

## **The Curious Case of Benjamin Button**

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

(Adapted book. Pre-Intermediate level)

### **Part 1**

*“I can’t say exactly who I am,” the old man replied. “I was only born a few hours ago. But I know my last name is Button.”*

Our story starts in the summer of 1860, in the busy city of Baltimore. At that time, babies were usually born at home, not in hospitals. But young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button had different ideas. They wanted their first baby to arrive in a hospital.

Was this one of the reasons for the strange history that I am going to tell you? I can only describe what happened. Then you can decide.

The Roger Buttons were important people in Baltimore society. They knew every good family in town, and everyone knew them. This was their first baby, so Mr. Button was naturally nervous. He was hoping for a boy so he could send him to Yale College in Connecticut. Mr. Roger Button was a student at Yale when he was a young man. Of course, he wanted his son to follow him there.

The great day arrived. Mr. Button hurried to the hospital one morning in September for news of his wife and baby.

When he was close to the Maryland Private Hospital, he saw the family doctor on the front steps. There was a serious look on the doctor’s face and this worried Mr. Button.

He ran toward the doctor.

“Doctor Keene!” he called. “Oh, Doctor Keene!”

The doctor heard him, and turned around. He saw Mr. Button, and a curious look came over his face.

“What happened?” asked Mr. Button. “What was it? How is she? A boy?

What ...?”

“Talk sense!” said the doctor, a little angrily.

“Is the child born?” asked Mr. Button.

Doctor Keene didn’t answer immediately. “Yes,” he said slowly. “A strange birth.”

“Is my wife all right?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Go and see,” replied Doctor Keene. He still seemed strangely angry.

“Terrible! One more case like this will finish me in medicine.”

“What’s the matter? Is there a problem with the baby?” asked Mr. Button.

“Go and see them,” said Doctor Keene. “And then get yourself another

doctor. I brought you into the world, young man, and I've looked after your family for forty years, but this is the end! I don't want to see you or any of your relatives ever again! Goodbye!"

And without another word, he turned and walked away.

Mr. Button stood there on the sidewalk, feeling very worried and afraid.

"Something terrible has happened," he thought. Now, he didn't want to go into the hospital. But he walked slowly up the steps and through the entrance doors.

A nurse was sitting behind a desk.

"Good morning," she said, smiling.

"Good morning. I- I am Mr. Roger Button."

A look of fear came over the girl's face. She stood up, clearly planning to run away. Then she calmed herself and sat down again.

"I want to see my child," said Mr. Button.

The nurse gave a little scream. "Oh, of course! Upstairs! Go upstairs!" she said quickly.

She pointed to the stairs and Mr. Button turned away from the desk. He went upstairs and found another nurse. She was carrying a large metal bowl.

"I'm Mr. Button," he began nervously. "I want to see my ..."

Clank! The nurse dropped the bowl. It fell down the stairs, one step at a time, and landed with a loud noise at the bottom.

"I want to see my child!" Mr. Button shouted.

"All right, Mr. Button," the nurse agreed in a quiet voice. "All right. But it's terrible! We're all feeling - well, nobody will want to use the hospital again after this ..."

"Hurry!" Mr. Button cried. "I can't wait any longer."

"Come this way, Mr. Button."

Mr. Button followed the nurse. There was a sound of babies crying. This grew louder until they stopped outside a room. The nurse pushed the door open and they went in. Around the walls were white cribs, each one with a name tied to the top.

"Well," said Mr. Button, "which is mine?"

"There!" said the nurse.

Mr. Button's eyes followed her pointing finger. And this is what he saw. An old man of about seventy years old sat in one of the cribs. His hair was almost white, and he had a long, gray beard. His feet hung over one end of the crib, and his head and arms hung over the other. He was wearing only a large, white blanket. He looked at Mr. Button with a question in his eyes.

"Am I crazy?" Mr. Button shouted angrily at the nurse. "Is this some terrible hospital joke?"

"It doesn't seem like a joke to us," said the nurse angrily. "And I don't know

if you're crazy or not. But there's no mistake. That is your child."

The old man looked calmly at the nurse, and then at Mr. Button.

