



SIXPENCE (1921)

By Katherine Mansfield

Children are unaccountable little creatures. Why should a small boy like Dicky, good as gold as a rule, sensitive, affectionate, obedient, and marvellously sensible for his age, have moods when, without the slightest warning, he suddenly went “mad dog,” as his sisters called it, and there was no doing anything with him?

“Dicky, come here! Come here, sir, at once! Do you hear your mother calling you? Dicky!”

But Dicky wouldn't come. Oh, he heard right enough. A clear, ringing little laugh was his only reply. And away he flew; hiding, running through the uncut hay on the lawn, dashing past the woodshed, making a rush for the kitchen garden, and there dodging, peering at his mother from behind the mossy apple trunks, and leaping up and down like a wild Indian.

It had begun at tea-time. While Dicky's mother and Mrs. Spears, who was spending the afternoon with her, were quietly sitting over their sewing in the drawing-room, this, according to the servant girl, was what had happened at the children's tea. They were eating their first bread and butter as nicely and quietly as you please, and the servant girl had just poured out the milk and water, when Dicky had suddenly seized the bread plate, put it upside down on his head, and clutched the bread knife.

“Look at me!” he shouted.

His startled sisters looked, and before the servant girl could get there, the bread plate wobbled, slid, flew to the floor, and broke into shivers. At this awful point the little girls lifted up their voices and shrieked their loudest.

“Mother, come and look what he's done!”

“Dicky's broke a great big plate!”

“Come and stop him, mother!”

You can imagine how mother came flying. But she was too late. Dicky had leapt out of his chair, run through the French windows on to the verandah, and, well—there she stood— popping her thimble on and off, helpless. What could she do? She couldn't chase after the child. She couldn't stalk Dicky among the apples and damsons. That would be too undignified. It was more than annoying, it was exasperating. Especially as Mrs.



Spears, Mrs. Spears of all people, whose two boys were so exemplary, was waiting for her in the drawing-room.

“Very well, Dicky,” she cried, “I shall have to think of some way of punishing you.”

“I don't care,” sounded the high little voice, and again there came that ringing laugh. The child was quite beside himself ...

“Oh, Mrs. Spears, I don't know how to apologise for leaving you by yourself like this.”

“It's quite all right, Mrs. Bendall,” said Mrs. Spears, in her soft, sugary voice, and raising her eyebrows in the way she had. She seemed to smile to herself as she stroked the gathers. “These little things will happen from time to time. I only hope it was nothing serious.”

“It was Dicky,” said Mrs. Bendall, looking rather helplessly for her only fine needle. And she explained the whole affair to Mrs. Spears.

“And the worst of it is, I don't know how to cure him. Nothing when he's in that mood seems to have the slightest effect on him.”

Mrs. Spears opened her pale eyes. “Not even a whipping?” said she.

But Mrs. Bendall, threading her needle, pursed up her lips. “We never have whipped the children,” she said. “The girls never seem to have needed it. And Dicky is such a baby, and the only boy. Somehow ...”

“Oh, my dear,” said Mrs. Spears, and she laid her sewing down. “I don't wonder Dicky has these little outbreaks. You don't mind my saying so? But I'm sure you make a great mistake in trying to bring up children without whipping them. Nothing really takes its place. And I speak from experience, my dear. I used to try gentler measures” — Mrs. Spears drew in her breath with a little hissing sound—“soaping the boys' tongues, for instance, with yellow soap, or making them stand on the table for the whole of Saturday afternoon. But no, believe me,” said Mrs. Spears, “there is nothing, there is nothing like handing them over to their father.”

Mrs. Bendall in her heart of hearts was dreadfully shocked to hear of that yellow soap. But Mrs. Spears seemed to take it so much for granted, that she did too.

“Their father,” she said. “Then you don't whip them yourself?”

“Never.” Mrs. Spears seemed quite shocked at the idea. “I don't think it's the mother's place to whip the children. It's the duty of the father. And, besides, he impresses them so much more.”

“Yes, I can imagine that,” said Mrs. Bendall, faintly.



“Now my two boys,” Mrs. Spears smiled kindly, encouragingly, at Mrs. Bendall, “would behave just like Dicky if they were not afraid to. As it is ...”

“Oh, your boys are perfect little models,” cried Mrs. Bendall.

They were. Quieter, better-behaved little boys, in the presence of grown-ups, could not be found. In fact, Mrs. Spears' callers often made the remark that you never would have known that there was a child in the house. There wasn't—very often.

In the front hall, under a large picture of fat, cheery old monks fishing by the riverside, there was a thick, dark horsewhip that had belonged to Mr. Spears' father. And for some reason the boys preferred to play out of sight of this, behind the dog-kennel or in the tool-house, or round about the dustbin.

“It's such a mistake,” sighed Mrs. Spears; breathing softly, as she folded her work, “to be weak with children when they are little. It's such a sad mistake, and one so easy to make. It's so unfair to the child. That is what one has to remember. Now Dicky's little escapade this afternoon seemed to me as though he'd done it on purpose. It was the child's way of showing you that he needed a whipping.”

“Do you really think so?” Mrs. Bendall was a weak little thing, and this impressed her very much.

“I do; I feel sure of it. And a sharp reminder now and then,” cried Mrs. Spears in quite a professional manner, “administered by the father, will save you so much trouble in the future. Believe me, my dear.” She put her dry, cold hand over Mrs. Bendall's.

“I shall speak to Edward the moment he comes in,” said Dicky's mother firmly.

