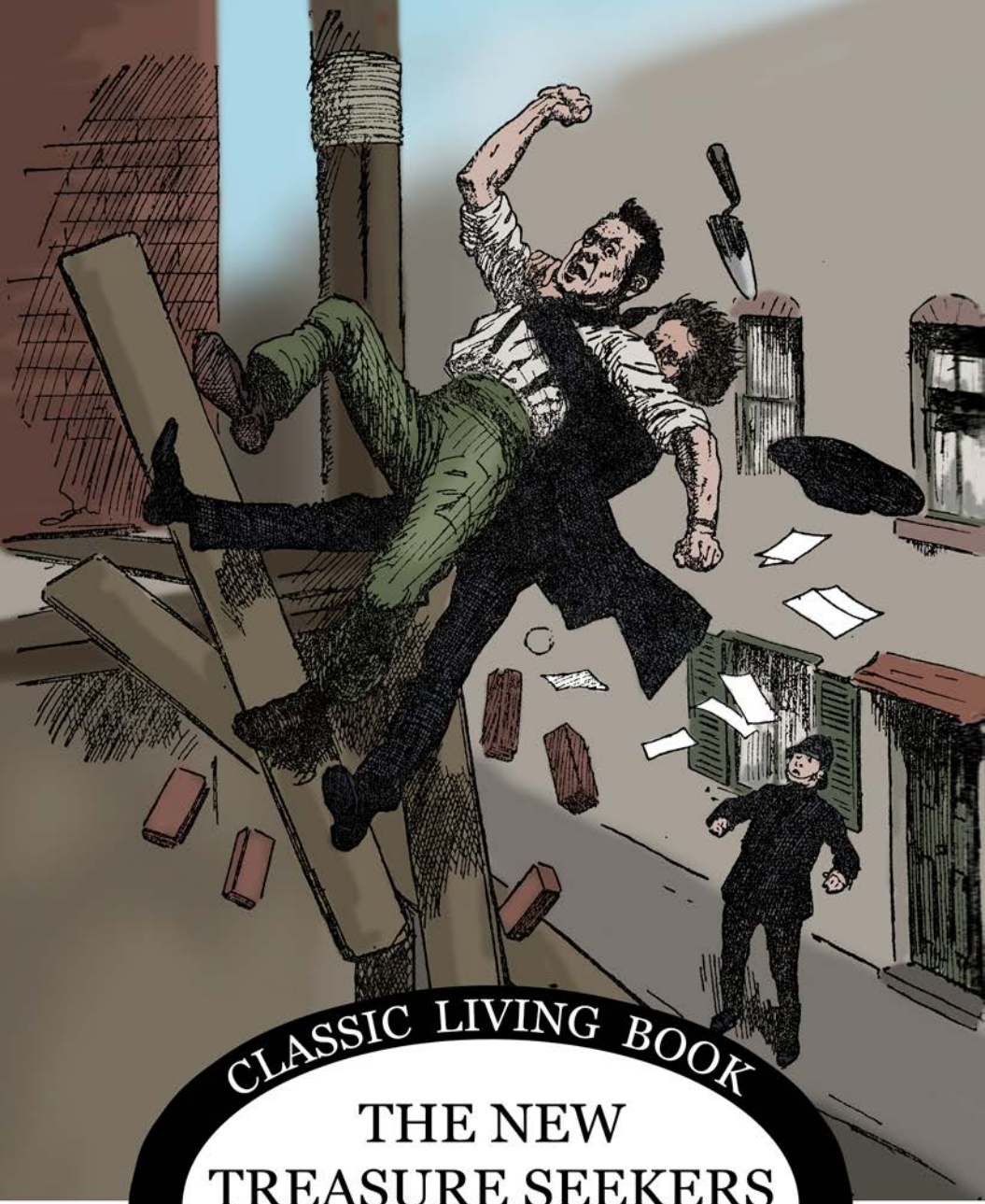

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

# THE NEW TREASURE SEEKERS

Edith Nesbit

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED


Sam

# The New Treasure Seekers

## OR THE BASTABLE CHILDREN IN SEARCH OF A FORTUNE

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BY

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This edition published 2021
by Living Book Press


First published in 1904.

ISBN: 978-1-922619-12-9 (softcover)




A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

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## 1. THE ROAD TO ROME; OR, THE SILLY STOWAWAY

We Bastables have only two uncles, and neither of them, are our own natural-born relatives. One is a great-uncle, and the other is the uncle from his birth of Albert, who used to live next door to us in the Lewisham Road. When we first got to know him (it was over some baked potatoes, and is quite another story) we called him Albert-next-door's-Uncle, and then Albert's uncle for short. But Albert's uncle and my father joined in taking a jolly house in the country, called the Moat House, and we stayed there for our summer holidays; and it was there, through an accident to a pilgrim with peas in his shoes—that's another story too—that we found Albert's uncle's long-lost love; and as she was very old indeed—twenty-six next birthday—and he was ever so much older in the vale of years, he had to get married almost directly, and it was fixed for about Christmas-time. And when our holidays came the whole six of us went down to the Moat House with Father and Albert's uncle. We never had a Christmas in the country before. It was simply ripping. And the long-lost love—her name was Miss Ashleigh, but we were allowed to call her Aunt Margaret even before the wedding made it really legal for us to do so—she and her jolly clergyman brother used to come over, and sometimes we went to the Cedars, where they live, and we had games and charades, and hide-and-seek, and Devil in the Dark, which is a game girls pretend to like, and very few do really, and crackers and a Christmas-tree for the village children, and everything you can jolly well think of.

And all the time, whenever we went to the Cedars, there was all sorts of silly fuss going on about the beastly wedding; boxes coming from London with hats and jackets in, and wedding presents—all glassy and silvery, or else brooches and chains—and clothes sent down from London to choose from. I can't think how a lady can want so many petticoats and boots and things just because she's going to be married. No man would think of getting twenty-four shirts and twenty-four waistcoats, and so on, just to be married in.

"It's because they're going to Rome, I think," Alice said, when we talked it over before the fire in the kitchen the day Mrs. Pettigrew went to see her aunt, and we were allowed to make toffee. "You see, in Rome you can only buy Roman clothes, and I think they're all stupid bright colours—at least I know the sashes are. You stir now, Oswald. My face is all burnt black."

Oswald took the spoon, though it was really not his turn by three; but he is one whose nature is so that he cannot make a fuss about little things—and he knows he can make toffee.

"Lucky hounds," H.O. said, "to be going to Rome. I wish I was."