"Are you my father?" he asked. "Because if you are, please get me out of this place. It's very uncomfortable."

"Where did you come from? Who are you?" screamed Mr. Button.

"I can't say exactly who I am," the old man replied. "I was only born a few hours ago. But I know my last name is Button."

"You're lying! I don't believe you!"

The old man turned to the nurse.

"That's a nice way to welcome a new-born baby," he said. "Please tell him he's wrong."

"You're wrong, Mr. Button," said the nurse coldly. "This is your child and you'll have to make the best of it. We want you to take him home as soon as possible. Some time today."

"Home?" said Mr. Button. "Take him home?"

"Yes, we can't have him here."

"I'll be glad to get home," said the old man. "I can't sleep because of all the crying in here. And I asked for something to eat and they brought me a bottle of milk!"

Mr. Button sat on a seat next to his son and put his head in his hands.

"What will people say? What must I do?" he said to himself quietly.

"You'll have to take him home," said the nurse. "Immediately!"

Mr. Button suddenly imagined himself walking through the town with the old man at his side. What could he say to people? "This is my son, born early this morning." He thought of those people looking in surprise at the old man next to him.

The nurse was watching him impatiently.

"Don't sit there feeling sorry for yourself," she said.

"I'm not going to walk home in this blanket," said the old man suddenly.

"Babies always have blankets," replied the nurse.

"Well, this baby's not going to wear this blanket any longer. In a few minutes I'm going to take it off."

"Keep it on! Keep it on!" said Mr. Button, hurriedly. He turned to the nurse. "What shall I do?"

"Go down town and buy your son some clothes," the nurse told him.

As Mr. Button left the room, his son called to him. "And a hat, Father. I want a hat. Maybe I need some glasses, too."

Mr. Button shut the door hard behind him, and all the babies started crying again.

He went to the nearest clothes store.

"I want to buy some clothes for my son," he said to the salesclerk.

“How old is your child, sir?”

“About six hours old,” answered Mr. Button, without thinking.

“Babies’ clothes are at the back of the store.”

“I don’t think - he’s an unusually large child. Very large.”

“They have the largest babies’ sizes.”

“Where are the boys’ clothes?” asked Mr. Button. He felt nervous. He was sure that the salesclerk already knew his terrible secret.

“Boys’ clothes are right here.”

Mr. Button stopped and thought for a minute. He didn’t like the idea of dressing his son in men’s clothes. Maybe a very large boy’s suit? Then he could cut his son’s beard off and color his hair brown. He looked around. But he couldn’t see anything to fit the new-born Button.

“How old did you say your son was?” asked the salesclerk curiously.

“He’s - he’s sixteen.”

“I’m so sorry, sir. I thought you said six hours. You’ll find something for the young man in the next room.”

Mr. Button turned away. Then he stopped and pointed his finger at a suit in the shop window.

“There!” he said. “I’ll take that suit.”

The salesclerk looked at the suit in surprise.

“But - that’s for a child to wear to a party, sir. It’s not for everyday wear, it’s a costume.”

“It’s what I want.”

The surprised salesclerk sold him the costume.

Back at the hospital, Mr. Button almost threw the package at his son.

“Here are your clothes,” he said. “Put them on.”

The old man untied the package and looked at the suit.

“I don’t want to look stupid,” he said.

“I’m the one who looks stupid,” said Mr. Button angrily. “Put them on or - or I’ll - I’ll hit you.” That sounded strange. But wasn’t it what fathers said to their sons?

“All right, Father. You’ve lived longer than me, you know best. I’ll do what you want.”

“And hurry.”

“I’m hurrying, Father.”

When his son was dressed, Mr. Button looked at him unhappily. It wasn’t good. The pants were pink, the socks were green, and the white shirt had a belt around the waist. Hanging down over the front of the shirt was his son’s long, gray beard.

“Wait!” he said.

Mr. Button picked up a hospital knife and cut off most of the beard. But even this didn't help much. The watery eyes, the yellow teeth ... You could see that this was an old man.

But Mr. Button held out his hand.

"Come along!" he said.

His son took his hand and they walked together from the hospital.

"What are you going to call me, Father? 'Baby' until you think of something better?" the old man asked.

