

Little Benjamin

by Laura E. Richards



Justus de Gelder, Boys flying kites, 17th century

"Then is little Benjamin their ruler."

"I THINK the kitty wants to come in," said Mother Golden. "I hear him crying somewhere. Won't you go and let him in, Adam?"

Adam laid down his book and went out; the whole family looked up cheerfully, expecting to see Aladdin, the great Maltese cat, enter with his stately port. There was a pause; then Adam came back with a white, scared face, and looked at his father without speaking.

"What is the matter, my son?" asked Father Golden.

"Is Kitty hurt?" asked Mother Golden, anxiously.

"Was it that dog of Jackson's?" cried Lemuel, Mary, Ruth, and Joseph.

"The cat isn't there!" said Adam. "It's—it's a basket, father."

"A basket? What does the boy mean?"

"A long basket, with something white inside; and—it's crying!"

The boy had left the door open, and at this moment a sound came through it, a long, low, plaintive cry.

"My heart!" said Mother Golden; and she was out of the door in a flash.

"See there now!" said Father Golden, reprovingly. "Your mother's smarter than any of you to-day. Go and help her, some of you!"

The children tumbled headlong toward the door, but were met by Mother Golden returning, bearing in her strong arms a long basket, in which was indeed something white and fluffy that cried.

"A baby!" exclaimed Father Golden.

"A baby!" echoed Mary, Lemuel, Ruth, and Joseph.

"Well, I knew it was a baby," protested Adam; "but I didn't like to say so."

Mother Golden lifted the child out and held it in a certain way; the cries ceased, and the little creature nestled close against her and looked up in her face.

"My heart!" said Mother Golden again. "Come here, girls!"

The girls pressed forward eagerly; the boys hung back, and glanced at their father; these were women's matters.

"It's got hair!" cried Ruth, in rapture. "Mother! real hair, and it curls; see it curl!"

"Look at its little hands!" murmured Mary. "They're like pink shells, only soft. Oh! see it move them, Ruth!" She caught her sister's arm in a sudden movement of delight.

"Oh, mother, mayn't we keep it?" cried both girls at once.

Mother Golden was examining the baby's clothes.

"Cambric slip, fine enough, but not so terrible fine. Flannel blanket, machine-embroidered—stop! here's a note."

She opened a folded paper, and read a few words, written in a carefully rough hand.

"His mother is dead, his father a waif. Ask the woman with the kind eyes to take care of him, for Christ's sake."

"My heart!" said Mother Golden, again.

"It's a boy, then!" said Father Golden, brightening perceptibly. He came forward, the boys edging forward too, encouraged by another masculine presence.

"It's a boy, and a beauty!" said Mother Golden, wiping her eyes. "I never see a prettier child. Poor mother, to have to go and leave him. Father, what do you say?"

"It's for you to say, mother;" said Father Golden. "It's to you the child was sent."

"Do you suppose 'twas me that was meant? They might have mistaken the house."

"Don't talk foolishness!" said Father Golden. "The question is, what shall we do with it? There's places, a plenty, where foundlings have the best of bringing up; and you've got care enough, as it is, mother, without taking on any more."

"Oh! we could help!" cried Mary. "I could wash and dress it, I know I could, and I'd just love to."

"So could I!" said twelve-year-old Ruth. "We'd take turns, Mary and I. Do let's keep it, mother!"

"It's a great responsibility!" said Father Golden.

"Great Jemima!" said Mother Golden, with a sniff. "If I couldn't take the responsibility of a baby, I'd give up."

Father Golden's mind moved slowly, and while he was meditating a reply, his wife issued various commands, and went through some intricate feminine manoeuvres, with the effect of increased fluffiness on the baby's part. In five minutes she was feeding the child with warm milk from a spoon, and proclaiming that he ate "like a Major!"

The boys, gaining more and more confidence, were now close at her knee, and watched the process with eager eyes.

"He's swallowing like anything!" cried Lemuel. "I can see him do it with his throat, same as anybody."

"See him grab the spoon!" said Joseph. "My! ain't he strong? Can he talk, mother?"

"Joe, you chuckle-head!" said Adam, who was sixteen, and knew most things. "How can he talk, when he hasn't got any teeth?"

"Uncle 'Rastus hasn't got any teeth," retorted Joseph, "and he talks like a buzz-saw."

"Hush, Joseph!" said Mother Golden, reprovingly. "Your Uncle 'Rastus is a man of years."

"Yes, mother!" said Joseph, meekly.

"Baby *has* got a tooth, too, Adam!" Mother Golden continued, triumphantly. "I feel it pricking through the gum this minute. And he so good, and laughing like a sunflower! Did it hurt him, then, a little precious man? he shall have a nice ring to-morrow day, to bitey on, so he shall!"

