

The Baby Party

by Francis Scott Fitzgerald

(Adapted book. Upper-Intermediate level)

When John Andros felt old, he comforted himself with the thought that life would continue through his child. His fears were calmed when he heard his child's quick footsteps or the sound of his child's voice talking nonsense to him over the telephone. His wife called him at the office every afternoon at three, and he looked forward to these conversations as one of the colourful minutes of his day.

He was not physically old, but his life had been a series of struggles up a series of hills. At thirty-eight, having won his battles against ill-health and poverty, he had few dreams left. Even his feelings about his little girl had limits. She had come between him and his wife, and it was for the child's sake that they had moved to a small town in the country. They paid for fresh country air with endless servant troubles and the daily journeys to and from work by train.

Little Ede interested him chiefly as an example of a young life. He liked to take her on his knees and examine the soft hairs on her scalp and her eyes of morning blue. But after ten minutes the endless curiosity of the child began to test his patience. He easily lost his temper and got annoyed when things were broken. One Sunday afternoon when she had spoiled a game of cards, he had been so angry that his wife had burst into tears. This was foolish and John was ashamed of himself. Such things could not be avoided. It was impossible that little Ede should spend all day in the baby room upstairs. Her mother frequently reminded him that she was becoming more nearly a 'real person' every day.

She was two and a half, and this afternoon, for example, she was going to a baby party. Edith, her mother, had telephoned this information to the office. Little Ede had repeated it, shouting, 'I yam going to a pantry!' into John's unsuspecting left ear.

'Call round at the Markeys' when you get home, won't you, dear?' said her mother. 'It'll be funny. Ede's going to be all dressed up in her new pink dress-'

The conversation ended suddenly with a tiny scream. It sounded as if the telephone had been pulled violently to the floor. John laughed and decided to catch an early train home. The idea of a baby party in someone else's house amused him.

'What a wonderful mess!' he thought, smiling to himself. 'A dozen mothers, and each one looking only at her own child. All the babies breaking things and grabbing at the cake. And each mama going home thinking her own child was so much better than every other child there.'

He was in a good mood today - all the things in his life were going better than they had ever gone before. When he got off the train at his station, he shook his head at a taxi man and began to walk up the long hill towards his house through the cold December evening. It was only six o'clock, but the moon was out and shining with proud brilliance on the thin sugary snow that lay over the gardens.

As he walked along, taking deep breaths of cold air, he began to wonder how Ede compared to other children of her own age. He wondered if she would look more grown up in her new pink dress. He walked faster and passed his own house. The party was at the Markeys' next door.

As he climbed the steps and rang the bell, he heard voices inside, and he was glad he was not too late. Then he lifted his head and listened - the voices were not children's voices, but they were loud and angry. There were at least three different voices. One of them rose to a sharp cry and he recognized it immediately as his wife's.

'There's been some trouble,' he thought quickly.

He tried the door, found it unlocked and pushed it open.

* * *

The baby party started at half past four, but Edith waited. She guessed that the new dress would have a more sensational effect if it was seen beside other costumes which were not as fresh and clean. So she planned the arrival of little Ede and herself for five o'clock. When they arrived, the party was already lively. Four baby girls and nine baby boys were dancing to the music of a record.

As Edith and her daughter entered, there was a cry of 'How sweet!' It was directed towards little Ede, who stood looking around shyly and fingering the edges of her pink dress. She was passed along a row of mamas, each one of whom said 'swe-e-et!' to her and held her pink little hand before passing her on to the next. After some encouragement and a few gentle pushes she joined the dance and became an active member of the party.

Edith stood near the door talking to Mrs Markey. She did not like Mrs Markey. She considered her both sharp-tongued and common. But John and Joe Markey were friendly and went in to work together on the train every morning, so the two women pretended to be good neighbours. They were always saying that it was a pity they never visited one another. And they were always planning the kind of parties that began with 'You'll have to come to dinner with us soon', but never developed any further.

'Little Ede looks a perfect darling,' said Mrs Markey, smiling and wetting her lips in a way that particularly annoyed Edith. 'So grown up - I can't believe it!'

Edith wondered if Mrs Markey referred to Ede as 'little Ede' because Billy Markey weighed almost five pound more, although he was several months younger. She accepted a cup of tea and sat down with two other ladies on a sofa. She immediately started on the real business of the afternoon, which consisted of describing the recent progress of her child.

