

TOM AND WILLIE-WHAT'S-YOUR-NAME

Tom and his folks lived in a big white house on a street. The whole street was full of houses and all of the people living in them could be considered Tom's neighbors. He had neighbors on the left and neighbors on the right. And he had neighbors on the other side of the road across the street. And it was a very long street. So you can imagine that it must have taken quite a while before Tom had explored the whole street and met all of his neighbors.

But one day he had seen it all.

He knew that the Blaker family living on their right had a baby who sometimes woke up crying in the middle of the night. This baby would sometimes not only wake up its parents, but Tom as well!

He knew Miss Berry, who had once been a school teacher but who was now old and gray. She lived in the house on their left. He often found himself over there. Because Miss Berry, you see, possessed a Chinese vase... This beautifully decorated vase, complete with a top, standing on an old-fashioned writing desk in a corner of Miss Berry's living room, contained deliciously interesting things. The contents were always different. Miss Berry might have self-made, self-wrapped brownies in her vase. Sometimes strawberry lollipops. Or mints. Or chocolate bonbons. You name it! Miss Berry had it in her vase.

We're not going to talk about the other people on Tom's street. Tom didn't know them as well as he knew the Blakers and Miss Berry anyhow. And anyhow, the story isn't about them. It's about people who weren't living on that street.

Because on that particular day, when Tom had seen it all and Miss Berry had gone away for the weekend to visit her sister who lived in another city, Tom decided to leave their street to see what was beyond...

Of course Tom didn't wake up thinking that he was going to leave the street on that day. It happened more by accident, you know, in sort of a casual way.

He was walking up and down his street, a little bored actually, kicking against stones, waiting -in vain- for something exciting to happen. Suddenly he found himself looking out into the street that started where his street ended... His feet

itched and his hands twitched and he could feel trembling inside: For there, before him, lay a whole new street, with new houses and new people and who knows what else!

But... his mom had told him to stay close to home. Which meant, probably, that he wasn't supposed to leave their street.

But mom was all forgotten when Tom spotted a dark boy of just about his age in that other street, sort of roaming around carelessly, just like Tom had been doing.

Who could he be? Tom didn't have much time to think about this particular question, though, because at that precise moment the other boy spotted him.

They just stood there, motionless, each in their street, not knowing what to do or what to say and Tom was just about to turn around and go away to at least have an end to his uneasy situation, when the dark boy called out to him.

"HEY! What's your name?" he shouted.

"TOM" What's yours?"

"Willie mumble-the-mumble.."

Actually that was not really what the boy said, but Tom could not make out whatever came after "Willie", so he came a little closer to the place where the two streets met and asked again:

"Willie WHAT? What's your name?"

"My first name is Willie, but I can't say my last name, it is too difficult."

"Well," suggested Tom, "maybe if you say it slowly."

Willie shook his head but tried anyhow:

"Gil..Gisp..Gilleps..Gil - les - pie! THAT'S IT!"

Willie was overjoyed!

"That's the first time I ever said it! You must have brought me some luck!"

They stood studying each other silently for a while. Tom noticed Willie's clothes. They were torn every here and there, and sometimes there would be a mend, where a different piece of cloth had been placed over the original. Tom believed that his mom would call Willie's clothes rags. Oh, well! Maybe they were just a pair of clothes Willie liked to wear a lot.

Suddenly Tom figured that it was actually pretty impolite of him to be staring at Willie like that.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

Willie motioned backwards: "Just a block away! Do you want to visit?"

And sort of to make up for his staring, Tom answered:

"Sure, why not?"

So he stepped into the territory that was forbidden to him by his mom and accompanied Willie as he strolled into the other street.

They came upon a dirty building with a lot of floors. Willie said that he lived on the fifth. The elevator wasn't working ("... again!" said Willie), so they had five stairs to climb. You can imagine Tom being pretty exhausted when they finally got to Willie's floor.

The door that led directly to Willie's living room creaked heavily, so that anyone in the living room -what am I saying- anyone in THE ENTIRE HOUSE would immediately know that somebody had come in.

"Everybody's here..." said Willie, "except father. He's working in the cheese factory."

Tom was surprised to find the living room full of people. And the people in the room were very surprised to see Tom! Everybody had stopped doing what they were doing and sat there, looking directly at him, with wide eyes. Willie first indicated his older sister who was sitting in a corner, cradling their baby brother, making soft shushing noises.

"Bet that baby wakes Willie up every now and then, just like the Blaker-baby wakes me up!" Tom thought.