"I suppose, then, he must be as much as a week old," hazarded Adam, in an offhand tone. "They are never born with teeth, are they, unless they are going to be Richard the Thirds, or something wonderful?"

"Perhaps he is!" said Ruth. "He looks wonderful enough for Richard the Twentieth, or anything."

But—"A week old!" said Mother Golden. "It's time there was a baby in this house, if you don't know better than that, Adam. About six months old I call him, and as pretty a child as ever I saw, even my own."

She looked half-defiantly at Father Golden, who returned the look with one of mild deprecation.

"I was only thinking of the care 'twould be to you, mother," he said. "We're bound to make inquiries, and report the case, and so forth; but if nothing comes of that, we might keep the child for a spell, and see how things turn out."

"That's what I was thinking!" said Mother Golden, eagerly. "I was thinking anyway, Joel, 'twould be best to keep him through his teething and stomach troubles, and give him a good start in the way of proper food and nursing. At them homes and nurseries, they mean well, but the most of them's young, and they *don't* understand a child's stomach. It's experience they need, not good-will, I'm well aware. Of course, when Baby begun to be a boy, things might be different. You work hard enough as it is, father, and there's places, no doubt, could do better for him, maybe, than what we could. But—well, seeing whose name he come in, I *do* feel to see him through his teething."

"Children, what do you say?" asked Father Golden. "You're old enough to have your opinion, even the youngest of you."

"Oh, keep him! keep him!" clamored the three younger children.

Adam and Lemuel exchanged a glance of grave inquiry.

"I guess he'd better stay, father!" said Adam.

"I think so, too!" said Lemuel; and both gave something like a sigh of relief.

"Then that's settled," said Father Golden, "saying and supposing that no objection turns up. Next thing is, what shall we call this child?"

All eyes were fixed on the baby, who, now full of warm milk, sat throned on Mother Golden's knee, blinking content.

It was a pretty picture: the rosy, dimpled creature, the yellow floss ruffled all over his head, his absurd little mouth open in a beaming smile; beaming above him, Mother Golden's placid face in its frame of silver hair; fronting them, Father Golden in his big leather chair, solid, comfortable, benevolent; and the five children, their honest, sober faces lighted up with unusual excitement. A pleasant, homelike picture. Nothing remarkable in the way of setting; the room, with its stuffed chairs, its tidies, and cabinet organ, was

only unlike other such rooms from the fact that Mother Golden habitually sat in it; she could keep even haircloth from being commonplace. But now, all the light in the room seemed to centre on the yellow flossy curls against her breast.

"A-goo!" said the baby, in a winning gurgle.

"He says his name's Goo!" announced Joseph.

"Don't be a chuckle-head, Joe!" said Adam. "What was the name on the paper, mother?"

"It said 'his father is a Waif;' but I don't take that to be a Christian name. Surname, more likely, shouldn't you say, father?"

"Not a Christian name, certainly," said Father Golden. "Not much of a name anyhow, 'pears to me. We'd better give the child a suitable name, mother, saying and supposing no objection turns up. Coming into a Christian family, let him have Christian baptism, I say."

"Oh, call him Arthur!"

"Bill!"

"Richard!"

"Charlie!"

"Reginald!" cried the children in chorus.

"I do love a Bible name!" said Mother Golden, pensively. "It gives a child a good start, so to say, and makes him think when he hears himself named, or ought so to do. All our own children has Bible names, father; don't let us cut the little stranger off from his privilege."

"But Bible names are so ugly!" objected Lemuel, who was sensitive, and suffered under his own cognomen.

"Son," said Father Golden, "your mother chooses the names in this family."

"Yes, father!" said Lemuel.

"Lemuel, dear, you was named for a king!" said Mother Golden. "He was a good boy to his mother, and so are you. Bring the Bible, and let us see what it opens at. Joseph, you are the youngest, you shall open it."

Joseph opened the great brown leather Bible, and closing his eyes, laid his hand on the page; then looking down, he read:

"There is little Benjamin their ruler, and the princes of Judah their council: the princes of Zebulun and the princes of Nephtali."

"Zebulun and Nephtali are outlandish-sounding names," said Mother Golden.

"I never knew but one Nephtali, and he squinted. Benjamin shall be this child's name. Little Benjamin: the Lord bless and keep him!"

"Amen!" said Father Golden.

PART II.

"Father, may I come in, if you are not busy?"

It was Mary who spoke; Mary, the dear eldest daughter, now a woman grown, grave and mild, trying hard to fill the place left empty these two years, since Mother Golden went smiling out of life.

Father Golden looked up from his book; he was an old man now, but his eyes were still young and kind.

"What is it, daughter Mary?"