"I don't know," said Mr. Button coldly. "I think we'll call you Methuselah."

Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button didn't call their baby Methuselah - they called him Benjamin. They cut his hair short and colored it brown. They shaved his beard every day and they ordered very large baby suits for him. They wanted Benjamin to look like a baby, and they tried very hard. But the baby nurse took one look and left the house immediately.

At first, on Mr. Button's orders, his son was only given warm milk. But this didn't please Benjamin, so Mr. Button finally changed his mind. After that, Benjamin was given bread and butter and other soft food. Mr. Button brought home toys for babies, and Benjamin tried to play with them. But the toy trains and animals didn't interest him. Soon, he found other things in the house that he liked better.

One day when Mr. Button came home, his cigarettes weren't in their usual place. He looked everywhere. Later that evening, he walked into his son's bedroom. The room was full of smoke and Benjamin was trying to hide a cigarette.

Mr. Button was angry. He knew that he should punish his son. But he found that he couldn't hit him.

"You won't grow," he told Benjamin. "Smoking is very bad for children."

He continued to bring home toys, but Benjamin wasn't interested. When he was alone in the house, he often took books from the shelves downstairs. Then he read them all afternoon in his room. His toys stayed in a corner of the room, and he never played with them.

Soon, everybody in Baltimore knew about Benjamin. Most people didn't know what to say to Mr. and Mrs. Button.

"He looks very much like his grandfather," some kind people said.

This was of course true, but Mr. and Mrs. Button weren't pleased and Benjamin's grandfather was very angry.

Small children were brought to the house to play with Benjamin. He tried to be interested in their games, but it wasn't easy for him. Their games were very simple baby games, and Benjamin wanted more difficult activities. One day, he broke a kitchen window with a stone when he was playing with some of the children. It was an accident but the boys were all afraid. But Mr. Button wasn't angry. Secretly, he was very pleased.

“Accidents happen when small boys are playing,” he told his wife. “You see, Benjamin is only a child, like every other small boy.”

After this success, Benjamin tried to break something every day, to please his parents.

After a difficult start, Benjamin and his grandfather became very good friends. They sat together for hours, talking about news from the town or stories in the newspapers. Benjamin started to feel more comfortable with his grandfather than with his parents.

Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button always seemed a little afraid of their son. They told him what to do. But they often called him “Mr.”

Benjamin was as surprised as everyone by the age of his mind and body. He didn’t understand it. He read books about medicine but he never found another case like his.

Because Mr. Roger Button wanted him to play with other boys, Benjamin tried to do this. But he couldn’t run with them and football was too hard for him. His body was too old. He was afraid of getting hurt.

The other boys couldn’t understand Benjamin. They didn’t know his age. They thought he was an old man. It seemed strange to them to play games with him.

When he was five, Benjamin was sent to kindergarten. There he learned to stick pieces of colored paper together. He made things from old boxes and he drew pictures. But he was bored and he often went to sleep in class.

His teacher was worried by this. She wrote to his parents, and soon Benjamin was taken out of school.

The Buttons explained this to their friends.

“We think he’s still too young for school,” they said.

By the time he was twelve years old, his parents were used to him. Most of the time, they didn’t think he was different from other children. Then, one day, Benjamin looked in the mirror and discovered something very surprising.

“My hair,” he thought. “It was white under the brown color, but now it looks gray. And my skin seems smoother and healthier. Can it be true? Is it possible ...?”

He went to his father.

“I’m grown-up,” he said. “I want to wear long pants.”

His father thought about it.

“Well,” he said finally, “I don’t know. Fourteen is the usual age for putting on long pants. You’re only twelve.”

“But you must agree that I’m big for my age,” said Benjamin.

“Oh, I’m not sure about that,” said Mr. Button. “I was as big as you when I was twelve.”

This wasn’t true, but Mr. Button wanted to believe it. He wanted nothing more than an ordinary son.

Finally, Benjamin's parents agreed to his request.

"But you must continue coloring your hair," said Mr. Button. "And you must try harder to play with boys of your own age."

"Yes, Father."

"And there's one more thing, Benjamin. You mustn't wear your glasses in the street."

"No, Father."

