

The story of Bartholomew Jonathan Marmaduke Mouse



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time the family returned to travel up to Nazareth, their home town, BJ rode confidently on the man's shoulder, and he couldn't think of ever living with anyone else. Once they arrived, he spent time in the carpenter's workshop (for that was the man's trade), making his home among the wood shavings. And all the while he watched the baby grow into a child even more kind and loving than his parents, if that was possible. In fact, sometimes they would play together.

And sometimes, when he was snuggling down to sleep in his little wood-shaving nest, he would think about his good fortune. 'Who would have thought I could find such a treasure in a place like a stable, of all things?' And he would silently give thanks to the God he had come to know through the love and kindness of his new family.

Now BJ didn't know much about babies, mouse or otherwise, but the sight of this beautiful creature melted his heart. He couldn't take his eyes off him. So much so, that he didn't see that the man was watching him, or that he had reached into his bag and taken out a little bread. He then broke off a tiny piece, which he slowly held out towards BJ. By the time BJ saw this, the bread was right under his nose, and to be honest, he was very, very frightened. For a few seconds he froze, unable to even run away. But the smell of the bread and the rumbling of his tummy won out, and he carefully leaned forward and picked it up off the man's hand, watching him carefully as he did. He needn't have worried. The man watched him eat, with a look of kindness on his face. When BJ had finished eating, he offered him some more bread.

BJ had never been treated with such kindness, animal or human. He thought about the mice at the Hilton, laughing behind his back, and Mrs Innkeeper, trying to whack him with her broom. He even thought about his mother, who, even though she wanted the best for her son, was never as warm and loving. For the first time in his life, he felt as though he belonged.

The man kept feeding BJ until he just couldn't eat any more. Then he picked him up gently and placed him in a little pile of straw he had carefully made on the floor. And there BJ slept, cosy and warm, with a full tummy, until morning.

This all turned out to be the beginning of a new life for BJ. At first it seemed to be a very lucky break. He was fed regularly and had a sort of home, even if it was with the humans that his mother so feared. But when the little family had to leave Bethlehem and flee to Egypt to escape King Herod who wanted to kill the baby, he realised he was developing an affection for his new family, and went with them. BJ simply couldn't understand why anyone would want to kill a child so small and helpless and innocent. So by the

This is the story of Bartholomew Jonathan Marmaduke Mouse - BJ to his friends. On the whole BJ liked his name, except for the Marmaduke. His mother (Hyacinth Bouquet Mouse, a renowned socialite in rodent circles) no doubt had grand aspirations for her son, which he appreciated, but he thought the 'Marmaduke' was just plain silly, so he hardly ever used it.

BJ lived in an inn. Unfortunately his mother's plans didn't quite work out, because this inn definitely did not provide the kind of surroundings worthy of such a noble name. It was a squalid, run down affair, and probably the last place anyone would want to come to in the town, which was Bethlehem. It wasn't that Bethlehem was a bad little town. Its reputation was built on being the place where the great King David lived, about a thousand years before. But like the whole nation, (as well as BJ's family fortune) it had been downhill from there, and this particular inn was about as downhill as you could get. The innkeeper was surly and lazy, and charged far too much - Jerusalem prices in fact. Consequently customers were few and far between. 'I ask you,' BJ would say to himself, 'how can this man stay in business?!'

Still, stay in business he did, and a mouse had to live, and it did provide a roof over his head and a few scraps to feed on, so he managed well enough, although Mrs Innkeeper would insist on chasing him out of the kitchen with her broom. It seemed to be the only thing she ever did with that broom, come to think of it.

BJ had his head filled with his mother's high ideals, and longed to be in a place more suited to his name, like the Bethlehem Hilton, for instance. But try as he might, as soon as the mice there knew where he came from, he was laughed out of the place. So, at least for the time being, the 'Last Chance Inn', as he called it, was his residence.

And he resented it. He resented the innkeeper's laziness; he resented Mrs Innkeepers's bad housekeeping and attitude towards him; he resented the food, and the fact that there was never enough. But mostly he resented the ruin of his family that put him there in the first place.

In short, BJ was not a happy mouse.

Then came the census, and suddenly the town was brimming with travellers, and every inn was overflowing with guests. The innkeeper, for a change, was in a good mood, now that the money was coming in. Mrs innkeeper, however, was not. BJ was banished not only from the kitchen, but from the whole building. So he found himself sheltering under the front door step, trying to keep out of the cold wind.

This inn might have been the last chance for weary travellers, but for some, even that chance was denied, like the couple that turned up on the doorstep late one night. BJ peeked out from under the step to see a man holding the halter of a donkey, on which sat a woman. He heard the innkeeper explain to the man that the inn was full, and then direct them to the stable at the back of the inn.

The *stable*?! As if the inn was bad enough! Mind you, BJ had never been to the stable. His mother had firmly forbade it. She told him that it was inhabited by big, clumsy creatures whose language was confined to 'moos' and 'brays' and 'bleats' - not nearly as refined as mouse language. 'Besides,' she would say, 'one should never consort with one's inferiors.' Clearly the couple had been sent into a den of iniquity as far as BJ was concerned. But since animals of the two legged variety were included on his mother's list of beasts to be avoided, he didn't really care where they went, so long as he was left alone.

So he curled up under the step and tried to keep warm. Some time later he heard cries coming from the stable, human cries, and he wondered what was happening there. Perhaps his mother had been right; perhaps they *had* fallen victim to the beasts. But a little later he heard a different cry, like the mewling of a cat (an animal *definitely* to be avoided in mousy circles), but different. 'That's not pain or fear.' he thought. 'That's something else.' And his curiosity was aroused.

Besides that, the night was growing colder and his tummy was rumbling. Surely even a stable would offer better shelter than a doorstep. And the man had been carrying a bag which might have contained food. So despite his mother's warnings, and with some trepidation, he went round to the stable, scurrying to keep warm and running close to the wall. Then he crept in under the door.

He stood for a while surveying the scene, which was lit by a single oil lamp. There were, as his mother had warned, some great, lumbering beasts there, but they were quietly dozing in their stalls. The stable was smelly and messy. Clearly it hadn't be **mucked** for ages, and BJ's nose wrinkled in disgust. However, some fresh straw had been scattered over the mess, probably to give the animals something to eat. Then he caught sight of the manger, which was full of fresh straw. 'Now that would make a very nice warm bed.' thought BJ, and carefully made his way over there.

He cautiously eyed the two people sitting behind the manger, but they didn't look as though they had even seen him. The man had his arm around the woman, who looked exhausted. For a moment BJ forgot his own needs and actually felt sorry for them. But a mouse has to do what a mouse has to do to survive, so he ran over to the manger and skittered up to the edge. But then he stopped. For there, in among the straw, was a human baby.