

Gingham Dog

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Children like toy animals, you know—
Horses with real black hair and manes and tails,
And flannel elephants with tiny eyes
Of black shoe-buttons—and small rubber cats
That plaintively protest when they are squeezed,
And teddy-bears to take to bed at night,
To kiss and cuff till they grow thin and worn,
Aenemic, from the sawdusts leaking out—
And gingham dogs, or sometimes calico,
With sprawly legs that can be tied in knots
And sad expressions and long drooping ears.
Oh, these are talismen to ward away
The terrors of the night if one's alone;
Or paint the vacant canvass of the day
With pictures warm and rich in company.

I say, most children like such toy things.
But as time steadies faltering childish hands
And guides them on to sterner tasks than play,
The cuddly bear and flannel elephant
Are laid aside upon a closet shelf,
Or boxed with tiny shoes and baby clothes
In darkened attics where the rain spats down
And taps its little melancholy croon;
And soft gray dust like an enshrouding cloak
Falls with the days and nights, to shut them off;
And play-days are but faint remembered things.

I loved them once . . . but I have seen a room
Where nothing ever happened; where a dog,
A sprawly spotted little gingham dog,
Was more than any dog should ever be
To one too old to cling to childish things.

The room, it was a gentle quiet place
High up above the city's turgid roar,
With shaded lights of warm and mellow glow.
It seemed to stretch its hands invitingly,
To beg that you come in and think and rest,
And know the wisdom and the solace of
The monumental dead whose shrine it was.
For she who lived therein from far-flung lands
Had gleaned the riches and had plucked the fruit.
She knew the art—and well had practised it—
Of stern-jawed Beethoven and mighty Bach.
And there old bards and new, in rhymed verse
And strange free fancies met in wise discourse.
Upon the wall was hung a Paisley shawl,

The color of the last faint sunset's glow;
And on the shawl a curving scimitar,
The relic of a long-dead Tartar chief,
Would catch and bend the long rays of the light.

Upon the davenport, with legs askew,
(And always oddly out of place, you thought),
You saw a dog—a little gingham dog.
You wondered why she always had it there
In that same spot; as though its dull black eyes
Should note the winking of the city's lights
From that still shaded room six stories high;
Or, if it faced the door, as though its ears
Might catch the rhythm of her steps as she
Returned at night from solitary walks . . .
And once I asked her . . . In the corridor
Outside, I heard the tap of twinkling feet,
And bright young voices. One called, "Wait for me!"
The other answered, "Did you really think
That I should let you go alone, my dear?"
And then she looked at me, and smiled, and said,
"That's why I keep him always there . . . You see
So very often I sit here alone;
And if I have him here beside me, I
Somehow just never feel the silence so.
I've no one else to talk to now, you know . . ."
And I said nothing. . .

Sometimes as we sat,
She'd take the dog and set it on her lap,
And smooth the wrinkled little gingham face,
Or loop the soft big ears about its head,
And let her hands play on the lifeless thing
As though it were the child she'd never borne,
The lover she had never loved . . . And when
I rose to leave, it often seemed to me
That she would clasp it to her closer then;
As though somehow my going sent her back
So many years to childish playtime hours;
As though, when shadows fell in dreary lengths,
As once she used to do when bedtime came,
And she must climb the stairs and face the dark,
She'd take along the little toy dog,
And feel not quite defenceless and alone.

And so it is I say I do not like
Small gingham dogs. I always see that room
With all its grace and still-born muted charm,
And then I see the dog, and her slim hands
Caressing it, and hear the wistful sigh
Of all she never said; and all the sweet
Things—all the foolish tender things
That should have happened in that silent room
Have found their being somehow in the dog.