"Then I will buy you a suit with long pants," said Mr. Button.

Benjamin was very happy.

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The years passed. Benjamin became younger as he grew older. When he was eighteen, he looked like a man of fifty. He had more hair and it was dark gray. His voice was deeper and stronger. So, his father sent him to Connecticut to take the entrance tests for Yale College. Benjamin passed all the tests and became a freshman.

Three days later, he received a letter from Mr. Hart, one of the professors. "Please come to see me today," the letter said. "We must discuss the times of your classes."

Benjamin looked in the mirror. His hair needed more brown color, but he didn't have time to go to the store. He had to go to Mr. Hart as he was.

"Good morning," said Mr. Hart politely. "You've come to discuss your son."

"Well, my name's Button ..." began Benjamin.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Button. I've asked Benjamin to see me today. He'll probably be here soon."

"That's me!" said Benjamin quickly. "I'm a freshman."

"What?"

"I'm a freshman."

"You are joking, of course."

"No. I'm Benjamin Button."

Mr. Hart looked at the information on his desk.

"Mr. Benjamin Button's age is, I believe, eighteen."

"That's my age," said Benjamin.

Mr. Hart looked at him. "You surely don't think I believe that?"

Benjamin smiled. "I am eighteen," he repeated.

Mr. Hart pointed to the door. "Get out," he said. "Get out of this college and out of town. You are a crazy, dangerous man."

"I'm eighteen."

Mr. Hart opened the door.

"That's terrible!" he shouted. "A man of your age trying to come here as a freshman! Eighteen years old, are you? Well, I'll give you eighteen minutes to get

out of town.”.

Benjamin walked slowly out of the room. Some students were waiting outside and they watched him curiously. Benjamin turned around and faced Mr. Hart again.

“I am eighteen years old,” he repeated.

The group of students laughed. Benjamin walked away.

Benjamin started to walk back to the railroad station. But the students outside Mr. Hart’s room were telling other students about the crazy man. Soon, everyone in Yale knew the story.

Benjamin started to realize that people were following him. At first there were only two or three people. Then more joined the group. Soon, there were a lot of students behind him, and the college football team came, too. They were all laughing and shouting at Benjamin.

“He thought the college was an old people’s home!”

“He’s a really good student for his age!”

“Go to Harvard!”

Benjamin walked faster, and soon he was running. When he was safely on the train for Baltimore, he put his head out of the window.

“I will go to Harvard!” he shouted at them. “You’ll be sorry for this one day!” “Ha-ha-ha!” laughed the students.

Benjamin learned an important lesson that day. Sometimes it was better not to be completely honest.

But it was also the biggest mistake that Yale College ever made.

## **Part 2**

*He compared his face with a photograph taken before the war.*

*There was no question about it: he was still getting younger.*

In 1880, Benjamin Button was twenty years old. On his birthday, he started working for his father at Roger Button & Company. In the same year, Benjamin began going out to social activities. His father wanted to take him out to dances in the town, and they spent many evenings together.

Roger Button was now fifty, and he and his son were friends. Benjamin had stopped coloring his hair (it was still a little gray) and he and his father looked about the same age. People often thought they were brothers.

One night in August, they dressed in their evening suits and drove out to a dance at the Shevlins’ country house, a few miles outside of Baltimore. It was a beautiful evening. The moon was a great, round ball in the sky. They drove through fields of flowering plants, green and silver and sweet-smelling in the warm night air. The sky above them was full of stars.



But Benjamin's father didn't seem to notice the wonderful evening. He was a practical man.

"There's a great future for our business," Roger Button said. "But old men like me can't learn new tricks. That great future is there for energetic young people like you."

Far up the road, they saw the lights of the Shevlins' country house, and soon they arrived at the front of the building.

Benjamin looked out the window at other arriving guests. A lady and an older man waited at the front steps. Then another, very beautiful young lady joined them.

Benjamin sat up straight. He suddenly felt different. His face became red, and there was an unusual noise in his ears. It was first love.

The girl's hair was silver under the moon, and a pale gold color under the gas lights. She was wearing a yellow and black dress, and her small, pretty feet were in gold dance shoes.

Roger Button turned to his son.

