

Bumber & Baby John



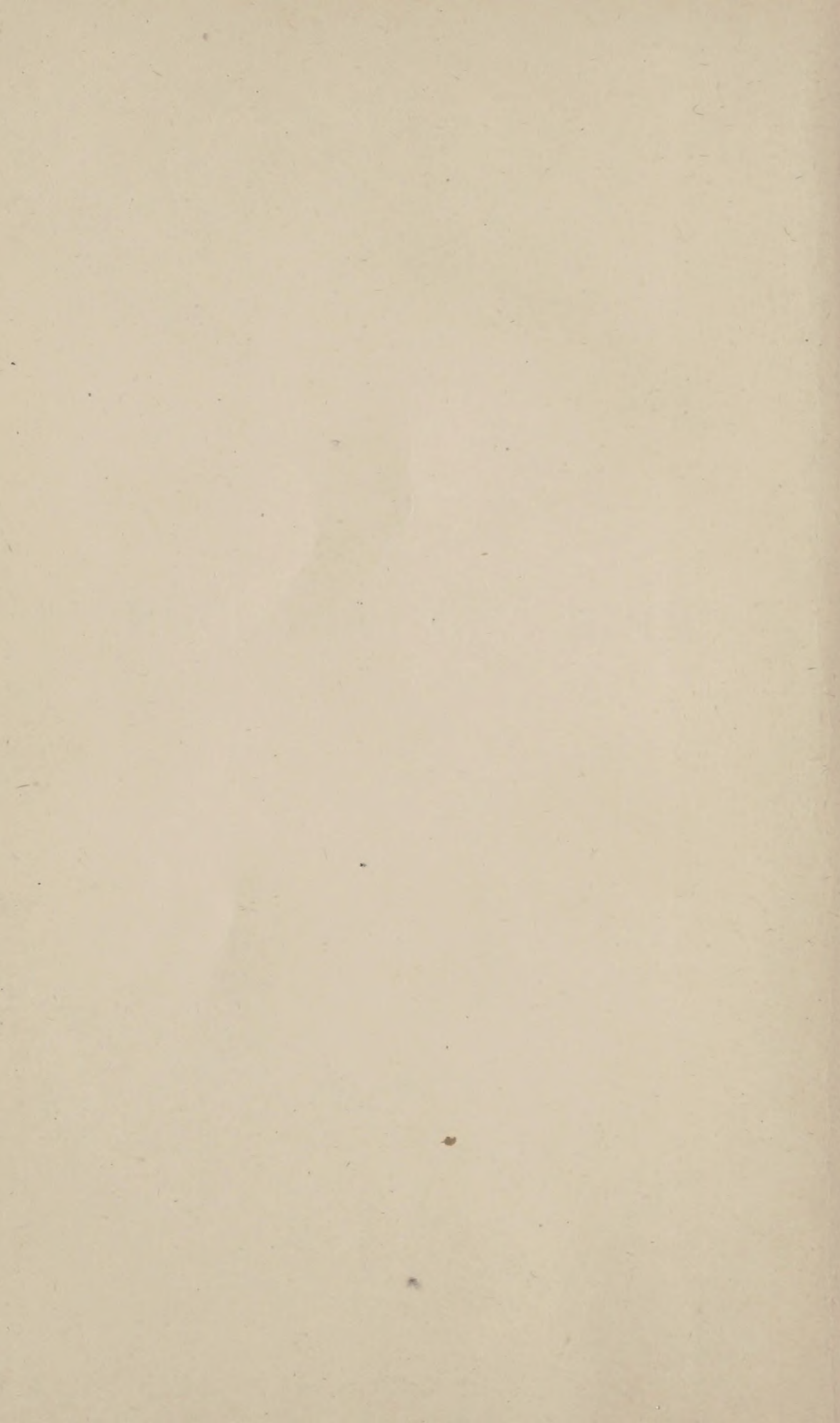
FT MEADE
GenColl

Anna Chablin Bay





BUMPER AND BABY JOHN





Frontispiece.

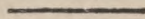
“ HIS HEAD HELD HIGH IN THE AIR HE TRUDGED AWAY ”

Bumper ^{AND} Baby John

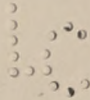
BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY

"



Illustrations by Curtis Wager-Smith

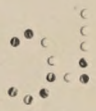


PHILADELPHIA
HENRY ALTEMUS COMPANY

PZ1
R21
BV

LIBRARY of CONGRESS
Two Copies Received
NOV 8 1904
Copyright Entry
May 5, 1904
CLASS A Xxc. No:
86188
COPY B.

Copyright, 1904,
By HENRY ALTEMUS.



04-31607

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
“His head held high in the air . . . he trudged away” <i>Frontispiece</i>	
“Turned the collar until the worn plate was uppermost”	19
“Bumper’s teeth shut firmly on the frock” .	47
“Beside a pink calico bundle, Bumper halted his captive”	59
“At the sight of Mr. Ainsworth, the shrieks ceased”	71
“‘Is he likely to go to sleep up there?’ he inquired”	97
“Bumper felt himself a puppy again” . . .	125
“‘Baby John! Oh, Baby John, come to mamma!’” -	137

BUMPER AND BABY JOHN

CHAPTER ONE

EVEN the fond eye of a lover must have discerned that Baby John had red hair and freckles. In Baby John's eyes, Bumper was altogether lovely. In the eyes of a dog-fancier, he was merely a great spotty-brown animal with frayed ears and a fat and stumpy tail. For the rest, Bumper and Baby John were exceedingly good friends, and their aggregate age was seven years.

Loyal to the traditions of his red hair, Baby John was something of a tyrant, and he took it seriously amiss when Bumper rose up, a piece of himself at a time, after the fashion of

Bumper and Baby John

stout dogs, stretched himself, gave a vast yawn and then trudged across the room in the direction of the open door.

“Tum back!” Baby John ordered imperiously.

Bumper halted long enough to draw several horizontal lines in the air with his tail. Then he resumed his march.

“Bumper, tum here!” Baby John’s accent was commanding, yet plaintive.

Bumper was trained to obedience; nevertheless, it was the plaintive note that stopped him. He cocked up his shabby ears and drew more lines with his tail, while he looked backward over his shoulder. Then, as his brown eyes moved about the room, bare save for a dozen wooden boxes, a table and the débris of a dismembered bedstead, his tail drooped. This was the first

Bumper and Baby John

time that Bumper had experienced the woes of moving-day, and he was finding it a period of discomfort and homesickness. Bumper was domestic in all his habits, and he pined for his own yellow water bowl, and for his rug made from a tattered breadth of rag carpet. The roar and jounce of the train was still upon him, his house was desolate and he wanted to go out into the clean morning air and feel the tall, cool grass rustle along his hairy sides. The tail wagged once more, this time in apology. Then Bumper crossed the threshold.

“Ahh—yahh—ooo—anghh—yah!”

There was no plaintive note in the lusty howl that came pealing out from Baby John's larynx. His vocal cords were of good material and toughened from much exercise. It was impossible for Bumper to pretend not to hear. Even his dog brain was able to

Bumper and Baby John

reason up to that point. He wagged his tail in comprehension; but he quickened his pace.

With a second roar, Baby John started to run after; but he choked himself with his own shriek, and while his attention was diverted by the effort to catch breath, he stubbed his toe against a projecting board, tottered and fell headlong to the floor where he lay, a woful bundle of pink calico, wailing like a siren and beating the floor with his feet in token of desperation.

Bumper listened to the changed note, snuffed the morning air and then reluctantly turned about and went in at the open door. The elastic paws made no sound on the bare boards, and Baby John's surprise caused him to bite off his wail in the middle, when a cold nose and a moist, soft tongue descended upon the hollow of his ear.

Bumper and Baby John.

Then one pink calico arm went around the thick brown neck and, cheek to cheek, the friends made their peace.

“Hullo, old man! Where did you come from?”

The ringing boy voice was attractive, and Bumper slowly emerged from the thicket of ferns. Mud was upon his paws and a sense of guilt was upon his conscience. More than an hour before, the gurgling snores of Baby John had assured him that the time was ripe for his escape. With a dexterity born of similar scenes, he had gently wormed his way out of the pink calico embrace and sneaked away on the tips of his paws. Since then, he had hunted a squirrel through and through a delightful bog, but not even the joy of feeling the cool, soft mud oozing between his toes could quite restore his wonted perkiness. Bumper had a conscience

Bumper and Baby John

of his own, and now he found it good to have the workings of that conscience disturbed by the boyish greeting. He came a foot or two nearer.

The boy, sitting on a rock and unjointing a trouting rod, surveyed him with merry eyes.

“ Well, I must say you aren’t a beauty,” he observed at length.

His tone, indolent, yet friendly, belied his words. Bumper came a step closer, sat down on his haunches and thrashed the ground with his tail.

The boy let go his rod and held out his hand invitingly.

“ Good dog! ” he said.

Instantly Bumper reared himself upright, steadying himself with one waving forepaw while, with a swift sweep, the other paw landed on the light gray sleeve before him.

“ Oh, by Jove, you beast! ”

Bumper and Baby John

Bumper toppled over abruptly, and the boy fell to scraping off the thickest of the mud. When his sleeve began to show light gray again, he looked around at the dog.

“ That’s all right, old fellow. You needn’t look so glum about it. Your manners were all right, only it’s a good scheme to wash your hands before you wipe them. Where did you come from, anyway? ”

At the inviting chirrup, Bumper thrashed the ground till the pine needles flew like chaff from a flail. Nevertheless, he realized that his first overtures had not been received with enthusiasm, and he refused to budge from his place.

“ Come here, sir! Come! I want to see what’s on your collar.”

With unchanged solemnity, Bumper came alongside and sat himself down with his back braced against the

Bumper and Baby John

boy's knee, while his new friend gently turned the collar until the worn plate was uppermost.

“ ‘Number one hundred and seventy-three ’,” he read. “ ‘Bumper ’. What a name! Is it you, or your master? ”

Again Bumper's tail battered the ground, and the boy laughed.

“ It's you, sure enough. It's not such a bad name for you, either. Well, Bumper boy, where did you hail from? I thought I knew every dog in the region; but I'll be hanged if I ever saw you before. You aren't a type of beauty that one forgets, you see.”

Bumper shrugged his shoulders and yawned broadly, not with any discourteous intent, but merely in token that he failed to understand. The word *beauty* held no place in his vocabulary.



“TURNED THE COLLAR UNTIL THE WORN PLATE WAS
UPPERMOST.”

Bumper and Baby John

There was an interval of silence, while the boy struggled with an obstinate joint of his rod. Bumper appeared to be waiting some further conversation, for he leaned more and more heavily against the boy's knee, and glanced up expectantly now and then. At length he abandoned the idea of winning more attention. He scratched his ear vaguely, found the sensation altogether pleasing and determined to follow it up. With this in mind, he moved a little to one side and seated himself with clumsy deliberation exactly on top of the basket of fish.

