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THE CHINA DOG

By MARGERY WILLIAMS

"I DON'T suppose he meant to hurt it, poor little chap," said Thurston.

"I daresay he didn't. But that has nothing to do with it, Jack. He shouldn't have touched it at all. It isn't as if he didn't understand. He understands perfectly. He's been told time and again he's never to touch anything on the mantelshelf—I've told him, and you've told him—and yet the moment he's left alone he goes and does it!"

Thurston puffed at his cigarette silently. He watched his wife as she stood fitting together the blue shattered fragments in her hand.

"I suppose it can be mended," he said at last.

"It can be rivetted, but it won't be the same. And this bit has gone all to pieces; you can't mend that. But it isn't so much the worth of the thing. It's the fact that he's been deliberately disobedient."

She laid the bits of china down impatiently.

"Don't you think you might forgive him—just this time? He said he was sorry."

"No, Jack, I'm not going to. It isn't just this time. It's happened before. You always forgive him for everything the minute he's done it, and so he gets to think it doesn't matter."

"We promised to take him with us to-day, and he's been looking forward to it so, poor little kiddie. We promised him last week. It seems rather a shame—and it's such a lovely day," he finished tentatively.

"He can be out in the garden. No, I'm not going to take him, Jack. He'll stay at home. I told him so. It's no use; he's got to learn. You won't have him whipped, so he must be punished other ways."

Thurston pulled his watch out. "The pony will be round in ten minutes. You'd better get your hat on," he said.

"All right. I won't be long."

As the pony-trap drew up outside the house, his wife appeared, knotting a white veil round her hat.

"Are you ready?" she said.

He climbed into the trap, with a shamefaced glance at the nursery window. A small desolate face looked out over the muslin blind.

Their drive contrived to be silent, in spite of each other's voices. Thurston was thinking all the while of the little face that had watched their going from the nursery window, and the drive seemed a stolen pleasure. Once, when they passed a hedge pinker than the others, he said:

"The kid would like some of those roses."

He stopped the pony and got out, cutting long sprays with his pocket-knife. He gathered a big bunch, and stowed them away under the wagon-seat. As they drove on again she said:

"I know you think I'm hard on him, Jack, but it can't be helped. He's got to be taught that when he does wrong, he must suffer for it. He's quite old enough to understand."

"He's only four," said Thurston.

"Four's old enough to learn obedience. If he doesn't know it by now he'll have to be punished till he does!"

Thurston muttered something inaudible, flicking the pony with the whip. "What?" said his wife.

"It seems to me that when a child says he's sorry, that's enough."

"No, it isn't. He's always sorry, but it doesn't appear to teach him any better next time. When he knows why he's sorry I'll forgive him."

"We might get tea at that little farmhouse the other side of Birchley," she said presently.

"As you like."

"You needn't do your best to spoil the drive by being disagreeable."

"I'm not disagreeable," said Thurston.

He turned the pony up a narrow lane, descending stonily between high hedges. The land dipped to a hollow, where the tiny farmhouse nestled among low-growing trees. There was an old orchard, where some pigs wandered, and a turkey hen, startled by

the sound of wheels, drew her brood off clucking through the long grass. Old-fashioned flowers grew about the house. A middle-aged woman came out to meet them at the door; she directed Thurston to the stable-yard, and he led the pony round and tied it in the shade.

When he entered the house tea was already laid in the small stuffy sitting-room. His wife stood by the fireplace; she beckoned him across.

"Look here—do you see that?"

She pointed him out a hideous red-and-white china dog, of the breed familiar to cottage chimney-pieces. Set aloft among the homely knick-knacks of the mantelshelf, its mouth curved to a fatuous smile, its staring eyes surveyed them insolently.

"Good Lord," said Thurston. "What an ugly beast!"

"Ugly, Jack? It's beautiful. It's real Chelsea. There ought to be a pair. I wonder where the other is?" She took the dog down. "Look, it's been mended. See that crack? But it's a beauty. Jack, do you think she'd sell it?"

"For a consideration, possibly."

"I'm going to try! I'm going to talk her over. I don't suppose she cares much about it. And it's cracked anyway!"

She sat down to pour the tea out, but all through the meal her gaze kept turning to the dog on the shelf. She fell into abstracted silences, and Thurston could detect in her eyes the determined battle-gleam of the collector. At another time he would have entered into her spirit good-humouredly; now her enthusiasm somehow jarred upon him. He felt irritable. He looked at the dog too, but with antagonism. It's black staring eyes revolted him. He ate bread and butter moodily.

"Jack," she whispered across the table. "Do be a dear, and talk to her for me! Don't let her see you're really keen. I simply must have that dog! If we can't get it to-day, I shall come back another time."

It was the farmer who came in, when they had finished. Thurston felt his wife's spirits droop visibly. She turned her back upon the dog with a studied indifference, leaving him to bargain. Thurston paid for their tea, then mentioned the dog casually. He wasn't going to put himself out about it.

"That dawg," said the farmer. "Yes, 'tis a rare ugly thing. There was a pair on 'em; my wife got 'em fur a weddin' present. Over a hundred years old, I've heard they was. She give the other away last summer to a bicycling chap as took a fancy to it."

"Do you think she would part with this one?" said Thurston. "I've rather a notion for it," he explained.

"I dunno," said the farmer. "I'll ask her. But I'm pretty sure she wouldn't. You see 'taint so much the dawg, but my wife, she kinder sets store by it—'count 'o our little gal."

"Yes?" said Thurston.

"Th' ain't much reason in it, you may say, on'y our little Liz. . . . You see, my wife she had the dawgs fur a weddin' present, an' she allus was one to think much o' things, an' she set store by them dawgs, bein' in the family so long, an' one time our Lizzie, she got reachin' up to the mantelshelf—she allus was a clumsy little thing—an' she knocked one on 'em down an' broke it. She warn't meanin' to, but my wife was a bit hasty-tempered, them days, an' she fetched the kid a shove, cross-like, an'—she fell down agin the fender there, an' hurt her back. Twenty years ago that was. She'd a' been twenty-four now, our Lizzie." He paused a moment, apologetically. "So you see, my wife, she likes to keep that dawg—sence we ain't got Liz now—"

There was a stir by the window. Thurston had not looked at his wife while the man was speaking, but he had seen her turn. He lifted his head now, and their eyes met. She came across the room to him blindly, catching at his arm.

"Jack," she said, "if we—. Oh, Jack, I want to get home—!"

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