

Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845)

1 *The Babes in the Wood; or, the Norfolk Tragedy*

An old song to a new tune.

When we were all little and good, —
A long time ago, I'm afraid, Miss —
We were told of the Babes in the Wood
By their false, cruel Uncle betray'd, Miss;
Their Pa was a Squire, or a Knight; 5
In Norfolk, I think, his estate lay —
That is, if I recollect right,
For I've not read the history lately.

Rum ti, etc.

Their Pa and their Ma being seized
With a tiresome complaint, which, in some seasons, 10
People are apt to be seized
With, who're not on their guard against plum-seasons,
Their medical man shook his head,
As he could not get well to the root of it;
And the Babes stood on each side the bed, 15
While their Uncle, he stood at the foot of it.

“Oh, Brother!” their Ma whisper'd, faint
And low, for breath seeming to labor, “Who'd
Think that this horrid complaint,
That's been going about in the neighborhood, 20
Thus should attack me, — nay, more,
My poor husband besides, — and so fall on him!
Bringing us so near to Death's door
That we can't avoid making a call on him!

“Now, think, 'tis your sister invokes 25
Your aid, and the last word she says is,
Be kind to those dear little folks
When our toes are turned up to the daisies! —
By the servants don't let them be snubb'd, —
Let Jane have her fruit and her custard, — 30
And mind Johnny's chilblains are rubb'd
Well with Whitehead's best essence of mustard.

“You know they’ll be pretty well off in
Respect to what’s called ‘worldly gear,’
For John, when his Pa’s in his coffin, 35
Comes in to three hundred a-year;
And Jane’s to have five hundred pound
On her marriage paid down, ev’ry penny,
So you’ll own a worse match might be found,
Any day in the week, than our Jenny!” 40

Here the Uncle pretended to cry,
And, like an old thorough-paced rogue, he
Put his handkerchief up to his eye,
And devoted himself to old Bogey
If he did not make matters all right, 45
And said, should he covet their riches,
He “wished the old Gentleman might
Fly away with him, body and breeches!”

No sooner, however, were they
Put to bed with a spade by the sexton, 50
Than he carried the darlings away
Out of that parish into the next one,
Giving out he should take them to town,
And select the best school in the nation,
That John might not grow a clown, 55
But receive a genteel education.

“Greek and Latin old twaddle I call!”
Says he, “While his mind’s ductile and plastic,
I’ll place him at Dotheboys Hall,
Where he’ll learn all that’s new and gymnastic. 60
While Jane, as, when girls have the dumps,
Fortune-hunters, by scores, to entrap ’em rise,
Shall go to those worthy old frumps,
The two Misses Tickler of Clapham Rise!”

Having thought on the How and the When 65
To get rid of his nephew and niece,
He sent for two ill-looking men,
And he gave them five guineas a-piece. —
Says he, “Each of you take up a child

On the crupper, and when you have trotted 70
Some miles through that wood lone and wild,
Take your knife out and cut its carotid!"

"Done" and "done" is pronounced on each side,
While the poor little dears are delighted
To think they a-cock-horse shall ride, 75
And are not in the least degree frightened;
They say their "Ta! Ta!" as they start,
And they prattle so nice on their journey,
That the rogues themselves wish to their heart
They could finish the job by attorney. 80

Nay, one was so taken aback
By seeing such spirit and life in them,
That he fairly exclaim'd, "I say, Jack,
I'm blow'd if I *can* put a knife in them!"
"Pooh!" says his pal, "you great dunce! 85
You've pouch'd the good gentleman's money,
So out with your whinger at once,
And scrag Jane, while I spiflicate Johnny."

He refused, and harsh language ensued,
Which ended at length in a duel, 90
When he that was mildest in mood
Gave the truculent rascal his gruel;
The Babes quake with hunger and fear,
While the ruffian his dead comrade, Jack, buries;
Then he cries, "Loves, amuse yourselves here 95
With the hips, and the haws, and the blackberries!"