"Hounds isn't polite, H.O., dear," Dora said; and H.O. said—

"Well, lucky bargees, then."

"It's the dream of my life to go to Rome," Noël said. Noël is our poet brother. "Just think of what the man says in the 'Roman Road.' I wish they'd take me."

"They won't," Dicky said. "It costs a most awful lot. I heard Father saying so only yesterday."

"It would only be the fare," Noël answered; "and I'd go third, or even in a cattle-truck, or a luggage van. And when I got there I could easily earn my own living. I'd make ballads and sing them in the streets. The Italians would give me lyres—that's the Italian kind of shilling, they spell it with an *i*. It shows how poetical they are out there, their calling it that."

"But you couldn't make Italian poetry," H.O. said, staring at Noël with his mouth open.

"Oh, I don't know so much about that," Noël said. "I could jolly soon learn anyway, and just to begin with I'd do it in English. There are sure to be some people who would understand. And if they didn't, don't you think their warm Southern hearts would be touched to see a pale, slender, foreign figure singing plaintive ballads in an unknown tongue? I do. Oh! they'd chuck along the lyres fast enough—they're not hard and cold like North people. Why, every one here is a brewer, or a baker, or a banker, or a butcher, or something dull. Over there they're all bandits, or vineyardiners, or play the guitar, or something, and they crush the red grapes and dance and laugh in the sun—you know jolly well they do."

"This toffee's about done," said Oswald suddenly. "H.O., shut your silly mouth and get a cupful of cold water." And then, what with dropping a little of the toffee into the water to see if it was ready, and pouring some on a plate that wasn't buttered and not being able to get it off again when it was cold without breaking the plate, and the warm row there was about its being one of the best dinner-service ones, the wild romances of Noël's poetical intellect went out of our heads altogether; and it was not till later, and when deep in the waters of affliction, that they were brought back to us.

Next day H.O. said to Dora, "I want to speak to you all by yourself and me." So they went into the secret staircase that creaks and hasn't been secret now for countless years; and after that Dora did some white sewing she wouldn't let us look at, and H.O. helped her.

"It's another wedding present, you may depend," Dicky said—"a beastly surprise, I shouldn't wonder." And no more was said. The rest of us were busy skating on the moat, for it was now freezing hard. Dora never did care for skating; she says it hurts her feet.

And now Christmas and Boxing Day passed like a radiating dream, and it was the wedding-day. We all had to go to the bride's mother's house before the wedding, so as to go to

DORA DID SOME WHITE SEWING

church with the wedding party. The girls had always wanted to be somebody's bridesmaids, and now they were—in white cloth coats like coachmen, with lots of little capes, and white beaver bonnets. They didn't look so bad, though rather as if they were in a Christmas card; and their dresses were white silk like pocket-handkerchiefs under the long coats. And their shoes had real silver buckles our great Indian uncle gave them. H.O. went back just as the waggonette was starting, and came out with a big brown-paper parcel. We thought it was the secret surprise present Dora had been making, and, indeed, when I asked her she nodded. We little recked what it really was, or how our young brother was going to shove himself forward once again. He *will* do it. Nothing you say is of any lasting use.

There were a great many people at the wedding—quite crowds. There was lots to eat and drink, and though it was all cold, it did not matter, because there were blazing fires in every fireplace in the house, and the place all decorated with holly and mistletoe and things. Every one seemed to enjoy themselves very much, except Albert's uncle and his blushing bride; and they looked desperate. Every one said how sweet she looked, but Oswald thought she looked as if she didn't like being married as much as she expected. She was not at all a blushing bride really; only the tip of her nose got pink, because it was rather cold in the church. But she is very jolly.

Her reverend but nice brother read the marriage service. He reads better than any one I know, but he is not a bit of a prig really, when you come to know him.

When the rash act was done Albert's uncle and his bride went home in a carriage all by themselves, and then we had the lunch and drank the health of the bride in real champagne, though Father said we kids must only have just a taste. I'm sure Oswald, for one, did not want any more; one taste was quite enough. Champagne is like soda-water with medicine in it. The sherry we put sugar in once was much more decent.

Then Miss Ashleigh—I mean Mrs. Albert's uncle—went away and took off her white dress and came back looking much warmer. Dora heard the housemaid say afterwards that the cook had stopped the bride on the stairs with "a basin of hot soup, that would take no denial, because the bride, poor dear young thing, not a bite or sup had passed her lips that day." We understood then why she had looked so unhappy. But Albert's uncle had had a jolly good breakfast—fish and eggs and bacon and three goes of marmalade. So it was not hunger made him sad. Perhaps he was thinking what a lot of money it cost to be married and go to Rome.

A little before the bride went to change, H.O. got up and reached his brown-paper parcel from under the sideboard and sneaked out. We thought he might have let us see it given, whatever it was. And Dora said she had understood he meant to; but it was his secret.

The bride went away looking quite comfy in a furry cloak, and Albert's uncle cheered up at the last and threw off the burden of his cares and made a joke. I forget what it was; it wasn't a very good one, but it showed he was trying to make the best of things.

Then the Bridal Sufferers drove away, with the luggage on a cart—heaps and heaps of it, and we all cheered and threw rice and slippers. Mrs. Ashleigh and some other old ladies cried.

And then every one said, "What a pretty wedding!" and began to go. And when our waggonette came round we all began to get in. And suddenly Father said—

"Where's H.O.?" And we looked round. He was in absence.

"Fetch him along sharp—some of you," Father said; "I don't want to keep the horses standing here in the cold all day."

So Oswald and Dicky went to fetch him along. We thought he might have wandered back to what was left of the lunch—for he is young and he does not always know better. But he was not there, and Oswald did not even take a crystallised fruit in passing. He might easily have done this, and no one would have

minded, so it would not have been wrong. But it would have been ungentlemanly. Dicky did not either. H.O. was not there.

We went into the other rooms, even the one the old ladies were crying in, but of course we begged their pardons. And at last into the kitchen, where the servants were smart with white bows and just sitting down to their dinner, and Dicky said—

"I say, cookie love, have you seen H.O.?"

"Don't come here with your imperence!" the cook said, but she was pleased with Dicky's unmeaning compliment all the same.

"*I* see him," said the housemaid. "He was colloguing with the butcher in the yard a bit since. He'd got a brown-paper parcel. Perhaps he got a lift home."

So we went and told Father, and about the white present in the parcel.

"I expect he was ashamed to give it after all," Oswald said, "so he hooked off home with it."

And we got into the wagonette.

"It wasn't a present, though," Dora said; "it was a different kind of surprise—but it really is a secret."

