

Nesbit Edith

Oswald Bastable and Others



Edith Nesbit
Oswald Bastable and Others

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23163699

Oswald Bastable and Others:

Содержание

OSWALD BASTABLE	5
AN OBJECT OF VALUE AND VIRTUE	5
THE RUNAWAYS	32
THE ARSENICATORS	55
THE ENCHANCERIED HOUSE	74
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	77

**Nesbit Edith
Oswald Bastable and Others**

TO

MY DEAR NIECE

ANTHONIA NESBIT

OSWALD BASTABLE

AN OBJECT OF VALUE AND VIRTUE

This happened a very little time after we left our humble home in Lewisham, and went to live at the Blackheath house of our Indian uncle, which was replete with every modern convenience, and had a big garden and a great many greenhouses. We had had a lot of jolly Christmas presents, and one of them was Dicky's from father, and it was a printing-press. Not one of the eighteenpenny kind that never come off, but a real tip-topper, that you could have printed a whole newspaper out of if you could have been clever enough to make up all the stuff there is in newspapers. I don't know how people can do it. It's all about different things, but it is all just the same too. But the author is sorry to find he is not telling things from the beginning, as he has been taught. The printing-press really doesn't come into the story till quite a long way on. So it is no use your wondering what it was that we did print with the printing-press. It was not a newspaper, anyway, and it wasn't my young brother's poetry, though he and the girls did do an awful lot of that. It was something much more far-reaching, as you will see if you wait.

There wasn't any skating those holidays, because it was what they call nice open weather. That means it was simply muggy,

and you could play out of doors without grown-ups fussing about your overcoat, or bringing you to open shame in the streets with knitted comforters, except, of course, the poet Noël, who is young, and equal to having bronchitis if he only looks at a pair of wet boots. But the girls were indoors a good deal, trying to make things for a bazaar which the people our housekeeper's elder sister lives with were having in the country for the benefit of a poor iron church that was in difficulties. And Noël and H. O. were with them, putting sweets in bags for the bazaar's lucky-tub. So Dicky and I were out alone together. But we were not angry with the others for their stuffy way of spending a day. Two is not a good number, though, for any game except fives; and the man who ordered the vineries and pineries, and butlers' pantries and things, never had the sense to tell the builders to make a fives court. Some people never think of the simplest things. So we had been playing catch with a fives ball. It was Dicky's ball, and Oswald said:

'I bet you can't hit it over the house.'

'What do you bet?' said Dicky.

And Oswald replied:

'Anything you like. You couldn't do it, anyhow.'

Dicky said:

'Miss Blake says betting is wicked; but I don't believe it is, if you don't bet money.'

Oswald reminded him how in 'Miss Edgeworth' even that wretched little Rosamond, who is never allowed to do anything

she wants to, even lose her own needles, makes a bet with her brother, and none of the grown-ups turn a hair.

'But *I* don't want to bet,' he said. 'I know you can't do it.'

'I'll bet you my fives ball I do,' Dicky rejoindered.

'Done! I'll bet you that threepenny ball of string and the cobbler's wax you were bothering about yesterday.'

So Dicky said 'Done!' and then he went and got a tennis racket – when I meant with his hands – and the ball soared up to the top of the house and faded away. But when we went round to look for it we couldn't find it anywhere. So he said it had gone over and he had won. And Oswald thought it had not gone over, but stayed on the roof, and he hadn't. And they could not agree about it, though they talked of nothing else till tea time.

It was a few days after that that the big greenhouse began to leak, and something was said at brekker about had any of us been throwing stones. But it happened that we had not. Only after brek Oswald said to Dicky:

'What price fives balls for knocking holes in greenhouses?'

'Then you own it went over the house, and I won my bet. Hand over!' Dicky remarked.

But Oswald did not see this, because it wasn't proved it was the fives ball. It was only his idea.

Then it rained for two or three days, and the greenhouse leaked much more than just a fives ball, and the grown-ups said the man who put it up had scamped the job, and they sent for him to put it right. And when he was ready he came, and men

came with ladders and putty and glass, and a thing to cut it with a real diamond in it that he let us have to look at. It was fine that day, and Dicky and H. O. and I were out most of the time talking to the men. I think the men who come to do things to houses are so interesting to talk to; they seem to know much more about the things that really matter than gentlemen do. I shall try to be like them when I grow up, and not always talk about politics and the way the army is going to the dogs.

The men were very jolly, and let us go up the ladder and look at the top of the greenhouse. Not H. O., of course, because he is very young indeed, and wears socks. When they had gone to dinner, H. O. went in to see if some pies were done that he had made out of a bit of putty the man gave him. He had put the pies in the oven when the cook wasn't looking. I think something must have been done to him, for he did not return.

So Dicky and I were left. Dicky said:

'If I could get the ladder round to the roof of the stovehouse I believe I should find my fives ball in the gutter. I *know* it went over the house that day.'

So Oswald, ever ready and obliging, helped his brother to move the ladder round to the tiled roof of the stovehouse, and Dicky looked in the gutter. But even he could not pretend the ball was there, because I am certain it never went over at all.

When he came down, Oswald said:

'Sold again!'

And Dicky said:

'Sold yourself! You jolly well thought it was there, and you'd have to pay for it.'

This unjustness was Oswald's reward for his kind helpingness about moving the ladder. So he turned away, just saying carelessly over his retiring shoulder:

'I should think you'd have the decency to put the ladder back where you found it.' And he walked off.

But he has a generous heart – a crossing-sweeper told him so once when he gave him a halfpenny – and when Dicky said, 'Come on, Oswald; don't be a sneak,' he proved that he was not one, and went back and helped with the ladder. But he was a little distant to Dicky, till all disagreeableness was suddenly buried in a rat Pincher found in the cucumber frame.

Then the washing-hands-and-faces-for-dinner bell rang, and, of course, we should have gone in directly, only just then the workmen came back from their dinner, and we waited, because one of them had promised Oswald some hinges for a ferrets' hutch he thought of making, and while he was talking to this man the other one went up the ladder. And then the most exciting and awful thing I ever saw happened, all in a minute, before anyone could have said 'Jack Robinson,' even if they had thought of him. The bottom part of the ladder slipped out along the smooth tiles by the greenhouse, and there was a long, dream-like, dreadful time, when Oswald knew what was going to happen; but it could only have been a second really, because before anyone could do anything the top end of the ladder slid softly, like cutting butter,

off the top of the greenhouse, and the man on the ladder fell too. I never saw anything that made me feel so wrong way up in my inside. He lay there all in a heap, without moving, and the men crowded round him. Dicky and I could not see properly because of the other men. But the foreman, the one who had given Oswald the hinges, said:

'Better get a doctor.'

It always takes a long time for a workman to understand what you want him to do, and long before these had, Oswald had shouted 'I'll go!' and was off like an arrow from a bow, and Dicky with him.

They found the doctor at home, and he came that minute. Oswald and Dicky were told to go away, but they could not bear to, though they knew their dinner-bell must have been already rung for them many times in vain, and it was now ringing with fury. They just lurked round the corner of the greenhouse till the doctor said it was a broken arm, and nothing else hurt; and when the poor man was sent home in a cab, Oswald and Dicky got the cabman, who is a friend of theirs, to let them come on the box with him. And thus they saw where the man lived, and saw his poor wife greet the sufferer. She only said:

'Gracious, Gus, whatever have you been up to now? You always was an unlucky chap.'

But we could see her loving heart was full to overflowing.

When she had taken him in and shut the door we went away. The wretched sufferer, whose name transpired to be Augustus

Victor Plunkett, was lucky enough to live in a mews. Noël made a poem about it afterwards:

'O Muse of Poetry, do not refuse
To tell about a man who loves the Mews.
It is his humble home so poor,
And the cabman who drove him home lives next door
But two: and when his arm was broke
His loving wife with tears spoke.'

And so on. It went on for two hundred and twenty-four lines, and he could not print it, because it took far too much type for the printing-press. It was as we went out of the mews that we first saw the Goat. I gave him a piece of cocoanut ice, and he liked it awfully. He was tied to a ring in the wall, and he was black and white, with horns and a beard; and when the man he belonged to saw us looking at him, he said we could have that Goat a bargain. And when we asked, out of politeness and not because we had any money, except twopence halfpenny of Dicky's, how much he wanted for the Goat, he said:

'Seven and sixpence is the lowest, so I won't deceive you, young gents. And so help me if he ain't worth thribble the money.'

Oswald did the sum in his head, which told him the Goat was worth one pound two shillings and sixpence, and he went away sadly, for he did want that Goat.

We were later for dinner than I ever remember our being,

and Miss Blake had not kept us any pudding; but Oswald bore up when he thought of the Goat. But Dicky seemed to have no beautiful inside thoughts to sustain him, and he was so dull Dora said she only hoped he wasn't going to have measles.

It was when we had gone up to bed that he fiddled about with the studs and old buttons and things in a velvety box he had till Oswald was in bed, and then he said:

'Look here, Oswald, I feel as if I was a murderer, or next-door to. It was our moving that ladder: I'm certain it was. And now he's laid up, and his wife and children.'

Oswald sat up in bed, and said kindly:

'You're right, old chap. It *was* your moving that ladder. Of course, you didn't put it back firm. But the man's not killed.'

'We oughtn't to have touched it,' he said. 'Or we ought to have told them we had, or something. Suppose his arm gets blood-poisoning, or inflammation, or something awful? I couldn't go on living if I was a doer of a deed like that.'

Oswald had never seen Dicky so upset. He takes things jolly easy as a rule. Oswald said:

'Well, it is no use fuming over it. You'd better get out of your clothes and go to bed. We'll cut down in the morning and leave our cards and kind inquiries.'

Oswald only meant to be kind, and by making this amusing remark he wished to draw his erring brother's thoughts from the remorse that was poisoning his young life, and would very likely keep him awake for an hour or more thinking of it, and fidgetting

about so that Oswald couldn't sleep.

But Dicky did not take it at all the way Oswald meant. He said: 'Shut up, Oswald, you beast!' and lay down on his bed and began to blub.

