The Penguin Book of Modern Women's Short Stories (1990) ed. Susan Hill

ELIZABETH TAYLOR

*

The Devastating Boys (1972)

Laura was always too early; and this was as bad as being late, her husband, who was always late himself, told her. She sat in her car in the empty railway-station approach, feeling very sick, from dread.

It was half-past eleven on a summer morning. The country station was almost spellbound in silence, and there was, to Laura, a dreadful sense of self-absorption – in herself – in the stillness of the only porter standing on the platform, staring down the line: even – perhaps especially – in inanimate things; all were menacingly intent on being themselves, and separately themselves – the slanting shadows of railings across the platform, the glossiness of leaves, and the closed door of the office looking more closed, she thought, than any door she had ever seen.

She got out of the car and went into the station walking up and down the platform in a panic. It was a beautiful morning. If only the children weren't coming then she could have enjoyed it.

The children were coming from London. It was Harold's idea to have them, some time back, in March, when he read of a scheme to give London children a summer holiday in the country. This he might have read without interest, but the words 'Some of the children will be coloured' caught his eye. He seemed to find a slight tinge of warning in the phrase; the more he thought it over, the more he was convinced. He had made a long speech to Laura about children being the great equalizers, and that we should learn from them, that to

insinuate the stale prejudices of their elders into their fresh, fair minds was such a sin that he could not think of a worse one.

He knew very little about children. His students had passed beyond the blessed age, and shades of the prison-house had closed about them. His own children were even older, grown-up and gone away; but, while they were young, they had done nothing to destroy his faith in them, or blur the idea of them he had in his mind, and his feeling of humility in their presence. They had been good children carefully dealt with and easy to handle. There had scarcely been a cloud over their growing-up. Any little bothers Laura had hidden from him.

In March, the end of July was a long way away. Laura, who was lonely in middle-age, seemed to herself to be frittering away her days, just waiting for her grandchildren to be born: she had agreed with Harold's suggestion. She would have agreed anyway, whatever it was, as it was her nature – and his – for her to do so. It would be rather exciting to have two children to stay – to have the beds in Imogen's and Lalage's room slept in again. 'We could have two boys, or two girls,' Harold said. 'No stipulation, but that they must be coloured.'

Now *he* was making differences, but Laura did not remark upon it. All she said was, 'What will they do all the time?'

'What our own children used to do – play in the garden, go for picnics . . .'

'On wet days?'

'Dress up,' he said at once.

She remembered Imogen and Lalage in her old hats and dresses, slopping about in her big shoes, see-sawing on high heels, and she had to turn her head away, and there were tears in her eyes.

Her children had been her life, and her grandchildren one day would be; but here was an empty space. Life had fallen away from her. She had never been clever like the other professors' wives, or managed to have what they called 'outside interests'. Committees frightened her, and good works made her feel embarrassed and clumsy.

She *was* a clumsy person – gentle, but clumsy. Pacing up and down the platform, she had an ungainly walk – legs stiffly apart, head a little poked forward because she had poor sight. She was short and squarely-built and her clothes were never right; often she looked dishevelled, sometimes even battered.

This morning, she wore a label pinned to her breast, so that the children's escort would recognize her when the train drew in; but she felt self-conscious about it and covered it with her hand, though there was no one but the porter to see.

The signal dropped, as if a guillotine had come crashing down, and her heart seemed to crash down with it. Two boys! she thought. Somehow, she had imagined girls. She was used to girls, and shy of boys.

The printed form had come a day or two ago and had increased the panic which had gradually been gathering. Six-year-old boys, and she had pictured perhaps eight or ten-year-old girls, whom she could teach to sew and make cakes for tea, and press wild flowers as she had taught Imogen and Lalage to do.