Our good Father did not command her to betray her young brother.

But when we got home H.O. wasn't there. Mrs. Pettigrew hadn't seen him, and he was nowhere about. Father biked back to the Cedars to see if he'd turned up. No. Then all the gentlemen turned out to look for him through the length and breadth of the land.

"He's too old to be stolen by gipsies," Alice said.

"And too ugly," said Dicky.

"Oh *don't*!" said both the girls; "and now when he's lost, too!"

We had looked for a long time before Mrs. Pettigrew came in with a parcel she said the butcher had left. It was not addressed, but we knew it was H.O.'s, because of the label on the paper from the shop where Father gets his shirts. Father opened it at once.

Inside the parcel we found H.O.'s boots and braces, his best

hat and his chest-protector. And Oswald felt as if we had found his skeleton.

"Any row with any of you?" Father asked. But there hadn't been any.

"Was he worried about anything? Done anything wrong, and afraid to own up?"

We turned cold, for we knew what he meant. That parcel was so horribly like the lady's hat and gloves that she takes off on the seashore and leaves with a letter saying it has come to this.

"*No*, *no*, NO, NO!" we all said. "He was perfectly jolly all the morning."

Then suddenly Dicky leaned on the table and one of H.O.'s boots toppled over, and there was something white inside. It was a letter. H.O. must have written it before we left home. It said—

"DEAR FATHER AND EVERY ONE,—I am going to be a Clown. When I am rich and reveared I will come back rolling.

"Your affectionate son,
"HORACE OCTAVIUS BASTABLE."

"Rolling?" Father said.

"He means rolling in money," Alice said. Oswald noticed that every one round the table where H.O.'s boots were dignifiedly respected as they lay, was a horrid pale colour, like when the salt is thrown into snapdragons.

"Oh dear!" Dora cried, "that was it. He asked me to make him a clown's dress and keep it deeply secret. He said he wanted to surprise Aunt Margaret and Albert's uncle. And I didn't think it was wrong," said Dora, screwing up her face; she then added, "Oh dear, oh dear, oh, oh!" and with these concluding remarks she began to howl.

Father thumped her on the back in an absent yet kind way.

"But where's he gone?" he said, not to any one in particular. "I

saw the butcher; he said H.O. asked him to take a parcel home and went back round the Cedars."

Here Dicky coughed and said—

"I didn't think he meant anything, but the day after Noël was talking about singing ballads in Rome, and getting poet's lyres given him, H.O. did say if Noël had been really keen on the Roman lyres and things he could easily have been a stowaway, and gone unknown."

"A stowaway!" said my Father, sitting down suddenly and hard.

"In Aunt Margaret's big dress basket—the one she let him hide in when we had hide-and-seek there. He talked a lot about it after Noël had said that about the lyres—and the Italians being so poetical, you know. You remember that day we had toffee."

My Father is prompt and decisive in action, so is his eldest son.

"I'm off to the Cedars," he said.

"Do let me come, Father," said the decisive son. "You may want to send a message."

So in a moment Father was on his bike and Oswald on the step—a dangerous but delightful spot—and off to the Cedars.

"Have your teas; and *don't* any more of you get lost, and don't sit up if we're late," Father howled to them as we rushed away. How glad then the thoughtful Oswald was that he was the eldest. It was very cold in the dusk on the bicycle, but Oswald did not complain.

At the Cedars my father explained in a few manly but well-chosen words, and the apartment of the dear departed bride was searched.

"Because," said my father, "if H.O. really was little ass enough to get into that basket, he must have turned out something to make room for himself."

Sure enough, when they came to look, there was a great bundle rolled in a sheet under the bed—all lace things and petticoats and ribbons and dressing-gowns and ladies' flummery.

"If you will put the things in something else, I'll catch the ex-

press to Dover and take it with me," Father said to Mrs. Ashleigh; and while she packed the things he explained to some of the crying old ladies who had been unable to leave off, how sorry he was that a son of his—but you know the sort of thing.

Oswald said: "Father, I wish you'd let me come too. I won't be a bit of trouble."

Perhaps it was partly because my Father didn't want to let me walk home in the dark, and he didn't want to worry the Ashleighs any more by asking them to send me home. He said this was why, but I hope it was his loving wish to have his prompt son, so like himself in his decisiveness, with him.

We went.

It was an anxious journey. We knew how far from pleased the bride would be to find no dressing-gowns and ribbons, but only H.O. crying and cross and dirty, as likely as not, when she opened the basket at the hotel at Dover.

Father smoked to pass the time, but Oswald had not so much as a peppermint or a bit of Spanish liquorice to help him through the journey. Yet he bore up.

When we got out at Dover there were Mr. and Mrs. Albert's uncle on the platform.

"Hullo," said Albert's uncle. "What's up? Nothing wrong at home, I hope."

"We've only lost H.O.," said my father. "You don't happen to have him with you?"

"No; but you're joking," said the bride. "We've lost a dress-basket."

*Lost a dress-basket!* The words struck us dumb, but my father recovered speech and explained. The bride was very glad when we said we had brought her ribbons and things, but we stood in anxious gloom, for now H.O. was indeed lost. The dress-basket might be on its way to Liverpool, or rocking on the Channel, and H.O. might never be found again. Oswald did not say these things. It is best to hold your jaw when you want to see a thing

out, and are liable to be sent to bed at a strange hotel if any one happens to remember you.

Then suddenly the station master came with a telegram.

It said: "A dress-basket without label at Cannon Street detained for identification suspicious sounds from inside detain inquirers dynamite machine suspected."

He did not show us this till my Father had told him about H.O., which it took some time for him to believe, and then he did and laughed, and said he would wire them to get the dynamite machine to speak, and if so, to take it out and keep it till its Father called for it.

So back we went to London, with hearts a little lighter, but not gay, for we were a very long time from the last things we had had to eat. And Oswald was almost sorry he had not taken those crystallised fruits.

It was quite late when we got to Cannon Street, and we went straight into the cloakroom, and there was the man in charge, a very jolly chap, sitting on a stool. And there was H.O., the guilty stowaway, dressed in a red-and-white clown's dress, very dusty, and his face as dirty as I have ever seen it, sitting on some one else's tin box, with his feet on some body else's portmanteau, eating bread and cheese, and drinking ale out of a can.

My Father claimed him at once, and Oswald identified the basket. It was very large. There was a tray on the top with hats in it, and H.O. had this on top of him. We all went to bed in Cannon Street Hotel. My Father said nothing to H.O. that night. When we were in bed I tried to get H.O. to tell me all about it, but he was too sleepy and cross. It was the beer and the knocking about in the basket, I suppose. Next day we went back to the Moat House, where the raving anxiousness of the others had been cooled the night before by a telegram from Dover.