“ Oh, confound you! ”

At the tone, Bumper dodged to avoid the blow which might follow; but no blow came. The boy's eyes were wrathful, but his lips were laughing, as he sprang forward to rescue his scattered trophies. Bumper

Bumper and Baby John

gulped down the nearest fish; then he turned with penitent, mournful eyes and drooping jaw, and peered up into the face of his companion.

“ Sorry, old man? Well, you ought to be, for you’ve bolted the biggest one of them all, and I wanted to show it to Uncle Larry. You’re a clumsy brute, anyhow. Why don’t you go home? ”

The tone was merry and altogether winning, and under its influence Bumper’s eyes were lighting, his ears lifting. At the last words, however, something, some sudden memory of Baby John, perhaps, crossed his mind, and the tail stopped itself in mid-wag.

“ Oh, go home! Where’s Massa? Go find Massa! ”

With a portentous sigh, Bumper rose, came forward and deposited his thick body across the boy’s feet. The

Bumper and Baby John

boy's lip curled; but, in spite of himself, he bent down to stroke the broad, blunt head.

“ I'm not your master, you mongrel. I wouldn't have a dog like you on my hands. And yet, you're a good fellow. Don't whine about it. Sit up like a man, and be friends. There, shake hands. Now I'm going home. Good by, Bumper! No; don't you dare to follow me. I wouldn't take you as a gift.”

With one last pat, he rose, picked up rod and basket and went striding away, as alert and contented and comely a boy as ever outgrew his knickerbockers. It was no unusual thing for young Lawrance Stephenson to make friends with strangers, dog as well as human. The episode was familiar, and it was ended. The boy went his way with scarcely a backward thought, still less a back-

Bumper and Baby John

ward glance. If he had looked back, he would have seen Bumper's tattered ears raise inquiringly, Bumper's broad, kindly, wistful face gazing after him, Bumper's left forefoot held up irresolutely. The boy vanished among the trees. Bumper waited for a moment longer. Then, nose to the earth, on elastic, noiseless feet he went trotting away on the trail of his new friend.

A man who, to Bumper's unaccustomed eyes, looked all iron-gray hair and spectacles, saw them coming and hailed them from the veranda.

“Where did you get your poodle, Lawrance?”

The boy glanced over his shoulder. His laugh was prompt; but it was as promptly checked.

“I ordered him sent up here for you, Uncle Larry,” he responded gravely.

Bumper and Baby John

“Thank you. You’d better send him back. I can’t afford to keep so many kinds of dog.”

Lawrance came forward with a leisurely step, and seated himself on the edge of the veranda.

“I’d advise you to take him, Uncle Larry. He’s a whole condensed dog-show: great Dane, Mexican hairless and all. It isn’t often you get a chance to sample so many breeds.”

Lowering his head, Mr. Lawrance Ainsworth surveyed Bumper over the top of his spectacles.

“Where did you accumulate the beast, Lawrance?”

The boy laughed carelessly. He was in no wise afraid of his uncle, who was considered by all the country neighbors the sternest man in the township.

“He accumulated me, Uncle Larry. He fell in love with me at first sight.

Bumper and Baby John

Then he fell in love with my largest trout and proceeded to accumulate that, too. There isn't another here to compare with it, and I was bringing it home to show it off for the best catch of the season."

"And what has become of it?"

"Ask Bumper. Pretty name; isn't it? But he bolted it, before my face and eyes."

Mr. Ainsworth's shrewd eyes twinkled.

"It's a new form of fish story, Lawrance. You will have to produce your fish, before I believe in its size. A sportsman takes nothing on trust."

"Neither does Bumper," the boy said ruefully.

"Bumper?"

The accent was of question, not of greeting. However, Bumper put his own interpretation upon the use of his name. Deliberately he clam-

Bumper and Baby John.

bered up the steps, crossed the veranda, laid his nose and one muddy forefoot upon the spotless white duck knee of Mr. Ainsworth and stared up at him with trusting brown eyes. Mr. Lawrance Ainsworth, aristocrat and retired banker, was by no means soft of heart. Nevertheless, case-hardened though he might be, he never failed to yield to two influences, to his nephew and namesake, Lawrance Stephenson, and to the friendly eyes of a dog, whether those eyes looked out at him from the head of thoroughbred or mongrel. In his younger days, Mr. Ainsworth had owned many a noted dog. His very familiarity with thoroughbred stock only rendered him the quicker to recognize the noble traits which showed themselves now and again in dogs of ignoble ancestry. Regardless of the brown stains on his knee, he looked

Bumper and Baby John

down into Bumper's honest eyes and knew that he was a dog to be trusted. He patted the great, uncouth head, permitted a caressing sweep of the tongue across his knuckles, and then gently pushed aside the heavy paw.

“That's all, sir. Now go home.”

He spoke with the accent of one accustomed to be obeyed, and Bumper reluctantly yielded to his bidding. At the steps, Lawrance caught the broad muzzle in his hands.

“Good by, old man. Don't worry about the fish. Most likely it will give you indigestion, anyhow. You're an old sinner; but I rather like you. Call again.” And he went inside the house to forage the pantry, without in the least suspecting how promptly his invitation would be accepted.

From the open doorway, Baby John spied Bumper from afar, and hailed him gleefully. The time had dragged

Bumper and Baby John

heavily for Baby John, since he had awakened to find himself deserted. Playthings were scarce in his life, and Bumper had been the chief of them all. Now Bumper was missing, and the other toys, packed in an empty coal-hod, were on the platform of the station, four miles away. In his old home, on the upper edge of Greater New York, there had been things to see and noises in the street. Here there was nothing but grass and trees and an occasional bird-note, and Baby John, self-reliant as he was, nevertheless felt himself aggrieved. He had even started out in pursuit of Bumper; but he had capsized on his way down the steps. By the time he was right side up once more, his zeal for exploration had left him, and he was content to mount the steps again, on all fours and with long pauses at every step.

Bumper and Baby John

If human speech had been given to Bumper, he would still have been reticent. He never felt the need of explaining where he had been, during his occasional absences from home. Now he came jogging into the house as demurely as if he had left it only a moment before. Baby John fell upon him with a chuckle and a crow, gripped his burly neck with arms so short that they barely met on top, and buried his freckled little face in the thick rolls of skin on Bumper's breast. Bumper's coat was of bristles, sharp and harsh; but Baby John's joy in the returned prodigal could survive many a pricking. He snuggled the dog's head against his pink calico bosom; then, casting sentiment to the winds, he lifted up his voice in a lusty demand for a game of hide and seek.

CHAPTER TWO

FATHER JOHN'S face was anxious, the next morning, as he entered the little house.

“Haven't the things come yet?” he asked, as he took Baby John on his knee.

Baby John, still breakfasting on bread and molasses, lifted a sticky countenance.

“Kiss,” he demanded.

Obediently the clean little Scotchman put his lips on the least adhesive spot to be found on the freckled little face. Then the young autocrat spoke again.

“Kiss Bumper,” he ordered.

Father John was too well acquainted with his son's firmness of

Bumper and Baby John

character to rebel. Moreover, just at present Bumper was by far the more kissable one of the two. His affectionate duty done, Father John once more turned to his wife.

“ We must have them, to-day, Wife.”

Wife nodded. The bed had been set up, the night before, and the dozen wooden boxes had been unpacked. However, a shawl mattress and an overcoat coverlet do not ensure a comfortable night, and the supper and breakfast materials to be bought, ready cooked, at a country store are not always toothsome. Baby John, tucked up in the largest box, had slept like a weasel; and, to his mind, slabs of bread and molasses were far better than turkey with oyster stuffing. Of the four, he was the only one to hail the new day with anything like enthusiasm. Even

Bumper and Baby John

Bumper's courage failed at sight of this homeless home.

Wife spoke wearily.

“ We can't spend another night like last night. It's out of the question. We must have our furniture, to-day.”

“ How ? ”

“ Where is the man you engaged to bring it up ? ”

“ He— ” Father John faltered and his head dropped, as he told his bad news. “ He can't bring it.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ He's got a job to do some hay-ing.”

“ How do you know ? ”

“ He just sent me word by another fellow.”

“ Can't the other fellow do it ? ” she asked hopefully.

Father John shook his head.

“ No horse but the crazy little

Bumper and Baby John

colt he was driving," he answered.

There was a pause, while Wife shut her teeth and summoned her Scotch courage to her aid.

"What shall we do?" Father John asked helplessly.

Wife clinched her teeth for an instant. The helplessness irritated her, yet it was excusable. It came from the ill health which had driven her husband out of city work and had forced him to buy a farm in this country of leisure and fresh air. In the strictest sense of the word, they were not poor. They always had been able to pay their debts, and Father John's trousers, though darned, had never quite come to patches. They were never able to get much ahead of that, however, and years of careful scrimping had barely sufficed to buy the four-acre farm and the five-room house in a valley of the Ver-

Bumper and Baby John

mont hills. Wife's whole love was for the paved streets; nevertheless, health was the first consideration, and she heroically turned her face towards this wilderness where moving-vans were not and where one's household goods might lie in the freight-station until the crack of doom.

The pause was short. It lasted only long enough for Wife's mind to journey to New York and back again. Then she spoke quietly.

“ I think we'd better go down to the station and try to hire somebody else.”

“ But you can't go.”

“ Why not? ”

“ It is too far for you to walk.”

She laughed at the notion.

“ Think of the way I used to walk, in town! It won't hurt me at all, and we can ride up on the load.”

Bumper and Baby John

“ What about Baby John ? ”

At his name, Baby John leaped abruptly into the conversation.

“ Pop! Da-da! D’ink! ” he observed.

The drink promptly was forthcoming. It tasted rather too strongly of sulphur, for Baby John’s tin cup had been used to cover the matches for safekeeping. However, Baby John was no epicure, and he drained the cup to the dregs, shutting his scanty supply of teeth on the rim and holding his breath until his face was purple. Then he let go with his teeth and raised his head.

“ Bumper, d’ink! ” he commanded.

“ What shall we do with him? ” Father John repeated.

Once more Wife shut her teeth. To her mind, this wilderness was fully capable of containing Indians and panthers, with a bison or two for

Bumper and Baby John

good measure. Then she answered cheerily,—

“What we always have done. Leave him with Bumper.”

“Lock him up in the house?”

She hesitated.

“No; not here. Bumper wouldn't let anything come in, and I should feel safer if he could get out. Something might come prowling, and Bumper could drive it away.”

“Safer to shut him up.”

Wife shook her head.

“If you say so; but I think it is better to leave the house open.”

“He might run away.”