Flurried and anxious entertaining at home; interviewing headmistresses; once – shied away from failure – opening a sale-of-work in the village – these agonies to her diffident nature seemed nothing to the nervousness she felt now, as the train appeared round the bend. She simply wasn't good with children – only her own. *Their* friends had frightened her, had been mouse-quiet and glum, or had got out of hand, and she herself had been too shy either to intrude or clamp down. When she met children – perhaps the small grandchildren of her acquaintances, she would only smile, perhaps awkwardly touch a cheek with her finger. If she were asked to hold a baby, she was fearful lest it should cry, and often it would, sensing lack of assurance in her clasp.

The train came in and slowed up. Suppose that I can't find them, she thought, and she went anxiously from window to window, her label uncovered now. And suppose they cry for their mothers and want to go home.

A tall, authoritative woman, also wearing a label, leaned out of a window, saw her and signalled curtly. She had a compartment full of little children in her charge to be delivered about Oxfordshire. Only two got out on to this platform, Laura's two, Septimus Smith and Benny Reece. They wore tickets, too, with their names printed on them.

Benny was much lighter in complexion than Septimus. He was obviously a half-caste and Laura hoped that this would count in Harold's eyes. It might even be one point up. They stood on the platform, looking about them, holding their little cardboard cases.

'My name is Laura,' she said. She stooped and clasped them to her in terror, and kissed their cheeks. Sep's in particular, was extraordinarily soft, like the petal of a poppy. His big eyes stared up at her, without expression. He wore a dark, long-trousered suit, so that he was all over sombre and unchildlike. Benny had a mock-suède coat with a nylon-fur collar and a trilby hat with a feather. They did not speak. Not only was she, Laura, strange to them, but they were strange to one another. There had only been a short train-journey in which to sum up their chances of becoming friends.

She put them both into the back of the car, so that there should be no favouritism, and drove off, pointing out – to utter silence – places on the way. 'That's a café where we'll go for tea one day.' The silence was dreadful. 'A caff,' she amended. 'And there's the little cinema. Not very grand, I'm afraid. Not like London ones.'

They did not even glance about them.

'Are you going to be good friends to one another?' she asked.

After a pause, Sep said in a slow grave voice, 'Yeah, I'm going to be a good friend.'

'Is this the country?' Benny asked. He had a chirpy, perky Cockney voice and accent.

'Yeah, this is the countryside,' said Sep, in his rolling drawl, glancing indifferently at some trees.

Then he began to talk. It was in an aggrieved sing-song. 'I don't go on that train no more. I don't like that train, and I don't go on that again over my dead body. Some boy he say to me, "You don't sit in that corner seat. I sit there." I say, "You don't sit here. I sit here." "Yeah," I say, "You don't own this train so I don't budge from here." Then he dash my comic down and tore it.'

'Yep, he tore his comic,' Benny said.

'"You tear my comic, you buy me another comic," I said. "Or else." "Or *else*," I said.' He suddenly broke off and looked at a wood they were passing. 'I don't go near those tall bushes. They full of snakes what sting you.'

'No they ain't,' said Benny.

'My Mam said so. I don't go.'

'There aren't any snakes,' said Laura, in a light voice. She, too, had a terror of them, and was afraid to walk through the bracken. 'Or only little harmless ones,' she added.

'I don't go,' Sep murmured to himself. Then, in a louder voice, he went on. 'He said, "I don't buy no comic for you, you nigger," he said.'

'He never said that,' Benny protested.

'Yes, "You dirty nigger," he said.'

'He never.'

There was something so puzzled in Benny's voice that Laura immediately believed him. The expression on his little monkey-face was open and impartial.

'I don't go on that train no more.'

'You've got to. When you go home,' Benny said.

'Maybe I don't go home.'

'We'll think about that later. You've only just arrived,' said Laura, smiling.

'No, I think about that right now.'

Along the narrow lane to the house, they were held up by the cows from the farm. A boy drove them along, whacking their messed rumps with a stick. Cow-pats plopped on to the road and steamed there, zizzing with flies. Benny held his nose

and Sep, glancing at him, at once did the same. 'I don't care for this smell of the countryside,' he complained in a pinched tone.

'No, the countryside stinks,' said Benny.

'Cows frighten me.'

'They don't frighten me.'

