Mary-Anne and the Cat Baby

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Just for a Minute</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Airing the Baby</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A Surprise for Mrs Belling</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Harry Meets Muffin</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Stuck!</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Just the Usual</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About the author</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Just for a Minute

Does your grandmother tell you that children were always good when she was young? Maybe, maybe not. That's all I'm saying – but read on.

This happened a long time ago when my grandmother was young.

I'm going to tell you about Mary-Anne.
She was a lively sort of girl. On Sundays she could look like a little angel. She wore coloured ribbons in her long, dark hair.

On other days, she lost her ribbons and her hair stood on end.

She wasn't an only child. She had three brothers and two little sisters. There was a big sister, too.

Oh! I nearly forgot the new baby.
So that was eight children.

No wonder their mother was always busy. This meant Mary-Anne often did things without asking her mother first.

If you promise not to copy her, I might just tell you about the time Mary-Anne got the cat mixed up with the new baby.

The new baby was very new. It slept a lot. It screamed a lot as well. To tell the truth, it was often quite smelly. Mary-Anne didn't like it much.
She also had a cat. That was quite new, too. The cat slept a lot as well. It never screamed and it was lovely and furry.

Mary-Anne thought Muffin the cat was much nicer than the baby.
One morning, there was just Mary-Anne and her mother at home. Mother was upstairs with the baby.

Mary-Anne was supposed to do the potatoes for dinner but the sun was shining.

It looked so nice outside. Perhaps she could go into the yard first. Just for a minute.

The big pram stood in the yard. Prams in those days were like carriages that horses pulled. They were high and had bouncy springs.
Mary-Anne touched the pram. It bounced. She took the brake off and pushed it a little way.

Soon, she was parading up and down the yard, pushing the pram.

As she passed the gate for the third time, she heard a scuffling noise on the other side. An eye was looking at her through a knothole in the fence.

I know it's you, Josh Pembroke! You might as well come in!
The latch rattled and lifted and a boy came in. He wasn’t like Mary-Anne. He was very tidy.

“You’re not allowed to touch the pram,” he said.

"It’s supposed to be your tongue, silly," said Josh. "Can I have a push?"

Mary-Anne let him. After all, whatever it looked like, Josh was her best friend.
Josh took a turn with the pram. It was boring, pushing an empty pram. "We need a baby," said Josh. "Not ours," said Mary-Anne.

The baby's clothes were dancing on the washing line.

Mary-Anne looked at Muffin, then she looked at the little bonnet and lacy shawl.
Josh looked, too.

"I'll tell," he said but he took away the prop so Mary-Anne could reach the bonnet and shawl.

Mary-Anne wrapped Muffin in the shawl and laid him in the pram. Then she put his bonnet on and tied it carefully under his chin.

Muffin closed his eyes.
Mary-Anne and Josh looked at each other.

"Open the gate," said Mary-Anne. "Muffin needs to go for an airing. It's good for him. All babies need to be aired. Mother said so."

And they pushed the pram out into the street.
Mary-Anne and Josh paraded down the High Street, pretending to be grown-ups. They stopped and looked in the windows.

"Where shall we go?" asked Josh.

"Well," said Mary-Anne. "Mother always goes past the butcher’s, past the greengrocer’s and into the sweet shop."
"She never does!" replied Josh. "She goes into all the other shops and straight past the sweet shop."

They waved to the greengrocer. He came out of his shop and stood by the fruit and vegetables.

"Doing the shopping?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mary-Anne, "and airing the baby."
“Helping your ma,” nodded Mr Green. He smiled at someone behind them. “Good morning, Mr Burton.” Mary-Anne and Josh looked at each other.

Mr Burton was Mary-Anne’s Uncle Henry! He might know that Mary-Anne was not allowed to take the new baby out on her own. He might look in the pram.
Mr Green came over to them and put his hand on the pram handle.

"Here's two good little children," he said. "Your niece is helping her Ma to look after the baby."

"Is she now!" said Uncle Henry.

Both men bent over and looked in the pram.

"What the ... ?" gasped Mr Green.

"Mary-Anne!" said Uncle Henry.