Oswald said, 'Beast yourself!' because it is the proper thing to say; but he was not angry, only sorry that Dicky was so duffing as not to see what he meant. And he got out of bed and went softly to the girls' room, which is next ours, and said:

'I say, come in to our room a sec., will you? Dicky is howling fit to bring the house down. I think a council of us elder ones would do him more good than anything.'

'Whatever is up?' Dora asked, getting into her dressing-gown.

'Oh, nothing, except that he's a murderer! Come on, and don't make a row. Mind the mats and our boots by the door.'

They came in, and Oswald said:

'Look here, Dicky, old boy, here are the girls, and we're going to have a council about it.'

They wanted to kiss him, but he wouldn't, and shrugged his shoulders about, and wouldn't speak; but when Alice had got hold of his hand he said in a muffled voice:

'You tell them, Oswald.'

When Oswald and Dicky were alone, you will have noticed the just elder brother blamed the proper person, which was Dicky, because he would go up on the stovehouse roof after his beastly ball, which Oswald did not care a rap about. And, besides, he knew it wasn't there. But now that other people were there

Oswald, of course, said:

'You see, *we* moved the men's ladder when they were at their dinner. And you know the man that fell off the ladder, and we went with him in the cab to the place where that Goat was? Well, Dicky has only just thought of it; but, of course, it was really our fault his tumbling, because we couldn't have put the ladder back safely. And Dicky thinks if his arm blood-poisoned itself we should be as good as murderers.'

Dicky is perfectly straight; he sat up and sniffed, and blew his nose, and said:

'It was my idea moving the ladder: Oswald only helped.'

'Can't we ask uncle to see that the dear sufferer wants for nothing while he's ill, and all that?' said Dora.

'Well,' said Oswald, 'we could, of course. But, then, it would all come out. And about the fives ball too. And we can't be at all sure it *was* the ball made the greenhouse leak, because I know it never went over the house.'

'Yes, it did,' said Dicky, giving his nose a last stern blow.

Oswald was generous to a sorrowing foe, and took no notice, only went on:

'And about the ladder: we can't be quite sure it wouldn't have slipped on those tiles, even if we'd never moved it. But I think Dicky would feel jollier if we could do something for the man, and I know it would me.'

That looks mixed, but Oswald was rather agitated himself, and that was what he said.

'We must think of something to do to get money,' Alice said, 'like we used to do when we were treasure-seekers.'

Presently the girls went away, and we heard them jawing in their room. Just as Oswald was falling asleep the door opened, and a figure in white came in and bent above his almost sleeping form. It said:

'We've thought of something! We'll have a bazaar, like the people Miss Blake's elder sister lives with did for the poor iron church.'

The form glided away. Miss Blake is our housekeeper. Oswald could hear that Dicky was already sleeping, so he turned over and went to sleep himself. He dreamed of Goats, only they were as big as railway engines, and would keep ringing the church bells, till Oswald awoke, and it was the getting-up bell, and not a great Goat ringing it, but only Sarah as usual.

The idea of the bazaar seemed to please all of us.

'We can ask all the people we know to it,' said Alice.

'And wear our best frocks, and sell the things at the stalls,' said Dora.

Dicky said we could have it in the big greenhouse now the plants were out of it.

'I will write a poem for the man, and say it at the bazaar,' Noël said. 'I know people say poetry at bazaars. The one Aunt Carrie took me to a man said a piece about a cowboy.'

H. O. said there ought to be lots of sweets, and then everyone would buy them.

Oswald said someone would have to ask my father, and he said he would do it if the others liked. He did this because of an inside feeling in his mind that he knew might come on at any moment. So he did. And 'Yes' was the answer. And then the uncle gave Oswald a whole quid to buy things to sell at the bazaar, and my father gave him ten bob for the same useful and generous purpose, and said he was glad to see we were trying to do good to others.

When he said that the inside feeling in Oswald's mind began that he had felt afraid would, some time, and he told my father about him and Dicky moving the ladder, and about the hateful fives ball, and everything. And my father was awfully decent about it, so that Oswald was glad he had told.

The girls wrote the invitations to all our friends that very day. We boys went down to look in the shops and see what we could buy for the bazaar. And we went to ask how Mr. Augustus Victor Plunkett's arm was getting on, and to see the Goat.

The others liked the Goat almost as much as Oswald, and even Dicky agreed that it was our clear duty to buy the Goat for the sake of poor Mr. Plunkett.

Because, as Oswald said, if it was worth one pound two and six, we could easily sell it again for that, and we should have gained fifteen shillings for the sufferer.

So we bought the Goat, and changed the ten shillings to do it. The man untied the other end of the Goat's rope, and Oswald took hold of it, and said he hoped we were not robbing the man

by taking his Goat from him for such a low price. And he said: 'Not at all, young gents. Don't you mention it. Pleased to oblige a friend any day of the week.'

So we started to take the Goat home. But after about half a street he would not come any more. He stopped still, and a lot of boys and people came round, just as if they had never seen a Goat before. We were beginning to feel quite uncomfortable, when Oswald remembered the Goat liked cocoanut ice, so Noël went into a shop and got threepenn'orth, and then the cheap animal consented to follow us home. So did the street boys. The cocoanut ice was more for the money than usual, but not so nice.

My father was not pleased when he saw the Goat. But when Alice told him it was for the bazaar, he laughed, and let us keep it in the stableyard.

It got out early in the morning, and came right into the house, and butted the cook in her own back-kitchen, a thing even Oswald himself would have hesitated before doing. So that showed it was a brave Goat.

The groom did not like the Goat, because it bit a hole in a sack of corn, and then walked up it like up a mountain, and all the oats ran out and got between the stones of the stableyard, and there was a row. But we explained it was not for long, as the bazaar was in three days. And we hurried to get things ready.

We were each to have a stall. Dora took the refreshment stall. The uncle made Miss Blake get all that ready.

Alice had a stall for pincushions and brush-and-comb bags,

and other useless things that girls make with stuff and ribbons.

Noël had a poetry stall, where you could pay twopence and get a piece of poetry and a sweet wrapped up in it. We chose sugar almonds, because they are not so sticky.

H. O.'s stall was to be sweets, if he promised on his word of honour as a Bastable only to eat one of each kind.

Dicky wished to have a stall for mechanical toys and parts of clocks. He has a great many parts of clocks, but the only mechanical toy was his clockwork engine, that was broken ages ago, so he had to give it up, and he couldn't think of anything else. So he settled to help Oswald, and keep an eye on H. O.

Oswald's stall was meant to be a stall for really useful things, but in the end it was just a lumber stall for the things other people did not want. But he did not mind, because the others agreed he should have the entire selling of the Goat, and he racked his young brains to think how to sell it in the most interesting and unusual way. And at last he saw how, and he said:

'He shall be a lottery, and we'll make people take tickets, and then draw a secret number out of a hat, and whoever gets the right number gets the Goat. I wish it was me.'

'We ought to advertise it, though,' Dicky said. 'Have handbills printed, and send out sandwich-men.'

Oswald inquired at the printers in Greenwich, and handbills were an awful price, and sandwich-men a luxury far beyond our means. So he went home sadly; and then Alice thought of the printing-press. We got it out, and cleaned it where the ink had

been upset into it, and mended the broken parts as well as we could, and got some more printers' ink, and wrote the circular and printed it. It was:

SECRET LOTTERY

Exceptionable and Rare Chance

An Object of Value —

'It ought to be object of *virtue*,' said Dicky. 'I saw it in the old iron and china and picture shop. It was a carved ivory ship, and there was a ticket on it: "Rare Object of Virtue."'

'The Goat's an object, certainly,' Alice said, 'and it's valuable. As for virtue, I'm not so sure.'

But Oswald thought the two V's looked well, and being virtuous is different to being valuable; but, all the same, the Goat might be both when you got to know him really well. So we put it in.

SECRET LOTTERY

Exceptionable and Rare Chance

An Object of Value and Virtue

will be lotteried for on Saturday next, at four o'clock. Tickets one or two shillings each, according to how many people want them. The object is not disclosed till after the Lottery, but it cost a lot of money, and is honestly worth three times as much. If you win it, it is the same as winning money. Apply at Morden House, Blackheath, at 3 o'clock next Saturday. Take tickets early to prevent disappointment.

We printed these, and though they looked a bit rum, we had not time to do them again, so we went out about dusk and dropped them in people's letter-boxes. Then next day Oswald, who is always very keen on doing the thing well, got two baking-boards out of the kitchen and bored holes in them with an auger I had, and pasted paper on them, and did on them with a paint-brush and ink the following lines:

SECRET LOTTERY

Object of Value and Virtue

Tickets 1/- and 2/-

If you win, it will be the same as winning money

Lottery at Morden House, Blackheath

Saturday at 4. Come at 3

And he slung the boards round his neck, and tied up his mouth in one of those knitted comforters he despises so much at other times, and, pulling a cap of father's over his bold ears, he got Dicky to let him out of the side-door. And then the brave boy went right across the heath and three times up and down the village, till those boys that followed him and the Goat home went

for him near the corner of Wemyss Road, and he made a fight for it, taking off the boards and using them as shields. But at last, being far outnumbered, which is no disgrace, he had to chuck the boards and run for it.

Saturday was fine. We had hung the greenhouse with evergreens and paper roses that looked almost like real among the green, and Miss Blake let us have some Chinesy-looking curtains to cover over the shelves and staging with. And the gardener let us have a lot of azaleas and things in pots, so that it was all very bowery and flowery.

Alice's stall was the smartest looking, because Miss Blake had let her have all the ribbons and things that were over from the other bazaar.

H. O.'s stall was also nice – all on silver tea-trays, so as not to be stickier than needful.

The poetry stall had more flowers on it than any of the others, to make up for the poetry looking so dull outside. Of course, you could not see the sweet inside the packets till you opened them. Red azaleas are prettier than poetry, I think. I think the tropic lands in 'Westward Ho!' had great trees with flowers like that.

