

THE DOING OF IT.

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It was out of the question that Freckles could go. He was a grave-faced boy with solemn eyes, short knickerbockers, and mischievous faculties of extraordinary degree. Let loose on board ship, the lives of other passengers would be worth less than excursion fares to them. There would be cries of "boy overboard," "boy down hold," "boy caught in engine," "boy on topmast," "boy in store room," till the ship generally would have developed the nerves of a tea-enfeebled female.

And Bunchie was a bilious little body.

To enjoy the voyage and her company at the same time it would be necessary to pack up a doctor and nurse with her pinafores. Father's sovereigns had not elasticity enough for that.

Dorrie was therefore deputed to stay behind and keep the little fingers from picking and stealing unripe peaches, tarts, cocoanuts, turnips, sugar, jam, currants, or cold pudding.

Also, as a matter of course, Don stayed too. Whoever heard of parting twins not yet twelve? especially such ones as Dorrie and Don.

When things had arranged themselves like this without the slightest interference, and no one could be accused of selfishness or anything else unpleasant, mother gave a joyous little laugh, pushed back her hair, and looked surprisingly girlish; and father pushed back his till it made a rakish-looking curl, joined in the laugh, and felt like a schoolboy with the summer holidays a stretch before him. They said for a whole month they were going to sweep it out of their minds that there were such troublesome little atoms of humanity belonging to them as Dorrie and Don, Freckles and Bunchie.

No one would have dreamed that the girlish figure in the blouse and sailor hat had a ten-year-old scamp of a son to chastise with slipper and strap, or long-legged daughters to scold into the way they should go.

"Try and avoid funerals," father said. "I don't much mind what else you do."

"The black bottle's on the second pantry shelf," said mother. "Half a tablespoonful at each attack."

Then they went to New Zealand.

Uncle Badgery came to lend an appearance of steadiness to the house for the month. He was fifteen years older than father, and had never been married; consequently, he had all manner of theories about the training of children.

For one thing, he thought porridge for breakfast, boiled mutton, carrots, and rice pudding for dinner, thick bread and butter with milk and water for tea, was the only legitimate diet for "under twelve." It was rather hard, considering Freckles had a passion for devilled kidneys, and Dorrie and Don worshipped at the shrine of plum-cake with peel in it, not to mention the extreme partiality of Bunchie for ice-cream.

Uncle Badgery was an editor, also a *bon vivant*.

To look at him you would never have suspected such things.

He was a little shrivelled-up man, bald, wrinkled, and aged at fifty. His eyes were a habitually worried and anxious expression that Dorrie said was owing to the "devils" (being an editor's niece she felt she might use that technical expression without fear of reprimand). But Freckles inclined to believe it was solicitude for the punctuality of dinner.

Uncle Badgery rode a new hobby to death every six months, as he had no children. Bimetallism and theosophy had served their turn, and he was now mounted excitedly on vegetarianism.

On the platform he said it was the finest thing in the world. So eloquent were his lectures that several susceptible youths and maidens in his audience became forthwith pure Buddhists. But at the table he felt convinced his constitution would not bear tampering with, and had therefore not yet made any personal experiments. A course of boiled mutton and parsley sauce, alternated with roast mutton and abhorred pumpkin, brought about mutiny in the nursery above stairs. For a week it smouldered, glowing

warmly at meal times, but dying down out of thought in the between hours that mimic battles, dressing up, and such pleasures filled to the brim.

It was the menu for Christmas dinner, secretly submitted to them by cook, dictated to her by Uncle Badgery, that caused it to blaze up so wildly.

This is what was ordered:—

Plain boiled fowl, turnips and mashed potatoes; suet pudding, with 25 sultanas and 12 currants. For tea, bread with butter or (not and) jam, and four spiced buns. No goose or turkey, no pudding richly brown with raisins and peel, and almonds and dried cherries; no dancing, burning holly and brandy for sauce, no snapdragon, no figs or prunes or bon-bons, no iced cake—in point of fact, as Bunchie eloquently summed up, “no nofing.”

Deep down in her poor little breast this included no “muvver” to comfort necessary Christmas tribulation with tenderly administered black bottle and soothing rockaby.

“He’ll have roast turkey,” said Dorrie; “and ham,” said Don.

“He’ll stuff almonds as if they were dirt,” Freckles spoke with savage energy.

“An’ m’rangs,” wept Bunchie.

“Let’s pay him out,” Dorrie said, her eyes lightening.

“Oh, let’s!” said Freckles.

“What’ll we do?” Don asked, looking business like.

“Come on,” cried Bunchie, struggling from her high chair and making for the door.

She trotted to the top of the stairs, and then bumped herself down from step to step, her invariable way of descent. She said “Gweedy pig,” in a voice increasing in tone at each bump; by the time she reached the foot it had developed into a challenge to arms. “Come on,” she cried, running down the hall. Her little fat twinkling legs were irresistible.