The children had gone to bed before the garden gate banged, and Dicky's father staggered up the steep concrete steps carrying his bicycle. It had been a bad day at the office. He was hot, dusty, tired out.

But by this time Mrs. Bendall had become quite excited over the new plan, and she opened the door to him herself.

“Oh, Edward, I'm so thankful you have come home,” she cried.

“Why, what's happened?” Edward lowered the bicycle and took off his hat. A red angry pucker showed where the brim had pressed. “What's up?”

“Come—come into the drawing-room,” said Mrs. Bendall, speaking very fast. “I simply can't tell you how naughty Dicky has been. You have no idea—you can't have at the office all day—how a child of that age can behave. He's been simply dreadful. I have no control over him—none. I've tried everything, Edward, but it's all no use. The only thing to do,” she finished breathlessly, “is to whip him — is for you to whip him, Edward.”



In the corner of the drawing-room there was a what-not, and on the top shelf stood a brown china bear with a painted tongue. It seemed in the shadow to be grinning at Dicky's father, to be saying, "Hooray, this is what you've come home to!"

"But why on earth should I start whipping him?" said Edward, staring at the bear. "We've never done it before."

"Because," said his wife, "don't you see, it's the only thing to do. I can't control the child ..." Her words flew from her lips. They beat round him, beat round his tired head. "We can't possibly afford a nurse. The servant girl has more than enough to do. And his naughtiness is beyond words. You don't understand, Edward; you can't, you're at the office all day."

The bear poked out his tongue. The scolding voice went on. Edward sank into a chair.

"What am I to beat him with?" he said weakly.

"Your slipper, of course," said his wife. And she knelt down to untie his dusty shoes.

"Oh, Edward," she wailed, "you've still got your cycling clips on in the drawing-room. No, really——"

"Here, that's enough," Edward nearly pushed her away. "Give me that slipper." He went up the stairs. He felt like a man in a dark net. And now he wanted to beat Dicky. Yes, damn it, he wanted to beat something. My God, what a life! The dust was still in his hot eyes, his arms felt heavy.

He pushed open the door of Dicky's slip of a room. Dicky was standing in the middle of the floor in his night-shirt. At the sight of him Edward's heart gave a warm throb of rage.

"Well, Dicky, you know what I've come for," said Edward.

Dicky made no reply.

"I've come to give you a whipping."

No answer.

"Lift up your nightshirt."

At that Dicky looked up. He flushed a deep pink. "Must I?" he whispered.

"Come on, now. Be quick about it," said Edward, and, grasping the slipper, he gave Dicky three hard slaps.

"There, that'll teach you to behave properly to your mother."

Dicky stood there, hanging his head.



“Look sharp and get into bed,” said his father.

Still he did not move. But a shaking voice said, “I’ve not done my teeth yet, Daddy.”

“Eh, what’s that?”

Dicky looked up. His lips were quivering, but his eyes were dry. He hadn’t made a sound or shed a tear. Only he swallowed and said, huskily, “I haven’t done my teeth, Daddy.”

But at the sight of that little face Edward turned, and, not knowing what he was doing, he bolted from the room, down the stairs, and out into the garden. Good God! What had he done? He strode along and hid in the shadow of the pear tree by the hedge. Whipped Dicky—whipped his little man with a slipper—and what the devil for? He didn’t even know. Suddenly he barged into his room—and there was the little chap in his nightshirt. Dicky’s father groaned and held on to the hedge. And he didn’t cry. Never a tear. If only he’d cried or got angry. But that “Daddy”! And again he heard the quivering whisper. Forgiving like that without a word. But he’d never forgive himself— never. Coward! Fool! Brute! And suddenly he remembered the time when Dicky had fallen off his knee and sprained his wrist while they were playing together. He hadn’t cried then, either. And that was the little hero he had just whipped.

Something’s got to be done about this, thought Edward. He strode back to the house, up the stairs, into Dicky’s room. The little boy was lying in bed. In the half light his dark head, with the square fringe, showed plain against the pale pillow. He was lying quite still, and even now he wasn’t crying. Edward shut the door and leaned against it. What he wanted to do was to kneel down by Dicky’s bed and cry himself and beg to be forgiven. But, of course, one can’t do that sort of thing. He felt awkward, and his heart was wrung.

“Not asleep yet, Dicky?” he said lightly.

“No, Daddy.”

Edward came over and sat on his boy’s bed, and Dicky looked at him through his long lashes.

“Nothing the matter, little chap, is there?” said Edward, half whispering.

“No-o, Daddy,” came from Dicky.

Edward put out his hand, and carefully he took Dicky’s hot little paw.

“You—you mustn’t think any more of what happened just now, little man,” he said huskily. “See? That’s all over now. That’s forgotten. That’s never going to happen again. See?”

“Yes, Daddy.”



“So the thing to do now is to buck up, little chap,” said Edward, “and to smile.” And he tried himself an extraordinary trembling apology for a smile. “To forget all about it — to—eh? Little man ... Old boy ...”

Dicky lay as before. This was terrible. Dicky's father sprang up and went over to the window. It was nearly dark in the garden. The servant girl had run out, and she was snatching, twitching some white clothes off the bushes and piling them over her arm. But in the boundless sky the evening star shone, and a big gum tree, black against the pale glow, moved its long leaves softly. All this he saw, while he felt in his trouser pocket for his money. Bringing it out, he chose a new sixpence and went back to Dicky.

“Here you are, little chap. Buy yourself something,” said Edward softly, laying the sixpence on Dicky's pillow.

But could even that—could even a whole sixpence—blot out what had been?

