

THE

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EXCELLENT OLD BALLAD

OF

*The Babes in the Wood.*



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THE BABES IN THE WOOD.

Now ponder well, you parents dear,  
The words which I shall write;  
A doleful story you shall hear,  
In time brought forth to light.  
A gentleman of good account  
In Norfolk liv'd of late,  
Whose wealth and riches did surmount  
Most men of his estate.

Sore sick he was, and like to die,  
No help that he could have;  
His wife by him as sick did lie,  
And both possess'd one grave.  
No love between these two was lost,  
Each was to other kind;  
In love they liv'd, in love they died,  
And left two babes behind.

The one a fine and pretty boy,  
Not passing three years old;  
Th' other a girl, more young than he,  
And made in beauty's mould.  
The father left his little son,  
As plainly doth appear,

When he to perfect age should come,  
Three hundred pounds a year;

And to his little daughter Jane,  
Five hundred pounds in gold,  
To be paid down on marriage-day,  
Which might not be controul'd;  
But if the children chanc'd to die  
Ere they to age should come,  
Their uncle should possess their wealth,  
For so the will did run.

Now, brother, said the dying man,  
Look to my children dear;  
Be good unto my boy and girl,  
No friends else have I here.  
To God and you I do commend  
My children night and day;  
But little while, be sure, we have  
Within this world to stay.

You must be father and mother both,  
And uncle, all in one;  
God knows what will become of them  
When I am dead and gone.  
With that bespake their mother dear;  
O brother kind, quoth she,

You are the man must bring our babes  
To wealth or misery.

And if you keep them carefully,  
Then God will you reward;  
If otherwise you seem to deal,  
God will your deeds regard.  
With lips as cold as any stone  
She kiss'd her children small;  
God bless you both, my children dear  
With that the tears did fall.

These speeches then their brother spoke  
To this sick couple there:  
The keeping of your children dear,  
Sweet sister, do not fear;  
God never prosper me nor mine,  
Nor aught else that I have,  
If I do wrong your children dear,  
When you are laid in grave.

The parents being dead and gone,  
The children home he takes,  
And brings them home unto his house,  
And much of them he makes.  
He had not kept these pretty babes  
A twelvemonth and a day,

When for their wealth he did devise  
To make them both away.

He bargain'd with two ruffians rude,  
Which were of furious mood,  
That they should take the children dear,  
And slay them in a wood.  
He told his wife, and all he had,  
He did the children send  
To be brought up in fair London,  
With one that was his friend.

Away then went these pretty babes,  
Rejoicing at that tide,  
Rejoicing with a merry mind  
They should on cock-horse ride.  
They prate and prattle pleasantly,  
As they rode on the way,  
To those that should their butchers be,  
And work their lives' decay.

So that the pretty speech they had  
Made murd'ers' hearts relent;  
And they that undertook the deed  
Full sore they did repent.  
Yet one of them, more hard of heart,  
Did vow to do his charge,

Because the wretch that hired him  
Had paid him very large.

The other would not agree thereto,  
So here they fell at strife;  
With one another they did fight  
About the children's life:  
And he that was of mildest mood,  
Did slay the other there;  
Within an unfrequented wood;  
While babes did quake for fear.

He took the children by the hand,  
When tears stood in their eye;  
And bade them come along with him,  
And looke they did not cry;  
And two long miles he led them on,  
While they for food complain;  
Stay here, quoth he, I'll bring you bread  
When I do come again.

These pretty babes, with hand in hand,  
Went wandering up and down;  
But never more they saw the man  
Approaching from the town.  
Their pretty lips with blackberries  
Were all besmear'd and dy'd;

And when they saw the darksome night  
They sat them down and cried.

Thus wander'd these two pretty babes,  
Till death did end their grief;  
In one another's arms they died,  
As babes wanting relief.  
No burial these pretty babes  
Of any man receives;  
But Robin-red-breast carefully  
Did cover them with leaves.

And now the heavy wrath of God  
Upon their uncle fell;  
Yea, fearful fiends did haunt his house,  
His conscience felt a hell:  
His barns were fir'd, his goods consum'd  
His lands were barren made,  
His cattle died within the field,  
And nothing with him staid.

And, in a voyage to Portugal,  
Two of his sons did die;  
And to conclude, himself was brought  
To extreme misery:  
He pawn'd and mortgag'd all his land  
Ere seven years came about.

And now at length this wicked act  
 Did by this means come out:

The fellow that did take in hand  
 These children for to kill;  
 Was for a robbery judg'd to die,  
 As was God's blessed will;  
 Who did confess the very truth,  
 The which is here express'd;  
 Their uncle died; while he, for debt  
 In prison long did rest.

All you that be executors made,  
 And overseers eke,  
 Of children that be fatherless,  
 And infants mild and meek,  
 Take you example by this thing,  
 And yield to each his right;  
 Lest God to such-like misery,  
 Your wicked minds requite.

FINIS.