair, which hung loose, a pure fair skin, with a faint rose-leaf color, and a delicate small face, with the clearest innocent golden-brown eyes I ever saw." Fannie also noticed the girl's serious concern for a doll that was "lying in invalid state upon a sofa." After being introduced to Birdie, Fannie asked about the doll's condition, and offered to help when Birdie explained that "Miss Anna has the measles very badly." The parents, and particularly the father, seemed delighted by their daughter's vivid imagination: "I saw her mamma and the Major glance at each other as we left them, and the Major's humorous eyes looked in a very quiet way more humorous than ever, but he did not laugh at all. I discovered afterwards that he never disturbed Birdie's beliefs and fancies, or treated them with any disrespect which would spoil them for her."

One wonders whether Birdie's concern for her doll's health was rooted in the recent loss of her little sister. Had Katie Nicholson died of the measles? Perhaps Fannie had this in mind, with a particular interest in encouraging the girl, when she befriended Birdie. Fannie suggested that Miss Anna, the doll, might recover at one of the region's renowned health spas, and took the doll home with her: "I had a delightful visit from Miss Anna. Birdie and I pretended that she was obliged to visit some fashionable mineral springs after her measles. So I carried her to my house in town and kept her there. I think I wrote one or two letters from her to her mother describing her gay life at Montvale [Springs, in

Blount County] or White Sulphur [Springs, West Virginia]. But the truth was that Miss Anna was really with me, and I was making her some new things to wear. . . . [W]hen she went back to Riverside she was newly dressed, and her mother found her looking very well and much improved by the mineral waters.”

It’s significant that Fannie not only knew of Montvale Springs, but mentioned it in her short story. The well-known resort had a literary history going back to its founding in 1832. That year, Charles Todd’s *Woodville; Or, The Anchorite Reclaimed* was printed in Knoxville as the first-ever novel published by a Tennessee author; the “substantially true” story opens with “a trip to the — Springs,” which Todd declined to name but nevertheless described with apparent faithfulness. Almost three decades later, poet Sidney Lanier set part of his autobiographical novel *Tiger-Lilies* at the resort hotel, which his grandfather managed at the time. And Mary Noailles Murfree, a contemporary of Burnett’s who published as “Charles Egbert Craddock” and set most of her works in Appalachia, boarded at Montvale Springs in 1885 while writing her novel *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*, and made several later visits as well.

In Knoxville, Fannie’s friendship with Birdie grew, and they enjoyed “many charming mornings” together. Because River View was located some distance from downtown, “the air felt so much cooler and fresher there,” Fannie wrote, “and during the hot Southern summer my visits to her home used to be a great relief to me.” On the hillside below the house “there were so many tall trees and so much shade. Her house was built in the midst of a beautiful grove of pine and oak trees.” As they walked through the grove, Birdie identified flowers and birds and other specimens that she had learned about from her father.

Birdie also talked about the little fairies that lived on the hillside, and she made swings for them by tying long blades of grass together. When the girl explained that the fairies liked to dance in the moonlight, Fannie bent down under an oak, and

together they “cleared away all twigs and fallen leaves and bits of pebble from under the tree, and made a charming smooth place to dance on,” Fannie wrote. “Then we made a fine moss carpet and bordered it with fresh leaves, and, as a finishing touch, we made moss seats to rest on between the dances.” Watching Birdie play on this wooded hillside may have reminded Fannie of her own experiences in “the Bower,” the secluded grove adjacent to the cottage where her family had first lived in Knoxville.

According to Fannie, “at the end of the summer [Birdie’s] family left their house in the country and took a house in town, which was just on the opposite side of the street from mine.” The writer likely altered the timeline, as deed records suggest that the Nicholsons were forced to move early, rather than late, in the summer of 1874. For whatever reason, East Tennessee University trustees chose to sell 23 acres of agricultural property, including “the large brick home belonging to the College farm,” and on June 27 deeded it to “Esther Wadlow, wife of E. P. Wadlow of Illinois.”