We got the Goat into the stovehouse. He was to be kept a secret till the very last. And by half-past two we were all ready, and very clean and dressed. We had all looked out everything we thought anyone could want to buy, and that we could spare, and some things we could not, and most of these were on Oswald's table – among others, several boxes of games we had never cared

about; some bags of marbles, which nobody plays now; a lot of old books; a pair of braces with wool-work on them, that an aunt once made for Oswald, and, of course, he couldn't wear them; some bags of odd buttons for people who like sewing these things on; a lot of foreign stamps, gardening tools, Dicky's engine, that won't go, and a stuffed parrot, but he was moth-eaten.

About three our friends began to come, Mrs. Leslie, and Lord Tottenham, and Albert's uncle, and a lot of others. It was a very grand party, and they admired the bazaar very much, and all bought things. Mrs. Leslie bought the engine for ten shillings, though we told her honestly it would never go again, and Albert's uncle bought the parrot, and would not tell us what he wanted it for. The money was put on a blue dish, so that everyone could see how it got on, and our hearts were full of joy as we saw how much silver there was among the pennies, and two or three gold pieces too. I know now how the man feels who holds the plate at the door in church.

Noël's poetry stall was much more paying than I thought it would be. I believe nobody really likes poetry, and yet everyone pretends they do, either so as not to hurt Noël's feelings, or because they think well-brought-up people ought to like poetry, even Noël's. Of course, Macaulay and Kipling are different. I don't mind them so much myself.

Noël wrote a lot of new poetry for the bazaar. It took up all his time, and even then he had not enough new stuff to wrap up all the sugar almonds in. So he made up with old poetry that he'd

done before. Albert's uncle got one of the new ones, and said it made him a proud man. It was:

'How noble and good and kind you are
To come to Victor A. Plunkett's Bazaar.
Please buy as much as you can bear,
For the sufferer needs all you can possibly spare.
I know you are sure to take his part,
Because you have such a noble heart.'

Mrs. Leslie got:

'The rose is red, the violet's blue,
The lily's pale, and so are you.
Or would be if you had seen him fall
Off the top of the ladder so tall.
Do buy as much as you can stand,
And lend the poor a helping hand.'

Lord Tottenham, though, only got one of the old ones, and it happened to be the 'Wreck of the *Malabar*.' He was an admiral once. But he liked it. He is a nice old gentleman, but people do say he is 'excentric.'

Father got a poem that said:

'Please turn your eyes round in their sockets,
And put both your hands in your pockets;
Your eyes will show you things so gay,

And I hope you'll find enough in your pockets to pay
For the things you buy.
Good-bye!'

And he laughed and seemed pleased; but when Mrs. Morrison, Albert's mother, got that poem about the black beetle that was poisoned she was not so pleased, and she said it was horrid, and made her flesh creep. You know the poem. It says:

'Oh, beetle, how I weep to see
Thee lying on thy poor back:
It is so very sad to see
You were so leggy and black.
I wish you were crawling about alive again,
But many people think this is nonsense and a shame.'

Noël *would* recite, no matter what we said, and he stood up on a chair, and everyone, in their blind generousness, paid sixpence to hear him. It was a long poem of his own about the Duke of Wellington, and it began:

'Hail, faithful leader of the brave band
Who went to make Napoleon understand
He couldn't have everything his own way.
We taught him this on Waterloo day.'

I heard that much; but then he got so upset and frightened no one could hear anything till the end, when it says:

'So praise the heroes of Waterloo,
And let us do our duty like they had to do.'

Everyone clapped very much, but Noël was so upset he nearly cried, and Mrs. Leslie said:

'Noël, I'm feeling as pale as a lily again! Take me round the garden to recover myself.'

She was as red as usual, but it saved Noël from making a young ass of himself. And we got seventeen shillings and sixpence by his reciting. So that was all right.

We might as well not have sent out those circulars, because only the people we had written to ourselves came. Of course, I don't count those five street boys, the same Oswald had the sandwich-board fight with. They came, and they walked round and looked at the things; but they had no money to spend, it turned out, and only came to be disagreeable and make fun. So Albert's uncle asked them if they did not think their families would be lonely without them, and he and I saw them off at the gate. Then they stood outside and made rude noises. And another stranger came, and Oswald thought perhaps the circular was beginning to bear fruit. But the stranger asked for the master of the house, and he was shown in. Oswald was just shaking up the numbers in his hat for the lottery of the Goat, and Alice and Dora were selling the tickets for half a crown each to our visitors, and explaining the dreadful misery of the poor man that all this

trouble was being taken for, and we were all enjoying ourselves very much, when Sarah came to say Master Oswald was to go in to master's study at once. So he went, wondering what on earth he could have been up to now. But he could not think of anything in particular. But when his father said, 'Oswald, this gentleman is a detective from Scotland Yard,' he was glad he had told about the fives ball and the ladder, because he knew his father would now stand by him. But he did wonder whether you could be sent to prison for leaving a ladder in a slippery place, and how long they would keep you there for that crime.

Then my father held out one of the fatal circulars, and said:

'I suppose this is some of your work? Mr. Biggs here is bound in honour to do his best to find out when people break the laws of the land. Now, lotteries are illegal, and can be punished by law.'

Oswald gloomily wondered how much the law could do to you. He said:

'We didn't know, father.'

Then his father said:

'The best thing you can do is to tell this gentleman all about it.'

So Oswald said:

'Augustus Victor Plunkett fell off a ladder and broke his arm, and perhaps it was our fault for meddling with the ladder at all. So we wanted to do something to help him, and father said we might have a bazaar. It is happening now, and we had three pounds two and sevenpence last time I counted the bazaar.'

'But what about the lottery?' said Mr. Biggs, who did not look

as if he would take Oswald to prison just then, as our young hero had feared. In fact, he looked rather jolly. 'Is the prize money?'

'No – oh no; only it's so valuable it's as good as winning money.'

'Then it's only a raffle,' said Mr. Biggs; 'that's what it is, just a plain raffle. What *is* the prize?'

'Are we to be allowed to go on with it?' asked the wary Oswald.

'Why, yes,' said Mr. Biggs; 'if it's not money, why not? What is the valuable object?'

'Come, Oswald,' said his father, when Oswald said nothing, 'what is the object of *virtù*?'

'I'd rather not say,' said Oswald, feeling very uncomfortable.

Mr. Biggs said something about duty being duty, and my father said:

'Come, Oswald, don't be a young duffer. I dare say it's nothing to be ashamed of.'

'I should think not indeed,' said Oswald, as his fond thoughts played with that beautiful Goat.

'Well, then?'

'Well, sir' – Oswald spoke desperately, for he wondered his father had been so patient so long, and saw that he wasn't going to go on being – 'you see, the great thing is, nobody is to know it's a G – I mean, it's a secret. No one's to know what the prize is. Only when you've won it, it will be revealed.'

'Well,' said my father, 'if Mr. Biggs will take a glass of wine with me, we'll follow you down to the greenhouse, and he can

see for himself.'

Mr. Biggs said something about thanking father kindly, and about his duty. And presently they came down to the greenhouse. Father did not introduce Mr. Biggs to anyone – I suppose he forgot – but Oswald did while father was talking to Mrs. Leslie. And Mr. Biggs made himself very agreeable to all the ladies.

Then we had the lottery. Everyone had tickets, and Alice asked Mr. Biggs to buy one. She let him have it for a shilling, because it was the last, and we all hoped he would win the Goat. He seemed quite sure now that Oswald was not kidding, and that the prize was not money. Indeed, Oswald went so far as to tell him privately that the prize was too big to put in your pocket, and that if it was divided up it would be spoiled, which is true of Goats, but not of money.

Everyone was laughing and talking, and wondering anxiously whatever the prize could possibly be. Oswald carried round the hat, and everyone drew a number. The winning number was six hundred and sixty-six, and Albert's uncle said afterwards it was a curious coincidence. I don't know what it meant, but it made Mrs. Leslie laugh. When everyone had drawn a number, Oswald rang the dinner-bell to command silence, and there was a hush full of anxious expectation. Then Oswald said:

'The prize number is six hundred and sixty-six. Who has it?'

And Mr. Biggs took a step forward and held out his paper.

'The prize is yours! I congratulate you,' said Oswald warmly. Then he went into the stovehouse, and hastily placing a wreath

of paper roses on the Goat's head, that Alice had got ready for the purpose, he got out the Goat by secretly showing it a bit of cocoanut ice, and led it by the same means to the feet of the happy winner.

'Here is your prize,' said Oswald, with feelings of generous pride. 'I am very glad you've got him. He'll be a comfort to you, and make up for all the trouble you've had over our lottery – raffle, I mean.'

And he placed the ungoated end of the rope in the unresisting hand of the fortunate detective.

Neither Oswald nor any of the rest of us has ever been able to make out why everyone should have laughed so. But they did. They said the lottery was the success of the afternoon. And the ladies kept on congratulating Mr. Biggs.

At last people began to go, and the detective, so unexpectedly made rich beyond his wildest dreams, said he, too, must be going. He had tied the Goat to the greenhouse door, and now he moved away. But we all cried out:

'You've forgotten your Goat!'

'No, I haven't,' he said very earnestly; 'I shall never forget that Goat to my dying hour. But I want to call on my aunt just close by, and I couldn't very well take the Goat to see her.'

'I don't see why not,' H. O. said; 'it's a very nice Goat.'

'She's frightened of them,' said he. 'One ran at her when she was a little girl. But if you will allow me, sir' – and he winked at my father, which is not manners – 'if you'll allow me, I'll call in

for the Goat on my way to the station.'

We got five pounds thirteen and fivepence by the bazaar and the raffle. We should have had another ten shillings from father, but he had to give it to Mr. Biggs, because we had put him to the trouble of coming all the way from Scotland Yard, because he thought our circular was from some hardened criminal wishing to cheat his trustful fellow-creatures. We took the money to Augustus Victor Plunkett next morning, and I tell you he *was* pleased.

We waited till long after dark for the detective to return for his rich prize. But he never came. I hope he was not set upon and stabbed in some dark alley. If he is alive, and not imprisoned, I can't see why he didn't come back. I often think anxiously of him. Because, of course, detectives have many enemies among felons, who think nothing of stabbing people in the back, so that being murdered in a dark alley is a thing all detectives are constantly liable to.