In a body they rushed into the deserted study, where Uncle Badgery wrote leaders, recited his lectures, napped, and did similar and solemn things.

“Burn his paper!” suggested Freckles, grasping a handful of the table confusion.

“Frow away his ole stones,” said Bunchie, pausing at the box of mineral specimens.

“Put a powder in his soup at dinner.”

This brilliant and feeling proposal was Dorrie’s.

“Or Epsom salts in the decanters,” said Don, close behind.



“She bumped herself down from step to step.”

The latchkey in the hall scraped and squeaked. Uncle Badgery had forgotten something, and had turned back when half way to an evening lecture he was about to deliver. His voice came along the hall, and the four figures fell in a wild heap under the table, sheltered by a long friendly cloth.

They heard keys rattle and little private drawers open and shut; then the blue cloth boots, with their patent-leather toe-caps, moved away, unconscious of the danger

"Well, give it too, and say it's to be inserted, just as it is, in the public notice column. You won't forget?"

"It's not a pumpkin my head's afther becomin'," Bridget assured him.

Then the four boots vanished, one pair kitchenwards again, the other through the open hall door and away down the street.

The heap resolved itself into four upright forms, with an average of two legs and one head apiece.



"When the lad comes those are the proofs."

they had run from a stray pin and Bunchie's itching fingers.

"Bridget!" he shouted.

A pair of elastic-side cashmere boots, burst in three places, came and added to the horizon of the uncomfortable human heap beneath the cloth.

"When the lad comes those are the proofs," he said. "And do you see this slip of paper?"

"Sure an' it's not blind oi am in the eyes!" was Bridget's retort. She was allowed liberty of speech, having been in the family for nine months.

Freckles sat down in the editorial arm-chair to recover himself. He remarked it had been a narrow squeak. Dorrie lamented the loss of such an opportunity for pinching the legs of their relative. Don fell to reading the type-written slip of paper that had been commended to Bridget's notice, first to herself, then aloud with a prefatory "Ugh!" of disgust.

"Mr. Joseph Beeston Badgery has kindly consented to deliver, on the 4th instant, at the rooms of the Society for the Promulgation of Universal Knowledge, the first of a series of lectures on the benefits and pleasures

to be derived from Vegetarianism. All are cordially invited to attend.' I'd just like to see him living on carrots and turnips."

"An' powidge wifout sugar," added Bunchie, with vivid remembrance of the nauseous plateful she was forced to eat each breakfast time.

Don sat down on the edge of the table, slightly displacing the sheets of a leader that informed the public in skilful phrase that certain party leaders were *Arcades ambo*.

"I wish we could print in big letters on the front page of his horrid old paper, 'Mr. Joseph Beeston Badgery's a mean, greedy pig,'" she said.

Dorrie's eyes grew wide and brilliant.

"Let's put it in as an advertisement," she said. "They'd be forced to print it if we paid. You can advertise anything. And I've got elevenpence, and Don has twopence. How much would it cost?"

"I've got threepence," Don said joyously. "Don't you remember, Dorrie, Bridget gave me a penny for scrubbing the veranda, because it makes her hands red? Oh, do let's! How many words could we have? Couldn't we say sneak as well? He's going to tell dad about us buying those ice-creams."

"An' say 'bout him snoring," Bunchie said eagerly.

But Freckles leaned back in his chair and looked scornful. "What donkeys girls are!" he said. "Of course you wouldn't be allowed to put things like that in. Whatever would the country come to if everyone printed what they liked about everyone? Why, it's inflammation of character!" The three eager faces fell hugely, but they looked impressed with Freckles' superior knowledge of the world.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Dorrie said despairingly. And Freckles smiled in the slow, beautiful way that was peculiarly his own when he was extraordinarily struck with the genius of his own plans.

First of all he remarked that really knowledge often came in handy. "Where'd we have been now if I hadn't found out how that thing worked?" he said.

Then he opened the lid of the typewriter, and a breathless silence fell upon the room while the little buttons clicked slowly along.

This is the slip that was left on the table at the end of twenty minutes for Bridget to hand over to the office boy. The alterations were few:—

"Mr. Joseph Beeston Badgery has kindly consented to deliver, on the 4th instant, at

the rooms of the Society for the Promulgation of Universal Knowledge, the first of a series of lectures on the great benefits and pleasures to be derived from good living and choice wines. All are cordially invited to attend."

Dorrie thought it was too mild, but, as Freckles represented, moderation was necessary to make it pass without comment at the office.

"And it's quite enough to make him sit up," he said. "When he sees that, and when all his friends see it, he'll wish he had never been born."