My Father said he would speak to H.O. in the evening. It is very horrid not to be spoken to at once and get it over. But H.O. certainly deserved something.

It is hard to tell this tale, because so much of it happened all at once but at different places. But this is what H.O. said to us about it. He said—

"Don't bother—let me alone."

But we were all kind and gentle, and at last we got it out of him what had happened. He doesn't tell a story right from the beginning like Oswald and some of the others do, but from his disjunctured words the author has made the following narration. This is called editing, I believe.

"It was all Noël's fault," H.O. said; "what did he want to go jawing about Rome for?—and a clown's as good as a beastly poet, anyhow! You remember that day we made toffee? Well, I thought of it then."

"You didn't tell us."

"Yes, I did. I half told Dicky. He never said don't, or you'd better not, or gave me any good advice or anything. It's his fault as much as mine. Father ought to speak to him to-night the same as me—and Noël, too."

We bore with him just then because we wanted to hear the story. And we made him go on.

"Well—so I thought if Noël's a cowardy custard I'm not—and I wasn't afraid of being in the basket, though it was quite dark till I cut the air-holes with my knife in the railway van. I think I cut the string off the label. It fell off afterwards, and I saw it through the hole, but of course I couldn't say anything. I thought they'd look after their silly luggage better than that. It was all their fault I was lost."

"Tell us how you did it, H.O. dear," Dora said; "never mind about it being everybody else's fault."

"It's yours as much as any one's, if you come to that," H.O. said. "You made me the clown dress when I asked you. You never said a word about not. So there!"

"Oh, H.O., you *are* unkind!" Dora said. "You know you said it was for a surprise for the bridal pair."

"So it would have been, if they'd found me at Rome, and I'd popped up like what I meant to—like a jack-in-the-box—and said, 'Here we are again!' in my clown's clothes, at them. But it's all spoiled, and father's going to speak to me this evening." H.O. sniffed every time he stopped speaking. But we did not correct him then. We wanted to hear about everything.

"Why didn't you tell me straight out what you were going to do?" Dicky asked.

"Because you'd jolly well have shut me up. You always do if I want to do anything you haven't thought of yourself."

"What did you take with you, H.O.?" asked Alice in a hurry, for H.O. was now sniffing far beyond a whisper.

"Oh, I'd saved a lot of grub, only I forgot it at the last. It's under the chest of drawers in our room. And I had my knife—and I changed into the clown's dress in the cupboard at the Ashleighs—over my own things because I thought it would be cold. And then I emptied the rotten girl's clothes out and hid them—and the top-hatted tray I just put it on a chair near, and I got into the basket, and I lifted the tray up over my head and sat down and fitted it down over me—it's got webbing bars, you know, across it. And none of you would ever have thought of it, let alone doing it."

"I should hope not," Dora said, but H.O. went on unhearing.

"I began to think perhaps I wished I hadn't directly they strapped up the basket. It was beastly hot and stuffy—I had to cut an air-hole in the cart, and I cut my thumb; it was so bumpety. And they threw me about as if I was coals—and wrong way up as often as not. And the train was awful wobbly, and I felt so sick, and if I'd had the grub I couldn't have eaten it. I had a bottle of water. And that was all right till I dropped the cork, and I couldn't find it in the dark till the water got upset, and then I found the cork that minute.

"And when they dumped the basket on to the platform I was so glad to sit still a minute without being jogged I nearly went

to sleep. And then I looked out, and the label was off, and lying close by. And then some one gave the basket a kick—big brute, I'd like to kick him!—and said, 'What's this here?' And I daresay I did squeak—like a rabbit-noise, you know—and then some one said, 'Sounds like live-stock, don't it? No label.' And he was standing on the label all the time. I saw the string sticking out under his nasty boot. And then they trundled me off somewhere, on a wheelbarrow it felt like, and dumped me down again in a dark place—and I couldn't see anything more."

"I wonder," said the thoughtful Oswald, "what made them think you were a dynamite machine?"

"Oh, that was awful!" H.O. said. "It was my watch. I wound it up, just for something to do. You know the row it makes since it was broken, and I heard some one say, 'Shish! what's that?' and then, 'Sounds like an infernal machine'—don't go shoving me, Dora, it was him said it, not me—and then, 'If I was the inspector I'd dump it down in the river, so I would. Any way, let's shift it.' But the other said, 'Let well alone,' so I wasn't dumped any more. And they fetched another man, and there was a heap of jaw, and I heard them say 'Police,' so I let them have it."

"What *did* you do?"

"Oh, I just kicked about in the basket, and I heard them all start off, and I shouted, 'Hi, here! let me out, can't you!'"

"And did they?"

"Yes, but not for ever so long, I had to jaw at them through the cracks of the basket. And when they opened it there was quite a crowd, and they laughed ever so, and gave me bread and cheese, and said I was a plucky youngster—and I am, and I do wish Father wouldn't put things off so. He might just as well have spoken to me this morning. And I can't see I've done anything so awful—and it's all your faults for not looking after me. Aren't I your little brother? and it's your duty to see I do what's right. You've told me so often enough."

These last words checked the severe reprimand trembling on


THEY LAUGHED EVER SO

the hitherto patient Oswald's lips. And then H.O. began to cry, and Dora nursed him, though generally he is much too big for this and knows it. And he went to sleep on her lap, and said he didn't want any dinner.

When it came to Father's speaking to H.O. that evening it never came off, because H.O. was ill in bed, not sham, you know, but real, send-for-the-doctor ill. The doctor said it was fever from chill and excitement, but I think myself it was very likely the things he ate at lunch, and the shaking up, and then the bread and cheese, and the beer out of a can.

He was ill a week. When he was better, not much was said. My Father, who is the justest man in England, said the boy had been punished enough—and so he had, for he missed going to the pantomime, and to "Shock-Headed Peter" at the Garrick Theatre, which is far and away the best play that ever was done, and quite different from any other acting I ever saw. They are exactly like real boys; I think they must have been reading about us. And he had to take a lot of the filthiest medicine I ever tasted. I wonder if Father told the doctor to make it nasty on purpose? A woman would have directly, but gentlemen are not generally so sly. Any way, you live and learn. None of us would now ever consent to be a stowaway, no matter who wanted us to, and I don't think H.O.'s very likely to do it again.

The only *meant* punishment he had was seeing the clown's dress burnt before his eyes by Father. He had bought it all with his own saved-up money, red trimmings and all.