She bent over to stroke the dog's head.

“Bumper would bring him back.”

“But he will be hungry,” Father John objected suddenly.

“Not very early, after such a breakfast, and I'll leave some bread where

Bumper and Baby John

he can get it. It won't be so very late, when we come back. We'll find somebody. The village is so small that it won't take long to hunt the place over, and we'll be back by the middle of the afternoon." There was a pause, while her courage wavered. Then she added a little wishfully, "It's the best thing we can do, John, and the only one."

Side by side in the window, Bumper and Baby John watched them go. They were quite accustomed to being left by themselves, for, regularly as the sun arose, Father John and his brown pasteboard dinner-box had gone to work and, at least three times a week, Wife had followed close on his heels, for she was an expert laundress and her services had been much in demand.

The two comrades knew by heart the routine which heralded her going:

Bumper and Baby John

the stir of preparation, the iterated commands of "Baby John, be a good boy," and "Bumper, take great, great care of Baby John," the shutting of the door and then the scrabble to the window to look after the erect little figure, trim in spite of its shabbiness. On such occasions, Bumper's serious eyes were heavy with a sense of responsibility; but Baby John was as gay and care-free as ever.

Father John and Wife vanished around a bend in the road. Bumper leaped down from the box by the window, and Baby John clambered down after him. There was a brief interval of quiet, and then proceedings began.

For the most part, they were silent proceedings. Neither Baby John nor Bumper were given to wasting words, and only an occasional crowing laugh or a feigned growl broke the silence.

Bumper and Baby John

The silence, however, was by no means stillness. There were sounds of pattering feet and pounding paws, of two fat, soft bodies rolling over and over on the floor, of snufflings and breathless gurglings, of the rattling of the stiff brown paper with which Baby John was vainly trying to crown the benign head of his companion. Bumper was all things in succession, from choo-choo cars to a pussycat, and he submitted amicably to all of Baby John's demands. Once only he rebelled and, with a deep-throated snarl, he shut his mouth over the pink forefinger with which Baby John was investigating the mechanism of his eyelids. For the space of a full minute, he held his jaws fixed. Then slowly he opened them, drew back his head from the unscathed finger and completely ruined the moral effect of his rebuke by drawing his long,

Bumper and Baby John

damp tongue across Baby John's cheeks and nose. Babies, according to Bumper's theory, were made to be caressed, not corrected.

Slowly the plays lost their charm, and Baby John subsided, a limp pink bundle of drowsiness, with his red head pillowed on Bumper's side. Bumper, stretched out at full length on the floor, raised his head to snuff at his burden, then, with a deep sigh and an indolent thump of his burly tail, he dropped his head again and wandered off into dreamland.

The day was still young when, an hour later, Baby John waked and sat up, eager for the fray. One pink fist was still in his eyes, when he caught sight of the bread, laid ready for him on the tallest of the boxes. Rolling over on his stomach, he slowly pried himself erect, trudged across the room to seize the bread and fell to

Bumper and Baby John

munching it contentedly. Then a frown crossed his crumby face, and he lifted up his voice.

“D’ink,” he demanded.

There was no answer, and he repeated his demand even more imperiously.

“D’ink.”

Bumper roused himself from his dream and came slouching forward. Anxiety and perplexity were in his eyes, for he knew that something was wrong, and he had no idea what he ought to do about it. He sat himself down facing Baby John and awaited his commands.

“D’ink!” Baby John ordered, for the third time.

Still nothing happened, and Baby John’s lip rolled over. Suddenly his eyes rested on a tin cup, his own tin cup, which had been dried and put back over the little pile

Bumper and Baby John

of matches on the table. A box stood beside the table and, with infinite difficulty and much stretching, Baby John contrived to reach the handle of the cup and drag it towards him, quite regardless of the matches which scattered themselves along the floor. The next minute, he was refreshing his thirsty throat with water dipped from Bumper's dish on the floor in the corner.

Then once more Baby John proceeded to enjoy himself. He and Bumper played tag, and Bumper was always IT. He and Bumper played horse, and Bumper was always the horse. He and Bumper did roly-poly tricks on the floor, and Bumper was never the one to be on top. Baby John crowed and giggled and issued stern commands, and even Bumper's grave eyes lighted, as he set himself to obey. So absorbed were they both

Bumper and Baby John

that they never noticed the curious crackling sound which rose from the scattered heap of matches crushed by Baby John's energetic little heel. Suddenly Baby John turned his head.

"Pitty," he observed, while he pointed to the yellow tongue licking along the edge of Bumper's paper crown.

Bumper, occupied in the search for a flea, paid no heed.

"Pitty!" Baby John reiterated, as the paper turned to a black, crumpled cinder, and the tongue mounted to the excelsior hanging over the edge of a box near by.

The box was blazing merrily, and two more boxes were smoking before Bumper realized that something was amiss. The yellow tongues of flame were rising to the level of the table-top, and Baby John was prancing about enthusiastically, with his pink

Bumper and Baby John

calico frock unduly close to the blaze.

“ Pa-pa-pa-pa-pap! Pitty! See!” he shrieked with rapture. “ Oh-h-h! Pitty! ”

Gently, but firmly, Bumper’s teeth shut on the tail of the pink frock, and Baby John slid backwards and sat down abruptly. Behind him, Bumper sat down, too, and together the two comrades silently inspected the conflagration.

By the time the table caught fire, the room was uncomfortably full of smoke, and Bumper realized that it was time for him to be up and doing. Leaving Baby John choking on the floor, he started up, rushed to the door and battered the panels with all the strength of his paws. Once he stopped to sniff and to apply his ear to the crack; then he renewed his assault, but the locked door held firm and no help was near. Baby John

Bumper and Baby John

was sobbing forlornly now, and the biting smoke was bringing the tears to Bumper's eyes. He gave a prolonged howl, started to howl again, but barked instead; then, springing to the box, he leaped madly against the window. Both glass and casing yielded to his weight, and, in an instant, Bumper was safe on the ground outside.

Dazed by the rush of fresh air into his lungs, he stood motionless for a moment. Then slowly he fell to licking the one little cut on his paw. Suddenly he raised his head, and the life came back into his eyes. From inside the house came a little choking cry, faint, yet laden with a meaning which he was not slow to grasp.

“Bumper! Tum back, Bumper!”

The smoke was rolling out of the window in a heavy gray cloud; but Bumper never hesitated. His aim



“BUMPER’S TEETH SHUT FIRMLY ON THE FROCK”

Bumper and Baby John

was unerring, his spring a powerful one. The cry was scarcely stilled, when Bumper's tail vanished in the heavy cloud of smoke. He was gone only for a moment. When he reappeared, there dangled from his powerful jaws a squirming bundle of pink calico whence issued a succession of terrified, indignant shrieks.

Outside the smoke, Bumper laid down his burden, while he meditated for a space. Baby John became restless and started to crawl off on a voyage of discovery; but Bumper's nose rolled him over on his back, Bumper's paw planted itself softly, but steadily on his chest, and Baby John yielded to the inevitable and lay still, blinking up at the sunshine.

It is impossible to analyze the reasoning that went on in Bumper's brain. Dog thoughts, clear as they are at times, are by no means the

Bumper and Baby John

thoughts of a human being. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that the thoughts of Bumper moved from this homeless home, now no longer inhabitable, to that cool, shady veranda where, only the day before, he had been petted and treated like a gentleman of sorts. With a dexterous sweep of his paw, he turned Baby John over like a pancake, and took a good grip of the clothing in the region of the belt. Then, with his head held high in the air to prevent his burden from dragging in the dust, he trudged away in the direction whence he had come, the day before, and vanished from sight just as, from exactly the opposite direction, there arose the clamorous cry of "Fire!"

CHAPTER THREE

JOGGING along the country road at Yellow Dobbin's heels, that noon, Lawrance Stephenson was absently flicking with his whip at the tall weeds by the roadside. Suddenly he raised his eyes.

“What's the smoke?” he demanded.

His uncle, deep in planning an itinerary which could include a round dozen of housekeeping errands, the inspection of a possible new horse and the sale of an incubator, roused himself at the question.

“What's what?” he inquired, true to his Yankee blood.

“What's that smoke down in the hollow?” young Lawrance asked,

Bumper and Baby John

waving his whip in the direction of the thin blue cloud that hung over the distant tree-tops.

“Cleaning up, and burning brush probably,” Mr. Ainsworth suggested idly.

“It’s a good-sized bonfire, Uncle Larry,” the boy objected.

“Very likely it is a good-sized brush-heap,” his uncle retorted. “There’s nothing else down there to burn.”

“No houses?”

“I never saw any,” Mr. Ainsworth asserted with perfect truthfulness, inasmuch as his wanderings had never led him into the by-road which led through the hollow. “Suppose you ask Dobbin to move on, Lawrance. We’ve a twenty-mile circle ahead of us, to say nothing of Halker’s baking-powder and nutmegs. Don’t ever try to set up housekeeping in the wilder-

Bumper and Baby John

ness, boy ; it is worse than adopting an orphan asylum."

"Then what made you do it, Uncle Larry?" the boy asked fearlessly.

The stern eyes beside him clouded.

"Loneliness and utter idiocy," was the short answer.

It was now three years since Mr. Lawrance Ainsworth had suddenly retired from the world to that portion of the wilderness known as Riverdale Farm. None of his city friends had quite understood the change which had taken place in him since the death of his young wife. He had made no outward sign of mourning; he rarely mentioned her; he even had sold the house where their married life had been spent, and had moved into a bachelor apartment farther down town. Little by little the lines in his face grew more rigid, his speech more terse, his manner more curt and

Bumper and Baby John

abrupt. Then, one day, the many friends who were still loyal to him received a sudden shock. It was abruptly announced that Lawrance Ainsworth had sold out his share in the business, had made a will settling all his large property upon his nephew and namesake, Lawrance Stephenson, and had betaken himself to a farm in the Vermont hills where he proposed to live by himself and raise Jersey cows. It was not announced, however, that he had chosen for housekeeper the woman who had been the old nurse of his wife. Neither was it announced that, within a year, he was to fall under a domestic tyranny which was as inconvenient and exasperating to a man of his habits as it was practical and wholesome.

Stern of face and voice, he was feared by all his neighbors, and accordingly for the most part he lived

Bumper and Baby John

alone, dividing his time between his farm, his account books and his library. Once a year, however, the quiet house awakened into life and, for the space of two full months, young Lawrance clattered and whistled in the halls, foraged in the pantry, cleaned fish in the kitchen and ruled all things from Mrs. Halker to Yellow Dobbin. While those two months lasted, Mr. Ainsworth was a different man. When they were ended, he lived on the memory of them, until the next summer brought them around again.

