

Sixpence

Katherine Mansfield

Children are unaccountable little creatures. Why should a small boy like Dicky, good as gold as a rule, sensitive, affectionate, obedient and marvelously sensible for his age, have suddenly gone "mad dog", 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 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 slivers. 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 hurried. 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 apologize 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.