Sep cringed against the back of the seat, whimpering; but Benny wound his window right down, put his head a little out of it, and shouted, 'Get on, you dirty old sods, or else I'll show you.'

'Hush,' said Laura gently.

'He swore,' Sep pointed out.

They turned into Laura's gateway, up the short drive. In front of the house was a lawn and a cedar tree. From one of its lower branches hung the old swing, on chains, waiting for Laura's grandchildren.

The boys clambered out of the car and followed her into the hall, where they stood looking about them critically; then Benny dropped his case and shot like an arrow towards Harold's golf-bag and pulled out a club. His face was suddenly bright with excitement and Laura, darting forward to him, felt a stab of misery at having to begin the 'No's' so soon. 'I'm afraid Harold wouldn't like you to touch them,' she said. Benny stared her out, but after a moment or two gave up the club with all the unwillingness in the world. Meanwhile, Sep had taken an antique coaching-horn and was blowing a bubbly, uneven blast on it, his eyes stretched wide and his cheeks blown out. 'Nor that,' said Laura faintly, taking it away. 'Let's go upstairs and unpack.'

They appeared not at all overawed by the size of this fairly large house; in fact, rather unimpressed by it.

In the room where once, as little girls, Imogen and Lalage had slept together, they opened their cases. Sep put his clothes neatly and carefully into his drawer; and Benny tipped the case into his – comics, clothes and shoes, and a scattering of peanuts. I'll tidy it later, Laura thought.

'Shall we toss up for who sleeps by the window?' she suggested.

'I don't sleep by no window,' said Sep. 'I sleep in *this* bed; with *him*.'

'I want to sleep by myself,' said Benny.

Sep began a babyish whimpering, which increased into an anguished keening. 'I don't like to sleep in the bed by myself. I'm scared to. I'm real scared to. I'm scared.'

This was entirely theatrical, Laura decided, and Benny seemed to think so, too; for he took no notice.

A fortnight! Laura thought. This day alone stretched endlessly before her, and she dared not think of any following ones. Already she felt ineffectual and had an inkling that they were going to despise her. And her brightness was false and not infectious. She longed for Harold to come home, as she had never longed before.

'I reckon I go and clean my teeth,' said Sep, who had broken off his dirge.

'Lunch is ready. Afterwards would be more sensible, surely?' Laura suggested.

But they paid no heed to her. Both took their tooth-brushes, their new tubes of paste, and rushed to find the bathroom. 'I'm going to bathe myself,' said Sep. 'I'm going to bathe all my skin and wash my head.'

'Not *before* lunch,' Laura called out, hastening after them; but they did not hear her. Taps were running and steam clouding the window, and Sep was tearing off his clothes.

'He's bathed three times already,' Laura told Harold.

She had just come downstairs, and had done so as soon as she heard him slamming the front door.

Upstairs, Sep was sitting in the bath. She had made him a lacy vest of soap-froth, as once she had made them for Imogen and Lalage. It showed up much better on his grape-dark skin. He sat there, like a tribal warrior done up in war-paint.

Benny would not go near the bath. He washed at the basin, his sleeves rolled up: and he turned the cake of soap over and over uncertainly in his hands.

'It's probably a novelty,' Harold said, referring to Sep's bathing. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Later perhaps. I daren't sit down, for I'd never get up again.'

'I'll finish them off. I'll go and see to them. You just sit there and drink this.'

'Oh, Harold, how wonderfully good of you.'

She sank down on the arm of the chair, and sipped her drink, feeling stunned. From the echoing bathroom came shouts of laughter, and it was very good to hear them, especially from a distance. Harold was being a great success, and relief and gratitude filled her.

After a little rest, she got up and went weakly about the room, putting things back in their places. When this was done, the room still looked wrong. An unfamiliar dust seemed to have settled all over it, yet, running a finger over the piano, she found none. All the same, it was not the usual scene she set for Harold's home-coming in the evenings. It had taken a shaking-up.