Late in the sunshiny afternoon, Yellow Dobbin came jogging home, the reins on his back. Behind his heels, the trap was stuffed with all manner of bundles, and the back seat was open for the accommodation of the new wash-boiler of which Mrs. Halker had shrilly reminded them, just

Bumper and Baby John

as they were setting forth. Mr. Ainsworth's brows were clouded, for he had a shrewd suspicion that he had been cajoled into buying a spavined horse; but Lawrance, lolling back in his seat and humming a student song, was supremely content. Three pounds of maple fudge and a new book were among the parcels under his feet, and nothing now but a rainy day was needed to complete his satisfaction. The inevitable misgivings would not arise until later.

As Yellow Dobbin turned in at the maple-bordered drive, a great brown form rose from the front steps and came slowly forward to welcome them.

“Bumper, old man! Where did you come from?”

The voice was hospitable; nevertheless, there was something deprecating in the wag of the burly tail.

Bumper and Baby John

“What are you doing here?” Mr. Ainsworth asked a little sharply.

The shabby ears drooped, and the tail wagged more and more slowly.

“Lawrance, what are we going to do with that dog? We can't have him stop here,” Mr. Ainsworth asked testily, as he prepared to dismount.

Bumper stood back and waited respectfully until Mr. Ainsworth's feet were on the gravel walk. Then he stepped forward and shut his teeth on a corner of Mr. Ainsworth's light overcoat.

“Get out! Let go!”

Bumper turned the whites of his eyes upward, not humorously, but with steady determination. The muscles of his jaws never relaxed.

Mr. Ainsworth tried to pull his coat free, and Bumper responded with a low growl.

“Better let him work, Uncle Lar-

Bumper and Baby John

ry?" his nephew advised. "He has something or other in his head."

"He also has something in his mouth, and that something happens to be my new coat," Mr. Ainsworth answered irately.

"Yes; but he'll let you go, as soon as he is through with you. Wait and see what he wants."

Mr. Ainsworth yielded, less to the advice of his nephew than to stern necessity. An unwilling victim, he advanced, a stiff pace at a time, to the front steps, went up them stiffly and along the veranda to a corner where the shadow lay deepest. Beside a pink calico bundle, Bumper halted his captive, let go his hold, backed off a step and raised his shabby ears.

"Wow-ow-ow!" he explained delightedly.

Mr. Ainsworth bent over and peered into the shadow. Then he put



“ BESIDE A PINK CALICO BUNDLE, BUMPER HALTED HIS CAPTIVE ”

Bumper and Baby John

on his spectacles and peered again. Then, with his eyes almost popping from their sockets, he turned himself about and addressed his nephew.

“Lawrance Ainsworth Stephenson, here’s a-a-a great big baby!”

“What?” Lawrance’s tone bristled with exclamation-points.

“Yes, a baby!” his uncle responded, with weighty emphasis on each syllable.

“A live one?”

The question was incredulous, and Mr. Ainsworth answered touchily.

“Of course. You don’t suppose it’s a dead one; do you?”

But Baby John settled that question promptly. Roused by Bumper’s explanatory bark and by the heavy voice of Mr. Ainsworth, he stirred drowsily, half opened his right eye and rubbed his fists across his buttony little nose. Then he opened both eyes

Bumper and Baby John

wide, stretched his mouth to its utmost limit and let forth a resounding roar.

For the next few minutes, Mr. Ainsworth and his nephew could have been seen speaking to each other. Then Baby John's breath failed, and Lawrance's voice could be heard again.

"Where did he come from?" he asked as, side by side with his uncle, he peered down at the baby face.

"How should I know? I didn't order him," Mr. Ainsworth answered, half in wrath, half in amusement.

"Perhaps the dog brought him."

"Then he can carry him off again. I don't want the youngster for anything."

"No." The boy bent down on one knee to inspect the baby more closely, while Bumper, his back bristling, came a step or two nearer. "No, Un-

Bumper and Baby John

cle Larry, I shouldn't really think you would. He isn't what you'd call pretty."

Baby John stared up into the face so near his own. Then his lip rolled over and, turning, he stretched two pink hands upward imploringly to Mr. Ainsworth.

"Pa-pa, tum!" he sobbed.

Mr. Ainsworth's ruddy face lost something of its color. He drew back a step, and tried to efface himself behind his nephew.

Lawrance chuckled over the scene which he felt sure was to follow. Unlike his uncle, he had beheld babies before and had even manipulated them upon occasion.

"Most likely he wants you to pick him up in your arms," he responded unfeelingly.

Baby John lifted his voice in assent.

Bumper and Baby John

“Pa-pa! Pa-pa! Pa-pa!” he implored.

Mr. Ainsworth found it necessary to retreat to the farther side of the veranda.

“Pick him up, yourself,” he ordered his nephew.

“All right. Come up here, youngster.”

But Baby John was of another mind. He had a distinct choice between his temporary hosts. Lithe as a little fish, he wriggled out of the boy's arms, kicked viciously at him and then stretched out his own arms anew to Mr. Ainsworth. Then, for the space of another five minutes, Mr. Ainsworth and Lawrance were forced to converse in dumb show, while Bumper withdrew himself to the ground and gave his whole care to a long-neglected flea. For the time being, he felt that Baby John was quite capable

Bumper and Baby John

of holding the general attention focused upon himself. Accordingly, he allowed himself to take a well-earned holiday.

“Call Halker,” Mr. Ainsworth said at length, when he could make himself heard above the din.

Mrs. Halker came, running.

“I thought I heard a baby cry,” she explained, as she pounded along the veranda at Lawrance’s heels; “but I supposed it was just some of your monkey-shines, and I didn’t pay much attention.” Then she bent over the weeping Baby John. “Oh, the poor lamb!” she added.

At the new voice, the poor lamb straightway turned to the vocal likeness of a peacock on parade. Mr. Ainsworth drew in his breath through his shut teeth.

“There he goes again! What shall we do with him, Halker?”

Bumper and Baby John

For her only answer, Mrs. Halker bent down and swept the baby up into her motherly arms.

“Poor itty sing! Where did he tum f’om?” she crooned, dropping into the vernacular which comes so naturally to the tongue of her who has borne children, and to her alone.

Baby John’s right hand descended smartly upon the bridge of her nose; his left hand buried itself in her hair. Then both hands turned appealingly to Mr. Ainsworth.

With his fists plunged deep in his trouser pockets, Lawrance surveyed the scene with a certain aloofness.

“Might as well take him, Uncle Larry. If I know anything at all about red hair, you’ve got to give in, and you might as well do it gracefully,” he advised. Then he cupped his hand at the back of his ear. “What

Bumper and Baby John

were you saying, Mrs. Halker?" he shouted.

Mrs. Halker's answer came in short, explosive phrases, timed to the breaths of Baby John.

"Once—at a circus—I heard some—bagpipes.—They was—awful; but they—wasn't—nothing—to this."

Still holding the child in her arms, she sat down in a veranda chair and sought to compose the kicking little heels. The next moment, she sprang up in terror.

"Land! What's that?" she cried.

Bumper, meanwhile, had lost interest in his flea and, on noiseless paws, had mounted the steps again. He could see no reason why it should shock the nerves of Mrs. Halker to find, of a sudden, his great, blunt muzzle pressed against her cheek. Most people took his friendly overtures more quietly.

Bumper and Baby John

“ Oh, that’s only Bumper,” Lawrance reassured her.

“ How do you know?” she asked rather irrelevantly.

“ Because his collar says so.”

Mrs. Halker’s eyes roved from the red head on her arm to the brown head at her knee.

“ Did they come together?” she queried slowly.

“ Yes. They appear to hunt in pairs.”

“ Who brought them?”

“ Nobody knows.”

“ Where did they come from?”

“ Nobody knows.”

“ What are you going to do with them?”

For the space of a second, young Lawrance’s eyes rested on his uncle. Then, for the third time, he made answer,—

“ Nobody knows.”

Bumper and Baby John

Abruptly his uncle wheeled himself about.

“I do know. I shall send him to an orphan asylum till his people turn up.”

“There aint no asylum nearer than Burlington,” Mrs. Halker interpolated.

Mr. Ainsworth jerked off his spectacles, jerked his spectacles into their case and jerked the case into his pocket.

“Then I’ll send him to the poor-house,” he said stormily.

“To-night?” Mrs. Halker asked reproachfully, while she smoothed down the pink calico frock.

“No; to-morrow, of course. Stick him into bed somewhere, and give us our supper.”

“Yes, sir. Did—did he happen to bring a nightgown with him?” she asked gravely.

Bumper and Baby John

Mr. Ainsworth again wheeled about sharply.

“No. Put him into one of yours, and hurry up about it. Lawrance is half starved.”

She rose obediently.

“Yes, sir. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

When she departed, she left a trail of shrieks behind her, and her absence was a short one. The same trail of shrieks heralded her approach, and presently she appeared around the corner of the house with Bumper at her heels and Baby John in her arms. Bumper’s eyes wore a look of anxiety. Baby John wore a blue flannel night-gown cut to the portly dimensions of Mrs. Halker.

At the sight of Mr. Ainsworth, the shrieks ceased, and two huge flannel sleeves flapped vaguely in the direction of his arms.



"AT THE SIGHT OF MR. AINSWORTH THE SHRIEKS
CEASED."

Bumper and Baby John

“ Pa-pa!” Baby John begged imploringly.

“ He does want you to take him,” Mrs. Halker explained triumphantly.

“ I thought that was it.”

“ But I don’t want him.”

“ Just to quiet him a bit, sir. Maybe he’d drop to sleep, if you was to take him.”

“ But I told you to put him to bed.”

“ Yes; but he won’t go.”

“ Of course he ’ll go, if you put him.”

Mrs. Halker felt that it was time she asserted herself.

“ Try it yourself, sir, and see if it’s so easy,” she answered a little shortly.

Mr. Ainsworth quailed. He had heard that tone before now, and he had learned to recognize its meaning.

“ Me? I? Certainly not, Halker. He will be happy with you.”

“ He aint, then. He wants you.”

Bumper and Baby John

“But it is time for supper,” he protested feebly.

Then Mrs. Halker delivered her final blow.

“And how am I going to get supper, I’d like to know, with this child shrieking every minute in my arms? If you want your supper put on the table, you’ll have to hold him, while I do it. Sit down in that chair, while I put him in your lap. There. Now put your other arm so. No! His knees bent down, not up. Sakes and soul! To see you, one would think you never were a baby, yourself, or you’d remember better how it felt. Now hold him as tight as you can without pinching him and maybe, if you sit real still, he’ll drop to sleep.”

She walked away with Lawrance behind her. Mrs. Halker went straight to the kitchen; but Lawrance tarried at the corner of the house.