THE RUNAWAYS

It was after we had had the measles, that fell and blighting disorder which we got from Alice picking up five deeply infected shillings that a bemeasled family had wrapped in a bit of paper to pay the doctor with and then carelessly dropped in the street. Alice held the packet hotly in her muff all through a charity concert. Hence these tears, as it says in Virgil. And if you have ever had measles you will know that this is not what is called figuring speech, because your eyes do run like mad all the time.

When we were unmeasled again we were sent to stay at Lymchurch with a Miss Sandal, and her motto was plain living and high thinking. She had a brother, and his motto was the same, and it was his charity concert that Alice held the fatal shillings in her muff throughout of. Later on he was giving tracts to a bricklayer, and fell off a scaffold in his giddy earnestness, and Miss Sandal had to go and nurse him. So the six of us stayed in the plain living, high thinking house by ourselves, and old Mrs. Beale from the village came in every day and did the housework. She was of humble birth, but was a true lady in minding her own affairs, which is what a great many ladies do not know how to do at all. We had no lessons to do, and we were thus free to attend to any adventures which came along. Adventures are the real business of life. The rest is only in-betweenness – what Albert's uncle calls padding. He is an author.

Miss Sandal's house was very plain and clean, with lots of white paint, and very difficult to play in. So we were out a good deal. It was seaside, so, of course, there was the beach, and besides that the marsh – big green fields with sheep all about, and wet dykes with sedge growing, and mud, and eels in the mud, and winding white roads that all look the same, and all very interesting, as though they might lead to almost anything that you didn't expect. Really, of course, they lead to Ashford and Romney and Ivychurch, and real live places like that. But they don't look it.

The day when what I am going to tell you about happened, we were all leaning on the stone wall looking at the pigs. The pigman is a great friend of ours – all except H. O., who is my youngest brother. His name is Horace Octavius, and if you want to know why we called him H. O. you had better read 'The Treasure Seekers' and find out. He had gone to tea with the schoolmaster's son – a hateful kid.

'Isn't that the boy you're always fighting?' Dora asked when H. O. said he was going.

'Yes,' said H. O., 'but, then, he keeps rabbits.'

So then we understood and let him go.

Well, the rest of us were gazing fondly on the pigs, and two soldiers came by.

We asked them where they were off to.

They told us to mind our own business, which is not manners, even if you are a soldier on private affairs.

'Oh, all right,' said Oswald, who is the eldest. And he advised the soldiers to keep their hair on. The little they had was cut very short.

'I expect they're scouts or something,' said Dicky; 'it's a field-day, or a sham-fight, or something, as likely as not.'

'Let's go after them and see,' said Oswald, ever prompt in his decidings. So we did.

We ran a bit at first, so as not to let the soldiers have too much of a lead. Their red coats made it quite easy to keep them in sight on the winding white marsh road. But we did not catch them up: they seemed to go faster and faster. So we ran a little bit more every now and then, and we went quite a long way after them. But they didn't meet any of their officers or regiments or things, and we began to think that perchance we were engaged in the disheartening chase of the wild goose. This has sometimes occurred.

There is a ruined church about two miles from Lymchurch, and when we got close to that we lost sight of the red coats, so we stopped on the little bridge that is near there to reconnoitre.

The soldiers had vanished.

'Well, here's a go!' said Dicky.

'It *is* a wild-goose chase,' said Noël. 'I shall make a piece of poetry about it. I shall call the title the "Vanishing Reds, or, the Soldiers that were not when you got there."'

'You shut up!' said Oswald, whose eagle eye had caught a glimpse of scarlet through the arch of the ruin.

None of the others had seen this. Perhaps you will think I do not say enough about Oswald's quickness of sight, so I had better tell you that is only because Oswald is me, and very modest. At least, he tries to be, because he knows it is what a true gentleman ought to.

'They're in the ruins,' he went on. 'I expect they're going to have an easy and a pipe – out of the wind.'

'I think it's very mysterious,' said Noël. 'I shouldn't wonder if they're going to dig for buried treasure. Let's go and see.'

'No,' said Oswald, who, though modest, is thoughtful. 'If we do they'll stop digging, or whatever they're doing. When they've gone away, we'll go and see if the ground is scratched about.'

So we delayed where we were, but we saw no more scarlet.

In a little while a dull-looking man in brown came by on a bicycle. He stopped and got off.

'Seen a couple of Tommies about here, my lad?' he said to Oswald.

Oswald does not like being called anybody's lad, especially that kind of man's; but he did not want to spoil the review, or field-day, or sham-fight, or whatever it might be, so he said:

'Yes; they're up in the ruins.'

'You don't say so!' said the man. 'In uniform, I suppose? Yes, of course, or you wouldn't have known they were soldiers. Silly cuckoos!'

He wheeled his bicycle up the rough lane that leads to the old ruin.

'It can't be buried treasure,' said Dicky.

'I don't care if it is,' said Oswald. 'We'll see what's happening. I don't mind spoiling *his* sport. "My ladding" me like that!'

So we followed the man with the bicycle. It was leaning against the churchyard gate when we got there. The man off it was going up to the ruin, and we went after him.

He did not call out to the soldiers, and we thought that odd; but it didn't make us think where it might have made us if we had had any sense. He just went creeping about, looking behind walls and inside arches, as though he was playing at hide-and-seek. There is a mound in the middle of the ruin, where stones and things have fallen during dark ages, and the grass has grown all over them. We stood on the mound, and watched the bicycling stranger nosing about like a ferret.

There is an archway in that ruin, and a flight of steps goes down – only five steps – and then it is all stopped up with fallen stones and earth. The stranger stopped at last at this arch, and stooped forward with his hands on his knees, and looked through the arch and down the steps. Then he said suddenly and fiercely: 'Come out of it, will you?'

And the soldiers came. I wouldn't have. They were two to his one. They came cringing out like beaten dogs. The brown man made a sort of bound, and next minute the two soldiers were handcuffed together, and he was driving them before him like sheep.

'Back you go the same way as what you come,' he said.

And then Oswald saw the soldiers' faces, and he will never forget what they looked like.

He jumped off the mound, and ran to where they were.

'What have they done?' he asked the handcuffer.

'Deserters,' said the man. 'Thanks to you, my lad, I got 'em as easy as kiss your hand.'

Then one of the soldiers looked at Oswald. He was not very old – about as big as a fifth-form boy. And Oswald answered what the soldier looked at him.

'I'm *not* a sneak,' he said. 'I wouldn't have told if I'd known. If you'd told me, instead of saying to mind my own business I'd have helped you.'

The soldier didn't answer, but the bicycle man did.

'Then you'd 'a helped yourself into the stone jug, my lad,' said he. 'Help a dirty deserter? You're young enough to know better. Come along, you rubbish!'

And they went.

When they were gone Dicky said:

'It's very rum. I hate cowards. And deserters are cowards. I don't see why we feel like this.'

Alice and Dora and Noël were now discovered to be in tears.

'Of course we did right to tell. Only when the soldier looked at me ...' said Oswald.

'Yes,' said Dicky, 'that's just it.'

In deepest gloom the party retraced its steps.

As we went, Dora said with sniffs:

'I suppose it was the bicycle man's duty.'

'Of course,' said Oswald, 'but it wasn't *our* duty. And I jolly well wish we hadn't!'

'And such a beautiful day, too,' said Noël, sniffing in his turn.

It *was* beautiful. The afternoon had been dull, but now the sun was shining flat across the marshes, making everything look as if it had been covered all over with the best gold-leaf – marsh and trees, and roofs and stacks, and everything.

That evening Noël wrote a poem about it all. It began:

'Poor soldiers, why did you run away
On such a beautiful, beautiful day?
If you had run away in the rain,
Perhaps they would never have found you again,
Because then Oswald would not have been there
To show the hunter the way to your lair.'

Oswald would have licked him for that – only Noël is not very strong, and there is something about poets, however young, that makes it rather like licking a girl. So Oswald did not even say what he thought – Noël cries at the least thing. Oswald only said, 'Let's go down to our pigman.'

And we all went except Noël. He never will go anywhere when in the midst of making poetry. And Alice stayed with him, and H. O. was in bed.

We told the pigman all about the deserters, and about our miserable inside remorsefulness, and he said he knew just how

we felt.

'There's quite enough agin a pore chap that's made a bolt of it without the rest of us a-joinin' in,' he said. 'Not as I holds with deserting – mean trick I call it. But all the same, when the odds is that heavy – thousands to one – all the army and the navy and the pleece and Parliament and the King agin one pore silly bloke. You wouldn't 'a done it a purpose, I lay.'

'Not much,' said Oswald in gloomy dejection. 'Have a peppermint? They're extra strong.'

When the pigman had had one he went on talking.

'There's a young chap, now,' he said, 'broke out of Dover Gaol. I 'appen to know what he's in for – nicked a four-pound cake, he did, off of a counter at a pastrycook's – Jenner's it was, in the High Street – part hunger, part playfulness. But even if I wasn't to know what he was lagged for, do you think I'd put the coppers on to him? Not me. Give a fellow a chance is what I say. But don't you grizzle about them there Tommies. P'raps it'll be the making of 'em in the end. A slack-baked pair as ever wore boots. I seed 'em. Only next time just you take and think afore you pipes up – see?'

We said that we saw, and that next time we would do as he said. And we went home again. As we went Dora said:

'But supposing it was a cruel murderer that had got loose, you ought to tell then.'

'Yes,' said Dicky; 'but before you do tell you ought to be jolly sure it *is* a cruel murderer, and not a chap that's taken a cake

because he was hungry. How do you know what *you'd* do if you were hungry enough?

'I shouldn't steal,' said Dora.

'I'm not so sure,' said Dicky; and they argued about it all the way home, and before we got in it began to rain in torrents.

Conversations about food always make you feel as though it was a very long time since you had had anything to eat. Mrs. Beale had gone home, of course, but we went into the larder. It is a generous larder. No lock, only a big wooden latch that pulls up with a string, like in Red Riding Hood. And the floor is clean damp red brick. It makes ginger-nuts soft if you put the bag on this floor. There was half a rhubarb pie, and there were meat turnovers with potato in them. Mrs. Beale is a thoughtful person, and I know many people much richer that are not nearly so thoughtful.

