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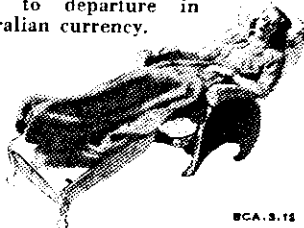
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SHORT STORY

(continued from previous page)

when every child was silent suddenly and at once. The teachers came, strolling slowly in the heat, and the monitors ran to stand importantly beside them while the doors were opened, but like everyone else they were shut out until the party was ready.

MISS BROWN came from her own room to the Primer room where the tree was, carefully carrying a large oblong box. She put it down on a desk, and helped the Infant Mistress to tidy the room, clearing away the mess they had left the afternoon before, picking up brown paper and string, and snippets of coloured paper, and putting away paste and scissors. When they had finished they looked with some satisfaction at the tree, which had really cost them a great deal of trouble. It was only a branch which the Headmaster and the big boys had leaned against the wall, but it looked festive and interesting. It was almost hidden by parcels hanging from it, and by coloured chains and other decorations made from shiny glazed handwork paper; and on the top was a silver star. The Infant Mistress sat down at her desk to tidy it, and both women had a happy

lightness of mood from the thought of freedom, and holidays, so near. Only a few more hours, and the moment which had been coming so slowly nearer for weeks would be theirs, and they both hoped that everything would go smoothly, because smoothly was quickly, nothing to hold on to Time and keep it back—Miss Brown turned to a small table near the door, and the pleasure it held for her, that she had kept at the back of her mind since she had entered the room, brought a smile to her face. On the table she had arranged plasticine animals, cows and dogs and horses, standing on yellow raffia that she had cut and scattered to look like straw. She took up the oblong box and opened it, and lifted out with careful hands a doll's cradle, and a baby doll with wide staring eyes. She set the cradle on the table among the animals, and the doll in the cradle, and she stood back to admire them. She looked across at the Infant Mistress, wishing she would show the interest that would make an explanation necessary. After a moment's waiting she couldn't keep silent.

Wasn't it jolly decent of Mrs. Martin to lend me this, she asked. I never dreamt she would. You can't buy anything like it nowadays, of course. It was hers when she was a child—she brought it out from England with her. Even Annette's only allowed to hold it on her birthday, for a treat. . . .

There was triumph in her voice. The Infant Mistress had been in the town a year longer than she had, and yet she hadn't managed to make a particular friend of Mrs. Martin—the nicest home in the district, and a car. . . .

I promised to take the greatest care of it—of course I shan't let any of the

children touch it—they'll be just as happy looking at it. But I must say a baby doll makes it all so real for them, don't you think so? Better than a plasticine one? But the Infant Mistress had her head in the cupboard where she was putting books away, and it was not clear what she thought. Miss Brown sighed her contentment. Anyway, they simply loved the story of the Babe in the manger when I told it to them—isn't it awful, I really believe some of them hadn't heard it before. She altered the position of one of the animals, fastidiously wiping her fingers afterwards; she disliked the feel of the plasticine, she couldn't help thinking of the warm dirty fingers that had moulded it. Even Fanny was interested—and as she said Fanny, she wiped her fingers again—and it takes something to make an impression on her. I'm convinced she's a really bad little girl. The lies—and cheating—and even stealing!



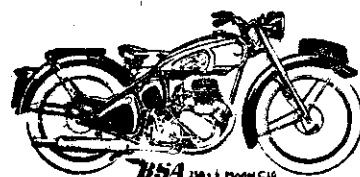
Nothing—simply nothing's safe from her. And at that moment as she looked towards the door, there was Fanny's black head beyond the glass, peering, impudent, and she reddened with vexation. Go away, go away at once, she called, and she hated the intrusion, she liked goodness and obedience and order so much; and she really felt, too, that

some privacy had been violated when Fanny looked with her wild eyes at that doll, serenely calm and dainty and clean.

THE party was a success. Big girls sang sweetly and big boys sang sheepishly, shuffling their feet on the dusty floor, and hanging their heads. Little girls and boys recited woodenly and competently, or in snatches and enchantingly, stopping for smiles and sidelong glances at the tree. The tree was stripped, and everyone had presents and lollies and paper caps. And it was all over, and most of the children had drifted outside, and their voices were dying away and quiet was settling slowly down, and the holiday was at last almost begun. As Miss Brown gathered up her presents—cakes of soap and handkerchiefs and cards, how sweet it was of them to like her so much, she was sure she had far more than the Infant Mistress had—she went over in her mind what she would do. Tidy up, that shouldn't take long, her boarding place for a change of clothes—she was hot and tired and there should be time for a bath if she hurried; Mrs. Martin's for a cup of tea and a good talk before she went to the station for the train. . . .

Please, Miss Brown, mother's baby doll—she turned and patted Annette's smooth shining hair. I'll take it to mother myself, dear, she said. But, please, it's not there, it's gone. She turned quickly, and looked towards the table, and the doll was truly no longer there. And all at once they were about her like a swarm, with the insufferable importance of children having something to tell. . . . Please, Fanny took it, I think. . . . Please, Fanny wanted to hold it, and Annette said she wasn't to go near it, and please, she went home,

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