Scampering footsteps now thundered along the landing. She waited a moment or two, then went upstairs. They were in bed, in separate beds; Benny by the window. Harold was pacing about the room, telling them a story: his hands flapped like huge ears at the side of his face; then he made an elephant's trunk with his arm. From the beds, the children's eyes stared unblinkingly at him. As Laura came into the room, only Benny's flickered in her direction, then back at once to the magic of Harold's performance. She blew a vague, unheeded kiss, and crept away.

'It's like seeing snow begin to fall,' said Harold at dinner. 'You know it's going to be a damned nuisance, but it makes a change.'

He sounded exhilarated; clashed the knife against the steel with vigour, and started to carve. He kept popping little titbits into his mouth. Carver's perks, he called them.

'Not much for me,' Laura said.

'What did they have for lunch?'

'Fish cakes.'

'Enjoy them?'

'Sep said, "I don't like that." He's very suspicious, and that makes Benny all the braver. Then he eats too much, showing off.'

'They'll settle down,' Harold said, settling down himself to his dinner. After a while, he said, 'The little Cockney one asked me just now if this were a private house. When I said "Yes", he said, "I thought it was, because you've got the sleeping upstairs and the talking downstairs." Didn't quite get the drift.'

'Pathetic,' Laura murmured.

'I suppose where they come from it's all done in the same room.'

'Yes, it is.'

'Pathetic,' Harold said in his turn.

'It makes me feel ashamed.'

'Oh, come now.'

'And wonder if we're doing the right thing – perhaps unsettling them for what they have to go back to.'

'My dear girl,' he said. 'Damn it, those people who organize these things know what they're doing.'

'I suppose so.'

'They've been doing it for years.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Well then . . .'

Suddenly she put down her knife and fork and rested her forehead in her hands.

'What's up, old thing?' Harold asked, with his mouth full.

'Only tired.'

'Well, they've dropped off all right. You can have a quiet evening.'

'I'm too tired to sit up straight any longer.' After a silence, lifting her face from her hands, she said, 'Thirteen more days! What shall I do with them all that time?'

'Take them for scrambles in the woods,' he began, sure that he had endless ideas.

'I tried. They won't walk a step. They both groaned and moaned so much that we turned back.'

'Well, they can play on the swing.'

'For how long, how *long*? They soon got tired of that. Anyhow, they quarrel about one having a longer turn than the other. In the end, I gave them the egg-timer.'

'That was a good idea.'

'They broke it.'

'Oh.'

'Please God, don't let it rain,' she said earnestly, staring out of the window. 'Not for the next fortnight, anyway.'

The next day, it rained from early morning. After breakfast, when Harold had gone off, Laura settled the boys at the dining-room table with a snakes-and-ladders board. As they had never played it, she had to draw up a chair herself, and join in. By some freakish chance, Benny threw one six after another, would, it seemed, never stop; and Sep's frustration and fury rose. He kept snatching the dice-cup away from Benny, peering into it, convinced of trickery. The game went badly for him and Laura, counting rapidly ahead, saw that he was due for the longest snake of all. His face was agonized, his dark hand, with its pale scars and scratches, hovered above the board; but he could not bring himself to draw the counter down the snake's horrid speckled length.

'I'll do it for you,' Laura said. He shuddered, and turned aside. Then he pushed his chair back from the table and lay, face-down on the floor, silent with grief.

'And it's not yet ten o'clock,' thought Laura, and was relieved to see Mrs Milner, the help, coming up the path under her umbrella. It was a mercy that it was her morning.

She finished off the game with Benny, and he won; but the true glory of victory had been taken from him by the vanquished, lying still and wounded on the hearth-rug. Laura was

bright and cheerful about being beaten, trying to set an example; but she made no impression.

Presently, in exasperation, she asked, 'Don't you play games at school?'

There was no answer for a time, then Benny, knowing the question wasn't addressed to him, said, 'Yep, sometimes.'

'And what do you do if you lose?' Laura asked, glancing down at the hearth-rug. 'You can't win all the time.'

In a muffled voice, Sep at last said, 'I don't win *any* time They won't let me win any time.'