We had a comfortable feast at the kitchen table, standing up to eat, like horses.

Then we had to let Noël read us his piece of poetry about the soldier; he wouldn't have slept if we hadn't. It was very long, and it began as I have said, and ended up:

'Poor soldiers, learn a lesson from to-day,
It is very wrong to run away;
It is better to stay
And serve your King and Country – hurray!'

Noël owned that Hooray sounded too cheerful for the end of

a poem about soldiers with faces like theirs were.

'But I didn't mean it about the soldiers. It was about the King and Country. Half a sec. I'll put that in.' So he wrote:

'P.S. – I do not mean to be unkind,
Poor soldiers, to you, so never mind.
When I say hurray or sing,
It is because I am thinking of my Country and my King.'

'You can't sing Hooray,' said Dicky. So Noël went to bed singing it, which was better than arguing about it, Alice said. But it was noisier as well.

Oswald and Dicky always went round the house to see that all the doors were bolted and the shutters up. This is what the head of the house always does, and Oswald is the head when father is not there. There are no shutters upstairs, only curtains. The White House, which is Miss Sandal's house's name, is not in the village, but 'quite a step' from it, as Mrs. Beale says. It is the first house you come to as you come along the road from the marsh.

We used to look in the cupboard and under the beds for burglars every night. The girls liked us to, though they wouldn't look themselves, and I don't know that it was much good. If there is a burglar, it's sometimes safer for you not to know it. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to find a burglar, especially as he would be armed to the teeth as likely as not. However, there is not much worth being a burglar about, in houses where the motto is plain living and high thinking, and there never was anyone in

the cupboards or under the beds.

Then we put out all the lights very carefully in case of fire – all except Noël's. He does not like the dark. He says there are things in it that go away when you light a candle, and however much you talk reason and science to him, it makes no difference at all.

Then we got into our pyjamas. It was Oswald who asked father to let us have pyjamas instead of nightgowns; they are so convenient for dressing up when you wish to act clowns, or West Indian planters, or any loose-clothed characters. Then we got into bed, and then we got into sleep.

Little did the unconscious sleepers reckon of the strange destiny that was advancing on them by leaps and bounds through the silent watches of the night.

Although we were asleep, the rain went on raining just the same, and the wind blowing across the marsh with the fury of a maniac who has been transformed into a blacksmith's bellows. And through the night, and the wind, and the rain, our dreadful destiny drew nearer and nearer. I wish this to sound as if something was going to happen, and I hope it does. I hope the reader's heart is now standing still with apprehension on our account, but I do not want it to stop altogether, so I will tell you that we were not all going to be murdered in our beds, or pass peacefully away in our sleeps with angel-like smiles on our young and beautiful faces. Not at all. What really happened was this. Some time must have elapsed between our closing our eyes in serene slumber and the following narrative:

Oswald was awakened by Dicky thumping him hard in the back, and saying in accents of terror – at least, he says not, but Oswald knows what they sounded like:

'What's that?'

Oswald reared up on his elbow and listened, but there was nothing to listen to except Dicky breathing like a grampus, and the giggle-guggle of the rain-water overflowing from the tub under the window.

'What's what?' said Oswald.

He did not speak furiously, as many elder brothers would have done when suddenly awakened by thumps.

'*That!*' said Dicky. 'There it is again!'

And this time, certainly, there it was, and it sounded like somebody hammering on the front-door with his fists. There is no knocker to the plain-living, high-thinking house.

Oswald controlled his fears, if he had any (I am not going to say whether he had or hadn't), and struck a match. Before the candle had had time to settle its flame after the first flare up that doesn't last, the row began again.

Oswald's nerves are of iron, but it would have given anybody a start to see two white figures in the doorway, yet so it was. They proved to be Alice and Dora in their nighties; but no one could blame anyone for not being sure of this at first.

'Is it burglars?' said Dora; and her teeth did chatter, whatever she may say.

'I think it's Mrs. Beale,' said Alice. 'I expect she's forgotten

the key.'

Oswald pulled his watch out from under his pillow.

'It's half-past one,' he said.

And then the knocking began again. So the intrepid Oswald went to the landing window that is over the front-door. The others went too. And he opened the window in his pyjamas and said, 'Who's there?'

There was the scraping sound of boots on the doorstep, as somebody down there stepped back.

'Is this the way to Ashford?' said the voice of a man.

'Ashford's thirteen miles off,' said Oswald. 'You get on to the Dover road.'

'I don't want to get on the Dover road,' said the voice; 'I've had enough of Dover.'

A thrill ran through every heart. We all told each other so afterwards.

'Well,' said Dicky, 'Ashford's thirteen miles –'

'Anybody but you in the house?'

'Say we've got men and dogs and guns,' whispered Dora.

'There are six of us,' said Oswald, 'all armed to the teeth.'

The stranger laughed.

'I'm not a burglar,' he said; 'I've lost my way, that's all. I thought I should have got to Ashford before dusk, but I missed the way. I've been wandering all over these marshes ever since, in the rain. I expect they're out after me now, but I'm dead beat. I can't go on. Won't you let me in? I can sit by the kitchen fire.'

Oswald drew his head back through the window, and a hasty council took place on the landing.

'It *is*,' said Alice.

'You heard what he said about Dover, and their being out after him?'

'I say, you might let a chap in,' said the voice outside. 'I'm perfectly respectable. Upon my word I am.'

'I wish he hadn't said that,' whispered Dora. [** ']Such a dreadful story! And we didn't even ask him if he was.'

'He sounds very tired,' said Alice.

'And wet,' said Oswald. 'I heard the water squelching in his boots.'

'What'll happen if we don't let him in?' said Dicky.

'He'll be caught and taken back, like the soldiers,' said Oswald. 'Look here, I'm going to chance it. You others can lock yourselves into your rooms if you're frightened.'

Then Oswald put his brave young head out of the window, and the rain dripped on to the back of his bold young neck off the roof, like a watering-pot on to a beautiful flower, and he said:

'There's a porch to the side door. Just scoot round there and shelter, and I'll come down in half a sec.'

A resolve made in early youth never to face midnight encounters without boots was the cause of this delay. Oswald and Dicky got into their boots and jackets, and told the girls to go back to bed.

Then we went down and opened the front-door. The stranger

had heard the bolts go, and he was outside waiting.

We held the door open politely, and he stepped in and began at once to drip heavily on the doormat.

We shut the door. He looked wildly round.

'Be calm! You are safe,' said Oswald.

'Thanks,' said the stranger; 'I see I am.'

All our hearts were full of pity for the outcast. He was, indeed, a spectacle to shock the benevolent. Even the prison people, Oswald thought, or the man he took the cake from, would have felt their fierceness fade if they could have seen him then. He was not in prison dress. Oswald would have rather liked to see that, but he remembered that it was safer for the man that he had found means to rid himself of the felon's garb. He wore a gray knickerbocker suit, covered with mud. The lining of his hat must have been blue, and it had run down his face in streaks like the gentleman in Mr. Kipling's story. He was wetter than I have ever seen anyone out of a bath or the sea.

'Come into the kitchen,' said Oswald; 'you can drip there quite comfortably. The floor is brick.'

He followed us into the kitchen.

'Are you kids alone in the house?' he said.

'Yes,' said Oswald.

'Then I suppose it's no good asking if you've got a drop of brandy?'

'Not a bit,' said Dicky.

'Whisky would do, or gin – any sort of spirit,' said the smeared

stranger hopefully.

'Not a drop,' said Oswald; 'at least, I'll look in the medicine cupboard. And, I say, take off your things and put them in the sink. I'll get you some other clothes. There are some of Mr. Sandal's.'

The man hesitated.

'It'll make a better disguise,' said Oswald in a low, significant whisper, and turned tactfully away, so as not to make the stranger feel awkward.

Dicky got the clothes, and the stranger changed in the back-kitchen. The only spirit Oswald could find was spirits of salts, which the stranger said was poison, and spirits of camphor. Oswald gave him some of this on sugar; he knows it is a good thing when you have taken cold. The stranger hated it. He changed in the back-kitchen, and while he was doing it we tried to light the kitchen fire, but it would not; so Dicky went up to ask Alice for some matches, and finding the girls had not gone to bed as ordered, but contrarily dressed themselves, he let them come down. And then, of course, there was no reason why they should not light the fire. They did.

When the unfortunate one came out of the back-kitchen he looked quite a decent chap, though still blue in patches from the lining of his hat. Dicky whispered to me what a difference clothes made.

He made a polite though jerky bow to the girls, and Dora said: 'How do you do? I hope you are quite well.'

'As well as can be expected,' replied the now tidy outcast, 'considering what I've gone through.'

'Tea or cocoa?' said Dora. 'And do you like cheese or cold bacon best?'

'I'll leave it to you entirely,' he answered. And he added, without a pause, 'I'm sure I can trust you.'

'Indeed you can,' said Dora earnestly; 'you needn't be a bit afraid. You're perfectly safe with us.'

He opened his eyes at this.

'He didn't expect such kindness,' Alice whispered. 'Poor man! he's quite overcome.'

We gave him cocoa, and cheese, and bacon, and butter and bread, and he ate a great deal, with his feet in Mr. Sandal's all-wool boots on the kitchen fender.

The girls wrung the water out of his clothes, and hung them on the clothes-horse on the other side of the fire.

'I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you,' he said; 'real charity I call this. I shan't forget it, I assure you. I ought to apologise for knocking you up like this, but I'd been hours tramping through this precious marsh of yours wet to the skin, and not a morsel of food since mid-day. And yours was the first light I'd seen for a couple of hours.'

'I'm very glad it *was* us you knocked up,' said Alice.

'So am I,' said he; 'I might have knocked at a great many doors before I got such a welcome. I'm quite aware of that.'

He spoke all right, not like a labouring man; but it wasn't a

gentleman's voice, and he seemed to end his sentences off short at the end, as though he had it on the tip of his tongue to say 'Miss' or 'Sir.'

Oswald thought how terrible it must be to be out alone in the rain and the dark, with the police after you, and no one to be kind to you if you knocked at their doors.