Willie's mom was in the kitchen, which was not a separate kitchen, but a secluded part of the living room. What she was cooking smelled terrific! A woman was helping her. This, as Willie told him, was aunt Millie. She had a little daughter, Willie's cousin, who was sitting on the lap of an old, dark man, who in turn sat on an old couch in the very center of the room. Tom was introduced to everybody. The old man was Willie's grandfather and the old couch was the only object in the room you could sit on that was really meant for sitting. Because Willie's family used all kinds of things to sit on: The sister had turned over a metal bucket. Willie sat down on a wooden crate and motioned for Tom to take a seat too. Tom looked at the object he was supposed to sit on, something he had never in his life imagined sitting on: a plastic waste basket (turned upside down, of course!)

Tom then glanced around the room. He now saw that Willie wasn't the only one wearing rags.

"You're poor!" he suddenly said.

The whole family started laughing heartily. Willie slapped his knee. The older sister rolled on the floor and the old man wiped away some laughing tears:

"Never been around poor people before, huh, Tom?" he said; "Of course we're poor. As poor as church mice!"

"What do you mean, grandpa?" asked Willie.

"Well, " said Willie's grandpa, "church mice are lucky to have the church to live in because that's about all they've got!"

Tom and Willie nodded in agreement.

They didn't stay around for long after that. Boys want to go out and play! Down the five stairs they rushed again, so Willie could show Tom the rest of his street.

They were walking further into the street, and the houses were getting more scarce since the street was coming to an end. But Tom wasn't really paying any attention.

"Have you ever seen a church mouse, Willie?" he asked.

Willie had to think about that.

"No, never!" he had to admit.

"I would sure like to see one." Tom said.

"Hey, I know!" went Willie, "There's an old church at the end of this road. Bet you anything there's church mice in there! Don't you think?"

"Yeah! Let's go there!"

"But..." Willie stopped walking, "it's HAUNTED. Grandpa said so. He said I wasn't ever supposed to go there or the ghosts would get me!"

They thought about this.

"But I'm not afraid!" said Tom; "You?"

"NAH! Course not!" said Willie, "I think grandpa was just trying to scare me, anyway. But I've never seen a ghost! You?"

"No! So let's go!" Tom decided.

They started for the church, marching heavily; taking these huge steps which were supposed to frighten off whatever ghosts they might meet.

Willie took the lead since he had known about the church. He pushed a side door open that led into the front hall of the church. They stood there getting used to the diminished light inside the church, sizing up the situation. They glanced at each other. Then the two grim-looking boys, prepared for any ghost who wanted to mess with them, boldly stepped further into the church, side by side, along the long, wide path between the benches. They halted at the very center of the church to take a look around. The church was huge, gray, cold and dusty and very, very quiet. The ceiling was so far up that the boys felt teeny-tiny. So they quickly looked down again. Some church benches were broken. Some were even totally gone.

"Where are the church mice?" Tom whispered to Willie.

"Don't know! Shall we look for them?" Willie whispered back.

Suddenly something hooted loudly:

"WHOO-HOO!"

The boys instantly froze to their spot.

"The ghosts!" Willie moaned.

Tom's teeth were chattering and his knees would barely hold him anymore, so that for a moment he really did believe in ghosts. Then he said:

"No, look Willie! Over there! It's an owl!"

The owl had flown down to an old wooden statue and had placed itself on its head.

"Whoo-hoo!" went the owl; "Whooo are you?"

"It talks!" went Willie. "Owls don't talk!"

"But of course I doooo! I'm the old church owl. I live up in the church tower. You may refer to me as Mrs. Owl."

"Mrs. Owl?" Tom began.

"SILENCE!" Mrs. Owl snapped, "Silence when I speak... I am not quite finished. I hear you are looking for church mice?"

The boys wanted to answer yes, polite as they were, but Mrs. Owl quickly continued.

"Well, then! I have a proposition! I can show you the place where the church mice live. I cannot go there myself, you see... So you can go there and bring them back to visit me! Well, what do you have to say to that?"

"Where do they live then and why can't you go there, Mrs. Owl?" Tom asked.

Mrs. Owl shot him a razor-sharp glance.

"They're in the benches!" she said, unwillingly, "They're in all the benches. The benches are hollow and interconnected by wooden beams which are hollow as well. I believe that this was done by the mice's friends, the termites. As you know, termites eat wood. As a reward the termites got to eat the rest of the benches the mice didn't need. That's why so many benches are gone."

"But how can we visit the mice, then?" Willie asked.

Mrs. Owl sat looking at them very keenly.

"I have a secret..." she said, "I can turn you into mice, so you can crawl in their holes after them and find out just exactly where they are!"

"But I don't want to be a church mouse forever!" Tom said.

"Well, you won't have to, son!" said Mrs. Owl, "I can turn you back into boys just as easily!"

"How?" Willie asked suspiciously.

Then Mrs. Owl suddenly swept over them, batting at them with her wings, screeching:

"I TOUCH YOU ONCE... I TOUCH YOU TWICE... I TURN YOU INTO...CHURCH MICE!"