'It's only luck.'

'No, they don't *let* me win. I just go and lie down and shut my eyes.'

'And are these our young visitors?' asked Mrs Milner, coming in with the vacuum-cleaner. Benny stared at her; Sep lifted his head from his sleeve for a brief look, and then returned to his sulking.

'What a nasty morning I've brought with me,' Mrs Milner said, after Laura had introduced them.

'You brought a nasty old morning all right,' Sep agreed, mumbling into his jersey.

'But,' she went on brightly, putting her hands into her overall pockets. 'I've also brought some lollies.'

Benny straightened his back in anticipation. Sep, peeping with one eye, stretched out an arm.

'That's if Madam says you may.'

'They call me "Laura".' It had been Harold's idea and Laura had foreseen this very difficulty.

Mrs Milner could not bring herself to say the name and she, too, could foresee awkwardnesses.

'No, Sep,' said Laura firmly. 'Either you get up properly and take it politely, or you go without.'

She wished that Benny hadn't at once scrambled to his feet and stood there at attention. Sep buried his head again and moaned. All the sufferings of his race were upon him at this moment.

Benny took his sweet and made a great appreciative fuss about it.

All the china had gone up a shelf or two, out of reach, Mrs Milner noted. It was like the old days, when Imogen's and Lalage's friends had come to tea.

'Now, there's a good lad,' she said, stepping over Sep, and plugging in the vacuum-cleaner.

'Is that your sister?' Benny asked Laura, when Mrs Milner had brought in the pudding, gone out again, and closed the door.

'No, Mrs Milner comes to help me with the housework – every Tuesday and Friday.'

'She must be a very kind old lady,' Benny said.

'Do you like that?' Laura asked Sep, who was pushing jelly into his spoon with his fingers.

'Yeah, I like this fine.'

He had suddenly cheered up. He did not mention the lolly, which Mrs Milner had put back in her pocket. All the rest of the morning, they had played excitedly with the telephone – one upstairs, in Laura's bedroom; the other downstairs, in the hall – chattering and shouting to one another, and running to Laura to come to listen.

That evening, Harold was home earlier than usual and could not wait to complain that he had tried all day to telephone.

'I know, dear,' Laura said. 'I should have stopped them, but it gave me a rest.'

'You'll be making a rod for everybody's back, if you let them do just what they like all the time.'

'It's for such a short while – well, relatively speaking – and they haven't got telephones at home, so the question doesn't arise.'

'But other people might want to ring you up.'

'So few ever do, it's not worth considering.'

'Well, someone did today. Helena Western.'

'What on earth for?'

'There's no need to look frightened. She wants you to take

the boys to tea.' Saying this, his voice was full of satisfaction, for he admired Helena's husband. Helena herself wrote what he referred to as 'clever-clever little novels'. He went on sarcastically, 'She saw you with them from the top of a bus, and asked me when I met her later in Blackwell's. She says she has absolutely *no* feelings about coloured people, as some of her friends apparently have.' He was speaking in Helena's way of stresses and breathings. 'In fact,' he ended, 'she rather goes out of her way to be extra pleasant to them.'

'So she does have feelings,' Laura said.

She was terrified at the idea of taking the children to tea with Helena. She always felt dull and overawed in her company, and was afraid that the boys would misbehave and get out of her control, and then Helena would put it all into a novel. Already she had put Harold in one; but, luckily, he had not recognized his own transformation from professor of archaeology to barrister. Her simple trick worked, as far as he was concerned. To Harold, that character, with his vaguely left-wing opinions and opinionated turns of phrase, his quelling manner to his wife, his very appearance, could have nothing to do with him, since he had never taken silk. Everyone else had recognized and known, and Laura, among them, knew they had.

'I'll ring her up,' she said; but she didn't stir from her chair, sat staring wearily in front of her, her hands on her knees – a very resigned old woman's attitude; Whistler's mother. 'I'm *too* old,' she thought. 'I'd be too old for my own grandchildren.' But she had never imagined *them* like the ones upstairs in bed. She had pictured biddable little children, like Lalage and Imogen.