"The same old story, father dear; Benny in mischief again. This time he has rubbed soot on all the door-handles, and the whole house is black with it. I hate to trouble you, father, but I expect you'll have to speak to him. I do love the child so, I'm not strict enough—I'm ashamed to say it, but they all think so, and I know it's true—and Adam is too strict."

"Yes, Adam is too strict," said Father Golden. He looked at a portrait that stood on his desk, a framed photograph of Mother Golden.

"I'll speak to the child, Mary," he said. "I'll see that this does not happen again. What is it, Ruthie?"

"I was looking for Mary, father. I wanted—oh, Mary! what shall I do with Benny? he has tied Rover and the cat together by their tails, and they are rushing all about the garden almost crazy. I must finish this work, so I can't attend to it. He says he is playing Samson. I wish you would speak to him, father."

"I will do so, Ruth, I will do so. Don't be distressed, my daughter."

"But he is so naughty, father! he is so different from the other boys. Joe never used to play such tricks when he was little."

"The spring vacation will be over soon now, Ruth," said Sister Mary. "He is always better when he is at work, and there is so little for a boy to do just at this time of year."

"I left Joe trying to catch the poor creatures," said Ruth. "Here he comes now."

Joe, a tall lad of seventeen, entered with a face of tragedy.

"Any harm done, Joseph?" asked Father Golden, glancing at the portrait on his desk.

"It's that kid again, father!" said Joe. "Poor old Rover—"

"Father knows about that, Joe!" said Mary, gently.

"Did you get them apart?" cried Ruth.

"Yes, I did, but not till they had smashed most of the glass in the kitchen windows, and trampled all over Mary's geraniums. Something has got to be done about that youngster, father. He's getting to be a perfect nuisance."

"I am thinking of doing something about him, son Joseph," said Father Golden. "Are your brothers in the house?"

"I think I heard them come in just now, sir. Do you want to see them?"

Apparently Adam and Lemuel wanted to see their father, for they appeared in the doorway at this moment: quiet-looking men, with grave, "set" faces; the hair already beginning to edge away from their temples.

"You are back early from the office, boys!" said Father Golden.

"We came as soon as we got the message," said Adam. "I hope nothing is wrong, father."

"What message, Adam?"

"Didn't you send for us? Benny came running in, all out of breath, and said you wished to see us at once. If he has been playing tricks again—"

Adam's grave face darkened into sternness. The trick was too evident.

"Something must be done about that boy, father!" he said. "He is the torment of the whole family."

"No one can live a day in peace!" said Lemuel.

"No dumb creature's life is safe!" said Joe.

"He breaks everything he lays hands on," said Ruth, "and he won't keep his hands off anything."

"You were all little once, boys!" said Mary.

"We never behaved in this kind of way!" said the brothers, sedate from their cradles. "Something must be done!"

"You are right," said Father Golden. "Something must be done."

Glancing once more at the portrait of Mother Golden, he turned and faced his children with grave looks.

"Sit down, sons and daughters!" said the old man. "I have something to say to you."

The young people obeyed, wondering, but not questioning. Father Golden was head of the house.

"You all come to me," said Father Golden, "with complaints of little Benjamin. It is singular that you should come to-day, for I have been waiting for this day to speak to you about the child myself."

He paused for a moment; then added, weighing his words slowly, as was his wont when much in earnest, "Ten years ago to-day, that child was left on our door-step."

The brothers and sisters uttered an exclamation, half surprised, half acquiescent.

"It doesn't seem so long!" said Adam.

"It seems longer!" said Mary.

"I keep forgetting he came that way!" murmured Joe.

"I felt doubtful about taking him in," Father Golden went on. "But your mother wished it; you all wished it. We decided to keep him for a spell, and give him a good start in life, and we have kept him till now."

"Of course we have kept him!" said Ruth.

"Naturally!" said Lemuel.

Adam and Mary said nothing, but looked earnestly at their father.

"Little Benjamin is now ten years old, more or less," said Father Golden. "You are men and women grown; even Joseph is seventeen. Your mother has entered into the rest that is reserved for the people of God, and I am looking forward in the hope that, not through any merit of mine, but the merciful grace of God, I may soon be called to join her. Adam and Lemuel, you are settled in the business, and looking forward to making homes of your own with worthy young women. Joseph is going to college, which is a new thing in our family, but one I approve, seeing his faculty appears to lie that way. Ruth will make a first-rate dressmaker, I am told by those who know. Mary—"

His quiet voice faltered. Mary took his hand and kissed it passionately; a sob broke from her, and she turned her face away from the brothers and sister who loved but did not understand her. They looked at her with grave compassion, but no one would have thought of interrupting Father Golden.

"Mary, you are the home-maker," the old man went on. "I hope that when I am gone this home will still be here, with you at the head of it. You are your mother's own daughter; there is no more to say." He was silent for a time, and then continued.