"What have you been up to?"
Both men started to laugh.

"Your new nephew will have to start shaving quite soon. Look at those whiskers."

"Good head of hair, too," said Uncle Henry. "Takes after me."

They laughed again and Uncle Henry gave them a penny each.

"Thank you, Uncle Henry," said Mary-Anne in a little, polite voice.
Mr Green picked out two apples and rubbed them on his apron.

"Here you are. Do call again."

"Thank you, Mr Green," they said.

They looked at each other. Then they both looked at the sweet shop.

They parked the pram and stood gazing in the window.

They took ages to choose. Sweets did not come in packets in those days. They were in big, glass jars.
Josh chose the humbugs in the end and Mrs Munns weighed him out a pennyworth into a little cone of paper. Mary-Anne chose a big stick of barley sugar.
As they left, Josh tripped over the step and nearly swallowed his humbug. Mary-Anne had to give him a big thump on his back.

They strolled away down the road. They were very happy.
Muffin snored gently in his pram outside the shop.
They had forgotten him!
Chapter 3

A Surprise for Mrs Belling

They did not talk much as they walked along. They were too busy sucking their sweets.

As they turned towards the park, a woman bustled towards them.

“Oh no!” cried Mary-Anne, “There’s Mrs Belling. She’ll want to see the baby.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Josh calmly, “she never has her glasses.”

“That’s true,” agreed Mary-Anne, but she still felt something was wrong.
Then she knew what it was.

Muffin! The pram! We haven’t got the pram! We’ve left it outside the Sweet Shop!

They both turned and ran back the way they had come. Their boots clattered on the pavement.

Outside the shop, the pram was still there, just as they had left it. They peered inside and Muffin was still asleep.
As they began to push the pram again, Mrs Belling came round the corner.

“My dears! How lovely. You’re taking the new baby for a walk. What’s the little angel’s name? What does he weigh? Who does he look like?”

“His name is Muffin,” said Josh.

“He hardly weighs anything,” said Mary-Anne.
"He looks like his mother," said Josh. "With bits of his father," said Mary-Anne.

Mrs Belling smiled. "You funny little things. I'll just peep. I won't wake him."

She leaned forward and looked under the hood.

She drew back. She looked again. The she fumbled in her bag.
She had one last look in the pram.
Then she turned and hurried away up the street without saying goodbye.
"She didn’t seem to mind," said Mary-Anne. "I hope she doesn’t tell Mother."
They walked on to the park.
On the round bandstand, men in uniform were playing a march.

Mary-Anne and Josh stopped to listen. They tapped their feet. They waved their arms. It was no good, they had to march.

This time, they did not forget Muffin. Mary-Anne pushed him round and round the bandstand in time to the music.
They were enjoying themselves so much, they didn’t see someone watching. A face peered out of the bushes.

It was a dirty face. They didn’t see him, but he certainly saw them.
Chapter 4

Harry Meets Muffin

Mary-Anne and Josh were out of breath. They sat, puffing, on the grass.

A nursemaid came along, pushing a very shiny pram. An older boy walked by her side.

Mary-Anne called to the nursemaid, "Can you tell me the time, please?"

" Nearly midday," answered the nursemaid.

"Help! Mother will skin me!" yelped Mary-Anne.
The boy was peering into the pram.

"Never mind him," cried Mary-Anne.
"I've got to hurry home."

They pushed the pram down the path which ran between the trees. They hurried as fast as they could.

Josh looked at the bushes beside the path. "Can you hear something?" he whispered.
Mary-Anne listened. “Yes. There’s something in the trees.”

“It’s following us,” said Josh in a very quiet voice. “I think it’s a big animal. I heard it sniff.”

“Wolves!” said Mary-Anne. “They can smell us. They’ll hunt us down.”

“No, it’s human!” yelled Josh. “Run!”
They flew down the path towards the park gate. But the rustling and crashing continued. It got faster, keeping up with them.

Mary-Anne and Josh kept their hands on the pram and their eyes on the gate. Only a little further ...
Then a dark shape shot out of the bushes and stood in their path.

"Got you," it said.

It's Horrible Harry Banks!