'They're good at *night*,' she said to Harold, continuing her thoughts aloud. 'They lie there and talk quietly, *once* they're in bed. I wonder what they talk about. Us, perhaps.' It was an alarming idea.

In the night she woke and remembered that she had not telephoned Helena. 'I'll do it after breakfast,' she thought.

But she was still making toast when the telephone rang, and the boys left the table and raced to the hall ahead of her. Benny was first and, as he grabbed the receiver, Sep stood close by him, ready to shout some messages into the magical instrument. Laura hovered anxiously by, but Benny warned her off with staring eyes. 'Be polite,' she whispered imploringly.

'Yep, my name's Benny,' he was saying.

Then he listened with a look of rapture. It was his first real telephone conversation, and Sep was standing by, shivering with impatience and envy.

'Yep, that'll be O.K.,' said Benny, grinning. 'What day?'

Laura put out her hand, but he shrank back, clutching the receiver. 'I got the message,' he hissed at her. 'Yep, he's here,' he said, into the telephone. Sep smiled self-consciously and drew himself up as he took the receiver. 'Yeah, I am Septimus Alexander Smith.' He gave his high, bubbly chuckle. 'Sure I'll come there.' To prolong the conversation, he went on, 'Can my friend, Benny Reece come, too? Can Laura come?' Then he frowned, looking up at the ceiling, as if for inspiration. 'Can my father, Alexander Leroy Smith come?'

Laura made another darting movement.

'Well, no, he can't then,' Sep said, 'because he's dead.'

This doubled him up with mirth, and it was a long time before he could bring himself to say goodbye. When he had done so, he quickly put the receiver down.

'Someone asked me to tea,' he told Laura. 'I said, "Yeah, sure I come."'

'And me,' said Benny.

'Who was it?' Laura asked, although she knew.

'I don't know,' said Sep. 'I don't know *who* that was.'

When later and secretly, Laura telephoned Helena, Helena said, 'Aren't they simply *devastating* boys?'

'How did the tea-party go?' Harold asked.

They had all arrived back home together – he, from a meeting; Laura and the boys from Helena's.

'They were good,' Laura said, which was all that mattered. She drew them to her, one on either side. It was her movement of gratitude towards them. They had not let her down. They had played quietly at a fishing game with real water and magnetized tin fish, had eaten unfamiliar things, such as anchovy toast and brandy-snaps without any expression of alarm or revulsion: they had helped carry the tea things indoors from the lawn. Helena had been surprisingly clever with them. She made them laugh, as seldom Laura could. She struck the right note from the beginning. When Benny picked up sixpence from the gravelled path, she thanked him casually and put it in her pocket. Laura was grateful to her for that and proud that Benny ran away at once so unconcernedly. When Helena praised them for their good behaviour, Laura had blushed with pleasure, just as if they were her own children.

'She is really very nice,' Laura said later, thinking still of her successful afternoon with Helena.

'Yes, she talks too much, that's all.'

Harold was pleased with Laura for having got on well with his colleague's wife. It was so long since he had tried to urge Laura into academic circles, and for years he had given up trying. Now, sensing his pleasure, her own was enhanced.

'When we were coming away,' Laura said, 'Helena whispered to me, "Aren't they simply *deva*stating?"'

'You've exactly caught her tone.'

At that moment they heard from the garden, Benny also exactly catching her tone.

'Let's have the bat, there's a little pet,' he mimicked, trying to snatch the old tennis-racket from Sep.

'You sod off,' drawled Sep.

'Oh, my dear, you shake me rigid.'

Sep began his doubling-up-with-laughter routine; first, in silence, bowed over, lifting one leg then another up to his chest, stamping the ground. It was like the start of a tribal dance, Laura thought, watching him from the window; then the pace quickened, he skipped about, and laughed, with his

head thrown back, and tears rolled down his face. Benny looked on, smirking a little, obviously proud that his wit should have had such an effect. Round and round went Sep, his loose limbs moving like pistons. 'Yeah, you shake me rigid,' he shouted. 'You shake me entirely rigid.' Benny, after hesitating, joined in. They circled the lawn, and disappeared into the shrubbery.