By the time Fannie’s first son, Lionel, was born on September 20, the Burnetts and the boy’s nurse, a formerly enslaved woman named Priscilla Whitson, resided in a brick house on the northwest corner of Cumberland and Henley. There isn’t evidence that the Nicholsons relocated to that block of Cumberland, but they did move to a new home about two blocks south of Cumberland, on Temple Avenue (now Volunteer Blvd), near Circle Park and the university. The two families, now living less than a mile from each other, continued their friendship, and Birdie finally met the newborn Burnett. “It was very absorbing when Boy”—as Lionel is called in Fannie’s story—“was introduced to Birdie and Miss Anna and myself. Birdie’s experience as a parent was very useful to me in my first venture, and she had a very good opinion of Boy, though I think we were both quite frank in admitting that just at first he was more big than exactly beautiful.”

Fannie and Birdie’s sister Carrie attended a masquerade ball at the Lamar House that Christmas Eve. Members of



FRANCES AND BIRDIE ON THE GROUNDS OF "RIVERSIDE" FROM
"BIRDIE," GIOVANNI AND THE OTHER, 1892.)

Knoxville's elite came disguised as fairies, dominoes, characters like Iago and the Count of Monte Cristo, historical figures like Captain Kidd and Queen Elizabeth, and abstract creations like "The Unknown." If the costumed guests were lined up as listed in the *Daily Press and Herald*, then Carrie (a shepherdess) followed Fannie (Mary Queen of Scots) into the ballroom, where the 46 participants danced to the music of Fannie's brother Herbert and his "string band," while "a large number of on-lookers" observed what the *Knoxville Weekly Chronicle* reckoned "the event of the season in fashionable circles."

Then in April 1875, the *Daily Press and Herald* reported that the Burnetts had planned "an extended stay in Europe," and would soon be leaving Knoxville. Initially, the couple intended to be gone only "a year or two," according to the *Whig and Chronicle* in early May, and Fannie later wrote of expecting to see her young friend again: "I went abroad the next spring, and when I kissed Birdie for the last time I thought we should be intimate friends again in about two years." As it turned out, though, Fannie's years as a Knoxville resident ended with her departure. The Burnetts' grand ambitions—Fannie's in literature, Swan's in medicine—couldn't very well accommodate a long-term friendship with Birdie and life in that city.

The Burnetts later visited the city at least once, as in mid-July 1878 when they "registered at the Lamar House." Whether the novelist, the major, and little Birdie ever reunited is anyone's guess.

Fannie did, however, correspond with Birdie from England, and through this exchange learned of a Nicholson family project, which Hunter, with his journalistic background, no doubt encouraged. Birdie "and her brothers and sisters published a little paper in their own house and she asked me to write them something," said Fannie, who responded with "Behind the White Brick," a tale in which Birdie also appears as a minor character.

In the story, a girl named Jem discovers "Chimneyland," a hidden world inside her aunt's chimney where Santa and his elves manufacture toys. At one point Thistle, an elf, asks Santa which

color eyes he should give a doll in progress for the “Little girl in the red brick house at the corner . . . name of Birdie.” Santa replies: “Blue eyes, if you please, Thistle, and golden hair. And let it be a big one. She takes good care of them.” Thistle agrees that Birdie “is most attentive to [dolls] when they are ill. In fact, her pet doll is a cripple, with a stiff leg.”

It isn’t known whether Birdie and her siblings actually printed this story and, if so, how widely it circulated in Knoxville. Fortunately, Fannie considered the story worth submitting to the American children’s magazine *St. Nicholas*, which published “Behind the White Brick” in its January 1879 issue and included an illustration captioned “Birdie and Her Pet Doll.” By the time the story reappeared (minus the drawing of Birdie) in her 1890 collection *Little Saint Elizabeth and Other Stories*, Fannie had achieved international fame as the author of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

If not for a subsequent story collection, it would have been impossible to connect Birdie Nicholson to the famous author. *Giovanni and the Other: Children Who Have Made Stories*, published in 1892, contains Fannie’s written “sketches” of children she had met over the years, primarily in Italy and other parts of Europe. Here she also wrote about her sons Lionel and Vivian, referring to them, respectively, as the Boy and the Socialist.