"Don't let her touch you! Don't let her touch you! It's a spell!" cried Tom.

But it was already too late. It had been a spell alright, and quicker than you can say "Boo!" Tom had inevitably shrunk to a cute little white mouse, and Willie had become a gray itty-bitty furry thing with twinkling eyes. They nervously sniffed at each other.

"Now off you go! Get me the church mice and BE BACK within the hour or you will never be boys again!"

Never boys again. NEVER boys again. It echoed in their ears. Imagine that! The Tom-mouse and the Willie-mouse took off in a hurry, on their little mouse feet. They jumped into the very first mouse hole in the very first church bench they came across.

The mouse hole gave way to a long, surprisingly spacey tunnel. They ran and they ran through the tunnel Mrs. Owl said the termites had made and very soon it became clear to them that there were a whole lot of tunnels. Each of these tunnels seemed endless. They soon got very tired and when they were running through yet

another tunnel without end without having met a single church mouse, Willie began to cry:

"What if we don't find the church mice in time? We will never be boys again! I don't want to be a mouse all my life!"

"SHHHT, Willie!" Tom peeped, "Be quiet for a second." He had heard something.

They stopped to listen. And yes! From afar they could hear the pitter-patter of little feet.

"The church mice!" Tom exclaimed; "They're coming! Hey, OVERHERE!"

"Over here, over here!" Willie cried.

They appeared around a corner. Horde upon horde of marching mice. It was one gray mass of mice. The pitter-patter had become deafening as they approached. One silver-whiskered mouse, bigger than the lot of them, proudly stepped forward.

"I am Greysnout, King of the church mice," he spoke, "the biggest mouse that ever lived. What do you seek in my kingdom?"

Willie-mouse was over-awed by the presence of the church mice. He couldn't utter a word so Tom had to do the talking.

Tom explained, as best he could and as humbly as he could, how they had been turned into mice but were boys really, and how they desperately wanted to be boys again, and if the mice would please, please come out with them for a second just to meet the owl, so she would change them back.

But then another mouse presented himself:

"Do not believe, dear king, that the old owl summoned us for nothing. I am sure she would love to have any one of us for her dinner."

"What? She eats you?" Tom gasped with surprise.

"Don't you know about owls eating mice?" said the king.

Tom didn't know, and neither did Willie...

"But then you won't come out with us!" cried Willie, "and then we'll never be boys again!" And he fell into the most heart-breaking sobs, which rocked the whole of his tiny mouse body.

"There, there," said Greysnout, "I want to have a second opinion before I decide what to do."

He turned toward a mouse with... Yes, truly! This mouse was wearing glasses!

"Tale-tell, the old! Eldest of all church mice! What say you in this matter!" roared the king.

"There is a way," said the ancient church mouse, "We must toll the bells of this church once more, before the hour is past. We must go all at once. We will be with so many that we will overwhelm the old owl. She cannot go after all. If we be swift, she will get none. So say I."

"Then so be it!" said the king, "We go!"

And the huge mice body moved forward. Tunnel upon tunnel was crossed until at last they could see light. They had reached the hole where Tom and Willie had come in.

Everyone sat very quiet. Not a word was spoken. Not a peep was heard. But suddenly there was action! Out they poured, the brave subjects of King Greysnout: A large, gray fountain of mice.

Mrs. Owl was waiting for them but she went totally berserk at the sight of so many mice.

"HOOOOOH! OOOOOH! So many mice! OOOH! I'm so hungry! HOOOH! I haven't had a mouse in years!"

And she flew left and right, not knowing which mouse to go after because of the multitude of mice:

"I must have one! OOOOH! I'm so hungry! I must have just one fat mouse!"

But the church mice were quick! They ran in all directions to distract Mrs. Owl! And before you knew it they had all disappeared through the cracks and holes in the floor of the tower. In the basement that was beneath, the owl could not come! But there was the bell rope, which went all the way up to the church bells in the top of the tower. Soon they were all clinging to the end of the rope. One big heap of mice, climbing and clinging! And it worked!

The weight of all the mice together was just enough to pull the rope down. The great church bells started to swing just when the hour struck. The heavy ding-dongs shook the church. The bells could be heard through all the street and even further away. People were coming out of their houses:

"What happened? What's the matter? Who is ringing the bells?"

But the boys who suddenly stood in the basement facing each other, a pile of mice at their feet, didn't know about those people and had they known wouldn't have cared! They were too happy to be boys again.

They thanked the church mice a zillion times and said their goodbyes because they could hear the nervous voices outside.

And although both Tom and Willie were heavily punished for going into the old church and ringing the bells (even Tom's parents had heard and had come a-running!) they were very glad.

Because just before they left the church they had seen the old church owl lying on the floor very still. Too much excitement! She had died of a heart attack. Mrs. Owl would never bother the church mice again.