'She *did* say that. Helena,' Laura said, turning to Harold. 'When Benny was going on about something he'd done she said, "My dear, you shake me entirely rigid."' Then Laura added thoughtfully, 'I wonder if they are as good at imitating *us*, when they're lying up there in bed, talking.'

'A sobering thought,' said Harold, who could not believe he had any particular idiosyncrasies to be copied. 'Oh, God, someone's broken one of my sherds,' he suddenly cried, stooping to pick up two pieces of pottery from the floor. His agonized shout brought Sep to the french windows, and he stood there, bewildered.

As the pottery had been broken before, he hadn't bothered to pick it up, or confess. The day before, he had broken a whole cup and nothing had happened. Now this grown man was bowed over as if in pain, staring at the fragments in his hand. Sep crept back into the shrubbery.

The fortnight, miraculously, was passing. Laura could now say, 'This time next week.' She would do gardening, get her hair done, clean all the paint. Often, she wondered about the kind of homes the other children had gone to – those children she had glimpsed on the train; and she imagined them staying on farms, helping with the animals, looked after by buxom farmers'-wives – pale London children, growing gratifyingly brown, filling out, going home at last with roses in their cheeks. She could see no difference in Sep and Benny.

What they had really got from the holiday was one another. It touched her to see them going off into the shrubbery with

arms about one another's shoulders, and to listen to their peaceful murmuring as they lay in bed, to hear their shared jokes. They quarrelled a great deal, over the tennis-racket or Harold's old cricket-bat, and Sep was constantly casting himself down on the grass and weeping, if he were out at cricket, or could not get Benny out.

It was he who would sit for hours with his eyes fixed on Laura's face while she read to him. Benny would wander restlessly about, waiting for the story to be finished. If he interrupted, Sep would put his hand imploringly on Laura's arm, silently willing her to continue.

Benny liked her to play the piano. It was the only time she was admired. They would dance gravely about the room, with their bottles of Coca-Cola, sucking through straws, choking, heads bobbing up and down. Once, at the end of a concert of nursery-rhymes, Laura played *God Save the Queen*, and Sep rushed at her, trying to shut the lid down on her hands. 'I don't like that,' he keened. 'My Mam don't like *God Save the Queen* neither. She say "God save *me*".'

'Get out,' said Benny, kicking him on the shin. 'You're shaking me entirely rigid.'

On the second Sunday, they decided that they must go to church. They had a sudden curiosity about it, and a yearning to sing hymns.

'Well, take them,' said liberal-minded and agnostic Harold to Laura.

But it was almost time to put the sirloin into the oven. 'We did sign that form,' she said in a low voice. 'To say we'd take them if they wanted to go.'

'Do you *really* want to go?' Harold asked, turning to the boys, who were wanting to go more and more as the discussion went on. 'Oh, God!' he groaned – inappropriately, Laura thought.

'What religion are you, anyway?' he asked them.

'I am a Christian,' Sep said with great dignity.

'Me, too,' said Benny.

'What time does it begin?' Harold asked, turning his back to Laura.

'At eleven o'clock.'

'Isn't there some kids' service they can go to on their own?'

'Not in August, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, God!' he said again.

Laura watched them setting out; rather overawed, the two boys; it was the first time they had been out alone with him.

She had a quiet morning in the kitchen. Not long after twelve o'clock they returned. The boys at once raced for the cricket-bat, and fought over it, while Harold poured himself out a glass of beer.

'How did it go?' asked Laura.

'Awful! Lord, I felt such a fool.'

'Did they misbehave, then?'

'Oh, no, they were perfectly good – except that for some reason Benny kept holding his nose. But I knew so many people there. And the Vicar shook hands with me afterwards and said, "We are especially glad to see *you*." The embarrassment!'

'It must have shaken you entirely rigid,' Laura said, smiling as she basted the beef. Harold looked at her as if for the first time in years. She so seldom tried to be amusing.