'You must have had an awful day,' he said.

'I believe you,' said the stranger, cutting himself more bacon. 'Thank you, miss (he really did say it that time), just half a cup if you don't mind. I believe you! I never want to have such a day again, I can tell you. I took one or two little things in the morning, but I wasn't in the mood or something. You know how it is sometimes.'

'I can fancy it,' said Alice.

'And then the afternoon clouded over. It cleared up at sunset, you remember, but then it was too late. And then the rain came on. Not half! My word! I've been in a ditch. Thought my last hour had come, I tell you. Only got out by the skin of my teeth. Got rid of my whole outfit. There's a nice thing to happen to a young fellow! Upon my Sam, it's enough to make a chap swear he'll never take another thing as long as he lives.'

'I hope you never will,' said Dora earnestly; 'it doesn't pay, you know.'

'Upon my word, that's nearly true, though I don't know how *you* know,' said the stranger, beginning on the cheese and pickles.

'I wish,' Dora was beginning, but Oswald interrupted. He did

not think it was fair to preach at the man.

'So you lost your outfit in the ditch,' he said; 'and how did you get those clothes?'

He pointed to the steaming gray suit.

'Oh,' replied the stranger, 'the usual way.'

Oswald was too polite to ask what was the usual way of getting a gray suit to replace a prison outfit. He was afraid the usual way was the way the four-pound cake had been got.

Alice looked at me helplessly. I knew just how she felt.

Harbouring a criminal when people are 'out after him' gives you a very chilly feeling in the waistcoat – or, if in pyjamas, in the part that the plaited cotton cord goes round. By the greatest good luck there were a few of the extra-strong peppermints left. We had two each, and felt better.

The girls put the sheets off Oswald's bed on to the bed Miss Sandal used to sleep in when not in London nursing the shattered bones of her tract-distributing brother.

'If you will go to bed now,' Oswald said to the stranger, 'we will wake you in good time. And you may sleep as sound as you like. We'll wake you all right.'

'You might wake me about eight,' he said; 'I ought to be getting on. I'm sure I don't know what to say in return for the very handsome reception you've given me. Good-night to you all, I'm sure.'

'Good-night,' said everyone. And Dora added, 'Don't you bother. While you're asleep we'll think what's best to be done.'

'Don't *you* bother,' said the stranger, and he absently glanced at his own clothes. 'What's big enough to get out of's big enough to get into.'

Then he took the candle, and Dicky showed him to his room. 'What's big enough to get out of,' repeated Alice. 'Surely he doesn't mean to creep back into prison, and pretend he was there all the time, only they didn't notice him?'

'Well, what are we to do?' asked Dicky, rejoining the rest of us. 'He told me the dark room at Dover was a disgrace. Poor chap!'

'We must invent a disguise,' said Dora.

'Let's pretend he's our aunt, and dress him up – like in "Hard Cash,"' said Alice.

It was now three o'clock, but no one was sleepy. No one wanted to go to sleep at all till we had taken our candles up into the attic and rummaged through Miss Sandal's trunks, and found a complete disguise exactly suited to an aunt. We had everything – dress, cloak, bonnet, veil, gloves, petticoats, and even boots, though we knew all the time, in our hearts, that these were far too small. We put all ready on the parlour sofa, and then at last we began to feel in our eyes and ears and jaws how late it was. So we went back to bed. Alice said she knew how to wake exact to the minute, and we had known her do it before, so we trusted her, and agreed that she was to wake us at six.

But, alas! Alice had deemed herself cleverer than she was, by long chalks, and it was not her that woke us.

We were aroused from deep slumber by the voice of Mrs.

Beale.

'Hi!' it remarked, 'wake up, young gentlemen! It's gone the half after nine, and your gentleman friend's up and dressed and awaiting for his breakfast.'

We sprang up.

'I say, Mrs. Beale,' cried Oswald, who never even in sleep quite loses his presence of mind, 'don't let on to anyone that we've got a visitor.'

She went away laughing. I suppose she thought it was some silly play-secret. She little knew.

We found the stranger looking out of the window.

'I wouldn't do that,' said Dora softly; 'it isn't safe. Suppose someone saw you?'

'Well,' said he, 'suppose they did?'

'They might take you, you know,' said Dora; 'it's done in a minute. We saw two poor men taken yesterday.'

Her voice trembled at the gloomy recollection.

'Let 'em take me,' said the man who wore the clothes of the plain-living and high-thinking Mr. Sandal; '*I* don't mind so long as my ugly mug don't break the camera!'

'We want to save you,' Dora was beginning; but Oswald, far-sighted beyond his years, felt a hot redness spread over his youthful ears and right down his neck. He said:

'Please, what were you doing in Dover? And what did you take yesterday?'

'I was in Dover on business,' said the man, 'and what I took

was Hythe Church and Burmarsh Church, and – '

'Then you didn't steal a cake and get put into Dover Gaol, and break loose, and – ' said Dicky, though I kicked him as a sign not to.

'*Me?*' said our friend. 'Not exactly!'

'Then, *what* are you? If you're not that poor escaped thief, what are you?' asked Dora fiercely, before Oswald could stop her.

'I'm a photographer, miss,' said he – 'a travelling photographer.'

Then slowly but surely he saw it all, and I thought he would never have done laughing.

'Breakfast is getting cold,' said Oswald.

'So it is,' said our guest. 'Lordy, what a go! This'll be something to talk about between friends for many a year.'

'No,' said Alice suddenly; 'we thought you were a runaway thief, and we wanted to help you whatever you were.' She pointed to the sofa, where the whole costume of the untrue aunt was lying in simple completeness. 'And you're in honour bound never to tell a soul. Think,' she added in persuading tones – 'think of the cold bacon and the cheese, and all those pickles you had, and the fire and the cocoa, and us being up all night, and the dry all-wool boots.'

'Say no more, miss,' said the photographer (for such he indeed was) nobly. 'Your will is my law; I won't never breathe a word.'

And he sat down to the ham and eggs as though it was weeks since he had tasted bacon.

But we found out afterwards he went straight up to the Ship, and told everybody all about it. I wonder whether all photographers are dishonourable and ungrateful. Oswald hopes they are not, but he cannot feel at all sure.

Lots of people chaffed us about it afterwards, but the pigman said we were jolly straight young Britons, and it is something to be called that by a man you really respect. It doesn't matter so much what the other people say – the people you don't really care about.

When we told our Indian uncle about it he said, 'Nonsense! you ought never to try and shield a criminal.' But that was not at all the way we felt about it at the time when the criminal was there (or we thought he was), all wet, and hunted, and miserable, with people 'out after him.' He meant his friends who were expecting him, but we thought he meant police. It is very hard sometimes to know exactly what is right. If what *feels* right *isn't* right, how are you to know, I wonder.

The only comforting thing about it all is that we heard next day that the soldiers had got away from the brown bicycle beast after all. I suppose it came home to them suddenly that they *were* two to one, and they shoved him into a ditch and got away. They were never caught; I am very glad. And I suppose *that's* wrong too – so many things are. But I *am*.

THE ARSENICATORS

A TALE OF CRIME

It was Mrs. Beale who put it into our heads that Miss Sandal lived plain because she was poor. We knew she thought high, because that is what you jolly well have to do if you are a vegetationist and an all-wooler, and those sort of things.

And we tried to get money for her, like we had once tried to do for ourselves. And we succeeded by means that have been told alone in another place in getting two golden pounds.

Then, of course, we began to wonder what we had better do with the two pounds now we had got them.

'Put them in the savings-bank,' Dora said.

Alice said:

'Why, when we could have them to look at?'

Noël thought we ought to buy her something beautiful to adorn Miss Sandal's bare dwelling.

H. O. thought we might spend it on nice tinned and potted things from the stores, to make the plain living and high thinking go down better.

But Oswald knew that, however nice the presents are that other people buy for you, it is really more satisfying to have the chink to spend exactly as you like.

Then Dicky said:

'I don't believe in letting money lie idle. Father always says it's bad business.'

'They give interest at the bank, don't they?' Dora said.

'Yes; tuppence a year, or some rot like that! We ought to go into trade with it, and try to make more of it. That's what we ought to do.'

'If it's Miss Sandal's money, do you think we ought to do anything with it without asking her?'

'It isn't hers till she's got it, and it is hers because it's not ours to spend. I think we're – what is it? —*in loco parentis* to that two quid, because anyone can see poor Miss Sandal doesn't know how to manage her money. And it will be much better if we give her ten pounds than just two.'

This is how Dicky argued.

We were sitting on the sands when this council took place, and Alice said, 'Suppose we bought a shrimping-net, and sold shrimps from our window in red handkerchiefs and white French caps.' But we asked her how she would like going into the sea nearly up to her neck in all weathers, and she had to own she had not thought of that. Besides, shrimps are so beastly cheap – more than you can eat for twopence.

The conversation was not interesting to anyone but Dicky, because we did not then believe we could do it, though later we thought differently. But I dare say we should have gone on with it just out of politeness to him, only at this moment we saw a

coastguard, who is a great friend of ours, waving to us from the sea-wall. So we went up. And he said:

'You take my tip and cut along home. There's something come for you.'

'Perhaps it's heaps of things, like I said, to eat with the plain living,' said H. O.

And bright visions of hampers full of the most superior tuck winged our young legs as we cut along home.

It was not, however, a hamper that we found awaiting us. It was a large box. And besides that there were two cases addressed to Dicky and me, and through the gaps in the boards we could see twisted straw, and our hearts leapt high in our breasts, because we knew that they were bikes.

And such, indeed, they proved to be – free-wheels of the most unspotted character, the noble gift of our Indian uncle, ever amiable, generous, and esteemed.

While we were getting the glorious bikes from their prison bars, the others were undoing the box which had their names on it.

It contained cakes and sweets, a work-basket for Dora, lined with red satin, and dressed up with silver thimbles, and all sorts of bodkins and scissors, and knives with silver handles. There was a lovely box of paints for Alice.

Noël had a paint-box too, and H. O. had a very good Aunt Sally. And there were lots of books – not the sawdusty, dry kind that Miss Sandal had in her house, but jolly good books, the kind

you can't put down till you've finished. But just now we hardly looked at them. For who with a spark of manly spirit would think twice about a book with a new free-wheel champing the oil like a charger in a ballad?