"That's young Hildegarde Moncrief, and her parents," he said quietly.

"A pretty little thing," said Benjamin, trying to sound uninterested. Then he added, "Dad, maybe you could introduce me to her."

They walked across the drive. Hildegarde Moncrief was now at the center of a group of people.

"Miss Moncrief," said Benjamin, after the introduction, "will you be very kind and dance with me?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'll be happy to dance with you later this evening."

Benjamin thanked her and, with difficulty, walked away. He seemed to be walking on air.

Inside the house, Benjamin stood at the side of the room and hours seemed to pass. He watched with murderous eyes as the young men of Baltimore danced with Hildegarde Moncrief. What stupid young boys they were - he hated them.

Benjamin didn't look at any other girls. For him, Hildegarde was the only girl in the room. He couldn't enjoy the evening until she danced with him.

When his time came, he took her hand. They walked onto the dance floor. In that minute, he felt that now his life was beginning.

Hildegarde looked up at him with bright blue eyes.

"You and your brother arrived here at the same time as us, didn't you?" Benjamin didn't reply immediately.

"She thinks we're brothers," he thought. "Is it best to tell her now?"

But he remembered that day at Yale, and the lesson that he learned there. He decided not to say anything.

"If I tell her, she won't like me," he thought. "And I want her to like me very

much. I'll tell her later. Maybe.”

So he smiled, listened, and was very happy.

“I like men of your age,” Hildegard told him. “Young boys are so silly. They tell me how much wine they drink at college. They talk about how much money they lose at cards. It all means nothing! Men of your age are more serious. And they understand women and enjoy their company.”

Benjamin suddenly wanted Hildegard to marry him. It was difficult not to ask her there and then.

“You're the best age,” she continued. “Fifty. Twenty-five is too young. Men of thirty work too much. At forty, men tell endless stories. Sixty is - oh, sixty is too close to seventy. But fifty is perfect. I love fifty.”

As they danced, Benjamin wanted to be fifty more than anything in the world.

“I've always said that,” Hildegard continued. “It's better to marry a man of fifty. He'll look after his wife. If a woman marries a man of thirty, she'll have to look after him”

For the rest of the evening, Benjamin was lost in his own world. Hildegard gave him two more dances. They discovered that they agreed on all the important subjects of that time. He asked her to go driving with him on the following Sunday. Then they would discuss all these subjects more.

Benjamin and his father drove home in the early morning, before the sun came up. Roger Button was talking about business again. It was his favorite subject. But Benjamin wasn't listening.

“... so what do you think about that?” Roger Button asked him.

“Love,” replied Benjamin, quietly.

“Love? What do you mean?” his father said. “How will love solve the problem of our costs?”

Benjamin didn't understand, and Roger Button had to explain everything again. And then the sun suddenly came over the hill, and a beautiful new day began.

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Six months later, Benjamin and Miss Hildegard Moncrief became engaged.

Her father wasn't happy about this. He thought that Benjamin was too old for his daughter. The excited people of Baltimore society suddenly remembered the old man brought home from the hospital years ago. The subject was discussed in every home. Was Benjamin really Roger Button's father? Or maybe Roger Button's brother, freed from prison after forty years. And there were other stories - some too crazy for anyone to believe.

Most people thought that Hildegard was mad. Why was she marrying a man of fifty when many young men in Baltimore wanted to marry her? Nobody understood Hildegard.

After a local newspaper called Benjamin “the Mystery Man of Maryland,” Mr. Roger Button took his son’s birth records to the paper.

“This proves his age,” he said, angrily.

But no one believed it. You only had to look at Benjamin.

Hildegarde believed none of the stories, not even the true one. It didn’t matter to her if he was fifty. It didn’t matter if he looked fifty. She wanted to marry Benjamin and nothing could change her mind.

In 1880, they were married. Benjamin believed he was the happiest man alive.

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Between 1880 and 1895, the Buttons’ business did very well and made a lot of money. This was mostly because of Benjamin’s ideas. Roger Button did less and less work and he left the company in 1895.

Baltimore soon forgot all the stories about Benjamin, and the young Buttons were popular in the town. Even Mr. Moncrief changed his mind about his daughter’s husband. When Benjamin paid for the printing and sale of Mr. Moncrief’s war stories, Hildegarde’s father was a very happy man.