Among that book’s stories, “Birdie” is apparently the only one drawn from the author’s life in Knoxville. In her preface, Fannie makes it clear that the sketches of Birdie and the other children are based on fact: “Remembering that to my own childhood the story of a child who was a real, living creature had a special fascination, I have put some of these sketches into words . . . thinking that perhaps other children may like to read of small creatures who were as real as themselves, and not only beings of the imagination.”

The story had actually appeared first in a December 1891 issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, under the title “Birdie—The Story of a Little Girl Who Believed in Fairies.” While few if any

Knoxvillians saw or knew of that original publication, the anthology *Giovanni and the Other* received wide publicity and favorable reviews in newspapers from San Francisco to Boston. In December 1892, Knoxville's *Tribune* called the book "a valuable addition to American literature," one that was available "at Hensell & Armstrong's"—a Gay Street bookstore co-owned by a nephew of Robert H. Armstrong.

The following year saw the release of *The One I Knew the Best of All*, a memoir in which Fannie sketched herself as a "Small Person" growing up in Manchester, England, who eventually moves with her siblings and widowed mother to America, and there in Tennessee begins to write for a living.



After Fannie's departure, Hunter married his second wife, Kate Martin, and eventually fathered more children. At the newly renamed University of Tennessee, he chaired the natural history department and was responsible for cataloging the university library according to the new Dewey system. He remained interested in both agriculture and publishing, becoming editor of the livestock magazine *Jersey Bulletin*. He wrote articles for *American Homes* on horticultural topics, such as "Planning and Planting Grounds" and "Flowers About the Home"—topics that would increasingly interest Burnett later in life. Knoxville's *Journal and Tribune* even brought Hunter on staff as an agriculture columnist.

He had long been interested in art, and invariably supported his children's artistic ambitions, as in 1883 when daughters Carrie and Birdie exhibited artwork in Knoxville—alongside noted artists like Lloyd Branson and Adelia Armstrong—and daughter Lora taught art in Spring Hill, northeast of Columbia. Near the end of his life, Hunter more publicly promoted Knoxville artists by helping organize the Knoxville Art Club, of which he served as vice-president before being elected president in April

1900. He encouraged all types of artists, even writers. It was later said of Hunter: “To many a writer whose tired pen faltered, there came strength from his encouragement and experience. To many an artist whose slow brush but faintly revealed the hidden thought, his kind, true criticisms gave new inspiration.”

Several months before “Birdie” first appeared in print, Knoxville lawyer Joshua Caldwell, who founded the men’s literary Irving Club in 1886, spoke to a local journalist and shared a little-known fact about Frances Hodgson Burnett and *That Lass O’ Lowrie’s*, the novel that put Burnett on America’s literary map in 1877. As the *Knoxville Sentinel* writer revealed: “Six or eight months prior to its publication, Mrs. Burnett submitted the manuscript to Prof. Hunter Nicholson for his opinion and the learned professor told my informant at the time that he had just read a story which, if published, would attract the attention of the whole world. The world can testify to the fact that Prof. Nicholson’s prediction came true.”

After a short illness, Hunter Nicholson, 68, fell into a coma and never awoke. His death on March 5, 1901, inspired obituaries and tributes in newspapers throughout Tennessee, and even into Kentucky, Alabama, and South Carolina. At their meeting that month, members of the Knoxville Art Club—including Lloyd Branson, a pallbearer at Nicholson’s funeral—unanimously voted to rename the organization after its departed president. Over a quarter century, the Nicholson Art League boasted some of the region’s best artists among its members: Branson, Catherine Wiley, Charles Krutch, Hugh Tyler, Adelia Armstrong Lutz, architect George F. Barber, and others.