Of course, when he got well we soon taught him not to say again that it was any of our faults. As he owned himself, he *is* our little brother, and we are not going to stand that kind of cheek from *him*.

## 2. THE CONSCIENCE-PUDDING

IT WAS Christmas, nearly a year after Mother died. I cannot write about Mother—but I will just say one thing. If she had only been away for a little while, and not for always, we shouldn't have been so keen on having a Christmas. I didn't understand this then, but I am much older now, and I think it was just because everything was so different and horrid we felt we *must* do something; and perhaps we were not particular enough *what*. Things make you much more unhappy when you loaf about than when you are doing events.

Father had to go away just about Christmas. He had heard that his wicked partner, who ran away with his money, was in France, and he thought he could catch him, but really he was in Spain, where catching criminals is never practised. We did not know this till afterwards.

Before Father went away he took Dora and Oswald into his study, and said—

"I'm awfully sorry I've got to go away, but it is very serious business, and I must go. You'll be good while I'm away, kiddies, won't you?"

We promised faithfully. Then he said—

"There are reasons—you wouldn't understand if I tried to tell you—but you can't have much of a Christmas this year. But I've told Matilda to make you a good plain pudding. Perhaps next Christmas will be brighter."

(It was; for the next Christmas saw us the affluent nephews and nieces of an Indian uncle—but that is quite another story, as good old Kipling says.)

When Father had been seen off at Lewisham Station with his bags, and a plaid rug in a strap, we came home again, and it was horrid. There were papers and things littered all over his room where he had packed. We tidied the room up—it was the only thing we could do for him. It was Dicky who accidentally broke his shaving-glass, and H.O. made a paper boat out of a letter we found out afterwards Father particularly wanted to keep. This took us some time, and when we went into the nursery the fire was black out, and we could not get it alight again, even with the whole *Daily Chronicle*. Matilda, who was our general then, was out, as well as the fire, so we went and sat in the kitchen. There is always a good fire in kitchens. The kitchen hearthrug was not nice to sit on, so we spread newspapers on it.

It was sitting in the kitchen, I think, that brought to our minds my Father's parting words—about the pudding, I mean.

Oswald said, "Father said we couldn't have much of a Christmas for secret reasons, and he said he had told Matilda to make us a plain pudding."

The plain pudding instantly cast its shadow over the deepening gloom of our young minds.

"I wonder *how* plain she'll make it?" Dicky said.

"As plain as plain, you may depend," said Oswald. "A here-am-I-where-are-you pudding—that's her sort."

The others groaned, and we gathered closer round the fire till the newspapers rustled madly.

"I believe I could make a pudding that *wasn't* plain, if I tried," Alice said. "Why shouldn't we?"

"No chink," said Oswald, with brief sadness.

"How much would it cost?" Noël asked, and added that Dora had twopence and H.O. had a French halfpenny.

Dora got the cookery-book out of the dresser drawer, where it lay doubled up among clothes-pegs, dirty dusters, scallop shells, string, penny novelettes, and the dining-room corkscrew. The general we had then—it seemed as if she did all the cooking

on the cookery-book instead of on the baking-board, there were traces of so many bygone meals upon its pages.

"It doesn't say Christmas pudding at all," said Dora.

"Try plum," the resourceful Oswald instantly counselled.

Dora turned the greasy pages anxiously.

"'Plum-pudding, 518.

"'A rich, with flour, 517.

"'Christmas, 517.

"'Cold brandy sauce for, 241.'

"We shouldn't care about that, so it's no use looking.

"'Good without eggs, 518.

"'Plain, 518.'

"We don't want *that* anyhow. 'Christmas, 517'—that's the one."

It took her a long time to find the page. Oswald got a shovel of coals and made up the fire. It blazed up like the devouring elephant the *Daily Telegraph* always calls it. Then Dora read—

"'Christmas plum-pudding. Time six hours.'"

"To eat it in?" said H.O.

"No, silly! to make it."

"Forge ahead, Dora," Dicky replied.

Dora went on—

"'2072. One pound and a half of raisins; half a pound of currants; three quarters of a pound of breadcrumbs; half a pound of flour; three-quarters of a pound of beef suet; nine eggs; one wine glassful of brandy; half a pound of citron and orange peel; half a nutmeg; and a little ground ginger.' I wonder *how* little ground ginger."

"A teacupful would be enough, I think," Alice said; "we must not be extravagant."

"We haven't got anything yet to be extravagant *with*," said Oswald, who had toothache that day. "What would you do with the things if you'd got them?"

"You'd 'chop the suet as fine as possible'—I wonder how fine that is?" replied Dora and the book together—"'and mix it with the breadcrumbs and flour; add the currants washed and dried.'"

"Not starched, then," said Alice.

"'The citron and orange peel cut into thin slices'—I wonder what they call thin? Matilda's thin bread-and-butter is quite different from what I mean by it—'and the raisins stoned and divided.' How many heaps would you divide them into?"

"Seven, I suppose," said Alice; "one for each person and one for the pot—I mean pudding."

"'Mix it all well together with the grated nutmeg and ginger. Then stir in nine eggs well beaten, and the brandy'—we'll leave that out, I think—'and again mix it thoroughly together that every ingredient may be moistened; put it into a buttered mould, tie over tightly, and boil for six hours. Serve it ornamented with holly and brandy poured over it.'"

"I should think holly and brandy poured over it would be simply beastly," said Dicky.

"I expect the book knows. I daresay holly and water would do as well though. 'This pudding may be made a month before'—it's no use reading about that though, because we've only got four days to Christmas."

"It's no use reading about any of it," said Oswald, with thoughtful repeatedness, "because we haven't got the things, and we haven't got the coin to get them."

"We might get the tin somehow," said Dicky.

"There must be lots of kind people who would subscribe to a Christmas pudding for poor children who hadn't any," Noël said.

"Well, I'm going skating at Penn's," said Oswald. "It's no use thinking about puddings. We must put up with it plain."

So he went, and Dicky went with him.

When they returned to their home in the evening the fire had been lighted again in the nursery, and the others were just having tea. We toasted our bread-and-butter on the bare side, and it gets a little warm among the butter. This is called French toast. "I like English better, but it is more expensive," Alice said—

"Matilda is in a frightful rage about your putting those coals

on the kitchen fire, Oswald. She says we shan't have enough to last over Christmas as it is. And Father gave her a talking to before he went about them—asked her if she ate them, she says—but I don't believe he did. Anyway, she's locked the coal-cellar door, and she's got the key in her pocket. I don't see how we can boil the pudding."