An hour passed. The children became bored with dancing and ran into the dining room. From there they made an attack on the door to the kitchen and were rescued by an army of mothers. They immediately set off again and ran back to the dining room and the kitchen door. The word 'over-excited' was used and small white faces were dried with small white handkerchiefs. There was a general attempt to make the babies sit down, but the babies jumped off their mothers' knees with loud cries of 'Down! Down!' And the rush into the dining room began again.

This game ended when the food and drink were brought in, including a large cake and saucers of ice cream. Billy Markey, a solid laughing baby with red hair and thick legs, took the first piece of cake. Drinks were poured and the children ate, greedily but without confusion. They had behaved remarkably well all afternoon. They were modern babies who ate and slept at regular hours, so their tempers and their faces were healthy and pink. Thirty years ago parties were not so peaceful.

After the food and drink the visitors began to leave. Edith looked at her watch. It was almost six and John had not arrived. She wanted him to see Ede with the other children. She wanted him to see how calm and polite and intelligent she was.

'You're a darling,' she whispered to her child, holding her closely. 'Do you know you're a darling? Do you know you're a darling?'

Ede laughed. 'Bow-wow,' she said suddenly.

'Bow-wow?' Edith looked around. She could not see a dog, a 'bow-wow', anywhere. 'There isn't any bow-wow,' she said.

'Bow-wow', repeated Ede. 'I want a bow-wow.'

Ede was pointing at Billy Markey who was holding his birthday present, a toy bear, in his arms.

'That isn't a bow-wow, dearest; that's a teddy-bear.'

'Teddy-bear?'

'Yes, that's a teddy-bear, and it belongs to Billy Markey. You don't want Billy Markey's teddy-bear, do you?'

Ede did want it.

She escaped from her mother and approached Billy Markey. Ede stood looking at him with a steady stare, and Billy laughed.

Edith looked at her watch again, this time impatiently. The party was smaller now. Besides Ede and Billy there were only two other babies. Why hadn't John come? It was selfish of him to be so late. He had no interest in the child. Other fathers had come to fetch their wives and they had stayed for a while and watched the party.

There was a sudden cry. Ede had pulled Billy's teddy-bear from his arms and when Billy had tried to take it back, she had simply pushed him to the floor.

'Why, Ede!' Edith was tempted to laugh.

Joe Markey, a handsome, broad-shouldered man of thirty- five, picked up his son and put him back on his feet. 'You're a fine fellow,' he said laughing. 'You let a girl push you over! You're a fine fellow.'

'Did he knock his head?' Mrs Markey asked quickly.

'No-o-o-o,' said Markey.

Billy had already forgotten the knock and was making an attempt to get his teddy-bear back. He grabbed a leg of the bear and pulled at it, but without success.

'No,' said Ede firmly.

Suddenly, encouraged by her earlier success, Ede dropped the teddy-bear, put her hands on Billy's shoulders and pushed him backwards off his feet. This time he landed less harmlessly. His head hit the floor with a dull hollow sound. He took a breath and let out a scream.

Immediately the room was in confusion. Markey hurried to his son, but his wife reached the injured baby before him. She took him in her arms.

'Oh, Billy,' she cried, 'What a terrible knock! She deserves a slap.'

Edith had rushed immediately to her daughter. She heard this remark and her lips came together sharply.

'Why, Ede,' she whispered, 'you bad girl!'

Ede put back her little head suddenly and laughed. It was a loud laugh, with a sound of victory. Unfortunately it was also an infectious laugh. Before her mother realized that it was a sensitive situation, she too had laughed. Edith's laugh was like her daughter's, with the same sound.

Then she stopped.

Mrs Markey's face had turned red with anger. Joe Markey was feeling the back of his son's head with one finger. He looked at her quickly.

'It's a bad knock,' he said. 'I'll get some cream to put on it.'

But Mrs Markey had lost her temper. 'I don't see anything funny about a child being hurt,' she said in a shaking voice.

Little Ede had been looking at her mother curiously. She had noticed that her own laugh had caused her mother's laugh, and she wondered if the same cause would always have the same effect. So she chose this moment to throw back her head and laugh again.

For her mother this was too much. Pressing her handkerchief to her mouth, she laughed uncontrollably. It was more than nervousness. She felt that in an odd way she was laughing with her child. They were laughing together. It was those two against the world.

While Markey rushed upstairs to the bathroom for the cream, his wife was walking up and down, holding the screaming boy in her arms.