As for Birdie Nicholson, in early 1879, she was confirmed and listed as a communicant at St. John’s Episcopal in Knoxville. In the fall of 1880 she attended school in Columbia, Tennessee, with



HUNTER NICHOLSON'S GRAVESTONE AT OLD GRAY CEMETERY,
AND AN ILLUSTRATION OF HIM FROM HIS *KNOXVILLE SENTINEL*
OBITUARY, MARCH, 1901.

her sister Lora. When Birdie contracted typhoid a year later, the *Knoxville Daily Tribune* had to publish an article countering a rumor that she had died of the illness. In 1882, she enrolled in the Tennessee Female College in Franklin, where she assisted in the publication of a weekly magazine, *The Clionean Argus*. The following year she transferred to Beechcroft Seminary in Spring Hill after her sister Lora joined the faculty teaching art.

During Birdie's time as a student there, a curiously named heifer was born in the vicinity; likely owned by a relation or friend of Hunter's, "Birdie Nicholson" would later be listed as the property of Maury Jersey Farm in Columbia, and identified as number 31676 in the American Jersey Cattle Club's *Herd Register*.

Newspapers that followed the girl's activities in Middle and East Tennessee eventually dropped the nickname and began referring to her as Miss Rebecca Nicholson. She got a teaching job

in Marshall, Texas, in 1885 and spent at least three academic years there. On October 30, 1889, she married Thomas Francis Howe in Williamson County, Tennessee. Except for a Marshall, Texas, newspaper mentioning the arrival in town of a “Mrs. T. F. Howe, of Atlanta” in August 1891, and her passing through Marshall “en route to Mexico” in April 1899, little else is known of Rebecca’s whereabouts until Hunter Nicholson’s death in 1901—when an obituary in Knoxville’s *Sentinel* identified her as “Mrs. T. F. Howe, of Villadoma, Mexico,” misspelling the town’s name. Villaldama, in the country’s northern state of Nuevo Leon, had been a mining district for more than two centuries. Rebecca’s husband supervised lead mine operations there, but had to be hospitalized for a month in 1903 after breathing lead dust. Apparently recovered, Thomas was managing three mines by the end of that year and predicting “a good future ahead” for local mining production.

Three years later, Rebecca found herself renting a room in Memphis as a 40-year-old widow.



She settled in Glendora, California, by 1912 with her uncle Hugh Gordon and aunt Anna—a sister of her father’s. Although Glendora was then a small, newly incorporated agricultural city in Los Angeles County, the population of Los Angeles itself had eclipsed Knoxville’s decades ago; in a few years it would hit half a million. Los Angeles was also expanding geographically, as in early 1910 when it annexed the smaller city of Hollywood—where just weeks later director D. W. Griffith released the first film ever produced there.

Coincidentally, Rebecca arrived in the area just as Hollywood’s burgeoning film industry began adapting Frances Hodgson Burnett’s stories for the screen. The first, *A Lady of Quality*, came out in 1913; by the end of the silent era, more than a dozen Hollywood movies had been made of her works, including

four starring Mary Pickford, and two others based on *That Lass O' Lowrie's*—whose unpublished manuscript Hunter Nicholson, and perhaps even young Birdie, had seen in Knoxville almost a half century earlier.

Census records show that between 1920 and 1940 Rebecca worked as an agent in the book industry, as a newspaper correspondent, and later in sales. Social life revolved around local women's and bridge clubs. According to one family member who knew her as Aunt Bird, Rebecca N. Howe had a feisty way of stating her own name—"Rebecca, and how!" Relatives had their fun as well. Several recall the prank as Rebecca drove back to the house one night, when two younger cousins hopped on their bicycles and pedaled side-by-side toward her, holding flashlights, causing her to swerve to miss the apparent oncoming car. Rebecca and her own vehicle ended up in an orchard, remarkably unscathed.