It was the owner of the dirty face which had been peering out of the bushes at them. The rest wasn't too clean, either.
Harry's hair was even worse than Mary-Anne's. He had better things to do than worry about his hair. On good days, he looked like a hedgehog. On bad days, his hair looked like the brush they used to clean the school toilets.
"Go away, Harry Banks," said Mary-Anne.

In fact Mary-Anne rather liked Harry. He was more exciting to play with than Josh.

"Don't have to," said Harry. "It's a free country. What's in the pram?"

"It's the baby," said Mary-Anne. Then she made a silly mistake.
She added, “but you can’t look at it.”

Now, Harry Banks was not very interested in babies. Until that moment, he had not even wanted to see the baby.

“I can look at it if I want to,” he said. “Anyone can look at a baby.”
“Just can’t look at this one,” said Mary-Anne, very quickly. “This one is different.” Which was true, of course.

“How is it different?” asked Harry, moving nearer.

Mary-Anne and Josh stood in front of the pram.
"We'd like to show him to you but it might be a shock," said Mary-Anne.

"You might faint," added Josh. "We'll be going now."

Harry stood in the middle of the path, looking puzzled.

"I'll pay you," he said at last.

Mary-Anne and Josh looked at each other. They smiled.
"All right," said Mary-Anne, "but be careful."

Harry handed over his marble. Then, very quietly, he crept up to the pram.

"It's your cat!"

"Muffin is a baby," said Mary-Anne, setting off quickly towards the gate.

"Give me my marble back!"

Harry grabbed the pram handle.
Josh grabbed Harry’s jumper. Harry was yelling.

Some kind of rocket shot out of the bushes. It was a barking rocket.


"It’s only your Nip," said Mary-Anne.

Nip danced around, mad with excitement. He smelled something.
With a leap, Nip was on the pram. Muffin had been woken up by the noise. He saw Nip. He exploded out of the shawl and landed on the path. They saw him streak out of the park gates, still wearing the bonnet. Behind him raced Nip, barking happily.
Harry set off behind his dog.
Josh was still hanging on to Harry’s jumper.
Last of all, Mary-Anne ran along as well as she could, pushing the pram. Mary-Anne was really in trouble now!
Chapter 5

Stuck!

Mr Green was arranging the piles of apples in his window.

"My goodness! A cat in a hat! It must be Mary-Anne’s kitten," he said, as Muffin flew past.

Then, “Josh and Harry in a hurry. What is going on? I must go out and see.”
Muffin ran as fast as he could but he was only a kitten. He could still hear Nip behind him, panting hard.

In front of him was a tree. He leapt onto the trunk. He scrabbled with his claws.

The next moment, he was perched on a high branch, looking down on Nip.
Nip sat under the tree and waited. Harry and Josh arrived next. They were out of breath and cross with each other. Mary-Anne and the pram arrived last. She was out of breath, too. She looked up.

Oh no! Muffin’s right up the tree. We’ll never reach him!
"Come to me, Muffin," cooed Mary-Anne. "You're quite safe now."

Muffin stayed where he was. Mrs Belling had finished her shopping. She was with Mrs Whiting and they both saw the children.
"There's something strange about the Burtons' new baby," she whispered to her friend.

"Is there, dear? Surely not."

The Mrs Belling saw Muffin.

Mrs Whiting tried to calm her.

"Don't be silly, dear. It's not a baby, it's a kitten. What happened?"

Mary-Anne explained about Nip, and Mrs Whiting took charge.
“Harry, Josh, can either of you climb that tree?”

“Easy, peasy,” said Harry, and he started to climb.

As he climbed, Muffin scrambled higher up the tree.

“I can’t get any higher,” said Harry. His voice sounded a bit wobbly.

“Now we’ve got Harry and Muffin up the tree,” sighed Josh.
“Mary-Anne,” said Mrs Whiting, “Run and fetch Mr Green. Tell him to bring the shop steps.”
Mr Green came running. He put the steps under the tree. He climbed to the top step and stretched and swayed.

He still couldn’t reach either of them.
“Wait a minute,” said Mrs Whiting. “The window cleaner does this street on a Tuesday. Run to the corner, Josh, and see if he’s coming.”