Wonderful to relate, Uncle Badgery did not read his paper over breakfast the next morning. He was too busy grumbling about the bacon that was cooked too much and the eggs that were cooked too little, the toast that was chippy and the coffee in which he found two grains of grounds. In the intervals he made Bunchie cry because he would not grant bread and butter till the porridge plate was quite empty, and it was the day before Christmas. The comforting smile Freckles gave her behind the shelter of his cup meant "It's in," and Bunchie was able to interpret and break out into April dimples. All day Uncle Badgery did not read that part of the paper. He was very busy in the morning at the office, and in the afternoon he went to the races. He fancied some of his friends looked rather oddly at him, and laughed more than was necessary. One or two said little chaffing things about his expected lecture that made him wonder vexedly if they knew he was only a vegetarian by precept. He decided he would really begin to practise presently—when the Christmas season was well over.

In the evening, when he was half through his solitary splendid dinner, a letter was brought to him from the secretary of the Society for the Promulgation of Universal Knowledge. The writer said of course he himself understood from the title of the promised lecture that it would be purely sarcastic and scathing; but might he suggest that the announcement be made a little more clear, as it was annoying to find all the evening papers had got hold of it and were making great capital of it.

Uncle Badgery pushed aside his plate and rang the bell violently. "The man's a fool," he said to himself.

Bridget appeared, smoothing laughter creases out of her face with poorest success.

"Bring me the paper," he said.

"W-w-which paper?" she giggled. As

if she imagined Uncle Badgery would call a paper he had no connection with, *the* paper.

"The paper! my paper!" he stormed, "and all the papers! If they haven't come, go down to the corner and get them—every paper there is!"

He went into the study and Bridget followed after him, her hands full of recently printed sheets.

Dorrie and Don came too. They thought it would disarm suspicion. They stood near the doorway, and took a paper each, in which they pretended to look.

"Great heavens!" he cried, and seized another paper, wherein his announcement was copied and various facetious strictures made. "Great heavens! Upon my life——"

"It must be a murder," whispered the wicked Dorrie in audible voice. "P'raps the Queen or the Prince of Wales!"

"Or Dibbs," said Don.

Uncle Badgery's face was purple. He swore for two whole minutes without stopping for breath or lowering his voice. Having no children he had never found it necessary to break himself of the habit, and



"I was so vevzy tired of powidge."

And "Oh!" they said. And "Whatever's the matter, uncle?"

"Is it a murder?" Dorrie cried.

"Has the Governor been assassinated?" asked Don.

Freckles dodged about between their sheltering frocks and the Japanese screen. He was a little nervous for the first time, but not sufficiently so to beat a retreat and lose the sight of his relative's discomfiture. Bunchie had disappeared entirely.

"God bless my soul!" said Uncle Badgery. "Bless my soul! Bless my soul!"

His eyes tore along the lines.

now, his agitation was too great to consider the delicacy of the ears of Dorrie and Don.

He roared to Freckles to fetch him a cab, and while waiting for its arrival he went for a moment into the big pantry where the wine and spirits were kept. He felt he must have a glass of something to calm his nerves.

Bunchie was standing in the middle of the floor, a pathetic little figure with ice-cream all down the front of her pinafore and jam round her mouth, a lobster's claw in one hand, a great semicircle of watermelon eaten to the green rind in the other.

Tears were in her eyes and trickling down her little pale cheeks to the excrescent jam. She was rocking her small body about as if in pain.

"Oh, weach it down twickerly," she sobbed.

"What is it?" he said with angry impatience.

"On ze second self Uncle Badgwy," she sobbed, and caught her breath. "Half a tablespoon at each tack—oh, twickerly."

But he tossed off some whisky and brushed past her into the hall and then to the cab. Freckles had procured with such despatch.

Such hardness of the human heart was too much for the child. She gave one final agonised glance at the high bottle and sank upon the floor a little bunch of misery.

They found her under a shelf and carried her to the dining-room sofa, in full view of her late solitary festivities. And when the black bottle as administered by Dorrie made no improvement in her sad condition, Freckles went over the way and fetched the family doctor.

"Oh, ho!" said that gentleman—"ah, ha!—ho, oh!" Why, I thought my good friend Mr. Badgery had turned vegetarian." He was looking at the despoiled table.

Then he sat down by Bunchie and examined her tongue and sticky little wrist in solemn and awful silence.

"What have you had?" he asked at last.

And "Half a tablespoon," Bunchie said, in a very small voice.

But he flung a sweeping magnificent look of scorn at the relics of the feast—the empty ice-cream jar, the scarlet lobster, the melon, the delicate fruits.