"What pudding?" said Oswald dreamily. He was thinking of a chap he had seen at Penn's who had cut the date 1899 on the ice with four strokes.

"*The* pudding," Alice said. "Oh, we've had such a time, Oswald! First Dora and I went to the shops to find out exactly what the pudding would cost—it's only two and elevenpence halfpenny, counting in the holly."

"It's no good," Oswald repeated; he is very patient and will say the same thing any number of times. "It's no good. You know we've got no tin."

"Ah," said Alice, "but Noël and I went out, and we called at some of the houses in Granville Park and Dartmouth Hill—and we got a lot of sixpences and shillings, besides pennies, and one old gentleman gave us half-a-crown. He was so nice. Quite bald, with a knitted red and blue waistcoat. We've got eight-and-sevenpence."

Oswald did not feel quite sure Father would like us to go asking for shillings and sixpences, or even half-crowns from strangers, but he did not say so. The money had been asked for and got, and it couldn't be helped—and perhaps he wanted the pudding—I am not able to remember exactly why he did not speak up and say, "This is wrong," but anyway he didn't.

Alice and Dora went out and bought the things next morning. They bought double quantities, so that it came to five shillings and elevenpence, and was enough to make a noble pudding. There was a lot of holly left over for decorations. We used very little for the sauce. The money that was left we spent very anxiously in other things to eat, such as dates and figs and toffee.

We did not tell Matilda about it. She was a red-haired girl, and apt to turn shirty at the least thing.

Concealed under our jackets and overcoats we carried the parcels up to the nursery, and hid them in the treasure-chest we had there. It was the bureau drawer. It was locked up afterwards because the treacle got all over the green baize and the little drawers inside it while we were waiting to begin to make the pudding. It was the grocer told us we ought to put treacle in the pudding, and also about not so much ginger as a teacupful.

When Matilda had begun to pretend to scrub the floor (she pretended this three times a week so as to have an excuse not to let us in the kitchen, but I know she used to read novelettes most of the time, because Alice and I had a squint through the window more than once), we barricaded the nursery door and set to work. We were very careful to be quite clean. We washed our hands as well as the currants. I have sometimes thought we did not get all the soap off the currants. The pudding smelt like a washing-day when the time came to cut it open. And we washed a corner of the table to chop the suet on. Chopping suet looks easy till you try.

Father's machine he weighs letters with did to weigh out the things. We did this very carefully, in case the grocer had not done so. Everything was right except the raisins. H.O. had carried them home. He was very young then, and there was a hole in the corner of the paper bag and his mouth was sticky.

Lots of people have been hanged to a gibbet in chains on evidence no worse than that, and we told H.O. so till he cried. This was good for him. It was not unkindness to H.O., but part of our duty.

Chopping suet as fine as possible is much harder than any one would think, as I said before. So is crumbling bread—especially if your loaf is new, like ours was. When we had done them the breadcrumbs and the suet were both very large and lumpy, and of a dingy gray colour, something like pale slate pencil.

They looked a better colour when we had mixed them with the flour. The girls had washed the currants with Brown Windsor soap and the sponge. Some of the currants got inside the sponge and kept coming out in the bath for days afterwards. I see now that this was not quite nice. We cut the candied peel as thin as we wish people would cut our bread-and-butter. We tried to take the stones out of the raisins, but they were too sticky, so we just divided them up in seven lots. Then we mixed the other things in the wash-hand basin from the spare bedroom that was always spare. We each put in our own lot of raisins and turned it all into a pudding-basin, and tied it up in one of Alice's pinafores, which was the nearest thing to a proper pudding-cloth we could find—at any rate clean. What was left sticking to the wash-hand basin did not taste so bad.

"It's a little bit soapy," Alice said, "but perhaps that will boil out; like stains in table-cloths."

It was a difficult question how to boil the pudding. Matilda proved furious when asked to let us, just because some one had happened to knock her hat off the scullery door and Pincher had got it and done for it. However, part of the embassy nicked a saucepan while the others were being told what Matilda thought about the hat, and we got hot water out of the bath-room and made it boil over our nursery fire. We put the pudding in—it was now getting on towards the hour of tea—and let it boil. With some exceptions—owing to the fire going down, and Matilda not hurrying up with coals—it boiled for an hour and a quarter. Then Matilda came suddenly in and said, "I'm not going to have you messing about in here with my saucepans"; and she tried to take it off the fire. You will see that we couldn't stand this; it was not likely. I do not remember who it was that told her to mind her own business, and I think I have forgotten who caught hold of her first to make her chuck it. I am sure no needless violence was used. Anyway, while the struggle progressed, Alice and Dora took the saucepan away and put it in the boot-cupboard under the stairs and put the key in their pocket.

This sharp encounter made every one very hot and cross. We got over it before Matilda did, but we brought her round before bedtime. Quarrels should always be made up before bedtime. It says so in the Bible. If this simple rule was followed there would not be so many wars and martyrs and law suits and inquisitions and bloody deaths at the stake.

All the house was still. The gas was out all over the house except on the first landing, when several darkly-shrouded figures might have been observed creeping downstairs to the kitchen.

On the way, with superior precaution, we got out our saucepan. The kitchen fire was red, but low; the coal-cellar was locked, and there was nothing in the scuttle but a little coal-dust and the piece of brown paper that is put in to keep the coals from tumbling out through the bottom where the hole is. We put the saucepan on the fire and plied it with fuel—two *Chronicles*, a *Telegraph*, and two *Family Herald* novelettes were burned in vain. I am almost sure the pudding did not boil at all that night.

"Never mind," Alice said. "We can each nick a piece of coal every time we go into the kitchen to-morrow."

This daring scheme was faithfully performed, and by night we had nearly half a waste-paper basket of coal, coke, and cinders. And in the depth of night once more we might have been observed, this time with our collier-like waste-paper basket in our guarded hands.

There was more fire left in the grate that night, and we fed it with the fuel we had collected. This time the fire blazed up, and the pudding boiled like mad. This was the time it boiled two hours—at least I think it was about that, but we dropped asleep on the kitchen tables and dresser. You dare not be lowly in the night in the kitchen, because of the beetles. We were aroused by a horrible smell. It was the pudding-cloth burning. All the water had secretly boiled itself away. We filled it up at once with cold, and the saucepan cracked. So we cleaned it and put it back on the shelf and took another and went to bed. You see what a lot

of trouble we had over the pudding. Every evening till Christmas, which had now become only the day after to-morrow, we sneaked down in the inky midnight and boiled that pudding for as long as it would.

