

Logically I suppose behaviour is all that really matters in a pen - and I certainly get that from my Mentmore '46. But appearance also counts, and I've definitely never had a more handsome pen than this!

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SHORT STORY

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Written for "The Listener"
by M.B.

I GOT quite a shock when I ran into Muriel the other day. I can never get out of the habit of seeing her as a somewhat fat and freckled seventeen-year-old, terribly in earnest about Life, but nevertheless given to giggling in corners. Now she's quite different, poised, rather on the thin side, and certainly not given to giggling. I suppose there's nothing like grief for taking away puppy-fat and ebullience.

Muriel's only 21 but she looks older. When she was 18 she married Gordon Blake, a very dashing ex-flyer who insisted on going right on being dashing in peacetime. Actually he was an ideal husband for Muriel, because he was always making her leave the dishes in the sink and dash off to a party or a dance. Unfortunately on their way back from one Gordon drove their new car straight over the level crossing, at quite the wrong time. He was killed instantly. Muriel was in hospital for months, and during that time produced a son. (Two and a half pounds, it was, and I remember the staff was very smug about having kept it alive.)

Everybody went round saying what a good thing it was for Muriel to have the baby, to take her mind off things. But I never thought it was a good thing. If Muriel hadn't had the baby she'd have gone back to her old job (quite an interesting one) and lived once more the sort of life that is normal for girls of her own age, and had companions of her own age. As it is she leads an uneventful existence at home with her mother and the baby, diversified by occasional trips to Gordon's parents. (The only difference is that at her home the doting grandparents think Douglas just like Muriel, and at the Blakes he's the absolute image of Gordon.)

Yes, Muriel is lonely. Unhappiness is always a lonely business, especially for the young. After the accident her friends were lavish with flowers and letters of condolence but more sparing of their company. They sensed she was different, marked off from them by the barrier of her tragedy. This feeling would have worn off in time if Muriel had been leading the same sort of life as her friends, but all this time she was withdrawing further and further into the narrow world bounded by the four walls of her home and the four sides of her baby's cot.

When I met Muriel this day in town she told me she had taken a cottage at the beach for the summer. She thought it would be good for the baby. (Wanted a change from home, was my explanation.) Would I come up for the weekend? I said I'd be delighted. I'm very

fond of Muriel, and she's always appeared to have a certain amount of time for me, which is odd considering that I used to teach her English and Latin at High School. And I was anxious to renew acquaintance with young Douglas, now rising two. An interesting age, they tell me.

I got to the place fairly late on Friday evening, after groping around in the rain for at least half-an-hour. I suppose the bus driver had some excuse for being vague, as Muriel had moved in only the previous Tuesday, and I couldn't remember the name of the people who owned the house. I was thoroughly bad-tempered by the time I found it, but



there was Muriel in the doorway kissing me firmly on a rather damp cheek, and behind her a fire of driftwood and leaping flames. And soon I had been hustled out of my wet things and was stretched in front of the fire listening to Muriel dishing dinner. One thing about Muriel, she's wonderful in the house and her cooking's excellent, which is more than could be said for her Latin.

"Where's Douglas?" I asked, as Muriel came in with the cloth.

"Asleep," said Muriel, "He hated going to bed. He wanted to see you." We tiptoed into the bedroom.

I've always thought babies infinitely more attractive asleep than awake. Douglas was no exception. He had Muriel's colouring, pink, white, and gold. And as if this wasn't enough to tug at the thickened heartstrings of an unemotional schoolmaam, he was clutching a teddy bear. Children always seem to me so much more human when they've reached the stage of being attached to something inanimate. Affection towards a parent can be diagnosed by the cynic as cupboard love, towards a teddy bear, never.

"He's adorable!" I exclaimed with genuine enthusiasm.

"Even more so awake," whispered his fond mother.

I took another look at Douglas.

(continued on next page)