

# UNEXCEPTIONABLE REFERENCES.

BY E. NESBIT.\*



"HOOTS!" said the gardener, "there's nae sense in't. The suppression o' the truth's bad as a lee. Indeed, I doot mair hae been lost for th'ane than t'ither."

"Law! Mr. Murchison, you do use language, I'm sure!" tittered the parlourmaid.

"I say nae mair than the truth," he answered, cutting bloom after bloom quickly yet tenderly. "To bring hame a new mistress to the hoose

and never to tell your bairn a word about the matter till all's made fast—it's a thing he'll hae to answer for to his Maker, I'm thinking. Here's the flowers, wumman; carry them canny. I'll send the lad up wi' the lave o' the flowers an' bit green stuff in a wee meenit. And mind you your flaunting streamers agin the pots."

The parlourmaid gathered her skirts closely, and delicately tip-toed to the door of the hothouse. Here she took the basket of bright beauty from his hand and walked away across the green blaze of the lawn.

Mr. Murchison grunted relief. He was not fond of parlourmaids, no matter how pretty and streamered.

He left the hot, sweet air of the big hothouse and threaded his way among the glittering glasshouses to the potting-shed. At its door a sound caught his ear.

"Hoots!" he said again, but this time with a gentle, anxious intonation.

"Eh! ma lammie," said he, stepping quickly forward, "what deevilment hae ye been after the noo, and wha is't's been catching ye at it?"

The "lammie" crept out from under the potting-shelf; a pair of small arms went round Murchison's legs, and a little face, round and red and very dirty, was lifted towards his. He raised the child in his arms and set her on the shelf, so that she could lean her flushed face on his shirt-front.

"Toots, toots!" said he, "noo tell me——"

"It isn't true, is it?" said the child.

"Hoots!" said Murchison for the third time, but he said it under his breath. Aloud he said, "Tell old Murchison a' about it, Miss Charling, hinney."

"It was when I wanted some more of the strawberries," she began, with another sob, "and the new cook said not, and I was a greedy little pig: and I said I'd rather be a greedy little pig than a spiteful old cat!" The tears broke out afresh.

"And you eight past! Ye should hae mair sense at siccan age than to ca' names." The head gardener spoke reprovingly, but he stroked her rough hair.

"I didn't—not one single name—not even when she said I was enough to make a cat laugh, even an old one—and she wondered any good servant ever stayed a week in the place."

"And what was ye sayin'?"

"I said 'Guid ye may be, but ye're no bonny'—I've heard you say that, Murchison, so I know it wasn't wrong, and then she said I was a minx, and other things, and I wanted keeping in order, and it was a very good thing I had a new mamma coming home to-day, to keep me under a bit, and a lot more—and—and things about my own, own mother, and that father wouldn't love me any more. But it's not true, is it? Oh! it isn't true? She only just said it?"

"Ma lammie," said he gravely, kissing the top of the head nestled against him, "it's true that yer guid feyther, wha never crossed ye except for yer ain sake syne the day ye were born, is bringing hame a guid wife the day, but ye mun be a wumman and no cry oot afore ye're hurted. I'll be bound it's a kind, genteel lady he's got, that'll love ye, and mak' much o' ye, and teach ye to sew fine—aye, an' play at the piano as like's no."

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The child's mouth tightened resentfully, but Murchison did not see it.

"Noo, ye'll jest be a douce lassie," he went on, "and say me fair that ye'll never gie an unkind word tae yer feyther's new lady. Noo, promise me that, an' I ken fine ye'll keep tae it."

"No, I won't say anything unkind to her," she answered, and Murchison hugged himself on a victory, for a promise was the one thing sacred to Charling. He did not notice the child's voice as she gave it.

When the tears were quite dried he gave her a white geranium to plant in her own garden, and went back to his work.

Charling took the geranium with pretty thanks and kisses, but she felt it a burden, none the less. For her mind was quite made up. When she had promised never to say anything unkind to her "father's new lady" she meant to keep the promise—by never speaking to her or seeing her at all. She meant to run away. How could she bear to be "kept under" by this strange lady, who would come and sit in her own mother's place, and wear her own mother's clothes, and no doubt presently burn her own mother's picture and make Charling wash the dishes and sweep the kitchen like poor dear Cinderella in the story? True, Cinderella's misfortunes ended in marriage with a prince, but then Charling did not want to be married, and she had but little faith in princes, and, besides, she had no fairy godmother. Her godmother was dead—her own, own mother was dead, and only father was left—and now he had done this thing, and he would not want his Charling any more.