Bumper and Baby John

Now and then he peeped around the corner, to see his uncle sitting as if petrified, while his face expressed every variety of indignant protest and of anxiety. Mysterious itchings came into his back, strange cramps assailed his legs; but Baby John's sobs were coming at longer and longer intervals, and he dared not move. Then the blue flannel bundle was convulsed with one final, mighty sob, a blue flannel sleeve rubbed slowly down Mr. Ainsworth's cheek and, yielding to some mechanism hidden within its folds, clung with a vigorous grasp to Mr. Ainsworth's whiskers. The red head nestled into the hollow of his arm, and two teary eyes looked up into his keen ones.

“Pitty pa-pa!” Baby John said sleepily.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT EARLY dawn and on the points of his toes, Mr. Lawrence Ainsworth went sneaking out of his own room and out of the house.

Not even an optimist could have called the night a restful one. Mr. Ainsworth was no optimist, and he frankly admitted to himself that the night was the longest he had ever spent. Baby John, who apparently had surrendered his whole heart to his grim-faced, whiskery host, had obstinately refused to be parted from him. Again and again Mrs. Halker had borne him away, screaming and kicking muffled little kicks inside his long blue swaddling-clothes. Again and again she had been forced to

Bumper and Baby John

bring him back. The last time, he had escaped from her vigilance and come back upon his own account and upon all fours, to the detriment of his trailing nightgown which he had impaled on the handle of the coal-hod as he passed by. The clatter of the falling coal had been too late to warn Mrs. Halker. She could only follow him as he scuttled along like a great blue spider, straight to the armchair in the library, where he lifted himself upright, smutty and triumphant, and cast himself rapturously upon Mr. Ainsworth's dangling foot. It was then that Mrs. Halker stood stock-still in amazement at the words that followed.

“ We may as well give it up, Halker. Let the little fellow stay. It's only for one night, anyway.”

And Baby John, left a victor in the field, fell to exploring the waste-paper

Bumper and Baby John

basket so industriously that, within fifteen minutes, the carpet looked as if it had been left out in a Dakota blizzard.

At bedtime, history repeated itself. The battle lasted for an hour; but the result was foreordained from the beginning. Baby John was tucked up in the decorous bed of Mr. Lawrance Ainsworth, where he fell asleep as soon as his red head touched the pillow. He waked again, as Mr. Ainsworth stealthily crept in beside him, and one flannel arm twined itself tightly around his companion's throat. Then once more Baby John composed himself to sleep; but there was no sleep for Mr. Lawrance Ainsworth. Worse even than Baby John, Bumper had insisted upon coming to bed, too. At first he had clambered up and stretched himself out at full length across the foot of the bed,

Bumper and Baby John

where he lay, a huge and heavy bolster of flesh which prevented Mr. Ainsworth from opening the hinges in his own knees. At last he yielded to sundry furtive kicks and to whispered conversation which was not entirely cordial. The windows jarred with the weight of his descending body. Then Bumper betook himself to the floor under the head of the bed, and Mr. Ainsworth's hopes of rest arose.

They fell again speedily, however, for Bumper was by no means what is termed a good sleeper. His restlessness demanded frequent changes of position, and, whenever he rose to turn over, the bed rose with him. What was worse, he snored and, worst of all, Baby John snored also, and the two snores differed materially in rhythm and in key.

The east was still faintly gray when Mr. Ainsworth rose and crept

Bumper and Baby John

out of the room, carrying his clothes in his arms. He drew a long sigh of satisfaction, as the duet grew faint upon his ears.

It was midday when Mr. Ainsworth drew up Yellow Dobbin in front of the village store. His eyes were heavy with sleepiness, and something akin to desperation was written upon his face. For four mortal hours, he had been driving along the high-roads and by-roads, searching in vain for the owners of a mongrel dog of surpassing intelligence and of a pink calico baby of surprising strength of character. A man born to country life would have had better judgment, would have begun, not ended, his wandering at the village store.

He found the chronic loafers wagging their tongues with more than usual eagerness and, even while he was fastening Yellow Dobbin to the

Bumper and Baby John

much-gnawed hitching-post, stray bits of their talk floated to his ears.

“ I tell you, ’twas a turrible thing.”

“ Awful!”

“ No wonder he took the first train back to New York.”

“ Just think how he must have felt, comin’ down here of an errand, and goin’ back to find his house burnt down, an’ his dog an’ baby burnt up!”

Mr. Ainsworth made no effort to fathom the law which regulated the prepositions of the speaker. Instead of that, he asked abruptly,—

“ What is it you’re talking about?”

His tone was sharper than he realized, and the man cast a wary glance over his shoulder.

“ Oh, just a little matter of local gossip,” he answered, in a malicious quotation of an unguarded speech which Mr. Ainsworth had once been betrayed into making.

Bumper and Baby John

“What about?” Mr. Ainsworth asked, with the petulance which too often follows a sleepless night.

Indolently the man turned to face him.

“You was interested?” he inquired blandly.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you owned the house?”

“What house?”

“The one that was burnt up.”

“I didn’t know that any house had been burned up.”

There was a pause. Then the man replied deliberately,—

“Well, they was.”

“When?”

“Yest’day noon.”

“Where?”

“In the hollow.”

“Whose house?”

“It use’ to be Marlin Paine’s; but he’d sold it to another man.”

Bumper and Baby John

“Who gets the insurance?” a bystander interpolated.

“Who knows ’twas insured?”

“Who was the man that bought it?” Mr. Ainsworth inquired impatiently.

“Man from New York. I don’t know his name.”

“Brown,” some one struck in abruptly. “John Brown was the name on his boxes. They’re over to the depot now, ready to be shipped back, and they’re all marked plain, ‘John Brown, New York City.’”

“Then he saved everything but the house?”

All along the row, the heads fell to wagging in sorrowful negation.

“I should think he didn’t,” one voice said disconsolately.

“’Twas an awful visitation,” observed another.

And a third voice added,—

Bumper and Baby John

“ First fire, and then sudden death !
It’s enough to make a man shrink.”

Mr. Ainsworth’s eyes rested upon the speaker who, to judge from the size of his coat, had already begun the process of shrinkage.

“ Is the man dead ? ” he asked.

“ No. They went back to New York, last night.”

“ They ? ”

“ Him and his wife.”

“ Then who did die ? ”

There was another disconsolate pause. Then some one answered solemnly,—

“ His dog and his little baby.”

In spite of himself, Mr. Ainsworth drew a sigh of satisfaction that at last he had laid hold upon the precious nubbin of truth.

“ But how do you know they are dead ? ” he inquired, smiling a little in his relief.

Bumper and Baby John

Five bearded faces turned upon him a stony gaze of rebuke for his flippancy.

“ Because they was burnt up.”

“ Are you sure they were burned ?”

“ They couldn't have helped it. They were locked up inside, when the house took.”

“ But they did help it.”

“ How do you know ?”

“ Because they are alive now.”

“ How do you know that ?”

“ Because I have seen them,” Mr. Ainsworth replied testily, for he preferred to be the one who asked, not answered, questions.

“ Where ?”

“ At my house.”

Then the shrinking man delivered himself of a question, and the question was a poser.

“ How do you know it was his dog and his little baby ?”

Bumper and Baby John

“ Because—because—why, because they can't belong to anybody else.”

“ How do you figure that out?” the shrinking man persisted.

“ I have been trying, all the morning, to find an owner for them.”

“ Been up the river road?”

“ No.”

“ Well, Jim Morse has got a dog and a baby.”

“ And so has Solomon Thomas.”

“ And so—”

Ruthlessly Mr. Ainsworth interrupted the fugue of babies.

“ What sort of a baby was it that the man lost?”

“ Why, a little baby.”

“ Yes; but what did it look like?”

“ I never seen it.”

“ Well, what sort of a dog was it?”

This time, to his surprise, the information was more definite.

Bumper and Baby John

“ Big and brown. Looked sort of good-natured.”

“ I always feel sorry when a good dog meets his end,” observed the shrinking man sadly.

“ But I tell you he hasn't met his end. I've got him,” Mr. Ainsworth reminded him sharply. “ What's more, I don't want to keep him. Where's the man?”

“ Gone back to New York.”

“ When?”

“ Five o'clock, last night.”

“ What for?”

“ Nothing to stay for. His house was burnt down, an' he didn't have any folks here, an' he couldn't so much as have the consolation of giving the baby a funeral. There was nothing to keep him, so he just ups an' goes back to where he come from.”

“ Where was that?”

“ New York.”

Bumper and Baby John

Mr. Ainsworth reflected that *John Brown, New York*, was scarcely a sufficiently definite form of address.

“New York is a largish city,” he observed dryly. “Didn’t he give any street and number?”

“No.”

“But his goods are to be shipped back, you said. How would they reach him?”

The rural mind works on simple lines.

“Maybe he was lottin’ on callin’ at the depot for them, himself.”

Impatiently Mr. Ainsworth twitched off his driving-gloves.

“Where’s the man who sold him the house?”

“Gone.”

“Gone where?”

“He left for Arizona, last week.”

“Who knows where he can be found?”

Bumper and Baby John

There was a long pause. It was not easy to choose between loyalty to a fellow townsman and love of gossip; but at last gossip had its way, and some one answered tersely,—

“That’s what the sheriff wants to know.”

To the manifest disappointment of the group, Mr. Ainsworth made no effort to probe the situation.

“Who was the lawyer who drew up the deeds?”

“Squire Morris, up to Overton.”

Mr. Ainsworth vouchsafed no answer. Instead, he turned on his heel and strode away in the direction of the post-office door where hung the blue bell of the telephone-station. The group looked after him with interested faces; then they backed up against the fence to await his return. When he reappeared, they hailed him eagerly.

Bumper and Baby John

“ Did you ketch him over the telephone ? ”

“ No. ” Mr. Ainsworth's tone was curt.

“ Gone out of town ? ”

“ Yes. ”

“ Where to ? ”

“ He sailed for Liverpool, this noon. ”

“ I wan' ter know. ”

There was a long silence, while Mr. Ainsworth released Yellow Dobbin from the post, stepped into his trap and gathered up the lines. Then the shrinking man made a step forward.

“ What was you calculating to do with that little baby ? ” he asked.

The whip came out of its socket with a jerk.

“ Ship it back to its parents by the first train. ”

“ Y—es, ” the speaker drew out the word doubtfully; “ but how air you going to find its payrents ? ”

CHAPTER FIVE

UPON his return home, Mr. Ainsworth drove directly to the barn. As he passed the region of the back door, he was horrified to see a brief pink calico frock flapping to and fro in the summer breeze. To his mind, it appeared to be a signal of domestication, a proof that Baby John had resolved that he would be legally adopted into that well-ordered home. Gloomily Mr. Ainsworth tossed the reins to his man and turned his face in the direction of the house.

A shriek of rapture from the back veranda heralded his appearing.