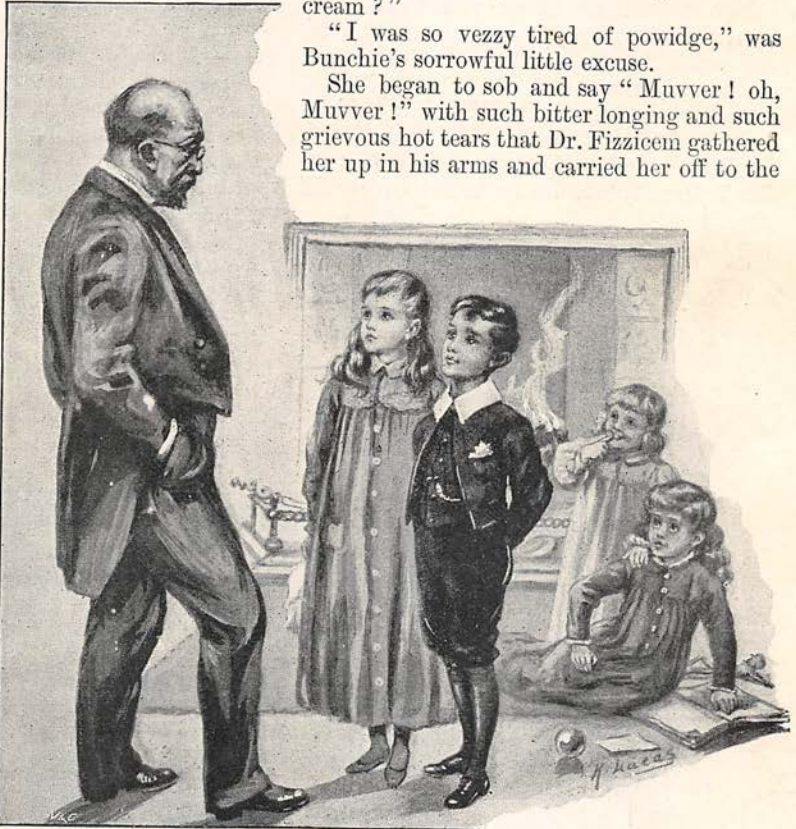
"What have you eaten of those things?" he said, in a terrible voice.

And Bunchie merely clasped one little hand over the other and answered with a quaint combination of melancholy and pride, "Eberyfing."

"Not ice-cream?" cried Dr. Fizzicem. "Not ice-cream *and* lobster?—melon perhaps—but not ice-cream *and* melon *and* lobster? An apple if you like, or a nice soft pear, but surely not an apple, *and* a pear, *and* melon, *and* lobster, *and* ice-cream?"

"I was so vezzy tired of powidge," was Bunchie's sorrowful little excuse.

She began to sob and say "Muvver! oh, Muvver!" with such bitter longing and such grievous hot tears that Dr. Fizzicem gathered her up in his arms and carried her off to the



"'We did it,' they said in a breath."

nursery with a gentleness that belied his fierce face.

When Uncle Badgery came home it was very late, but his anger was still only a few degrees below boiling point.

Four little figures rose from the hearth-rug and confronted him. Freckles, with bright, honest eyes, and head well back; the three girls, in their little red dressing gowns, their hair floating about their shoulders, their faces pale but courageous.

"We did it," they said in a breath.

"Shut up!" said Freckles in an angry aside

"I did it, uncle," he said. "I thought I'd better tell you or you'd be giving some little beggar of a 'devil' the sack. I did it quite by myself."

"We helped," Dorrie and Don repeated stoutly.

"They didn't," said Freckles. "I did it with your machine; they can't work it. Of course you can lick me if you like."

But Uncle Badgery would not so waste his strength. He gave them one scathing look and went to bed.

Two days later father and mother returned with sunburnt faces, smooth brows, and outstretched arms, into which the four wicked ones flew.

"We're awfully sorry," Freckles said at the end of the long recital.

"Dreadfully," said Dorrie and Don; "we didn't think of it being horrid of us till after."

"As per usual," father sighed.

"An' I was so vezzy hungwy," Bunchie said, burying her happy little face in mother's

neck. "Mayn't we have butter an' jam for tea, mammy sweet?"

"You all deserve dry bread and penal servitude for a month," mother said.

But somehow it happened in the joys of home-coming they did not get it. Mother had a grave, sweet, wise little talk with them, and father showed how foolish ridicule and practical joking were, and gave them fresh notions about honour and fair dealings and such, with a result that they all wished they had tried 'prentice hands on red-hot coals rather than journalism.

Uncle Badgery wrote the moral of the story himself. He took his fountain pen, and from his most private drawer extracted a document that bore witness of being the last will and testament of Joseph Beeston Badgery, and he scored four names out with heavy black marks.

And the names were the grave and baptismal ones that red-tape orthodoxy had demanded, and that corresponded respectively with Dorrie and Don, Freckles and Bunchie.