'Please go home!' she burst out suddenly. 'The child is badly hurt, and if you won't be quiet, you'd better go home.'

'Very well,' said Edith, losing her temper. 'I've never seen such a lot of trouble about nothing-'

'Get out!' cried Mrs Markey. 'There's the door, get out - I never want to see you in our house again. You or your horrible spoilt little child either.'

Edith had taken her daughter's hand and was moving quickly towards the door. But hearing this remark, she stopped and turned around.

'Don't you dare talk about my child like that!'

Mrs Markey did not answer but continued walking up and down, talking to herself and to Billy in a low voice.

Edith began to cry.

'I will get out,' she said. 'I've never heard anybody so rude and common in my life. I'm glad your baby was pushed down - he's nothing but a f-fat: little fool anyway.'

Joe Markey reached the bottom of the stairs just in time to hear this remark.

'Why, Mrs Andros,' he said sharply, 'can't you see the child is hurt. You really ought to control yourself'

'C-control myself.' said Edith in a broken voice. 'You'd better ask her to c-control herself. I've never heard anybody so c-common in my life.'

'She's insulting me!' Mrs Markey was now red with anger. 'Did you hear what she said, Joe? Please put her out of the house. If she won't go, just take her by the shoulders and put her out!'

'Don't you dare touch me!' cried Edith. 'I'm going just as soon as I can find my coat!'

Blind with tears, she took a step towards the hall. It was just at this moment that the door opened and John Andros walked in.

'John!' cried Edith, and ran to him wildly.

'What's the matter? Why, what's the matter?'

'They're - they're putting me out!' she cried. 'He'd just started to take me by the shoulders and put me out. I want my coat!'

'That's not true,' said Markey hurriedly. 'Nobody's going to put you out.' He turned to John. 'Nobody's going to put her out,' he repeated. 'She's-'

'What do you mean "put her out"?' demanded John. 'What's all this talk anyway?'

'Oh, let's go!' cried Edith. 'I want to go. They're so common, John!'

'Look here!' Markey's face darkened. 'You've said that often enough. You're acting crazy.'

'They called Ede "spoilt".'

For the second time that afternoon little Ede expressed emotion at an unsuitable moment. Confused and frightened at the shouting voices, she began to cry. And her tears seemed to say that she felt the insult in her heart.

'What's the idea of this?' John began. 'Do you insult your guests in your own house?'

'It's your wife who's been insulting people,' replied Markey angrily. 'In fact, your baby started all the trouble.'

John gave a short laugh. 'Are you accusing a little baby?' he enquired. 'That's a fine manly business!'

'Don't talk to him, John,' insisted Edith. 'Find my coat!'

'You must be a poor fellow,' went on John angrily, 'if you exercise your temper on a helpless baby.'

'I've never heard anything so twisted in my life,' shouted Markey. 'If your wife would shut her mouth for a minute-'

'Wait a minute! You're not talking to a woman and child now-'

'Your wife comes in here and begins shouting about how common we are!' burst out Markey violently. 'Well, if we're so common, you'd better stay away! And you'd better get out now!'

Again John gave a short laugh.

'You're not only common,' he replied, 'you're obviously an awful coward.' He reached for the door handle. 'Come on, Edith.'

His wife took her daughter in her arms and stepped outside. Still looking at Markey, John started to follow.

'Wait a minute!' Markey took a step forward. He was shaking slightly and his eyes were red. 'Do you think you can say that and just walk out of here? Do you?'

Without a word John walked out of the door, leaving it open.

Edith had started to walk back home. After watching her until she reached her own front door, John turned back towards the open door. Markey was slowly coming down the steps. He took off his coat and threw it onto the snow beside the path. Then, sliding a little on the icy surface, he took a step forward.

At the first blow they both slipped and fell heavily to the ground. They rose and again pulled each other down. It was easier to stand in the thin snow beside the path. They rushed at each other, both hitting wildly.

The street was empty. They fought in silence except for their tired breaths and the dull sound as one or the other slipped and fell in the muddy snow. They could see each other clearly in the moonlight. Several times they both slipped down together. And then they twisted around wildly in the mud for a while.

For ten, twenty minutes they fought there senselessly in the moonlight. Their shirts were torn, and both were cut and bleeding. They

were so exhausted that they could stand only when they supported each other. With a single blow they both fell to their hands and knees.