Dicky and I had a three-mile spin before dinner, and only fell off five times between us. Three spills were Dicky's, one was Oswald's, and one was when we ran into each other. The bikes were totally uninjured.

As time ran its appointed course we got a bit used to the bikes, and, finding that you cannot ride all day and all night, we began to look at the books. Only one of them comes into this story. It was called 'The Youth's Manual of Scientific and Mechanical Recreation,' and, of course, we none of us read it till we'd read everything else, and then we found it wasn't half bad. It taught you how to make all sorts of things – galvanic batteries, and kites, and mouse-traps, and how to electroplate things, and how to do wood-carving and leather-work. We tried as many of the things as we had money for, and some of them succeeded. Then we made a fire-balloon.

It took a long time to make, and then it caught fire and blazed away before we could get it launched.

So we made another, and Noël dropped it near the water-butt, where there was a puddle, and, being tissue-paper, it was unable to stand the strain.

So we made another. But the paste was bad, and it did not stick.

So we made another.

Then, at last, when all was ready, Oswald climbed on to the pigsty at Mrs. Beales', and held the balloon very steady while Dicky lighted the cotton-wool, soaked in spirits of wine, which hangs from the end (where cars are in larger sizes), and causes it to be called a fire-balloon. A taper is burned inside the balloon, and then, according to the book, 'it readily ascends, and is carried away by the wind, sometimes to a considerable distance.'

Well, this time everything happened just as the book said, which is not always the case.

It was a clear, dark night, bright stars only. And, to our relief and agreeable surprise, our balloon rose up and sailed away, dragging its lighted tail like a home-made comet.

It sailed away over the marshes, getting smaller and smaller, and at last it was, though lost to sight, to memory dear. Some of us thought it wasn't worth doing, but Oswald was glad he had persevered. He does hate to be beaten. However, we none of us cared to make another, so we went to bed.

Dicky always goes to sleep directly on these occasions, but Oswald, more thoughtful for his years, sometimes reviews the events of the day. He must have been nearly asleep, because he was just reviewing an elephant that flew with a lamp inside, so that it looked like a fire-balloon, when Alice suddenly came and woke him up completely.

'Beware!' she said in tones of awe.

And he said, but not crossly:

'Well, what on earth's up now?'

'The fire-balloon!' replied Alice.

'What about it?' he rejoined, still calm and kind, though roused from his reviews.

'Why, it came to me all in a minute! Oh, Oswald – when it comes down – there are lots of farms in the march. Suppose it comes down and sets light to something! It's a crime – arsenic or something – and you can be hanged for it!'

'Don't be an idiot!' said Oswald kindly. 'The book wouldn't have told youths how to make them if they were crimes. Go back to bed, for goodness' sake!'

'I wish we hadn't – oh, I do!' said Alice.

But she did as she was told. Oswald has taught her this.

Next day her fears had stopped, like silent watches in the night, and we began to make a trap for badgers – in case we ever found one.

But Dicky went to the top of the mill with some field-glasses he had borrowed from Mr. Carrington to look at distant ships with, and he burst into the busy circle of badger-trap makers, and said:

'I say, come and look! There's a fire in the marsh!'

'There!' said Alice, dropping the wire pliers on her good elder brother's foot. 'What did I tell you?'

We all tore to the top of the mill, and sure enough, far across the sunny green marshes rose a little cloud of smoke, and blue and yellow flames leaped out every now and then. We all took

turns to look through the glasses.

Then Oswald said:

'This is no time for looking through field-glasses with your mouths open. We must go and help. We might fetch the fire-engines or something. The bikes, Dicky!'

Almost instantly we were in the saddle and tearing along the level marsh towards the direction of the fire. At first we got down at every crossroad and used the field-glasses to see which way to go; but as we got nearer, or the fire got bigger, or perhaps both, we could see it quite plainly with the naked eye. It was much further off than we had thought, but we rode on undaunted, regardless of fatigue and of dinner-time, being now long gone by.

We got to the fire at last. It was at Crown Ovender Farm, and we had to lift the bikes over fences and wheel them over ploughed fields to get there, because we did not know the right way by road.

Crown Ovender is a little farmhouse, and a barn opposite, and a great rick-yard, and two of the ricks were alight. They smoked horribly, and the wind blew the hot smoke into your eyes, and every now and then you saw great flames – yards long they seemed – leap out as if they were crying to get to the house.

We had put our bikes in a ditch a field away, and now we went all round about to ask if we could help; but there wasn't a soul to be seen.

We did not know what to do. Even Oswald – always full of resource – almost scratched his head, which seems to help some people to think, though I don't think it ever would me, besides

not looking nice.

'I wish we'd told them in the village,' said Dicky.

We had not done this, and the reason, the author is ashamed to say, was because we wanted to get there before anyone else. This was very selfish, and the author has often regretted it.

The flames were growing larger and fiercer, and the tar on the side of the barn next the rick-yard was melting and running down like treacle.

'There's a well!' said Dicky suddenly. 'It isn't a deep well, and there are two buckets.'

Oswald understood. He drew up the water, and Dicky took the buckets as they came up full and dripping and dashed the water on to the tarry face of the barn. It hissed and steamed. We think it did some good. We took it in turns to turn the well-wheel. It was hard work, and it was frightfully hot. Then suddenly we heard a horrid sound, a sort of out-of-breath scream, and there was a woman, very red in the face and perspiring, climbing over the fence.

'Hallo!' said Oswald.

'Oh!' the woman said, panting, 'it's not the house, then? Thank them as be it's not the house! Oh, my heart alive, I thought it was the house!'

'It isn't the house,' said Oswald; 'but it jolly soon will be!'

'Oh, my pore Lily!' said the woman. 'With this 'ere wind the house 'll be alight in a minute. And her a-bed in there! Where's Honeysett?'

'There's no one here but us. The house is locked up,' we said.

'Yes, I know, 'cause of tramps. Honeysett's got the key. I comes in as soon as I've cleared dinner away. She's ill a-bed, sleeping like a lamb, I'll be bound, all unknowing of her burning end.'

'We *must* get her out,' said Oswald.

But the woman didn't seem to know what to do. She kept on saying, 'Where's Honeysett? Oh, drat him! where's that Honeysett?'

So then Oswald felt it was the time to be a general, like he always meant to if he got the chance. He said, 'Come on!' and he took a stone and broke the kitchen window, and put his hand through the jagged hole and unfastened the catch, and climbed in. The back-door was locked and the key gone, but the front-door was only bolted inside. But it stuck very tight, from having been painted and shut before the paint was dry, and never opened again.

Oswald couldn't open it. He ran back to the kitchen window and shouted to the others.

'Go round to the other door and shove for all you're worth!' he cried in the manly tones that all must obey.

So they went; but Dicky told me afterwards that the woman didn't shove for anything like all she was worth. In fact, she wouldn't shove at all, till he had to make a sort of battering-ram of her, and then she seemed to awake from a dream, and they got the door open.

We followed the woman up the stairs and into a bedroom, and there was another woman sitting up in bed trembling, and her mouth opening and shutting.

'Oh, it's you, Eliza,' she said, falling back against the pillows. 'I thought it were tramps.'

Eliza did not break things to the sufferer gently, like we should have done, however hurried.

'Mercy you aren't burnt alive in your bed, Lily!' she merely remarked. 'The place is all ablaze!'

Then she rolled her sick sufferer in a blanket and took hold of her shoulders, and told us to take her feet.

But Oswald was too calm to do this suddenly. He said:

'Where are you going to put her?'

'Anywheres!' said Eliza wildly – 'anywheres is better than this here.'

'There's plenty of time,' said Oswald; and he and Dicky rushed into another room, and got a feather-bed and bedclothes, and hunched them down the stairs, and dragged them half a field away, and made a bed in a nice dry ditch. And then we consented to carry the unfortunate bed-woman to it.

The house was full of smoke by this time, though it hadn't yet caught fire; and I tell you we felt just like heroic firemen as we stumbled down the crookety narrow stairs, back first, bearing the feet of the sick woman. Oswald did so wish he had had a fireman's helmet to put on!

When we got the fading Lily to her dry ditch, she clutched

Oswald's arm and whispered:

'Save the sticks!'

'What sticks?' asked Oswald, who thought it was the ragings of delirium.

'She means the furniture,' said Eliza; 'but I'm afraid its doom is written on high.'

'Rubbish!' said Oswald kindly; and we flew back, us boys dragging Eliza with us.

There didn't seem to be much furniture in the house, but when we began to move it, it at once seemed to multiply itself with the rapidity of compound interest. We got all the clothes out first, in drawers and clothes-baskets, and tied up in sheets. Eliza wasn't much use. The only thing she could do was to look for a bed-key to unscrew the iron bedsteads; but Oswald and Dicky toiled on. They carried out chairs and tables and hearthrugs. As Oswald was staggering on under a Windsor armchair, with a tea-tray and an ironing-board under his arms, he ran into a man.

'What's up?' said he.

'Fire!' said Oswald.

'I seed that,' said the man.

Oswald shoved the chair and other things on to the man.

'Then lend a hand to get the things away,' he said.

And more and more people came, and all worked hard; but Oswald and Dicky did most. Eliza never even found that bed-key, because when she saw people beginning to come thicker and thicker across the fields, like ants hurrying home, she went out

and told everyone over and over again that Honeysett had got the key.

Then a woman came along, and Eliza got her into a corner by the stairs and jawed. I heard part of the jaw.

'An' pore Mrs. Simpkins, her man he's gone to Ashford Market with his beasts and the three other men, and me and my man said we'd have Liz up at my place, her being my sister, so as Honeysett could go off to Romney about the sheep. But she wouldn't come, not though we brought the light cart over for her. So we thought it best Honeysett stayed about his work, and go for the sheep to-morrow.'

'Then the house would ha' been all empty but for her not being wishful to go along of you?' Oswald heard the other say.