In fifteen years, there were many changes to Benjamin himself. He had more energy. It pleased him to get up early. He enjoyed walking through the sunny streets each day to work. He worked very hard, and with great success. His father’s business made more money than ever, thanks to Benjamin.

Then, as time passed, he was more interested in having fun. Benjamin was the first man in the city of Baltimore to buy a car.

His friends saw his energy and good health, and they were surprised.

“He seems to grow younger every year,” they said.

Roger Button, now sixty-five, thought his son was a wonderful man. Benjamin was liked by everyone who met him.

There was a problem, though. One thing in Benjamin’s life was less than perfect: he stopped loving his wife.

By that time, Hildegarde was a woman of thirty-five, with a son, Roscoe, who was fourteen years old. When they were first married, Benjamin loved his wife completely. But, as the years passed, her beautiful gold-colored hair changed to an unexciting brown. Her blue eyes became less bright. She was different in other ways, too. She didn’t want to go out. Fifteen years earlier, Hildegarde was always the one who said, “Let’s go out to this party, or that dinner.” Now the opposite was true. She went to social evenings with Benjamin but she didn’t really want to go. They went at his suggestion, and because he wanted to. Hildegarde was happy to stay at home.

Benjamin grew unhappy with her. When the Spanish-American War began in 1898, he decided to become a soldier. He was a very good officer and his men

liked him. He was brave, too. But his business needed him, so in 1901 he returned home. A noisy band met him at the station. They walked with him to his house, playing their music all the way. Baltimore was happy to welcome Benjamin home again.

Hildegarde was waiting at the house to greet him. He kissed her, but his heart was heavy. After three years, her hair now had some gray in it. She was a woman of forty, but she looked older.

In his room, Benjamin looked in the mirror. He compared his face with a photograph taken before the war. There was no question about it: he was still getting younger. He now looked like a man of thirty.

“Good God!” he said to himself. “I’ve waited for this day, when my body age has reached my real age. I wanted to be able to say, ‘It’s finished. Now I’m like other men.’ But I can see that’s not going to happen.”

The future looked terrible, unbelievable - and he was afraid.

Hildegarde was waiting downstairs for him. She looked angry.

“She’s guessed,” he thought. “She knows what’s happening to me.

So at dinner he tried to talk to her about it.

“Everybody says I look younger than ever,” he started.

Hildegarde didn’t smile. “That’s nothing to be proud of,” she replied.

“I’m not proud of it,” he replied.

“You should stop it,” she added.

“How can I?”

“I’m not going to discuss it with you,” said Hildegarde. “But there’s a right way of doing things and a wrong way. If you’ve decided to be different from other people, I can’t stop you. But I don’t think it’s fair.”

“But Hildegarde, I can’t stop it,” said Benjamin.

“Yes you can. You’re being difficult. I’m glad that other people don’t think like you.”

There was no answer to this. But from that day, life with Hildegarde became less and less comfortable. Soon, they were like two strangers living in the same house.

Benjamin found that he wanted to go to more and more social evenings.

This made things worse at home.

He was invited to every party, every dinner, and every dance in town, and he went to all of them. He danced with the prettiest young married women, and talked to the smartest girls. Sometimes his wife went with him. She sat with other older women and watched him, sadly, without understanding.

“Look!” people said. “The poor young man, tied to a woman of forty-five. He must be twenty years younger than his wife.”

They didn’t remember that, back in 1880, their parents were saying almost

the same thing - but the other way around.

As Benjamin became unhappier at home, he found many new interests. He started to play tennis and made a great success of it. He took dancing lessons in 1906 he learned “The Boston” and was excellent at this new dance. A few years later, he could dance the “Castle Walk” better than any other young man in town.

His social life was becoming more important than his business life. And after twenty-five years with Roger Button & Company, Benjamin decided to leave work. His son, Roscoe, was home again after completing his studies at Harvard College. He was the right age to take Benjamin’s place in the family business. Roscoe was very interested in the business, too. Benjamin could remember feeling the same at one time.