But it was not exhaustion that ended the business. In fact, the meaninglessness of the fight was a reason for continuing. They stopped because they heard a man's footsteps coming along the pavement. They were lying on the ground in the shadow. When they heard these footsteps, they stopped fighting, stopped moving, stopped breathing. They lay close together like two boys playing a game until the footsteps had passed. Then, getting up, they looked at each other like two drunken men.

'I'm not going on with this thing anymore,' cried Markey.

'Nor am I,' said John Andros. 'I've had enough of this thing.'

Again they looked at each other, as if each one suspected the other of trying to restart the fight. Markey touched his lip, which was cut and bleeding. Then he swore softly, picked up his coat and shook the snow off it.

'Do you want to come in and get cleaned up?' he asked suddenly.

'No, thanks,' said John. 'I ought to be going home - my wife will be worried.'

He too picked up his coat.

'Well - good night,' he said hesitantly.

Suddenly they walked towards each other and shook hands. It was a firm handshake; John Andros put his arm around Markey's shoulder.

'No harm done,' he said in a broken voice.

'No - you?'

'No, no harm done.'

'Well,' said John Andros after a minute. 'I'll say good night.'

Dragging one leg slightly and with his coat over his arm, John Andros turned away.

The moonlight was still bright. Down at the station half a mile away he could hear the sound of the seven o'clock train.

'But you must have been crazy,' cried Edith brokenly. 'I thought you were going to explain everything, fix it up and shake hands. That's why I went away.'

'Did you want us to fix it up?'

'Of course not; I never want to see them again. But I thought of course that was what you were going to do.' She was touching the cuts on his neck and back as he sat calmly in a hot bath. 'I'm going to get a doctor,' she insisted.

He shook his head. 'No, you aren't,' he answered. 'I don't want everyone in the town to hear about this.'

'I still don't understand how it all happened.'

'Neither do I,' he said. 'I suppose these baby parties can be quite rough.'

'Well, there's one good thing,' suggested Edith hopefully. 'I'm certainly glad we have beef steak in the house for tomorrow's dinner.'

'Why?'

'For your eye, of course. Do you know I very nearly ordered pork? Wasn't that the luckiest thing?'

Half an hour later John was dressed except for his collar, which was now too small for his neck. He tested the movements of his arms and legs in front of the mirror. 'I think I'll get myself fit and in better shape,' he said thoughtfully. 'I must be getting old.'

'You mean so next time you can beat him?'

'I did beat him,' he replied quickly. 'At least I beat him as much as he beat me. And there isn't going to be any next time. Don't you start calling people common any more. If you get in any trouble, you just take your coat and go home. Understand?'

'Yes dear,' she said quietly. 'I was very foolish and now I understand.'

He went out into the hall and paused by the baby's door.

'Is she asleep?'

'Yes. But you can go in and have a look at her - just to say good night.'

They went softly into the room and bent together over the bed. Little Ede was sleeping calmly. Her cheeks were pink with health and her little hands were tightly joined. John reached down and passed his hand lightly over the soft hair.

'She's asleep,' he said in a puzzled way.

'Naturally, after such an afternoon.'

'Miz Andros!' The servant's loud whisper floated into the room from the hall outside. 'Mr and Miz Markey are downstairs an' want to see you. Mr Markey, he's all cut up in pieces. His face looks like roast beef. An' Miz Markey, she's angry.'

'Why, how dare they?' cried Edith. 'Just tell them we're not home. I wouldn't go down for anything in the world.'

'You most certainly will.' John's voice was firm and hard.

'What?'

'You'll go down right now, and, whatever that other woman does, you'll apologize for what you said this afternoon. After that you don't have to see her again.'

'Why, John, I can't.'

'You've got to. And just remember that she probably hated to come over here twice as much as you hate to go downstairs.'

'Aren't you coming? Do I have to go alone?'

'I'll be down - in just a minute.'

John Andros waited until she closed the door behind her. Then he reached into the bed and picked up his daughter wrapped in her blankets. He sat down in the chair, holding her tightly in his arms. She moved a little, and he held his breath, but she was sleeping deeply. In a moment she was resting in the hollow of his elbow. Slowly he bent his head until his cheek was against her bright hair. 'Dear little girl,' he whispered. 'Dear little girl, dear little girl.'

John Andros knew at last what he had fought for so wildly that evening. He had it now, he would keep it for ever, and for some time he sat there in the darkness with his daughter in his arms.

- THE END -

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