At lunch, she asked if the boys had enjoyed their morning.

'Church smelt nasty,' Benny said, making a face.

'Yeah,' agreed Sep. 'I prefer my own country. I prefer Christians.'

'Me, too,' Benny said. 'Give me Christians any day.'

'Has it been a success?' Laura asked Harold. 'For them, I mean.'

It was their last night – Sep's and Benny's – and she wondered if her feeling of being on the verge of tears was entirely from tiredness. For the past fortnight, she had reeled into bed, and slept without moving.

A success for *them*? She could not be quite sure; but it had

been a success for her, and for Harold. In the evenings, they had so much to talk about, and Harold, basking in his popularity, had been genial and considerate.

Laura, the boys had treated as a piece of furniture, or a slave, and humbly she accepted her place in their minds. She was a woman who had never had any high opinions of herself.

'No more cricket,' she said. She had been made to play for hours – always wicket-keeper, running into the shrubs for lost balls while Sep and Benny rested full length on the grass.

'He has a lovely action,' she said to Harold one evening, watching Sep take his long run up to bowl. 'He might be a great athlete one day.'

'It couldn't happen,' Harold said. 'Don't you see, he has rickets?'

One of her children with rickets, she had thought, stricken.

Now, on this last evening, the children were in bed. She and Harold were sitting by the drawing-room window, talking about them. There was a sudden scampering along the landing and Laura said, 'It's only one of them going to the toilet.'

'The *what*?'

'They ticked me off for saying "lavatory",' she said placidly. 'Benny said it was a bad word.'

She loved to make Harold laugh, and several times lately she had managed to amuse him, with stories she had to recount.

'I shan't like saying good-bye,' she said awkwardly.

'No,' said Harold. He got up and walked about the room, examined his shelves of pottery fragments. 'It's been a lot of work for you, Laura.'

She looked away shyly. There had been almost a note of praise in his voice. 'Tomorrow,' she thought. 'I hope I don't cry.'

At the station, it was Benny who cried. All the morning he had talked about his mother, how she would be waiting for him at Paddington station. Laura kept their thoughts fixed on the near future.

Now they sat on a bench on the sunny platform, wearing their name-labels, holding bunches of wilting flowers, and Laura looked at her watch and wished the minutes away. As usual, she was too early. Then she saw Benny shut his eyes quickly, but not in time to stop two tears falling. She was surprised and dismayed. She began to talk brightly, but neither replied. Benny kept his head down, and Sep stared ahead. At last, to her relief, the signal fell, and soon the train came in. She handed them over to the escort, and they sat down in the compartment without a word. Benny gazed out of the further window, away from her, rebukingly; and Sep's face was expressionless.

As the train began to pull out, she stood waving and smiling; but they would not glance in her direction, though the escort was urging them to do so, and setting an example. When at last Laura moved away, her head and throat were aching, and she had such a sense of failure and fatigue that she hardly knew how to walk back to the car.

It was not Mrs Milner's morning, and the house was deadly quiet. Life, noise, laughter, bitter quarrelling had gone out of it. She picked up the cricket-bat from the lawn and went inside. She walked about, listlessly tidying things, putting them back in their places. Then fetched a damp cloth and sat down at the piano and wiped the sticky, dirty keys.

She was sitting there, staring in front of her, clasping the cloth in her lap, when Harold came in.

'I'm taking the afternoon off,' he said. 'Let's drive out to Minster Lovell for lunch.'

She looked at him in astonishment. On his way across the room to fetch his tobacco pouch, he let his hand rest on her shoulder for a moment.

'Don't fret,' he said. 'I think we've got them for life now.'

'Benny cried.'

'Extraordinary thing. Shall we make tracks?'

She stood up and closed the lid of the keyboard. 'It was awfully nice of you to come back, Harold.' She paused, thinking

she might say more; but he was puffing away, lighting his pipe with a great fuss, as if he were not listening. 'Well, I'll go and get ready,' she said.