



The Walter Kerr family in a reasonably relaxed moment. Mr. Kerr, the calm, squarely effective drama critic of the New York Herald Tribune, directed the hit comedy which Mrs. Kerr, a handsome, mocking, many-witted woman, wrote with Eleanor Brooke. Both are former students of Mr. Kerr at Catholic University. This circular arrangement has turned into a major success.

## PLEASE DON'T EAT THE DAISIES!



Christopher

By Jean Kerr

Co-author of *King of Hearts*

We are being very careful with our children. They'll never have to pay a psychiatrist twenty-five dollars an hour to find out why we rejected them. We'll tell them why we rejected them. Because they're impossible, that's why.

It seems to me, looking back on it, that everything was all right when there were two of them and two of us. We felt loved, protected, secure. But now that there are four of them and two of us, things have changed. We're in the minority, we're not as vigorous as we used to be, and it's clear that we can not compete with these younger men.

You take Christopher—and you may; he's a slightly used

eight-year-old. The source of our difficulty with him lies in the fact that he is interested in the precise value of words whereas we are only interested in having him pick his clothes up off the floor. I say, "Christopher, you take a bath and put all your things in the wash," and he says, "Okay, but it will break the Bendix." Now at this point the shrewd rejoinder would be, "That's all right, let it break the Bendix." But years of experience have washed over me in vain and I, perennial patsy, inquire, "Why will it break the Bendix?" So he explains, "Well, if I put *all* my things in the wash, I'll have to put my shoes in and they will certainly break the machinery."

"Very well," I say, all sweetness and control, "put everything but the shoes in the wash." He picks up my agreeable tone at once, announcing cheerily, "Then you *do* want me to put my belt in the wash." I don't know what I say at this point but my husband says, "Honey, you mustn't scream at him that way."

Another version of this battle of semantics would be:

"Don't kick the table leg with your foot."

"I'm not kicking, I'm tapping."

"Well, don't tap with your foot."

"It's not my foot, it's a fork."

"Well, don't tap with the fork."

"It's not a *good* fork," . . . et cetera, et cetera.

Christopher is an unusual child in other respects. I watch him from the kitchen window. With a garden rake in one hand he scampers up a tree, out across a long branch, and down over the stone wall—as graceful and as deft as a squirrel. On the other hand, he is unable to get from the living room into the front hall without bumping into at least two pieces of furniture. (I've seen him hit as many as five, but that's championship stuff and he can't do it every time.)



*The twins*

He has another trick which defies analysis, and also the laws of gravity. He can walk out into the middle of a perfectly empty kitchen and trip on the linoleum. I guess it's the linoleum. There isn't anything else there.

My friends who have children are always reporting the quaint and agreeable utterances of their little ones. For example, the mother of one five-year-old philosopher told me that when she appeared at breakfast in a new six-dollar pink wrap-around, her little boy chirped, in a tone giddy with wonder, "Oh look, Our Miss Mommy must be going to a wedding!" Now I don't think any one of my children would say a thing like that. (What do I mean, I don't *think*; there are some things about which you can be positive.) Of course, in a six-dollar wrap-around I wouldn't look as if I were going to a wedding. I'd look as if I were going to paint the garage. But that's not the point. The point is: where is that babbling, idiotic loyalty that other mothers get?

A while back I spoke of a time when there were two of them and two of us. In my affinity for round numbers, I'm falsifying the whole picture. Actually, there never were two of them. There was one of them, and all of a sudden there were three of them.

The twins are four now, and for several years we have had galvanized iron fencing laced onto the outside of their bedroom windows. This gives the front of the house a rather institutional look and contributes to unnecessary rumours about my mental health; but it does keep them off the roof, which is what we had in mind.

For twins they are very dissimilar. Colin is tall and active and Johnny is short and middle-aged. Johnny doesn't kick off his shoes, he doesn't swallow beer-caps or tear pages out of the telephone book. I don't think he ever draws pictures with my best lipstick. In fact, he has none of the charming, light-hearted "boy" qualities that precipitate so many scenes of violence in the home. On



*The baby*

the other hand, he has a feeling for order and a passion for system that would be trying in a head nurse. If his pyjamas are hung on the third hook in the closet instead of on the second hook, it causes him real pain. If one slat in a Venetian blind is tipped in the wrong direction he can't have a moment's peace until somebody fixes it. Indeed, if one of the beans on his plate is slightly longer than the others he can scarcely bear to eat it. It's hard for him to live with the rest of us. And vice versa.

Colin is completely different. He has a lightness of touch and a dexterity that will certainly put him on top of the heap if he ever takes up safecracking. Equipped with only a spoon and an old emery board he can take a door off its hinges in seven minutes and remove all of the towel racks from the bathroom in five.

Gilbert is only seventeen months old and it's too early to tell about him. (As a matter of fact, we can tell, all right, but we're just not ready to face it.) Once upon a time we might have been taken in by smiles and gurgles and round blue eyes, but no more. We know he is just biding his time. Today he can't do much more than eat his shoelaces and suck off an occasional button. Tomorrow, the world.

My real problem with children is that I haven't any imagination. I'm always warning them against the commonplace defections while they are planning the bizarre and unusual. Christopher gets up ahead of the rest of us on Sunday mornings and he has long since been given a list of clear directives: "Don't wake the baby," "Don't go outside in your pyjamas," "Don't eat cookies before breakfast." But I never told him, "Don't make flour paste and glue together all the pages of the magazine section of the *Sunday Times*." Now I tell him, of course.

And then last week I had a dinner party and told the twins and Christopher not to go in the living room, not to use the guest towels in the bathroom, and not to leave the bicycles on the front steps. However, I neglected to tell them not to eat the daisies on the dining-room table. This was a serious omission, as I discovered when I came upon my centrepiece—a charming three-point arrangement of green stems.

The thing is, I'm going to a psychiatrist and find out why I have this feeling of persecution . . . this sense of being continually surrounded . . .



*Mrs. Kerr wrote her share of the play by the water front in New Rochelle, in this car, on this clipboard.*