In fact, people often thought that Benjamin and his son were brothers. This pleased Benjamin, as he liked to look young. There was only one thing in his life that he didn’t enjoy. He hated going out in Baltimore with Hildegarde.

She was now almost fifty. When they were together, Benjamin felt stupid. She looked like his mother.

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One September day in 1910, Benjamin Button went to Harvard College as a freshman. He looked about twenty and he didn’t tell them his correct age. He remembered that mistake from his short time at Yale. And he didn’t say that his son was a student there, years before.

He seemed a little older and wiser than the other, mostly eighteen-year-old freshmen. And he was excellent at football. In his first year, the Harvard team played against Yale. In that game, Benjamin played the best football that anyone could remember. Because of this, he was soon the best-known student at the college.

But in his third year, he wasn’t always on the team. He weighed less, and he seemed shorter than before. He wasn’t playing as well as in his first year. He was really only chosen for the team to bring fear to the other side.

In his final year, Benjamin didn’t play on the team. He was much smaller and thinner. Some first year students thought that he, too, was a freshman. At the same time, his studies seemed more difficult. He felt that the other students in his class were older and much wiser than he was.

Some of them spoke about St. Midass School. Many of the Harvard students came from St. Midas s. At this school they prepared young boys for college. Benjamin started to think about going there after his studies at Harvard. It was a good plan - he would like to be with boys of his own size and with the same interests.

In 1914, Benjamin returned to Baltimore from college. Hildegarde was now living in Italy, so he moved in with his son, Roscoe, and his wife. They tried to be welcoming - he could see that. But it was clear that Roscoe didn’t really want his

father there. Roscoe, now a successful businessman, had an important position in Baltimore society that he wanted to protect. Benjamin understood this, but he felt a little sad.

Benjamin was bored at home and he had no friends now in Baltimore. Old girlfriends from his dancing days weren't interested in him. The tennis players, from before his time at Harvard, stayed away. They thought he was only a boy. There were only three or four fifteen-year-old boys living in the neighborhood, and he spent time with them. The idea of St. Midas's School came to him again.

He asked Roscoe about it one day.

"I'd really like to go there," he said.

"Then go," replied Roscoe.

He disliked the subject, and didn't want to discuss it with his father.

"I can't go alone," said Benjamin. "You'll have to take me."

"I don't have time," Roscoe told him, angry and red-faced. "In fact, you can't continue like this. You must stop, and - and go back the other way. This isn't a joke now."

Benjamin almost started crying.

"And another thing," Roscoe continued. "When visitors are in the house,

I want you to call me 'Uncle' - not Roscoe, but 'Uncle'. Do you understand?

It seems wrong for a boy of fifteen to call me by my first name. Wait, here's a better idea - call me 'Uncle' all the time. Then you'll find it easier."

Roscoe turned away from his father and walked out of the room.

Benjamin went upstairs and looked at himself in the mirror.

"I haven't shaved for three months," he thought, "but there's still nothing there."

Roscoe wanted him to wear glasses. He also suggested a beard to stick onto Benjamin's face. It seemed for a time that the crazy days of his early life were starting again. But Benjamin cried and Roscoe didn't continue with the idea.

Now, in his room, Benjamin opened a book of boys' stories. But he only read a little because he was thinking of other things. American soldiers were fighting in the First World War in Europe and Benjamin wanted to join them. But he had to be sixteen to become a soldier, and he looked younger. His true age was fifty-seven, but that, of course, was too old.

But the government wanted soldiers from the Spanish-American War to fight again. They wrote to all these men, and soon a letter arrived for Benjamin. It invited him to get a new uniform and to go to Camp Mosby in South Carolina.

Benjamin hurried into town. Because he was so small, he couldn't buy the uniform ready-made. He needed one to be made to his size. The salesclerk in the store measured him.

"Do you want to play soldiers, son?" he said, smiling.

“I’m not playing,” replied Benjamin. “This uniform must be correct.”

The man laughed at him, and Benjamin became angry.

“My name’s Button, and I live on Mount Vernon Place,” he said. “So you know I can pay for it.”

Well, said the man, “I guess that’s OK. If you can’t pay for it, your father can.”