“ Pa-pa, tum! Oh-h, pa-pa, tum back! ”

Bumper and Baby John

He raised his eyes in time to see Baby John, swathed in a bath-towel, rise up and run to meet him. Then a second shriek rent the air, for Baby John, heedless of his footsteps, went sprawling over Bumper, who lay in his pathway. Baby John's red head was dangerously near the edge of the veranda, and instinctively Mr. Ainsworth sprang forward to prevent a second catastrophe. The next instant, he was chagrined to find himself clasping Baby John upside down in his arms, while Baby John, crowing with happiness, vainly sought to return his head and his heels to their more orthodox relative positions.

“He's been good as a kitten, all the while you were gone,” Mrs. Hal-ker explained resignedly. “Now I suppose there won't be anything right with him, as long as he knows you're here.”

Bumper and Baby John

Mr. Ainsworth glanced up to the shady corner where she sat sewing, surrounded by fragments of calico and of outing flannel.

“What are you doing?” he asked sharply.

“Can’t you turn that child over endwise?” she demanded. “I’m making him some clothes.”

“What for?”

“Because he hasn’t got but one dress to his back, and it isn’t decent to have the poor child rigged out in a Turkish towel,” she answered shortly, while she sheared mysterious corners and curves out of the cloth in her lap.

“But I’m not going to keep him, Halker.”

Deliberately she raised her eyes to his face.

“Oh. Aint you?”

“Certainly not.”

Bumper and Baby John

“What are you going to do with him, then?”

“Send him—why, send him to some sort of an asylum.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Halker deftly converted two pear-shaped fragments into two baggy little sleeves.

Experience had taught Mr. Ainsworth that, when Mrs. Halker took refuge in monosyllables, it was in token of disapproval. Experience had also taught him that outspoken disapproval was preferable to that which was merely implied. The one took the form of words few and forcible; the other assailed his domestic concerns and took the guise of doughnuts and of unbleached sheets.

“It is really the only thing I can do,” he murmured in self-justification, while he ducked his head sideways to escape Baby John’s assault upon his hat.

Bumper and Baby John

“ I don't know any asylums that take in dogs as big as Bumper,” she said calmly.

“ Naturally, I shall keep Bumper.”

“ And send away the baby?”

“ Yes.”

“ You'll kill him, then.”

“ Which?”

“ The dog, of course. He loves that baby for all he is worth. I'm not so sure about the baby, though he does have a cunning way with him. Just look at him now! Quiet as a mouse and sweet as sugar!”

Mr. Ainsworth made a futile attempt to look at the baby head cuddled against his stiff collar. Not being equipped with eyes mounted upon tentacles, he was forced to abandon the attempt.

“ Is he likely to go to sleep up there?” he inquired anxiously. “ I'd a little rather he didn't, you know, be-

Bumper and Baby John

cause he cries so, when one wakes him up."

"Then what do you wake him up for?" Mrs. Halker demanded.

"Oh, I really can't have him begin to take naps on my neck," Mr. Ainsworth objected hurriedly.

"Have you found out anything about him?" Mrs. Halker inquired, as she threaded her needle.

"Yes. That is, I have found out where he came from."

"Then why can't you take him back there?"

Mr. Ainsworth, baby and all, sat down heavily in a veranda chair.

"Because there isn't anything to take him back to."

"Look out! You'll tunk his head on the chair."

The warning came too late. The air resounded with the wails of Baby John, until Bumper, an anxious light



“‘IS HE LIKELY TO GO TO SLEEP UP THERE?’ HE
INQUIRED.”

Bumper and Baby John

in his eyes, rose up and came forward to investigate the situation. By degrees the wails stilled themselves. Then abruptly Baby John stuck up his head.

“Kiss!” he ordered.

Mr. Ainsworth looked inquiringly across at Mrs. Halker.

“He wants you to kiss him,” she interpreted.

Mr. Ainsworth faltered; then he gave a gingerly peck in the direction of Baby John’s nose.

Baby John’s hand disentangled itself from the fringe of the towel, and rubbed the spot where his red crown had collided with the chair.

“Kiss!” he ordered once more.

The interpreter spoke again.

“He wants you to kiss the place where he bumped him.”

Mr. Ainsworth made another gingerly peck. Then he stifled an in-

Bumper and Baby John

clination to sneeze, for the soft red hair had tickled his nose.

The third order followed.

“ Kiss Bumper!”

“ I will not!” Mr. Ainsworth responded mutinously, for Bumper’s countenance showed that he had been removing a mole from the lawn.

Two little heels flew skyward, and then descended full upon Mr. Ainsworth’s rheumatic knee.

“ Kiss Bumper!”

Completely cowed, Mr. Ainsworth planted a kiss in the air above Bumper’s ears. Then he straightened up with a jerk.

“Halker, can you have the boy ready to go, to-morrow?”

Mrs. Halker’s face turned grim.

“ It aint much to have him ready, when there’s nothing to do but iron out one calico dress and button it down the back. But do you want to

Bumper and Baby John

know what I think about it? I think, when an inscrutable Providence sees fit to put a loving little soul on your steps, it's downright disrespectful to that Providence to go packing that little soul off to an asylum, without giving his rightful owners a chance to call and get him."

"You think—?"

"That it's plain humanity to let him stay."

Mr. Ainsworth ventured one more feeble remonstrance.

"But how can we keep him, when we don't even know his name?"

Mrs. Halker drew her thumb-nail sharply down an opened seam.

"I should think you might be able to give him another that would answer for the present," she observed dryly.

However, it was young Lawrance who finally named him, and the nam-

Bumper and Baby John

ing did not occur until more than a week later.

“ You say you want a label for that kid,” he suggested, as he and his uncle entered the hall to find Baby John investigating Mr. Ainsworth’s tall trouting boots. “ Why don’t you call him Bildad, the Shuhite ?”

And Bildad accordingly he became.

The week, meanwhile, had been fraught with events, and while Baby John had been slowly worming his way into the bull’s-eye of the family circle, Bumper had shown equal industry in fighting his way up to a commanding position at the top of the family heap. There were four dogs at Riverdale Farm, two of them setters, the others a collie and a Boston terrier. All four were thoroughbreds of high degree; all four, while nominally they lived at the barn, in reality had free range in the house. Bumper

Bumper and Baby John

stopped all that. The setters yielded easily; but Bumper met with unexpected opposition on the part of the Boston terrier. Nevertheless, he succeeded in overcoming that opposition, one night in the library, although his success was impeded by Mr. Ainsworth and the tongs. Bumper's pleasure in his success, too, was impaired by the fact that young Lawrance followed the terrier back to the barn, while he himself was shut into the closet in the hall, among the boots and the raincoats.

To young Lawrance, Bumper had given his allegiance as absolutely as Baby John had yielded up his heart to young Lawrance's uncle. All the spare time Bumper could take from the care of Baby John, he was to be found lying pressed against the boy's toes, or trudging about close at his heels. It was only natural that he

Bumper and Baby John

should have taken it as a personal affront, one day, when he lumbered up the stairs in search of his idol, only to find that idol, book in hand, stretched out at full length on the sofa in the up-stairs hall, with the Boston terrier's head on his chest and the three other dogs snoozing on the floor beside him. It was only the third day after Bumper's coming, and he was hurt by Lawrance's failure to invite him, a comparative stranger, to join the party. He paused for a moment to contemplate the peaceful scene. Then the hall echoed with the clamorous shouts of the larger of the setters, as he raced and tumbled down the stairs with Bumper baying at his heels. Thirty hours later, Bumper found himself sitting among the boots in the closet. The boots were in no wise to blame for Bumper's imprisonment. Nevertheless,

Bumper and Baby John

he took it out on them with a zealous fury.

The next day, Bumper began a new campaign. Baby John, on the library floor, was contentedly dismembering the long strings of paper dolls provided by Mrs. Halker, and Bumper was free to follow his own devices. His devices led him to the veranda in time to see young Lawrance starting off for a walk in company with the Boston terrier. The Boston terrier wore a strip of clean linen around his neck and over one ear, and Bumper felt that he looked an unseemly companion for an outing along the high-road. After some slight show of reluctance, the terrier decided to remain at home, and it was Bumper who fell into step at the boy's side.

“ I don't know what we're going to do about it all,” the man at the barn reported to Mr. Ainsworth, at length.

Bumper and Baby John

“Them dogs is just getting peaked for lack of a little petting; but that great cur that belongs to the baby makes it so hot for them that they dässent say their souls are their own.”

Mr. Ainsworth sighed. He admitted to himself that the cases, dog and human, were parallel. He too was reaching the point where he dared not say his soul was his own.

“What shall we do about it?” he asked, with the faint hope that the man might suggest a way of escape for them all.

“Pizen him,” the man said tersely.

Mr. Ainsworth sighed again. It was manifestly impossible to poison the baby.

At times, too, he was not sure that he wished to make way with the child. There were hours when he felt a lazy enjoyment in watching the intent baby face and the busy baby fingers

Bumper and Baby John

on the floor at his feet. He gained a certain pleasure in seeing the sturdy wee figure plodding about the room, sitting down abruptly now and then, as he collided with a rug or a pile of books. On one or two occasions, Mr. Ainsworth had tiptoed to the door, peered out, shut and locked the door noiselessly and then, returning to the armchair, had picked up Baby John and cuddled the red head against the buttons of his waistcoat. He had listened to the steps and voices outside with the same sense of guilty pleasure he had felt when, as a boy, he had investigated the contents of his mother's jam-closet. However, Baby John would tell no tales, and Mr. Ainsworth was quite oblivious of the boyish eyes peering in at the window and taking full note of all the little hugs and pat-a-cakings that went on inside the room.

Bumper and Baby John

And then there were other hours. These were the hours when Mr. Ainsworth longed to abolish the child completely. They occurred when Baby John assisted himself to arise by means of the table-cover, and brought cover, inkstand, books, lamp and a jar of Mr. Ainsworth's choicest tobacco to the floor in an indiscriminate heap. Baby John, plastered with tobacco dust and ink, thought that the operation was exquisitely funny; but Mr. Ainsworth's sense of humor failed him utterly. It failed him again, the next day, when, too late, he found that Baby John had neglected to mention that he had used the arm-chair for a larder, and that Mrs. Halker had been too generous in her provision of bread and molasses. In fact, Mr. Ainsworth objected strenuously to the whole idea of bread and molasses. To his mind, Baby

Bumper and Baby John

John should have subsisted entirely upon shredded-wheat biscuit eaten dry over a newspaper, and upon hot beef tea administered through a tube. Baby John's table manners were rudimentary, and his new guardian longed acutely for the day when food should be given by hypodermic injections.