On Christmas morning we chopped the holly for the sauce, but we put hot water (instead of brandy) and moist sugar. Some of them said it was not so bad. Oswald was not one of these.

Then came the moment when the plain pudding Father had ordered smoked upon the board. Matilda brought it in and went away at once. She had a cousin out of Woolwich Arsenal to see her that day, I remember. Those far-off days are quite distinct in memory's recollection still.

Then we got out our own pudding from its hiding-place and gave it one last hurried boil—only seven minutes, because of the general impatience which Oswald and Dora could not cope with.

We had found means to secrete a dish, and we now tried to dish the pudding up, but it stuck to the basin, and had to be dislodged with the chisel. The pudding was horribly pale. We poured the holly sauce over it, and Dora took up the knife and was just cutting it when a few simple words from H.O. turned us from happy and triumphing cookery artists to persons in despair.

He said: "How pleased all those kind ladies and gentlemen would be if they knew *we* were the poor children they gave the shillings and sixpences and things for!"

We all said, "*What?*" It was no moment for politeness.

"I say," H.O. said, "they'd be glad if they knew it was us was enjoying the pudding, and not dirty little, really poor children."

"You should say 'you were,' not 'you was,'" said Dora, but it was as in a dream and only from habit.

"Do you mean to say"—Oswald spoke firmly, yet not angrily—"that you and Alice went and begged for money for poor children, and then *kept* it?"

"We didn't keep it," said H.O., "we spent it."

"We've kept the *things*, you little duffer!" said Dicky, looking

at the pudding sitting alone and uncared for on its dish. "You begged for money for poor children, and then *kept* it. It's stealing, that's what it is. I don't say so much about you—you're only a silly kid—but Alice knew better. Why did you do it?"

He turned to Alice, but she was now too deep in tears to get a word out.

H.O. looked a bit frightened, but he answered the question. We have taught him this. He said—

"I thought they'd give us more if I said poor children than if I said just us."

"*That's* cheating," said Dicky—"downright beastly, mean, low cheating."

"I'm not," said H.O.; "and you're another." Then he began to cry too. I do not know how the others felt, but I understand from Oswald that he felt that now the honour of the house of Bastable had been stamped on in the dust, and it didn't matter what happened. He looked at the beastly holly that had been left over from the sauce and was stuck up over the pictures. It now appeared hollow and disgusting, though it had got quite a lot of berries, and some of it was the varied kind—green and white. The figs and dates and toffee were set out in the doll's dinner service. The very sight of it all made Oswald blush sickly. He owns he would have liked to cuff H.O., and, if he did for a moment wish to shake Alice, the author, for one, can make allowances.

Now Alice choked and spluttered, and wiped her eyes fiercely, and said, "It's no use ragging H.O. It's my fault. I'm older than he is."

H.O. said, "It couldn't be Alice's fault. I don't see as it was wrong."

"That, not as," murmured Dora, putting her arm round the sinner who had brought this degrading blight upon our family tree, but such is girls' undetermined and affectionate silliness. "Tell sister all about it, H.O. dear. Why couldn't it be Alice's fault?"

H.O. cuddled up to Dora and said snufflingly in his nose—

"Because she hadn't got nothing to do with it. I collected it all. She never went into one of the houses. She didn't want to."

"And then took all the credit of getting the money," said Dicky savagely.

Oswald said, "Not much *credit*," in scornful tones.

"Oh, you are *beastly*, the whole lot of you, except Dora!" Alice said, stamping her foot in rage and despair. "I tore my frock on a nail going out, and I didn't want to go back, and I got H.O. to go to the houses alone, and I waited for him outside. And I asked him not to say anything because I didn't want Dora to know about the frock—it's my best. And I don't know what he said inside. He never told me. But I'll bet anything he didn't *mean* to cheat."

"You *said* lots of kind people would be ready to give money to get pudding for poor children. So I asked them to."

Oswald, with his strong right hand, waved a wave of passing things over.

"We'll talk about that another time," he said; "just now we've got weightier things to deal with."

He pointed to the pudding, which had grown cold during the conversation to which I have alluded. H.O. stopped crying, but Alice went on with it. Oswald now said—

"We're a base and outcast family. Until that pudding's out of the house we shan't be able to look any one in the face. We must see that that pudding goes to poor children—not grisling, grumpy, whiney-piney, pretending poor children—but real poor ones, just as poor as they can stick."

"And the figs too—and the dates," said Noël, with regretting tones.

"Every fig," said Dicky sternly. "Oswald is quite right."

This honourable resolution made us feel a bit better. We hastily put on our best things, and washed ourselves a bit, and hurried out to find some really poor people to give the pudding to. We cut it in slices ready, and put it in a basket with the figs and dates

and toffee. We would not let H.O. come with us at first because he wanted to. And Alice would not come because of him. So at last we had to let him. The excitement of tearing into your best things heals the hurt that wounded honour feels, as the poetry writer said—or at any rate it makes the hurt feel better.

We went out into the streets. They were pretty quiet—nearly everybody was eating its Christmas dessert. But presently we met a woman in an apron. Oswald said very politely—

"Please, are you a poor person?" And she told us to get along with us.

The next we met was a shabby man with a hole in his left boot.

Again Oswald said, "Please, are you a poor person, and have you any poor little children?"

The man told us not to come any of our games with him, or we should laugh on the wrong side of our faces. We went on sadly. We had no heart to stop and explain to him that we had no games to come.

The next was a young man near the Obelisk. Dora tried this time.

She said, "Oh, if you please we've got some Christmas pudding in this basket, and if you're a poor person you can have some."

"Poor as Job," said the young man in a hoarse voice, and he had to come up out of a red comforter to say it.

We gave him a slice of the pudding, and he bit into it without thanks or delay. The next minute he had thrown the pudding slap in Dora's face, and was clutching Dicky by the collar.

"Blime if I don't chuck ye in the river, the whole bloomin' lot of you!" he exclaimed.

The girls screamed, the boys shouted, and though Oswald threw himself on the insulter of his sister with all his manly vigour, yet but for a friend of Oswald's, who is in the police, passing at that instant, the author shudders to think what might have happened, for he was a strong young man, and Oswald is not yet come to his full strength, and the Quaggy runs all too near.

Our policeman led our assailant aside, and we waited anxiously, as he told us to. After long uncertain moments the young man in the comforter loafed off grumbling, and our policeman turned to us.

"Said you give him a dollop o' pudding, and it tasted of soap and hair-oil."