"There remains little Benjamin, a child of ten years. He is no kin to us; an orphan, or as good as one; no person has ever claimed him, or ever will. The time has come to decide what shall be done with the child."

Again he paused, and looked around. The serious young faces were all intent upon him; in some, the intentness seemed deepening into trouble, but no one spoke or moved.

"We have done all that we undertook to do for him, that night we took him in, and more. We have brought him—I should say your mother brought him—through his sickly days; we 'most lost him, you remember, when he was two years old, with the croup—and he is now a healthy, hearty child, and will likely make a strong man. He has been well treated, well fed and clothed, maybe better than he would have been by his own parents if so't had been. He is turning out wild and mischievous, though he has a good heart, none better; and you all, except Mary, come to me with complaints of him.

"Now, this thing has gone far enough. One of two things: either this boy is to be sent away to some institution, to take his place among other orphans and foundlings, or—he must be one of you for now and always, to share alike

with you while I live, to be bore with and helped by each and every one of you as if he was your own blood, and to have his share of the property when I am gone. Sons and daughters, this question is for you to decide. I shall say nothing. My life is 'most over, yours is just beginning. I have no great amount to leave you, but 'twill be comfortable so far as it goes. Benjamin has one-sixth of that, and becomes my own son, to be received and treated by you as your own brother, or he goes."

Mary hid her face in her hands. Adam walked to the window and looked out; but the other three broke out into a sudden, hurried clamor, strangely at variance with their usual staid demeanor.

"Oh, father, we couldn't let him go!"

"Why, father, I can't think what you mean!"

"I'm sure, sir, we never thought of such a thing as sending him away. Why, he's our Ben."

"Good enough little kid, only mischievous."

"Needs a little governing, that's all. Mary spoils him; no harm in him, not a mite."

"And the lovindest little soul! the minute he found that Kitty's paw was cut, he sat down and cried—"

"I guess if Benny went, I'd go after him pretty quick!" said Joseph, who had been loudest in his complaint against the child.

Mary looked up and smiled through her tears. "Joe, your heart is in the right place!" she said. "I finished your shirts this morning, dear; I'm going to begin on your slippers to-night."

"Well, but, father—"

"Father dear, about little Benny—"

"Yes, sir—poor little Ben!"

"Go easy!" said Father Golden; and his face, as he looked from one to the other, was as bright as his name.

"Why, children, you're real excited. I don't want excitement, nor crying—Mary, daughter, I knew how you would feel, anyway. I want a serious word, 'go,' or 'stay,' from each one of you; a word that will last your lives long. I'll begin with the youngest, because that was your mother's way. She always

said the youngest was nearest heaven. Joseph, what is your word about little Benjamin?"

"Stay, of course!" cried Joe. "Benny does tease me, but I should be nowhere without him."

"Ruth! you seemed greatly tried just now. Think what you are going to say."

"Oh, of course he must stay, father. Why, the child is the life of the house. We are all so humdrum and mopy, I don't know what we should do without Benny to keep us moving."

"Mary, daughter—not that I need your answer, my dear."

"He is the only child I shall ever have!" said Mary, simply.

There was silence for a moment, and all thought of the grave where her young heart had laid its treasure.

"Lemuel!"

"I've been hard on the child, Father!" said Lemuel. "He's so different from the rest of us, and he does try me. But mother loved him, and down at the bottom we all do, I guess. I say 'stay,' too, and I'll try to be more of a brother to him from now on."

"Son Adam, I have left you the longest time to reflect," said Father Golden. "You are the oldest, and when I am gone it will be on you and Mary that the heft of the care will come. Take all the time you want, and then give us your word!"

Adam turned round; his face was very grave, but he spoke cheerfully.

"I have had time enough, Father," he said. "I was the first that heard that little voice, ten years ago, and the first, except mother, that saw the child; 'twould be strange if I were the one to send him away. He came in Christ's name, and in that name I bid him stay."

"Amen!" said Father Golden.

A silence followed; but it was broken soon by a lively whistle, shrilling out a rollicking tune; the next moment a boy came running into the room. Curly, rosy, dirty, ragged, laughing, panting, little Benjamin stood still and looked round on all the earnest, serious faces.

"What's the matter, all you folks?" he asked. "I should think you was all in meeting, and sermon just beginning. Ruth, I tied up Kitty's leg all right; and

I'll dig greens to pay for the glass, Joe. Say, Bro'rer-Adam-an'-Lem (Benny pronounced this as if it were one word), did you forget it was April Fool's Day? Didn't I fool you good? And—say! there's a fierce breeze and my new kite's a buster. Who'll come out and fly her with me?"

"I will, Benny!" said Adam, Lemuel, Mary, Ruth, and Joseph.