

Mary Howitt (1799-1888)

1 *The Boy of Heaven*

One summer eve, seven little boys
Were playing at the ball,
Seven little boys so beautiful,
Beside a castle wall.

And, whilst they played, another came, 5
And stood among them there;
A little boy, with gentle eyes
And thick and curling hair.

The clothes he on his body wore
Were linen fine and white; 10
The girdle that was round his waist
Was like the morning light.

A little while he looked on them,
Looked lovingly, and smiled,
When unto him the eldest said, 15
“Whence comest thou, fair child?”

“Art thou the son of some great king,
And in a hidden place
Hast been concealed; for until now
I never saw thy face? 20

“Dost dwell among the lonely hills,
Or in the forest low;
Or dost thou chase the running deer,
A hunter with thy bow?

“And tell us what wild, woodland name 25
Have they unto thee given?”
“They called me Willie,” said he, “on earth;
They call me so in heaven.

“My father with King David dwells,
In the land of heaven dwells he; 30
And my gentle mother, meek and mild,
Sits at the Virgin’s knee.

“Seven years ago to heaven we went;
’T was in the winter chill,
When icy cold the winds did blow, 35
And mists were on the hill.

“But, when we reached the land of heaven,
’T was like a summer’s day;
The skies were blue, and fragrant flowers
All round about us lay. 40

“The land of heaven is beautiful:
There no cold wind doth blow;
And fairer apples than e’er ye saw
Within its gardens grow.

“I’ve seen the patriarchs face to face; 45
The wise of every land;
And with the heavenly little ones
Have wandered, hand in hand,

“Down by the golden streams of life,
All through the forests old, 50
And o’er the boundless hills of heaven,
The sheep of God’s own fold.”

Then up and spoke a little boy,
The youngest of the seven:
“My mother is dead, so let me go 55
With thee, dear child, to heaven.

“My mother is dead, and my father loves
His dogs far more than me;
No one would miss me if I went:
Oh, let me go with thee! 60

“No one would miss me if I went:

Dame Bertha loves me not;
And for old crabbed Hildebrand
I do not care a jot.”

“Alas!” the heavenly child replied, 65
“That home thou canst not win,
If thou have an ill word on thy tongue,
Or in thy heart a sin.

“The way is long and wearisome,
Through peril great it lies: 70
With any sin upon thy soul
From earth thou couldst not rise.

“There are waters deep and wild to pass;
And who hath a load of sin,
Like the heavy rock that will not float, 75
Is tumbled headlong in.

“There are red and raging fires to pass;
And like the iron stone
Is sin; red-hot as a burning share,
It scorcheth to the bone. 80

“Darest go with me? Wilt try the path,
Now thou its pain dost know?”
The motherless boy turned round and wept,
And said, “I dare not go.”

The boy of heaven to a chamber came 85
Ere rosy day was peeping,
And marveled if his sister 't were
Who on the ground lay sleeping.

She used to have a bed of down,
And silken curtains bright; 90
But he knew her by her dainty foot,
And little hand so white;

He knew her by the long fair hair
That on her shoulders lay,

Though the pleasant things about the room 95
Were taken all away.

And "Oh!" sighed he, "my sister dear,
Art thou left all alone?"
Just then she spoke in troubled dreams,
And made a gentle moan. 100

"They have ta'en from me my bed of down,
And given me straw instead;
They have ta'en from me the wheaten cakes,
And given me barley bread.

"The pearls which my dear mother wore 105
They have ta'en from me away,
And the little book with silver clasps
Wherefrom I learned to pray.

"My heart is grown as heavy as lead,
And pale and thin my cheek; 110
I sit in corners of the house,
And hardly dare to speak.

"For they are stern, and love me not;
No gentle hearts are here.
I wish I were in heaven above, 115
With my own brother dear!"

Then Willie bent down unto the ground,
And knelt upon his knee;
He breathed heaven's breath upon her lips,
And gave her kisses three. 120

And tenderly he looked on her,
And yet he looked not long,
Ere he spoke three words into her ear,
Three awful words and strong.

Then Annie rose from her bed of straw 125
A joyful angel bright,
And the chamber late so dark and drear

Was full of heavenly light.

Amazed she looked one moment's space,

One moment made a stand;

130

But she knew it all in a moment more,

And away to the heavenly land,

Like the morning lark when it rises up,

Went they two hand in hand.

1830

(From *Ballads and Other Poems*. London, 1847)