A week later, Benjamin’s uniform arrived at the house. He said nothing to Roscoe about his plans, but one night in April he left the house and took the train to South Carolina. A taxi carried him and his suitcases to Camp Mosby. The soldier at the gate laughed at the boy who wanted to play soldiers. “Get someone to take my suitcases!” said Benjamin. “And hurry - we’re at war, Soldier!”

Some other soldiers arrived to watch. Then an officer came along on his horse. He was a kind man.

“Whose little boy are you?” he asked, with a smile in his eyes.

“I’ll soon show you!” said Benjamin angrily. “Here! Read this!” And he gave the officer his letter from the government.

The officer read it. He was very surprised.

“Where did you get this?” he asked.

“I got it from the government. You can check with them,” Benjamin replied.

The officer put the letter in his pocket.

“You come along with me,” he said to Benjamin, looking strangely at him, “and we’ll talk about this.”

He turned and began walking his horse toward the office buildings.

Benjamin followed behind him, on foot.

Everyone thought that the letter really belonged to Benjamin’s father.

Nobody believed Benjamin’s story. Two days later, Roscoe arrived from Baltimore and took Benjamin back home. Benjamin left in tears, without his uniform.

\* \* \*

In 1920, Roscoe Button’s first child was born. It was a happy time. But there was one thing that nobody talked about. The baby’s grandfather was a small ten-year-old who played around the house. He was a little boy who loved his toy soldiers.

No one disliked the little boy. He had a fresh, happy face, with eyes that were sometimes a little sad. But Roscoe Button wasn’t happy about having Benjamin in his home. It wasn’t right for a man of sixty to look fifty years younger. Like Hildegard, many years before, Roscoe didn’t think it was fair.

“It’s good for older people to stay young,” he said. “But this is too much.”

Five years later, Roscoe’s little boy was old enough to play games with little Benjamin. There was a nurse to look after the two children. Roscoe took them both



to kindergarten on the same day. Here, Benjamin discovered how much he enjoyed playing with little pieces of colored paper. He also made things from old boxes and he drew pictures. But this time, he didn't hate these activities and he wasn't bored. Once he was bad, and had to stand in the corner, and he cried. But most days were happy. He loved the time that he spent there. His teacher, Miss Bailey, was kind to him, and he loved her, too.

Roscoe's son moved into the next class after a year, but Benjamin happily stayed in the kindergarten. Sometimes, other children talked about their hopes for their futures. Benjamin never joined in these conversations, and his little face became sad. Maybe he realized that his future was different.

In his third year of kindergarten, Benjamin was too little to understand much. He didn't know what to do with the pieces of colored paper. He cried because the other boys were bigger. He was afraid of them. The teacher talked to him, but he didn't understand her.

He was taken out of the kindergarten. His nurse, Nana, became the center of his little world. On bright days, they walked to the park.

"Dog," Nana taught him. "Cat."

"Dog," Benjamin repeated happily. "Cat."

Sometimes Benjamin jumped on his bed, and this was fun. He jumped until he was tired. Sometimes he took a stick from the yard and went around the house with it. He hit the chairs and tables and shouted, "Fight, fight, fight!" When there were visitors, the older ladies always wanted to talk to him. The young ones tried to kiss him. He was a good boy and he held up his face to them, but this bored him. And when the long day ended, at five o'clock, he went upstairs with Nana. There, she fed him milk and nice, soft food from a spoon.

There were no memories in his child's sleep. Benjamin didn't remember his brave college days, or the many beautiful girls from his past. There were only the white, safe walls of his crib and Nana, and a man who visited him sometimes. When the sun went down, his eyes were sleepy. There were no dreams in his head, and nothing to worry him.

The past wasn't in his head now. He didn't remember his days as a soldier, or the first years of his marriage. He forgot about Hildegarde, and his work at the family business. He had no memory of talking with his grandfather, into the night, in Roger Button's family home.

He didn't remember clearly if the milk was warm or cold at the last feed. There was only the crib, and Nana. And then he remembered nothing at all. When he was hungry, he cried. There were sounds and smells, light and dark, and nothing more.

Then it was all dark. The crib, the faces above him, and the sweet smell of milk disappeared completely from his mind.



- THE END -

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