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1.
The Old-Fashioned Family and the Beastly Baby



Once upon a time there was a family named Willoughby; an old-fashioned type of family, with four children.

The eldest was a boy named Timothy; he was twelve. Barnaby and Barnaby were ten-year-old twins. No one could tell them apart, and it was even more confusing because they had the same name; so they were known as Barnaby A and Barnaby B. Most people, including their parents, shortened this to A and B, and many were unaware that the twins even *had* names.

There was also a girl, a timid, pretty little thing with glasses and a fringe. She was the youngest, just six and a half, and her name was Jane.

They lived in a tall, thin house in an ordinary city and they did the kinds of things that children in old-fashioned stories do. They went to school and to the seashore. They had birthday parties. Occasionally they were taken to the circus or the zoo, although they did not care much for either, except for the elephants.

Their father, an impatient and irascible man, went to work at a bank each day, carrying a briefcase and an umbrella even if it was not raining. Their mother, who was indolent and ill-tempered, did not go to work. Wearing a pearl necklace, she grudgingly prepared the meals. Once she had read a book but found it distasteful because it contained adjectives. Occasionally she glanced at a magazine.

The Willoughby parents frequently forgot that they had children and became quite irritable when they were reminded of it. Tim, the eldest, had a heart of gold, as many old-fashioned boys do, but he hid it behind a somewhat bossy exterior. It was Tim who decided what the children would do: what games they would play ("We'll have a game of chess now,"

he occasionally said, "and the rules are that only boys can play, and the girl will serve biscuits each time a pawn is captured"); how they would behave in church ("Kneel nicely and keep a pleasant look on your face, but think only about elephants," he told them once); whether or not they would eat what their mother had cooked ("We do *not* like this," he might announce, and they would all put down their forks and refuse to open their mouths, even if they were very, very hungry).

Once, his sister whispered to him privately, after a dinner they had refused to eat, "I liked it."

But Tim glared at her and replied, "It was stuffed cabbage. You are not allowed to like stuffed cabbage."

"All right," Jane said with a sigh. She went to bed hungry and dreamt, as she often did, about becoming older and more self-assured so that one day she could play whatever game she liked or eat any food she chose.

Their lives proceeded in exactly the way lives proceed in old-fashioned stories.

One day they even found a baby on their doorstep. This happens quite often in old-fashioned stories. The Bobbsey Twins, for example, found a baby on their doorstep once. But it had never happened to

the Willoughbys before. The baby was in a wicker basket and wearing a pink jumper that had a note attached to it with a safety pin.

"I wonder why Father didn't notice it when he left for work," Barnaby A said, looking down at the basket, which was blocking the front steps to their house when the four children set out one morning to take a walk in the nearby park.

"Father is oblivious – you know that," Tim pointed out. "He steps over any obstructions. I expect he poked it aside." They all looked down at the basket and at the baby, which was sound asleep.

They pictured their father taking a high step over it after moving it slightly out of his way with his furled black umbrella.

"We could leave it out for the bin men," Barnaby B suggested. "If you take one handle, A, and I take the other, I believe we could get it down the stairs without much trouble. Are babies heavy?"

"Please, could we read the note?" asked Jane, trying to use the self-assured voice that she practised in secret.

The note was folded over so that the writing could not be seen.

"I don't think it's necessary," Tim replied.

"I believe we should," Barnaby B said. "It could possibly say something important."

"Perhaps there is a reward for finding the baby," Barnaby A suggested. "Or it might be a ransom note."

"You dolt!" Tim said to him. "Ransom notes are sent by the ones who *have* the baby."

"Maybe we could send one, then," said Barnaby A.

"Perhaps it says the baby's name," said Jane. Jane was very interested in names because she had always felt she had an inadequate one, with too few syllables. "I would like to know its name."

The baby stirred and opened its eyes.

"I suppose the note might give instructions about babies," Tim said, peering down at it. "It might say where to put them if you find one."

The baby began to whimper and then very quickly the whimper changed to a yowl.

"Or," said Barnaby B, holding his ears, "how to keep them from screeching."

"If the note doesn't say the name, may I name it?" Jane asked.

"What would you name it?" Barnaby A asked with interest.

Jane frowned. "Something with three syllables, I

think," she said. "Babies deserve three syllables."

"Brittany?" Barnaby A asked.

"Possibly," Jane replied.

"Madonna?" Barnaby B suggested.

"No," Jane said. "Taffeta, I think."

By now the baby was waving its fists, kicking its chubby legs and crying loudly. The Willoughbys' cat appeared at the front door, gazed briefly down at the basket, twitched its whiskers and then dashed back inside as if it was made nervous by the sound. The baby *did* sound a bit like a yowling kitten; perhaps that was why.

Tim finally reached down past the flailing little fists and unpinned the note. He read it silently. "The usual," he said to the others. "Pathetic. Just what I expected."

He read it aloud to them. "'I chose this house because it looks as if a happy, loving family lives here, prosperous enough to feed another child. I am very poor, alas. I have fallen on hard times and cannot care for my dear baby. Please be good to her.'"

