

JACK IN THE BOX

By Dorothy Piper

The make-shift curtains closed jerkily, but not before a kindergartner dodged through, squinting into the darkness, completely unaware of the three-foot drop immediately in front of him. One of the curtain-pullers leaned out and yanked him back to safety. Still waving and smiling, the little one disappeared behind the blue material. There was no sound on stage for a while, and the audience began whispering and laughing, then hidden but noisy scampering on stage told Traci that her 19 first-graders were taking their places. Her class would be the last performers in the Christmas concert.

“Are you all right, Jack?” she whispered into her walkie-talkie.

Silence.

“Turn on your microphone, Jack,” she urged.

A timid “Got it, miss,” answered her.

“Just sit still up there, and do your best. Okay?”

“Yes, miss.”

Ian, the art teacher, who sat next to her, fingers poised over the tape recorder, whispered “Ready?” Traci gulped and nodded.

“Please, *please* God, don’t let anything go wrong,” she prayed.

So many things had gone wrong in the few weeks since she’d started teaching at this private school: misunderstandings over rules, nasty notes from parents after she had made a typo in one of her letters – it *was* a typo. Of course she knew how to spell ‘pigeon’ – and she’d had trouble getting to school on time. On top of that, there was Jack. Clumsy, noisy, ever-eager to please Jack with his inability to sit still and his impish grin that made him her favorite. She knew she shouldn’t have

favorites but he reminded her so much of her nephew. No, it wasn't Jack. It was Jack's viper-tongued mother. Traci had clashed with some of the other mothers but they hadn't reduced her to tears, made her feel stupid, a complete dummy, the way Jack's mother had.

The curtains swung open to reveal her class. The front row of six, mostly boys, knelt on stage. They waved silver stars, tinsel wrapped around their foreheads. Already some of the makeshift headdresses were coming apart and one little urchin crossed his eyes as he tried to blow a loose end into the air. Behind the star-wavers stood six fidgeting girls dressed in yellow. The center girl – the most restless of them all – caught everyone's eye in her gold, voluminous tulle creation that sparkled with light-catching sequins, and behind them were six boys and girls in simple white tunics, paper flames sprouting from their heads. They were supposed to be candles and they stood on the bottom level of stage bleachers, so that they could be seen.

And Jack? Jack was squatting in a big box right at the top of the bleachers. The box had been turned on its side and the flaps tucked in, presenting a cardboard cave to the audience. Tap lights had been fixed around the inside of the box and a decorators' ladder, right behind the bleachers, provided a small platform for the box to rest on. The ladder was duct-taped to the bleachers, and the box was taped to both, so it should be safe. During rehearsals Jack had been the only kid who'd had the nerve to climb up there but with Jack, who knew what he would do? If he leaned too much to one side, if he shuffled back too far... Traci trembled, thinking what *could* happen – and at what Jack's mother would do to her if her precious son tumbled. She crossed her fingers and prayed again.

Ian's finger pressed the power button and "*If I were a beautiful twinkling star, I'd shine on the darkest night,*" belted out. Two of the front line children sat motionless, but the other four waved their stars and tried to sing along in time to the recording. At the end of the verse, they moved aside. The yellow-clad girls stepped forward and joined in singing "*Jesus wants me for a sunbeam*". With the other little girls swaying behind her, the lead Sunbeam pranced to and fro, leaping and bowing to left and right, revealing her lace-adorned panties. She acknowledged each indulgent laugh from the

audience with a little smirk. When “...*I’ll be a sunbeam for him,*” rang out for the last time, she reluctantly sat down and the spotlight fixed on the Candles, each waving a battery-powered Christmas candle aloft.

Traci’s hands began to sweat and she rubbed them down her pants. So far, so good, but here came the test.

At her signal, all the lights – on stage and off – dimmed, and the tiny candles bobbed and tilted in the darkness. “*Jesus bids us shine*” began weakly, and Ian turned the volume up. After the words “*You in your small corner...*” he stopped the tape. Silence reigned for a few seconds. Then the box illuminated as Jack punched two of the taped-on round lights. He squirmed to reach more lights, but his knees extinguished the bottom ones and the box went black again. In a panic, he touched all the lights. They flickered on briefly but they hadn’t been hit hard enough.

“Sorry, miss.” Jack’s tear-laden cry carried sibilantly through the microphone.

“It’s all right, Jack. Calm down, dear,” soothed Traci. “Sing your line.”

“*And I in mine*” wept Jack.

Sympathetic laughter rippled round the hall. That wasn’t the effect Traci wanted.

Ian jabbed the button again and the singers plunged into the second verse. Traci sank down onto her chair, disappointed and trembling. Her smooth, dark hair curtained her hands as she sunk her face into her palms. It was her fault. She had expected too much of Jack. The temptation to redeem her standing by pulling off this stunt had been too great. Oh, lead me not into temptation.... Well, she hadn’t needed any leading. She’d embraced it willingly. She hadn’t been thinking about Jack at all. Oh, Jack! She was so sorry.

When the singers reached “*You in your small corner...*” there was another pause. It was a much longer pause. Traci peeped unwillingly through her fingers. Slowly, as Jack tapped each of the round lights, the box lit up. He sat quietly, arms stretched above his head, eyes closed in sheer contentment. The lights gleamed on his face and then, sweetly, unbelievably sweetly, Jack sang “*And I in mine.*”

There was no laughter this time, or any kind of sound, until the clapping started.