Josh returned with the window cleaner. He was carrying a very long ladder.

![Window cleaner with a ladder](image)

For some reason, he had a very big grin on his face. He set his ladder against the tree.

“Which shall I rescue first?” he asked.

“The big creature or the pretty one?”

Mary-Anne began to feel better.
The window cleaner almost ran up the ladder. He didn't mind the height at all. He guided Harry safely down.

"I could have done it if I hadn't got stuck," said Harry.

Mary-Anne felt sorry for him and gave him a piece of barley sugar.

The window cleaner climbed again.

This time he stayed under Muffin, making little cheeping noises and speaking softly.
Soon, he gently put out his hand and Muffin let him pick him up. He buttoned the kitten into his jacket and brought him down.

Mary-Anne put Muffin back in the pram and the three children, followed by Nip, began to walk home.
Chapter 6
Just the Usual

It was rather a sad little procession.

Even Nip was quiet. Mary-Anne was worrying about what Mother would say. She still hadn’t done the potatoes and it was so late.

Muffin, of course, slept on.

They turned out of the High Street into the narrow, cobbled lane.

When they reached Mary-Anne’s gate, she opened it very quietly.
They crept in one by one, leaving Nip outside.

The yard was empty. The back door was still open but they could hear no sound.

"Mother’s gone out to look for me,” gasped Mary-Anne. "Now I’m in trouble."

"Go and check," said Josh. Mary-Anne went indoors.
Josh took Muffin out of the pram and put him to sleep in the sun. Then he gave the shawl and bonnet a good shake and pegged them back on the line.

Mary-Anne appeared in the doorway looking puzzled.

"They’re asleep," she whispered. "Even Mother! She’s fast asleep."
“Get the dinner ready then,” said Harry. Under his hedgehog hair, he had brains.

Very quietly, they peeled the potatoes and put a pot of water to boil on the big cooking range.

Mary-Anne was not allowed to put coal in the stove, so Harry did it. Soon, they felt the whole kitchen warming up.
They went outside again and stood looking at each other.

"Clean the pram," said Harry.
Mary-Anne fetched a brush and some dusters and they started to work on the pram.

Suddenly, above their heads, a window opened.

Mother was looking out of the window.

Mother came hurrying into the yard.
"Oh dear," she said, "I'm all behind this morning. Baby was crying all night and we both just fell asleep."

Then she realised they were cleaning the pram.

![Image of three people cleaning a pram]

"Just helping out, Mrs Burton," said Harry.

"The dinner!" gasped Mother.

"The potatoes are on, Mother," said Mary-Anne. It seemed best not to say anything else.
"Wonderful," said Mother. "I'll just heat the stew and there's some blackberry pie left. You must stay and eat.

Josh, run and ask your mother. Harry, what about you?"

"Ma's not in," said Harry, firmly. He liked stew and blackberry pie.
They sat round the big wooden table and tucked in. Their adventure had made them hungry but they were on their best behaviour.

"Now, what have you been doing today?" Mother asked.

"We went for a little walk," said Mary-Anne. "We met Mr Green."
"I hope you remembered your manners."

"Oh yes, Mother," said Mary-Anne.

"We met Mrs Belling, too. She asked about the baby."

"How kind. What about you, Harry?"

"Well Mrs Burton ..." Harry was thinking quickly.
“Things are looking up,” he said.

“That’s excellent,” said Mother, smiling. “So you all had lots to do.”

“Not really,” said Mary-Anne. “Just the usual.”

It was true, you know. For Mary-Anne, that sort of day was usual.
About the author

My grandmother was born in Queen Victoria’s time. She was always complaining about me and my brother and sisters. “You modern children!” she would say, shaking her head. “The way children behave these days!” Then she would tell us about what she used to do when she was little. I can tell you, we were angels compared with her.

This is one of her stories, and now I’m passing it on to you. I hope you enjoy it as much as we used to.
Mary-Anne thinks her kitten is much more fun than the new baby. And what a good idea to take him for a walk around town in the baby’s pram!

But it’s bound to lead to trouble for Mary-Anne and her friends. And what will her mother say when she finds out?