"Take that handle, twins," Tim said to his brothers. He took hold of the opposite handle. "Jane, you carry the note. We'll take the whole disgusting thing inside."

Jane took the folded note and followed behind her

brothers, who picked up the basket, carried it into the front hall of the house and put it down there on an Oriental rug. The noise coming from the baby was not insignificant.

Their mother, frowning, opened the door at the end of the long hall. She emerged from the kitchen. "Whatever is that noise?" she asked. "I am trying to remember the ingredients for shepherd's pie and I cannot hear myself think."

"Oh, someone has left a beastly baby on our front steps," Tim told her.

"My goodness, we don't want a baby!" their mother said, coming forward to take a look. "I don't like the feel of this at all."

"I'd like to keep it," Jane said in a small voice. "I think it's cute."

"No, it's not cute," Barnaby A said, looking down at it.

"Not cute at all," Barnaby B agreed.

"It has curls," Jane pointed out.

Their mother peered at the baby and then reached towards the basket of beige knitting that she kept on a hall table. She removed a small pair of gold-plated scissors and snipped them open and closed several times, thoughtfully. Then she leant over the basket

and used the scissors.

"Now it doesn't have curls," she pointed out, and put the scissors away.

Jane stared at the baby. Suddenly it stopped crying and stared back at her with wide eyes. "Oh, dear. It isn't cute without curls," Jane said. "I suppose I don't want it anymore."

"Take it somewhere else, children," their mother said, turning back towardss the kitchen. "Dispose of it. I'm busy with a shepherd's pie."

The four children lugged the basket back outside. They thought. They discussed the problem. It was Barnaby A, actually, who came up with a plan, which he explained to Tim, since Tim made all the decisions for the group.

"Fetch the wheelbarrow," Tim commanded.

The twins got the wheelbarrow from where it was kept, along with their bikes, under the steps of the house. The boys put the basket inside the wheelbarrow while their sister watched. Then, taking turns at pushing the wheelbarrow, they transported the baby in its basket down the road, across the road (waiting carefully for the light), and around the corner, going some distance further until, reaching their destination, they finally stopped in front of a very forbid-

ding house that was known as the Melanoff mansion. The gentleman who lived there was a millionaire. Maybe even a billionaire. But he never came out. He stayed inside, with the mouldy curtains drawn, counting his money and feeling hostile. As with Scrooge from another old-fashioned story, tragic events in his past had caused him to lose interest in life.

The mansion was much larger than the other houses in the area, but it was unkempt. A wrought-iron fence around its garden was tilted and twisted in places, and the garden itself was cluttered with pieces of discarded furniture. Some of the windows were broken and boarded over, and a thin cat scratched itself and meowed on the porch.

"Wait, A," said Tim, when his brother began to push open the front gate. "I need to add to the note." He held his hand out to Jane, who had placed the folded paper carefully in the pocket of her ruffled frock, and she gave it to him.

"Pencil," Tim demanded, and one of the twins – for all the children were accustomed to carrying whatever Tim might need and demand – handed him a pencil.

Barnaby B turned so that Tim could use his back for a table.

"Could you tell what I wrote, B?" Tim asked his brother when he had finished.

"No. It felt like scribbles."

"You must train yourself better," Tim pointed out. "If my back had been the table, I would be able to recite each word and also the punctuation. Practise when you have a chance." Barnaby B nodded.

"You, too, A," Tim said, looking at the other twin.

"I will," Barnaby A promised.

"So will I," offered Jane.

"No. You needn't, because you are a girl. You will never be called upon for important work," Tim told her.

Jane began to cry a little, but very quietly, so that no one would notice. She vowed, through her quiet little tears, that one day she would prove Tim wrong.

"Here is what I wrote," Tim told them, holding up the note. He read it aloud. "'P.S. If there is any reward to be had for this beastly baby, it should go to the Willoughbys.'"

The other children nodded. They thought the P.S. was a good idea.

"You might say must instead of should," Barnaby B proposed.

"Good idea, B. Turn around."

Barnaby B turned and Tim used his back for a table again, rubbing out one word and replacing it with the other, which Barnaby B could feel him underline. Then Tim read it aloud: "'If there is any reward to be had for this beastly baby, it *must* go to the Willoughbys.'"

He refolded the note and leant down towards the basket. Then he paused.

"Turn again, B," he commanded. After his brother had turned to make a table of his back one more time, Tim wrote an additional sentence. He folded the note and pinned it to the baby's jumper.

"Get the gate, Jane," Tim said, and she pulled it open. "Now, one, two, three: HOIST!" Together the boys lifted the basket containing the baby from the wheelbarrow. They carried it to the sagging, dusty porch of the mansion and left it there.

The Willoughbys walked home.

"What did you add to the note at the end, Tim?" Barnaby A asked.

"Another P.S."

"What did it say, Tim?" asked Barnaby B.

"It said, 'Her name is Ruth.'"

Jane pouted. "Why?" she asked.

"Because," Tim said with a sly smile, "we are the ruthless Willoughbys."