I suppose the hair-oil must have been the Brown Windsoriness of the soap coming out. We were sorry, but it was still our duty to get rid of the pudding. The Quaggy was handy, it is true, but when you have collected money to feed poor children and spent it on pudding it is not right to throw that pudding in the river. People do not subscribe shillings and sixpences and half-crowns to feed a hungry flood with Christmas pudding.

Yet we shrank from asking any more people whether they were poor persons, or about their families, and still more from offering the pudding to chance people who might bite into it and taste the soap before we had time to get away.

It was Alice, the most paralysed with disgrace of all of us, who thought of the best idea.

She said, "Let's take it to the workhouse. At any rate they're all poor people there, and they mayn't go out without leave, so they can't run after us to do anything to us after the pudding. No one would give them leave to go out to pursue people who had brought them pudding, and wreck vengeance on them, and at any rate we shall get rid of the conscience-pudding—it's a sort of conscience-money, you know—only it isn't money but pudding."

The workhouse is a good way, but we stuck to it, though very cold, and hungrier than we thought possible when we started, for we had been so agitated we had not even stayed to eat the plain pudding our good Father had so kindly and thoughtfully ordered for our Christmas dinner.

The big bell at the workhouse made a man open the door to us, when we rang it. Oswald said (and he spoke because he is next eldest to Dora, and she had had jolly well enough of saying anything about pudding)—he said—

"Please we've brought some pudding for the poor people."

He looked us up and down, and he looked at our basket, then he said: "You'd better see the Matron."

We waited in a hall, feeling more and more uncomfy, and less and less like Christmas. We were very cold indeed, especially our hands and our noses. And we felt less and less able to face the Matron if she was horrid, and one of us at least wished we had chosen the Quaggy for the pudding's long home, and made it up to the robbed poor in some other way afterwards.

Just as Alice was saying earnestly in the burning cold ear of Oswald, "Let's put down the basket and make a bolt for it. Oh, Oswald, *let's*!" a lady came along the passage. She was very upright, and she had eyes that went through you like blue gimlets. I should not like to be obliged to thwart that lady if she had any design, and mine was opposite. I am glad this is not likely to occur.

She said, "What's all this about a pudding?"

H.O. said at once, before we could stop him, "They say I've stolen the pudding, so we've brought it here for the poor people."

"No, we didn't!" "That wasn't why!" "The money was given!" "It was meant for the poor!" "Shut up, H.O.!" said the rest of us all at once.

Then there was an awful silence. The lady gimleted us again one by one with her blue eyes.

Then she said: "Come into my room. You all look frozen."

She took us into a very jolly room with velvet curtains and a big fire, and the gas lighted, because now it was almost dark, even out of doors. She gave us chairs, and Oswald felt as if his was a dock, he felt so criminal, and the lady looked so Judgular.

Then she took the arm-chair by the fire herself, and said, "Who's the eldest?"

"I am," said Dora, looking more like a frightened white rabbit than I've ever seen her.

"Then tell me all about it."

Dora looked at Alice and began to cry. That slab of pudding

in the face had totally unnerved the gentle girl. Alice's eyes were red, and her face was puffy with crying; but she spoke up for Dora and said—

"Oh, please let Oswald tell. Dora can't. She's tired with the long walk. And a young man threw a piece of it in her face, and—"

The lady nodded and Oswald began. He told the story from the very beginning, as he has always been taught to, though he hated to lay bare the family honour's wound before a stranger, however judgelike and gimlet-eyed He told all—not concealing the pudding-throwing, nor what the young man said about soap.

"So," he ended, "we want to give the conscience-pudding to you. It's like conscience-money—you know what that is, don't you? But if you really think it is soapy and not just the young man's horridness, perhaps you'd better not let them eat it. But the figs and things are all right."

When he had done the lady said, for most of us were crying more or less—

"Come, cheer up! It's Christmas-time, and he's very little—your brother, I mean. And I think the rest of you seem pretty well able to take care of the honour of the family. I'll take the conscience-pudding off your minds. Where are you going now?"

"Home, I suppose," Oswald said. And he thought how nasty and dark and dull it would be. The fire out most likely and Father away.

"And your Father's not at home, you say," the blue-gimlet lady went on. "What do you say to having tea with me, and then seeing the entertainment we have got up for our old people?"

Then the lady smiled and the blue gimlets looked quite merry.

The room was so warm and comfortable and the invitation was the last thing we expected. It was jolly of her, I do think.

No one thought quite at first of saying how pleased we should be to accept her kind invitation. Instead we all just said "Oh!" but in a tone which must have told her we meant "Yes, please," very deeply.

Oswald (this has more than once happened) was the first to restore his manners. He made a proper bow like he has been taught, and said—

"Thank you very much. We should like it very much. It is very much nicer than going home. Thank you very much."

I need not tell the reader that Oswald could have made up a much better speech if he had had more time to make it up in, or if he had not been so filled with mixed flusteredness and furification by the shameful events of the day.

We washed our faces and hands and had a first rate muffin and crumpet tea, with slices of cold meats, and many nice jams and cakes. A lot of other people were there, most of them people who were giving the entertainment to the aged poor.

After tea it was the entertainment. Songs and conjuring and a play called "Box and Cox," very amusing, and a lot of throwing things about in it—bacon and chops and things—and nigger minstrels. We clapped till our hands were sore.

When it was over we said goodbye. In between the songs and things Oswald had had time to make up a speech of thanks to the lady.

He said—

"We all thank you heartily for your goodness. The entertainment was beautiful. We shall never forget your kindness and hospitableness."

The lady laughed, and said she had been very pleased to have us. A fat gentleman said—

"And your teas? I hope you enjoyed those—eh?"

Oswald had not had time to make up an answer to that, so he answered straight from the heart, and said—

"Ra—*ther*!"

And every one laughed and slapped us boys on the back and kissed the girls, and the gentleman who played the bones in the nigger minstrels saw us home. We ate the cold pudding that night, and H.O. dreamed that something came to eat him, like

it advises you to in the advertisements on the hoardings. The grown-ups said it was the pudding, but I don't think it could have been that, because, as I have said more than once, it was so very plain.

Some of H.O.'s brothers and sisters thought it was a judgment on him for pretending about who the poor children were he was collecting the money for. Oswald does not believe such a little boy as H.O. would have a real judgment made just for him and nobody else, whatever he did.

But it certainly is odd. H.O. was the only one who had bad dreams, and he was also the only one who got any of the things we bought with that ill-gotten money, because, you remember, he picked a hole in the raisin-paper as he was bringing the parcel home. The rest of us had nothing, unless you count the scrapings of the pudding-basin, and those don't really count at all.