

Miss Dilly and the Crystal Vase

By Lila Lennon



MISS DILLY knew what they said about her. She was too old to teach . . . too set in her ways. Hadn't she overheard that mother last week saying, "I just can't imagine Miss Dilly ever being a child!"

What sentimental bosh. Some of those mothers ought to try handling a roomful of second graders. Especially

with a child like Robert. Robert evaded her, somehow, with his ready laughter, his inattention. And, if laid end to end, the bottles of milk he spilled would reach clear to the assembly room. Only this time it wasn't milk.

She looked down again at the shattered fragments of the crystal vase on the floor. Re-

turning to the room after lunch, she had found Robert bending over them, picking up the few flowers. Anger and futility filled her. Her lovely vase. It had been her mother's, one of the few really nice things she had left. One room in a home that didn't belong to you . . . people who were not your own . . . no wonder

a little thing like a crystal vase meant so much. And there it was, ruined forever. "Robert! What have you done? You've broken my crystal vase!"

His blue eyes were frightened. "I didn't break it, Miss Dilly. I was just picking up the flowers. . . ." His voice trailed off, uncertainly.

Her voice was sharp. "I expect the truth, Robert." He planted his feet solidly apart, and looked at her defiantly. "I didn't break the vase, Miss Dilly."

He'd say that, anyway, she thought wearily. She rapped on her desk with the ruler. "Children, one of you has broken my vase."

Will the child who did it please stand up?"

Miss Dilly waited. She looked out at the leaden sky, the dripping trees. No one stood up. It was Robert, she was sure of it.

"You will stay after school, Robert," she said suddenly. He ducked his head. The redness in his face reached his blond hair. He had broken her vase. He would have to admit it. After all, it was a matter of principle. He might as well learn that now.

"All right, Robert, you may go home now."

He raised his head and stared silently at her for a long moment. Then his words jumped at her, in a childish, jerky treble.

"You don't believe me, do you, Miss Dilly?"

He turned and ran out of the room, and Miss Dilly watched him go. The slamming of the door echoed loudly in the deserted hall. Anger bubbled up in her, and yet there was another, stranger feeling. The words hadn't mattered so much, it was the accusing tone, the deep look of injustice on his face. She kept seeing it.

Miss Dilly stood up, then wearily leaned down and picked up the shining crystal pieces and put them in the basket. She walked to the closet to get her coat. It was still wet, and she sniffed the damp wool distastefully.

She sat down abruptly on the first small desk, still holding her coat. How long ago had it been? She hadn't been any older than Robert. Suddenly, in one brief moment, the years sped backwards. The whole scene, the old feeling, leaped alive for her.

How proud and self-conscious she had been when the fourth-grade teacher had "borrowed" her from the second grade. She stood straight-shouldered and tense against the blackboard in a spell down with the older children, and she had won. Back again in her own room, she looked eagerly to her own teacher, Miss Bates, for approval. But

Miss Bates had not seen her come back into the room, and had never let her explain she had not known a test was in progress. Against Miss Bates' anger, little Ann Dilly had never been able to find the words to make her believe she had not cheated.

"Robert," Miss Dilly moved her lips soundlessly. "Robert!"

Quickly, she put on her coat and ran down the hall, out into the rain. Ahead, she saw a small blue-clad figure trudging slowly. She hurried after him, through the rain.

She caught up with him and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. Robert looked up at her, his tear-streaked face startled. She saw the frightened defiance begin again in his eyes.

"Robert," Miss Dilly said softly, "I just wanted to tell you . . . I believe you."

AT THREE o'clock, Miss Dilly led her orderly group into the hall. The clang of the bell meant liberation, and the children knew it. She kept them in line to the outside door and watched them break formation to race home.

Back in her room, Miss Dilly closed the door firmly and went to her desk.

"Robert, come up here."

He came, slowly, shuffling. "Robert," she said severely. "I insist on the truth. Did you break my vase?"

He looked as if he might cry, and his voice was unsteady. "No, Miss Dilly."

"Why don't you tell the truth?" she persisted.

"I didn't do it," he protested sturdily, but she saw the sudden trembling of his lower lip, the brightness of his eyes.

"Do you know who did break it?" she questioned.

He was looking down at his shoes. "No, ma'am."

Miss Dilly sighed. Suddenly, a feeling of utter failure swept over her. She could not reach this stubborn child.

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