

SHORT STORY

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than he'd ever climbed; swinging himself up, regardless of scratches, two branches higher than he'd ever dared to go before. Precariously he clung to the now slender trunk and looked. She had moved from the path. For half a second he thought she had gone, then he saw she was standing under the tree looking up at him. Immediately he resumed his careless study of the horizon. Suddenly he spoke. He was careful to address his remark to a far hill. "You can," he announced, "see the sea from here." As this brought no response, he said to the far hill "You can come up and see if you like." The little girl at the foot of the tree said, "I'm not allowed to climb trees." Normally the remark would have sickened Michael, recalling to him all the incapacity and the disgusting weakness of the sex. Not to-day . . . to-day was magic. He said, still to the far hill, "Ever see a chaffinch's nest?" "No," said the little girl. He pulled the nest free and swarmed down to her, red and breathless. "You can have it," he said, thrusting the nest at her. She took it without enthusiasm, looked at it and handed it back. "I don't want it," she said.

THAT rocked him. After all, it was a chaffinch's nest, the second he had found—it was something to be prized, kept like stamps and marbles. His indecision lasted only a second. He flung the nest away. "It's old," he said, "I get thousands"; then casually, "I wish I'd caught the young ones; I'd have wrung their necks." This was, of course, as Michael knew, a gross untruth. Michael caused many casualties among the young birds, but only with such frequent doting over the nests that the scandalised parents deserted. But it was urgently important that this small girl be impressed; she must know he was tough. "I pulled hundreds of their necks on my holiday," he announced. This fiendishness moved the girl to neither dismay nor enthusiasm. "What's your name?" she said. "What's yours?" he countered. "Tell me yours first," she demanded. "Mike," he said shortly. "Mike's Jean," she said, "and hers is Diana." It took him some seconds before he realised she was introducing him to her doll. "I call her Diana because it's a pretty name, much prettier than Jean, isn't it?" "I don't know," said Michael; which was less than the truth because he'd just realised that Jean was the nicest girl's name he'd ever heard.

IT was a swift, sweet eternity, that long summer's day. An eternity of minutes which only children can know. He showed her how to stalk and catch the lizards basking in the compost heap; he enjoyed her scream of half-simulated horror when a lizard deftly detached itself from its tail. For her he caught big, irritable cicadas and brilliant Red Admiral butterflies, that left stuff like coloured dust on your fingers. For her he produced and presented his picture album, heedless of the fact that its completion had cost him his pocket knife and six marbles. By lunchtime he was her slave.

Slipping out to meet her after lunch, fear seized him. What would Bruce say; what would his gang think of him playing with a girl? Then she appeared, still clutching the doll. "Hullo, Mike," she

said; something sang deep down in him. Bruce and the gang faded. "Hullo," he said and reddened, "hello, Jean." They walked to the bottom of the section. Jean prim and careful, Michael slouching, kicking at stones.

They talked. He learned she was on holiday. She was going home Saturday. The calamity of that reached him; she would go; he would never see her again. But that was Saturday, two days away. This was to-day. "Race you to the gate," he shouted.

They played; new amazing make-believe games these were; girls' games, yet Michael found them wonderful. Sometimes he was the hero, sometimes the villain. Jean was always the heroine. At four o'clock they sat, resting, beside the fort which Michael had just stormed and taken. "Mike," she said, "I think you're pretty." From a boy it would have been deadly; a withering, ghastly jibe. From her . . . it reduced him to a red, tongued confusion. "No," he spluttered, "not me—you; you're pretty; you're the prettiest girl I ever seen . . . easily," he added. "You're nice," she said. "Most boys aren't nice, but you are; I like you. Do you like me?" Michael said "Yes." He knew it was inadequate but it was all he could say. He was, you know, only twelve. She looked at him shyly, then she seized her doll, calling "Catch me."

HE tore after her; she could run, this small girl in her flying red print dress. He caught her, just where the path turned up to the front gate, caught and held her. The words came very clear and loud on the afternoon air.

"Mike's got a girl. She's his tart." He released her quickly. She stooped to pick up the doll which had fallen to the ground. Two boys hung over the gate. Two of his gang back early from holiday. He looked at them. One said impassively, "You've got a tart." "Liar!" said Michael. "You was trying to kiss her," said the other. There was no emotion in either statement; the words were uttered tonelessly and with a terrible conviction. "We saw you," said the first boy.

The blood surging from Michael's heart was choking him; he felt tears smarting under his eyes. Instinctively he knew this was the trial, the testing, and he knew he wasn't strong enough. "I was just kickin' her out of my place," he said.

For perhaps half-a-second the little girl looked at him wide-eyed. Then slowly her head sank a little; the arm which held the doll to her breast dropped. The doll trailed by the leg as she slowly started up the path.

The two boys swung the gate open for her, eyeing her with cold disapproval. She didn't look at them. She glanced back at Michael solemnly; "Good-bye," she said. The two boys tensed. Michael saw they were watching him with stern suspicion. He knew what was expected of him; it was the law. He looked hotly at a point six feet above her head. "Go on," he shouted, "go on, scram . . . Fat Face." The two boys by the gate relaxed; the little girl moved away; impassive, not looking back.

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