The lights came back on and conversation buzzed as Traci's class formed a semi-circle on stage watching Jack climb down from his perch. He ignored the hands stretched out to him and nearly came a cropper when he jumped down two levels of the bleachers at once. The children filed slowly off stage, not looking where they were going, seeking the wave, the call, that told them where their parents had positioned themselves. Jack seemed to glide off. How? Then it dawned. So help her, the little tyke was wearing Heeleys. And he'd jumped down from the bleachers. He could've broken his leg... or his neck.

Chairs scraped back and parents packed their tripods and cameras away. Some crept towards the exits, not waiting for the end of the Head's final address and prayers. Traci bowed her head and listened, but not hearing.

It had gone right after all. "Thank you, Jack," she breathed, blowing her nose into an already soggy tissue.

While the rows of chairs were cleared from the body of the hall, the teachers manned the tables set along the sides. Traci was grateful that her table was the furthest from the stage. She was still trembling from the ordeal and needed time to compose herself. She fiddled with the plates of cookies, set out rows of paper cups and piled paper napkins at strategic places where she thought there might be a spill. Ian had gone backstage to uncouple the box. What was she going to do with that? She could use a couple of the lights but ten of them? That had cost her forty dollars she didn't have. Oh well, it had been worth it.

Looking across the hall, she saw a mother making a beeline towards her, dragging a pouting Sunbeam. And, from another corner, came Jack and his mother. It looked as if both pairs were going to reach her simultaneously until the Sunbeam's mother saw Jack and put on a spurt.

Traci didn't wait for Mrs. Sunbeam to open the conversation.

"What's the matter?"

“I wanted to be in the box,” pouted the girl.

“She’d have made a much better job of it,” agreed her mother.

“But you were our sunbeam!” gasped Traci. There was no pleasing some people. “What would we have done without your dance? And that beautiful dress!”

Mrs. Sunbeam preened. “It took me hours!” and she launched into a description of how much material it had taken, the number of sequins she’d sown on and how much it had cost. “And, of course, Caitlin practiced that dance over and over for hours, making sure she got it right.”

Jack and his mother were waiting patiently. How could Traci stem Mrs. Sunbeam’s flow, without upsetting her?

“Now, if she could just put as much dedication into writing her bs and ds the right way round,” she said, laughing, to soften the criticism.

The sunbeam and her mother looked at each other, in surprise.

“We’re working on it. We’re getting there,” retorted Mrs. Sunbeam. “Oh, look, Caitlin. There’s Jordan’s mother, talking to the Head. Let’s go show her your dress.”

They stomped away and Jack’s mother moved forward. Traci’s hands trembled as she nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and forced a smile.

“H-hello,” she ventured, her voice suddenly husky.

Jack’s mother was looking down at Jack. She seemed to be having trouble deciding what to say, then she darted a quick glance at Traci, before looking down again.

“M-my Jack,” she started. Her chin quivered, and Traci saw her gulp. “M-my Jack,” she repeated, before blurting “My Jack’s n-never been a s-s-star before. Y-you made him a star!” She looked straight at Traci, her eyes bright with proud tears. One escaped and she turned to dab it away. Traci pressed her lips together, trying to stop them trembling, trying to think of something to say, but her words were impeded by the lump in her throat. She felt a tear slide down her cheek and dashed it away with the back of her hand. Swallowing hard, she managed “A-and he didn’t let me down.”

The two women exchanged watery smiles. Traci grabbed one of the paper napkins and blew hard into it. "I could do with one of those," Jack's mother confessed.

"Mom, mom," Jack tugged at his mother's free hand, while she repaired her makeup. "Don't forget to ask..."

"No, you ask, Jack."

Jack looked up anxiously at Traci. "Please, miss. Please. Can I have the box?"

Traci hadn't expected the request. She spread her hands. "Yes, if you want it, but..."

"And the lights?"

"I'll pay you for the lights," his mother butted in.

"You don't have to do that. But how are you going to get it home? It's heavy and awkward."

Traci looked around for Ian. He was maneuvering his way towards them, the box on his shoulder.

"What are we going to do with this?" he asked, setting it down on the floor.

"I'm giving it to Jack."

Jack's face lit up and he darted towards the box. "If you cut a hole in the bottom I can put my legs through, an' holes in the side so's I can put out my hands. Like Sponge Bob."

Ian grinned and pulled out his penknife.

"Just where do you want these holes?"

Teacher and parent watched as Ian cut holes and helped the eager youngster inside.

"Thank you. Thank you so much." Jack's mother stretched a tentative hand towards Traci.

Traci took the hand and squeezed it. "You're welcome."

They smiled at each other, friends now, no longer at loggerheads, then Jack started marching towards the exit. Other children ran towards him.

"Is that yours, Jack?"

"Hey! Giss a go!"

“I don’t know how he’s going to get in the car,” Jack’s mother said. “I’d better go help him.

Thank you again.”

Traci and Ian watched them leave.

“Well, that went off pretty well,” Ian said. “What a surprise!”

Traci rubbed her chin. “Yes, it did. But, come to think of it, what d’you expect from a jack-in-the-box?”