'Yes,' said Eliza; 'an' so you see –'

'You keep your mouth shut,' the other woman fiercely said; 'you're Lily's sister, but Tom, he's my brother. If you don't shut your silly mouth you'll be getting of them into trouble. It's insured, ain't it?'

'I don't see,' said Eliza.

'You don't never see nothing,' said the other. 'You just don't say a word 'less you're arst, and then only as you come to look after her and found the fire a-raging something crool.'

'But why –'

The other woman clawed hold of her and dragged her away, whispering secretly.

All this time the fire was raging, but there were lots of men

now to work the well and the buckets, and the house and the barn had not caught.

When we had got out all the furniture, some of the men set to work on the barn, and, of course, Oswald and Dicky, though weary, were in this also. They helped to get out all the wool – bundles and bundles and bundles of it; but when it came to sacks of turnip seed and things, they thought they had had enough, and they went to where the things were that had come out of the larder, and they got a jug of milk and some bread and cheese, and took it to the woman who was lying in the dry ditch on the nice bed they had so kindly made for her. She drank some milk, and asked them to have some, and they did, with bread and cheese (Dutch), and jolly glad they were of it.

Just as we had finished we heard a shout, and there was the fire-engine coming across the field.

I do like fire-engines. They are so smart and fierce, and look like dragons ready to fight the devouring element.

It was no use, however, in spite of the beautiful costumes of the firemen, because there was no water, except in the well, and not much left of that.

The man named Honeysett had ridden off on an old boneshaker of his to fetch the engines. He had left the key in the place where it was always kept, only Eliza had not had the sense to look for it. He had left a letter for her, too, written in red pencil on the back of a bill for a mowing-machine. It said: 'Rix on fir'; going to git fir'-injins.'

Oswald treasures this letter still as a memento of happier days.

When Honeysett saw the line of men handing up buckets to throw on the tarry wall, he said:

'That ain't no manner of use. Wind's changed a hour ago.'

And so it had. The flames were now reaching out the other way, and two more ricks were on fire. But the tarry walls were quite cool, and very wet, and the men who were throwing the water were very surprised to find that they were standing in a great puddle.

And now, when everything in the house and the barn was safe, Oswald had time to draw his breath and think, and to remember with despair exactly who it was that had launched a devastating fire-balloon over the peaceful marsh.

It was getting dusk by this time; but even the splendour of all those burning ricks against the darkening sky was merely wormwood and gall to Oswald's upright heart, and he jolly soon saw that it was the same to Dicky's.

'I feel pretty sick,' he said. 'Let's go home.'

'They say the whole eleven ricks are bound to go,' said Dicky, 'with the wind the way it is.'

'We're bound to go,' said Oswald.

'Where?' inquired the less thoughtful Dicky.

'To prison,' said his far-seeing brother, turning away and beginning to walk towards the bicycles.

'We can't be sure it was our balloon,' said Dicky, following.

'Pretty average,' said Oswald bitterly.

'But no one would know it was us if we held our tongues.'

'We can't hold our tongues,' Oswald said; 'if we do someone else will be blamed, as sure as fate. You didn't hear what that woman said about insurance money.'

'We might wait and see if anyone *does* get into trouble, and *then* come forward,' said Dicky.

And Oswald owned they might do that, but his heart was full of despair and remorse.

Just as they got to their bikes a man met them.

'All lost, I suppose?' he said, jerking his thumb at the blazing farmyard.

'Not all,' said Dicky; 'we saved the furniture and the wool and things –'

The man looked at us, and said heavily:

'Very kind of you, but it was all insured.'

'Look here,' said Oswald earnestly, 'don't you say that to anyone else.'

'Eh?' said the man.

'If you do, they're safe to think you set fire to it yourself!'

He stared, then he frowned, then he laughed, and said something about old heads on young shoulders, and went on.

We went on, too, in interior gloom, that only grew gloomier as we got nearer and nearer home.

We held a council that night after the little ones had gone to bed. Dora and Alice seemed to have been crying most of the day. They felt a little better when they heard that no one had been

burned to death. Alice told me she had been thinking all day of large families burned to little cinders. But about telling of the fire-balloon we could not agree.

Alice and Oswald thought we ought. But Dicky said 'Wait,' and Dora said 'Write to father about it.'

Alice said:

'No; it doesn't make any difference about our not being sure whether our balloon *was* the cause of destruction. I *expect* it was, and, anyway, we ought to own up.'

'I feel so too,' said Oswald; 'but I do wish I knew how long in prison you got for it.'

We went to bed without deciding anything.

And very early in the morning Oswald woke, and he got up and looked out of the window, and there was a great cloud of smoke still going up from the doomed rickyard. So then he went and woke Alice, and said:

'Suppose the police have got that poor farmer locked up in a noisome cell, and all the time it's *us*.'

'That's just what *I* feel,' said Alice.

Then Oswald said, 'Get dressed.'

And when she had, she came out into the road, where Oswald, pale but resolute, was already pacing with firm steps. And he said:

'Look here, let's go and tell. Let's say you and I made the balloon. The others can stop out of it if they like.'

'They won't if it's really prison,' said Alice. 'But it would be

noble of us to try it on. Let's – '

But we found we didn't know who to tell.

'It seems so fatal to tell the police,' said Alice; 'there's no getting out of it afterwards. Besides, he's only Jameson, and he's very stupid.'

The author assures you you do not know what it is like to have a crime like arsenic on your conscience, and to have gone to the trouble and expense of making up your mind to confess it, and then not to know who to.

We passed a wretched day. And all the time the ricks were blazing. All the people in the village went over with carts and bikes to see the fire – like going to a fair or a show. In other circumstances we should have done the same, but now we had no heart for it.

In the evening Oswald went for a walk by himself, and he found his footsteps turning towards the humble dwelling of the Ancient Mariner who had helped us in a smuggling adventure once.

The author wishes to speak the truth, so he owns that perhaps Oswald had some idea that the Ancient Mariner, who knew so much about smugglers and highwaymen, might be able to think of some way for us to save ourselves from prison without getting an innocent person put into it. Oswald found the mariner smoking a black pipe by his cottage door. He winked at Oswald as usual. Then Oswald said:

'I want to ask your advice; but it's a secret. I know you can

keep secrets.'

When the aged one had agreed to this, Oswald told him all. It was a great relief.

The mariner listened with deep attention, and when Oswald had quite done, he said:

'It ain't the stone jug this time mate. That there balloon of yours, I see it go up – fine and purty 'twas, too.'

'We all saw it go *up*,' said Oswald in despairing accents. 'The question is, where did it come down?'

'At Burmarsh, sonny,' was the unexpected and unspeakably relieving reply. 'My sister's husband's niece – it come down and lodged in their pear-tree – showed it me this morning, with the red ink on it what spelled your names out.'

Oswald, only pausing to wring the hand of his preserver, tore home on the wings of the wind to tell the others.

I don't think we were ever so glad of anything in our lives. It is a frightfully blighting thing when you believe yourself to be an Arsenicator (or whatever it is) of the deepest dye.

As soon as we could think of anything but our own cleanness from guilt, we began to fear the worst of Tom Simkins, the farmer at Crown Ovenden. But *he* came out of it, like us, without a stain on his fair name, because he and his sister and his man Honeysett all swore that he had given a tramp leave to sleep up against the beanstack the night before the fire, and the tramp's pipe and matches were found there. So he got his insurance money; but the tramp escaped.

But when we told father all about it, he said he wished he had been a director of that fire insurance company.

We never made another fire-balloon. Though it was not us that time, it might have been. And we know now but too well the anxieties of a life of crime.

THE ENCHANCERIED HOUSE

A STORY ABOUT THE BASTABLES

The adventure which I am about to relate was a very long time ago, and it was nobody's fault. The part of it that was most like a real crime was caused by H. O. not being at that date old enough to know better – and this was nobody's fault – though we took care that but a brief half-hour elapsed between the discovery of his acts and his *being* old enough to know better, and knowing it, too (better, I mean), quite thoroughly. We were residing at the residence of an old nurse of father's while Dora was engaged in the unagreeable pastime of having something catching at home. If she had been with us most likely none of this would have happened. For she has an almost unerring nose for right and wrong. Or perhaps what the author means is that she never does the kind of thing that grown-ups don't like your doing. Father's old nurse was very jolly to us, and did not bother too much, except about wet feet and being late for meals, and not airing your shirt before you put it on. But it is part of the nature of the nicest grown-ups to bother about these little things, and we must not be hard on them for it, for no one can help their natures.

The part where old nurse's house was was where London begins to leave off being London, but before it can make up its

mind not to be it. There are fields and bits of lanes and hedges, but the rows of ugly little houses go creeping along like yellow caterpillars, eating up the green fields. There are brickfields here and there, and cabbage fields, and places where rhubarb is grown. And it is much more interesting than real town, because there is more room to do things in, and not so many people to say 'Don't!' when you do.

Nurse's house was the kind that is always a house, no matter how much you pretend it is a baron's castle or an enchanted palace. And to play at its being a robber's cave or any part of a pirate ship is simply silly, and no satisfaction to anyone. There were no books except sermons and the Wesleyan Magazine. And there was a green cut-paper fuzziness on the frame of the looking-glass in the parlour. There was a garden – at least, there was enough ground for one, but nothing grew there except nettles and brick-bats and one elder-tree, and a poor old oak-tree that had seen better days. There was a hole in the fence, very convenient for going through in a hurry.

One morning there had been what old nurse called a 'set out' because Noël was writing some of his world-without-end poetry, and he had got as far as before Dicky found out that he was writing it on the blank leaf at the end of the Latin prize Dicky got at the Preparatory School.

'How beautiful the sun and moon
And all the stars appear!

They really are a long way off,
Although they look very near.'

'I do not think that they are worlds,
But apples on a tree;
The angels pick them whenever they like,
But it is not so with me.
I wish I was a little angel-child
To gather stars for my tea,'

Noël – for mysterious reasons unknown to Fame – is Alice's favourite brother, and of course she stood up for him, and said he didn't mean it.

And things were said on both sides, and the rest of us agreed with Dicky that Noël was old enough to know better. It ended in Alice and Noël going out for a walk by themselves as soon as Noël had had the crying washed off his hands and face.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.