Moreover, bedtime came with un-failing regularity, and bedtime always marked a crisis. In vain Mrs. Halker had exhausted her list of stratagems. If Baby John fell asleep in Mr. Ainsworth's bed and waked up in Mrs. Halker's room, the house echoed with his shouts, while Bumper mingled his voice in the remonstrance. The awakening usually occurred soon after midnight. It lasted for a varying period; but Baby John's lungs were always more enduring than Mr. Ainsworth's nerves, and the contests

Bumper and Baby John

had but one ending. The door of the front room jerked open, a short command issued from the crack, and then Mrs. Halker, candle in hand, came padding along the hall and handed a bundle of flannel through the half-open door. A moment later, Baby John heaved a contented sigh, wriggled himself into a little ball and fell asleep with his right hand clasped about Mr. Ainsworth's thumb.

Matters had been going on like this for some days, when Lawrance burst into the library, one noon.

“ Found him at last!” he said jubilantly.

His uncle looked up from his newspaper.

“ Found what?”

“ Bildad's daddy.”

“ Where?”

“ 9999 Poe Avenue, Fordham, New York.”

Bumper and Baby John

“ Who told you ? ”

“ Bumper. ”

“ What do you mean, Lawrance ? ”

The boy spoke more quietly.

“ We were down by the ruins, Bumper and I, a little while ago, and Bumper saw a squirrel. He chased it to a clump of bushes. Then he started to dig it out and, first flop, he turned up this envelope. Look ! ”

Mr. Ainsworth did look. Then he reached for a telegraph-blank and a pencil. Baby John, on the floor, was playing with a Noah's ark which had mysteriously appeared from the trap, the day before. Now he held up a spotted rhinoceros.

“ See ! Pa-pa ! Bumper ! ” he remarked. “ Pitty Bumper ! ”

With the pencil in his hand, Mr. Ainsworth bent over to inspect the wild beast.

“ Yes, Bildad, nice Bumper, ” he

Bumper and Baby John

assented. "Now find a moo-cow for pa-pa." Then he gripped the telegraph-blank resolutely.

*To John Brown, 9999 Poe Avenue,
Fordham, New York.*

*Your baby is here. Come and get
him.*

*(Signed) Lawrance Ainsworth,
Riverdale Farm.*

"Tell John to harness Dobbin and take this to the village," he ordered briefly.

Four hours later, a messenger brought a yellow envelope to Riverdale Farm. Mr. Ainsworth tore it open with unwonted clumsiness. Then he gave a sigh of relief, as he read the few words it contained.

*To Lawrance Ainsworth, Riverdale
Farm.*

*No such person living at the ad-
dress you gave.*

CHAPTER SIX

“JOHN,” Wife said slowly, one night; “what if we go back home?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Father John answered dully, without raising his head from the paper spread out on the table before him.

“What if we go back to Scotland?” she repeated.

“That’s no home to us.”

“It was to our fathers, though, and you were born there,” she replied with some spirit.

Father John’s eyes wandered on down the long list of Help Wanted.

“What’s the use?” he asked.

“You must get out of this city in some way or other. The doctor said

Bumper and Baby John

that another year of it would kill you.”

“Let it,” he responded morosely.

“John!”

“I mean it. There’s no place for me in the world. Nothing but bad luck comes my way, and there’s no use in trying to deny it.”

Wife bit her under lip for a moment.

“Things may take a turn,” she suggested then.

“What if they do? They can’t give back Baby John.”

“No,” she assented drearily.

“And they can’t give us back our money. Not that the money counts beside Baby John; but at least it could take us out of this hole.” He glanced angrily about the mean little tenement. “When I think of that Fordham cottage, and of all that has happened since we lived there, it

Bumper and Baby John

seems like another world, or else as if I were in a horrible dream.”

Wife rose and stood with her arm resting across his shoulders.

“ I know, John. And don't you remember how, when we both had been off to work, Baby John and Bumper always heard our step on the walk and ran to the window to watch for us ?”

“ Don't !” he said fiercely.

The tears were sliding down Wife's cheeks, by this time.

“ And how he used to make us kiss Bumper ?” she suggested again.

And again he said fiercely,—

“ Don't !”

There was a long silence. Then Wife spoke once more.

“ John, I am in earnest about our going to Scotland. Of course, it won't be home to us. I never lived there. You were only two years old, when your father came over. But my

Bumper and Baby John

father's people are all farmers. They could find you work, and I know they would. There is nothing to keep us here. Baby John is gone; Bumper is gone. There's no work for you and, even if there were, you're not strong enough now to do it. It is time we moved on to a new home. Perhaps there, where everything is strange, we may not miss Baby John quite so much."

"I don't think it would make much difference," Father John said brokenly. "He was growing cunning, every day of his life, and then he was taken away, all in a minute. Wife, what had we done to deserve it?"

Resolutely she took the paper from under his hand, and turned to the shipping news.

"To-day is the third of September," she said. "Could we sail, on

Bumper and Baby John

the twelfth? That would give time for us to send a letter ahead of us.”

“ We’ve no money for the passage.”

“ We will go in the steerage, and the furniture would sell for something.”

“ Not enough.”

Crossing the room, she opened a bureau-drawer and took out the few poor little trinkets he had given her before her marriage.

“ These would help,” she said quietly. “ If the real need came, I would sell my ring, too. You and I don’t need a wedding-ring to look at, John.”

A week later, Father John came home to find her with her hat on.

“ I am going up to the cottage,” she explained briefly. “ I want to see it once more. The nasturtium-bed must be in blossom, and perhaps the new

Bumper and Baby John

people will let me get a few seeds from it. Do you remember how Baby John lay on the walk and watched you, while you were digging it up, and how Bumper persisted in lying in the bed? We must have driven him out more than a hundred times.”

The nasturtium-patch was a carpet of orange and yellow and scarlet blossoms. With the young girl whom she had found alone in the house, Wife bent over them lovingly, breaking off the dead leaves as tenderly as if they had covered the last resting-place of Baby John. In all truth, many a memory of the child did lie buried there.

The girl, meanwhile, was busily picking a huge bunch of blossoms which she gave into Wife's keeping. Then together the two women fell to hunting the ripened seeds.

Bumper and Baby John

“And you used to live here?” she asked.

“Yes. We moved away, last June.”

The girl’s hand stopped in mid-air.

“Was your name Mrs. John Brown?”

Wife was too busy with the flowers to resent the use of the past tense which somehow implied that she had ceased to exist.

“Yes,” she answered listlessly.

“Did you ever get your telegram?”

“What telegram?”

“The one that came here for you.”

“When?” Wife’s tone was sharper.

“I don’t remember just when it was,” the girl said musingly. “It was sometime early in July, I know.”

“What was it?”

“We didn’t open it. Mother just told the boy that no such person lived here.”

Bumper and Baby John

The flowers dropped from Wife's relaxed fingers.

“ Oh, I must see that telegram!” she wailed. “ It might have told us something that would have helped us to live.”

The words were scarcely coherent; but the girl understood their meaning.

“ Can't you give me your address,” she said kindly; “ the one where you are living now? When my father comes home, he may know some way of finding out where the telegram came from.”

That same afternoon, another crisis was shaping itself at Riverdale Farm.

All summer long, an editor friend had been urging Mr. Ainsworth to write for him an essay upon Farming as a Fine Art; and, all summer long, Mr. Ainsworth had been putting off the day of toil. That morning at

Bumper and Baby John

breakfast, however, the inspiration had come upon him. As he had left the table, he had ordered Mrs. Halker to array herself and Baby John for a drive which should last till noon; then he had shut himself up in his library in company with his inkstand.

Ink and ideas both had flowed so freely that Mr. Ainsworth had been astonished to hear the call to lunch. Half dazed by his morning of hard, concentrated work, he had piled his manuscript on the table and hurried away to join his nephew in the dining-room. Once there, his nephew rudely dispelled his ideals of Farming as a Fine Art, by reporting the serious illness of one of the best cows he had ever owned. After such tidings as that, lunch was bound to be a comfortless and hasty meal. Mr. Ainsworth swallowed the last of his coffee, and then vanished in the direction of the

Bumper and Baby John

barn, quite oblivious of the fact that he had left the library door invitingly ajar.

An hour later, Baby John, fresh from his nap, came stubbing along the hall and paused at the library door.

“Pa-pa-pa-pa?” he queried coaxingly.

There was no answer. Baby John repeated his query.

“Pa-pa?”

Then he pushed the door wide open.

“Tum in, Bumper,” he said graciously, and, side by side, the two comrades entered the room.

First of all, Baby John made a complete tour of the apartment, to assure himself that Mr. Ainsworth was not lurking unseen in some corner. Then, returning to the armchair, he painfully mounted to its capacious depths, grunting and stretching and rolling

Bumper and Baby John

backward a time or two in the process. For a while, he was content to sit quiet and play peek-a-boo with Bumper over the broad plush arms. Just as that amusement was beginning to lose interest for them both, Baby John's eyes lighted with a new idea. Scrambling upright in the chair, he reached the table and laid violent hands upon the manuscript. Then, clasping it in his arms, he sat down again with a vigorous chug.

“ See, Bumper! See! Pitty! Bumper, see! ”

Bumper made a pretended snap at the single sheet of paper waved before his nose, and Baby John giggled gleefully. The sheet waved again and, this time, Bumper's teeth shut over the larger part of it. Baby John's laugh rang out anew, and he gripped the paper sturdily. Bumper let go, bit at it for a second time, worried

Bumper and Baby John

it and then, lifting his lips daintily, let his teeth meet and slowly tear the page to ribbons. Baby John threw the ruin to the floor and began on a second sheet, then on a third. Bumper's spirits rose, as page after page was submitted to him for inspection. For the hour, he felt himself a puppy again, and he fell to frisking clumsily about, tipping over the shovel and poker, and sending the contents of the waste-paper basket half across the room. Now and then he barked explosively; but the remainder of the household was at the bedside of the dying cow, and there was no one to hear or to heed. At last he suddenly discovered that he was a middle-aged dog, after all, and he sat himself down on his haunches to rest, though he continued to watch Baby John with gleaming eyes and to laugh at him with a lolling tongue.



"BUMPER FELT HIMSELF A PUPPY AGAIN."

Bumper and Baby John

But Baby John had no intention of being tired, so long as those crackling papers were still in his lap. Bumper had failed him; but the scattered fragments on the rug had suggested a new plan to his mind, and with busy fingers he fell to tearing the remaining pages to scraps which would have been useful only for a paper chase.

“Bildad!”

Baby John, somewhere in the recesses of his anatomy, owned a conscience. He also owned a memory, and that memory assured him that torn-up paper and spankings possessed some hidden bond of connection. He looked up hastily to see Mr. Ainsworth's tired face in the doorway. He cocked his head on one side, and determined to brazen out the situation.

“Pitty pa-pa!” he cooed blandly.