Family information about Rebecca's California years comes courtesy of Thompson Webb, whose grandmother Mary Gordon Stimson was a first cousin to Rebecca. Webb (himself a first cousin once removed of the late Robert Webb, founder of the Webb School of Knoxville) knew Rebecca in her later years, when her threshold for childhood mischief was especially low.

"I last saw her at a family Christmas party in Glendora in 1951, when I was about to turn 8," writes Webb, who remembers shooting off his popgun near the octogenarian one too many times. "She spoke sharply to me when I surprised her with a popgun . . . she told me to cease and desist in no uncertain terms. Her stern words meant that I went away not liking her." Webb's unfortunate final impression of Rebecca contrasts with other family stories that paint her as an adventurous, fun-loving woman.

She was fond of going to the movies, especially back when she could drive herself, which begs the question of whether she took special interest in any of those films based on Burnett's novels—films that were being produced roughly 25 miles due west from Rebecca's house. Not counting six overseas productions, Hollywood



REBECCA NICHOLSON HOWE, 1930.
(Courtesy of Thompson Webb.)

studios released 18 screen adaptations during Rebecca's years in the vicinity. Had she seen, for example, Shirley Temple in *The Little Princess* in 1939, or MGM's version of *The Secret Garden*, produced by former Knoxvilleian Clarence Brown, a decade later? Or is it possible that, after all that time, Rebecca had lost track of Fannie's career, and never realized how internationally famous her friend had become? Could it be that Rebecca never read the story "Birdie," and was therefore oblivious to her own literary significance? We may never know.

As widely as her California relatives admired her, much of Rebecca's early life, including her brief friendship with the renowned author, would remain a mystery to them. On January 14, 1953, Rebecca died of carcinomatosis at age 86, and was buried in Oakdale Memorial Park in Glendora. Members of the family who paid for her gravestone had it engraved with the nickname by which most of them knew her:

REBECCA N. HOWE

"COUSIN BIRD"

1866-1953

In concluding her story "Birdie," Frances Hodgson Burnett mused on what had become of the little girl she'd known in Knoxville, and what kind of woman she was now, some 15 years after their last meeting. "Birdie must be by now a grown-up young lady," Burnett wrote. "Remembering her delicate *spirituelle* little face and translucent golden-brown eyes, I feel sure she is fair to look upon; remembering her pretty innocent fancies and tender beliefs, I am sure she must be lovable and sweet. When I think of her, as I often do, knowing how many fairy things seem to fade away as one grows from a child to a woman, I cannot help saying to myself wistfully, 'I hope she still believes in the fairies,



CURRENT VIEW OF THE TYSON JUNIOR HIGH BUILDING ON KINGSTON PIKE, THE FORMER SITE OF RIVER VIEW. (Paul Brown.)

and I hope—because she is so gentle and tender—she sometimes sees one.”

Burnett, who died in 1924, eventually wrote more than 50 books—novels and story collections for both adults and children—and adapted 15 of her stories for the stage. To date, there have been at least 65 screen adaptations. Burnett’s most enduring work among modern readers is *The Secret Garden*, a book that still inspires film versions (the newest in 2020), and has never gone out of print since its publication in 1911.

The picturesque oak grove in Knoxville, where Frances and Birdie played together and imagined a fairy ballroom, ultimately disappeared from the landscape, as did the large house, known as the Washburn home before it was torn down. Now with modern developments, like Sorority Village, dotting the hillside, it would be a stretch to still call the property River View, though the wedge of land farther down, between Third Creek and the river, is still home to UT’s department of agriculture. But the spot where the colonial mansion sat has, since 1936, been occupied by a notable school building, one added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. Funded by the WPA and designed by Baumann and Baumann, Tyson Junior High—now the Tyson Place office complex—is one of the city’s finest examples of New Deal architecture.