"I'll be back in a couple of shakes;
So don't, dears, be quivering and quaking,
I'm going to get you some cakes,
And a nice butter'd roll that's a-baking!" 100
He rode off with a tear in his eye,
Which ran down his rough cheek, and wet it,
As he said to himself with a sigh,
"Pretty souls! — don't they wish they may get it!!"

From that moment the Babes ne'er caught sight 105
Of the wretch who thus sought their undoing,

But pass'd all that day and that night
 In wandering about and "boo-hoo"-ing.
The night proved cold, dreary, and dark,
 So that, worn out with sighings and sobbings, 110
Next morn they were found stiff and stark,
 And stone-dead, by two little Cock-Robins.

These two little birds it sore grieves
 To see what so cruel a dodge I call,
They cover the bodies with leaves, 115
 An interment quite ornithological;
It might more expensive have been,
 But I doubt, though I've not been to see 'em,
If among those in all Kensal Green
 You could find a more neat Mausoleum. 120

Now, whatever your rogues may suppose,
 Conscience always makes restless their pillows,
And Justice, though blind, has a nose
 That sniffs out all conceal'd peccadilloes.
The wicked old Uncle, they say, 125
 In spite of his riot and revel,
Was hippish and qualmish all day,
 And dream't all night long of the d—l.

He grew gouty, dyspeptic, and sour,
 And his brow, once so smooth and so placid, 130
Fresh wrinkles acquired every hour,
 And whatever he swallow'd turn'd acid.
The neighbors thought all was not right,
 Scarcely one with him ventured to parley,
And Captain Swing came in the night, 135
 And burnt all his beans and his barley.

There was hardly a day but some fox
 Ran away with his geese and his ganders:
His wheat had the mildew, his flocks
 Took the rot, and his horses the glanders; 140
His daughters drank rum in their tea,
 His son, who had gone for a sailor,
Went down in a steamer at sea,
 And his wife ran away with a tailor!

It was clear he lay under a curse; 145
None would hold with him any communion,
Every day matters grew worse and worse,
Till they ended at length in The Union;
While his man being caught in some fact
(The particular crime I've forgotten), 150
When he came to be hanged for the act,
Split, and told the whole story to Cotton.

Understanding the matter was blown,
His employer became apprehensive
Of what, when 'twas more fully known, 155
Might ensue — he grew thoughtful and pensive;
He purchased some sugar-of-lead,
Took it home, popp'd it into his porridge,
Ate it up, and then took to his bed,
And so died in the workhouse at Norwich. 160

MORAL.

Ponder well now, dear Parents, each word
That I've wrote, and when Sirius rages
In the dog-days, don't be so absurd
As to blow yourselves out with Green-gages!
Of stone-fruits in general be shy, 165
And reflect it's a fact beyond question
That Grapes, when they're spelt with an *i*,
Promote anything else but digestion. —

When you set about making your will,
Which is commonly done when a body's ill, 170
Mind, and word it with caution and skill,
And avoid, if you can, any codicil!
When once you've appointed an heir
To the fortune you've made, or obtain'd, ere
You leave a reversion beware 175
Whom you place in contingent remainder!

Executors, Guardians, and all
Who have children to mind, don't ill-treat them,
Nor think that, because they are small

And weak, you may beat them, and cheat them; 180
Remember that "ill-gotten goods
Never thrive"; their possession's but cursory,
So never turn out in the woods
Little folks you should keep in the nursery.

Be sure he who does such base things 185
Will ne'er stifle Conscience's clamor;
His "riches will make themselves wings,"
And his property come to the hammer!
Then He, — and not those he bereaves,
Will have most cause for sighings and sobbings, 190
When he finds *himself* smother'd with leaves
(Of fat catalogues) heap'd up by Robins!

1842

(From *The Ingoldsby Legends or Mirth and Marvels* by Thomas
Ingoldsby, Esquire. From the Edinburgh Edition. New York:
Thomas Y. Crowell, n.d.)