Mr. Ainsworth glanced from the

Bumper and Baby John

empty spot on the table to the overfull spots on the floor. Then he took a step forward.

“Uncle Larry!”

He turned sharply.

“What?”

“Here’s a telegram.”

Mr. Ainsworth jerked it open and read the few words inside,—

The present address of John Brown is 1234 Avenue X, New York City.

“Lawrance!” he called.

“Yes.”

“Tell the messenger to wait for the reply.”

Lawrance rushed out of the room, and Mr. Ainsworth stalked over the rustling fragments of his essay, seized the telegraph-blanks that always lay ready on his table and, without a glance at Baby John, dashed off his message,—

Bumper and Baby John

To John Brown, 1234 Avenue X, New York City.

You must take your confounded baby out of this house before to-morrow night.

(Signed) L. Ainsworth.

A vindictive blot punctuated the close of the document. Then Mr. Ainsworth lifted up his voice and called for Mrs. Halker.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FROM the front steps, Bumper saw them coming. He lifted his drowsy head from his paws and tilted up his ears inquiringly at sight of the dusty wayfarers turning in at the drive. Then he rose to his feet by the simple method of sliding his fore-paws down for a couple of steps and bringing his weight to bear upon them, while the rest of his anatomy unfolded itself. His vigorous yawn ended in a "Wow-ow?" of inquiry, and he shambled off down the drive.

"Bumper!" Father John said softly.

The sound that followed was neither bark nor howl. It was the crying of a faithful old heart almost ready

Bumper and Baby John

to break from sheer happiness. Straight as an arrow's flight, Bumper flew at Father John, reared himself to the full of his great height and then plunged forward to rest his paws on Father John's shoulders and lick away and away again the salty drops on Father John's cheeks.

Father John and Wife had come in hot haste, for the telegraph-operator was a literal-minded man and, in forwarding the telegram, he had carefully included the erased word. Accordingly, Father John and Wife had travelled half the night, and had spent the other half sitting on the extreme edge of a baggage-truck at the junction, waiting until the morning train should be made up. A sleepless night or two mattered not to them, now that Baby John was alive. A few dollars of debt counted for nothing, when Baby John must be

Bumper and Baby John

rescued from the arms of an ogre who called him "confounded" and signed himself L. Ainsworth. All night long, they had talked of nothing else, wondering if he had had proper food, wondering whether the pink calico frock had survived the ravages of the summer, wondering, in short, whether or not he had been kindly treated.

With their hearts thumping hard against the bottoms of their throats, they drew near the veranda. Then, as they started to mount the steps, Wife gave a little choking sob. Baby John was before her, pink and hearty and happy, his red curls brushed until they shone like burnished copper, and his chubby body clothed in an embroidered frock the like of which she had never seen before, outside a shop window. From one fat hand, a doll dangled by its flaxen hair; the other hand was buried in the iron-gray

Bumper and Baby John

whiskers of the man who held him.

“Baby John!” Wife cried out.

Baby John always turned coy at the approach of strangers. Now he buried his face in the waistcoat of the man; then, turning his head slightly, he brought one eye out of eclipse and peeped up at the excited face before him.

The color left Mr. Ainsworth's cheeks. Gathering Baby John into the curve of his arm, he rose to what seemed to Wife an unconscionable height.

“I beg your pardon?” he observed majestically.

Wife faltered, as she looked up at the threatening figure on the step above her.

“We—we've come for the baby,” she said nervously.

Mr. Ainsworth backed off a step or two.

Bumper and Baby John

“ Well, you won't get him,” he said pugnaciously.

“ Why not?” Father John demanded.

“ Because I'm saving him for his parents.”

“ But we are his parents.”

Mr. Ainsworth sat down again and shifted Baby John back to his knee.

“ Impossible,” he said testily.

Father John took a step forward.

“ I should like to know why.”

“ Because his real parents can't get here till four o'clock,” Mr. Ainsworth answered triumphantly.

Father John turned vaguely towards Wife.

“ But—but we are here,” he muttered.

Wife came to his support.

“ Are you Mr. Ainsworth?”

“ Yes.”

“ Mr. L. Ainsworth?”

Bumper and Baby John

“ Yes.”

“ Then that is our baby.”

“ Prove it!” Mr. Ainsworth demanded, with a pugnacity born of an absolutely sleepless night.

Wife fumbled for a moment in the folds of her limp blouse. Then she drew out a sheet of yellow paper, worn thin on the folds.

“ There is your telegram,” she said quietly.

As a matter of mere form, Mr. Ainsworth glanced at the telegram. The restored word struck him like a blow, and his face grew even more forbidding.

“ That counts for nothing. There’s no telling how you came by it. Bildad’s real parents—”

“ Bildad?”

“ Yes, I said Bildad,” Mr. Ainsworth repeated stonily. “ Bildad’s real parents could not reach here till

Bumper and Baby John

afternoon. I looked up the trains to make sure. Still, if you insist, we can leave it to the baby."

Wife bit her lip, and her eyes blazed with sudden fury. Then she controlled herself. Drawing near, she held out her hands invitingly.

"Come, Baby John, come to mamma," she urged.

Baby John looked at her, cocked up his red head and sat very still, while by degrees the dimples came into his cheeks and his lips spread into the beginnings of a smile. Wife stood waiting, scarcely daring to breathe. Then there came a thin gurgle of laughter, and Baby John ducked his head into the hollow of Mr. Ainsworth's arm.

"Baby John! Oh, Baby John, come to mamma!" Wife implored him.

Stooping, she tried to take him into her arms; but Baby John drew back,



"BABY JOHN! OH, BABY JOHN, COME TO MAMMA!"

Bumper and Baby John

launched a terrified kick in her direction, clasped his arms around Mr. Ainsworth's neck and, his face pressed against Mr. Ainsworth's left ear, let off a succession of shrieks which nearly wrecked the ear-drums of his protector.

“There, you see!” he said triumphantly. “The child never saw you before. You are a pair of imposters after blackmail. You'd better take yourselves off, before I have you arrested.”

“But he is my baby,” Wife wailed. “Give him to me. He is mine, mine, our Baby John.”

“Yes, he acts like it.”

“But look at Bumper,” Father John interposed. “He knows us.”

“So do I know you. But I'm not talking about the dog.”

“He has twelve teeth,” Wife said faintly.

Bumper and Baby John

“ Yes, twelve, plus nineteen. He had lost one of his front teeth, when he came to me.”

Wife looked mystified.

“ Baby John lost a tooth?”

“ No; Bumper had.”

“ But I said Baby John had twelve.”

With a remorseless and triumphant finger, Mr. Ainsworth pried Baby John's mouth open.

“ He has sixteen. You can see for yourself.”

There was a pause. Then Father John whispered in Wife's ear, and once more she began fumbling in her blouse. This time, she drew out a worn effigy of Mary and her Lamb.

“ See, Baby John! Pitty doddy,” she said.

With the gracious dignity of a little king, Baby John bent forward, took the effigy and then cast it far from

Bumper and Baby John

him. Bumper went lumbering after it, caught it and brought it back to the foot of the steps where he lay down and proceeded to add it to the rest of his breakfast. Baby John, meanwhile, was dangling the flaxen-haired doll before Mr. Ainsworth's eyes.

“Pa-pa! Pitty dolly! Pitty pa-pa!” he babbled discursively.

Suddenly Wife was seized with an inspiration.

“He wore a pink calico dress and cut-over stockings, when he came here,” she burst out, in the shrill accent of despair; “and his inside petticoat had a darn a finger long in the front breadth.”

Then, all at once, Mr. Ainsworth quailed. It seemed to him that the ground was slipping from beneath his feet. He sought the nearest support.

Bumper and Baby John

“Halker!” he called, and the windows throbbed an echo to his powerful voice.

Once again Mrs. Halker came, running, just as she had run in that summer twilight, two full months before.

“Halker,” Mr. Ainsworth said sternly; “these people say Bildad is their child. I don’t believe it. The woman is trying to tell what clothes the child wore, when he came to us. I don’t know what she is talking about. You listen to her and, if she makes a single mistake, call John and have him take them straight to the lock-up. Now, go ahead.”

Once more Wife began her recital of colors and fabrics, of patches and of darns. Mr. Ainsworth, meanwhile, sat with his eyes glued to Mrs. Halker’s face and he saw her give a slight nod at each item of the report.

Bumper and Baby John

“Yes,” she said reluctantly at the end; “them’s it.”

There was a long pause, when it seemed as if no one of the party breathed quite freely. Even Bumper stopped chewing at Mary’s head and turned his blunt nose upward, as though he were waiting for the next word. Then slowly, reluctantly, Mr. Ainsworth arose. He stood for a moment with his face buried in Baby John’s stiff little white frock; then he held out the child to Wife.

“Take him,” he said briefly. “He’s yours.”

Only Baby John’s sobbing breaths broke the silence that followed. The silence lasted for a long, long time. Then Father John beckoned to his wife, and they turned to go away.

The crunching of the gravel beneath their heels aroused Mr. Ains-

Bumper and Baby John

worth from his apathy. He sprang forward.

“Where are you going?” he shouted.

Father John turned around in astonishment.

“Why, back to New York.”

“What for?”

“Because we are going to sail for Scotland, to-morrow.”

Regardless of his years, Mr. Ainsworth took the steps at a bound.

“To Scotland?”

“Yes.”

“And take Bildad?”

“Bil—? Oh, yes, of course.”

“The—” Mr. Ainsworth controlled himself with a mighty effort. “What are you going to Scotland for, I’d like to know?” he demanded a little more quietly.

“To get work.”

“What kind of work?”

Bumper and Baby John

In her turn, Wife faced about. She spoke with a certain dignity.

“ My husband is not strong enough to work in a city. The doctor told him that his only chance was to go to the country and work on a farm. We came here to live, and our house burned up. Then we went back to New York, and he has done his best to find something to do; but it was of no use. Now we are going to our people in Scotland. They are farmers, and they will be sure to find work for him.”

Mr. Ainsworth sat down on the lower step. All at once he felt a little sickness creeping over him, and his legs were strangely unsteady. It passed as quickly as it came, however, and, when he looked up, his eyes were shining.

“ If that is all you want, you needn't go to Scotland,” he said

Bumper and Baby John

shortly. "Before the week is out, I shall need a new man to help around the barn. Never mind the wages now; they'll be all right. Halker, take these people around to the kitchen and cook them something hot for breakfast." Then he held out his arms. "Come, Bildad, come to pa-pa," he added coaxingly.

Baby John nearly always hyphenated the word into Pa-pa.

And, with Baby John riding high on his shoulder and stretching out his pink hands to Bumper, who trudged away at the heels of Father John, Mr. Ainsworth went up the steps and vanished inside the house.

THE END.





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00020733858