So Charling went indoors and washed her face and hands and smoothed her hair, which never would be smoothed, put a few treasures in her pocket—all her money, some coloured chalks, a stone with crystal inside that showed where it was broken, and went quietly out at the lodge gate, carrying the white geranium in her arms, because when you are running away you cannot possibly leave behind you the last gift of somebody who loves you. But the geranium was very heavy—and it seemed to get heavier and heavier as she walked along the dry, dusty road, so that presently Charling turned through the swing-gate into the field-way, for the sake of the shadow of the hedge; and the field-way led past the church, and when she reached the low, mossy wall of the churchyard she set the pot on it and rested. Then she said—

"I think I will leave it with mother to take care of." So she took the pot in her

hands again and carried it to her mother's grave. Of course they had told Charling that her mother was an angel now and was not in the churchyard at all, but in heaven; only heaven was a very long way off, and Charling preferred to think that mother was only asleep under the green counterpane with the daisies on it. There had been a green coverlet to the bed in mother's room, only it had white lilac on it, and not daisies. So Charling set down the pot, and she knelt down beside it, and wrote on it with a piece of blue chalk from her pocket: "*From Charling to mother to take care of.*" Then she cried a little bit more, because she was so sorry for herself; and then she smelt the thyme and wondered why the bees liked it better than white geraniums; and then she felt that she was very like a little girl in a book, and so she forgot to cry, and told herself that she was the third sister going out to seek her fortune.

After that it was easy to go on, especially when she had put the crystal stone, which hung heavy and bumpy in the pocket, beside the geranium pot. Then she kissed the tombstone where it said, "Helen, beloved wife of—" and went away among the green graves.

Mother had died when she was only five, so that she could not remember her very well; but all these three years she had loved and thought of a kind, beautiful Something that was never tired and never cross, and always ready to kiss and love and forgive little girl however naughty she was, and she called this something "mother" in her heart, and it was for this something that she left her kisses on the gravestone. And the gravestone was warm to her lips as she kissed it, because the sun had been kissing it, too.

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It was on a wide, furze-covered down, across which a white road wound like a twisted ribbon, that Charling's courage began to fail her. The white road looked so very long; there were no houses anywhere, and no trees, only far away across the down she saw the round tops of some big elms. "They look like cabbages," she said to herself.

She had walked quite a long way, and she was very tired. Her dinner of sweets and stale cakes from the greeny-glass bottles in the window of a village shop had not been so nice as she expected; the woman at the shop had been cross because Charling had no pennies, only the five-shilling piece father had given her when he went away, and the

woman had no change. And she had scolded so that Charling had grown frightened and had run away, leaving the big, round piece of silver on the dirty little counter. This was about the time when she was missed at home, and the servants began to search for her, running to and fro like ants whose nest is turned up by the spade.

A big furze bush cast a ragged square yard of alluring shade on the common. Charling flung herself down on the turf in the shadow. "I wonder what they are doing at home?" she said to herself after awhile. "I don't suppose they've even missed me. They think of nothing but making the place all flowery for her to see. Nobody wants me——"

At home they were dragging the ornamental water in the park—old Murchison directing the operation with tears running slow and unregarded down his face.

Charling lay and looked at the white road. Somebody must go along it presently. Roads were made for people to go along. Then when any people came by she would speak to them, and they would help her and tell her what to do. "I wonder what a girl ought to do when she runs away from home?" said Charling to herself. "Boys go to sea, of course; but I don't suppose a pirate would care about engaging a cabin-girl——" She fell a-musing, however, on the probable woes of possible cabin-girls, and their chances of becoming admirals, as cabin-boys always did in the stories; and so deep were her musings that she positively jumped when a boy, passing along the road, began suddenly to whistle. It was the air of a comic song, in a minor key, and its inflections were those of a funeral march. It went to Charling's heart. Now she knew, as she had



"'It isn't true, is it?' said the child."

never known before, how lonely and miserable she was.

She scrambled to her feet and called out, "Hi! you boy!"

The boy also jumped. But he stopped and said "Well?" though in a tone that promised little.

"Come here," said Charling. "At least, of course, I mean come here, if you please."

The boy, a well grown lad of twelve or fourteen, shrugged his shoulders and came towards her.

"Well?" he said again, very grumpily, Charling thought; so she said, "Don't be cross. I wish you'd talk to me a little, if you are not too busy. If you please, I mean, of course."

She said it with her best company manner,



“Won't you tell me the real true truth?”

and the boy laughed, not unkindly, but still in a grudging way. Then he threw himself down on the turf and began pulling bits of it up by the roots. "Go ahead!" said he.

But Charling could not go ahead. She looked at his handsome, sulky face, his knitted brow, twisted into fretful lines, and the cloud behind his blue eyes frightened her.

"Oh! go away!" she said. "I don't want you! Go away; you're very unkind!"

The boy seemed to shake himself awake at the sight of the tears that rushed to follow her words.

"I say, don't-you-know, I say;" but Charling had flung herself face down on the turf and took no notice.

"I say, look here," he said; "I am not unkind, really. I was in an awful wax about something else, and I didn't understand. Oh! drop it. I say, look here, what's the matter? I'm not such a bad sort, really. Come, kiddie, what's the row?"

He dragged himself on knees and elbows to her side and began to pat her on the back. With some energy: "There, there," he said; "don't cry, there's a dear. Here, I've got a handkerchief, as it happens," for Charling was feeling blindly and vainly among the coloured chalks. He thrust the dingy handkerchief into her hands, and she dried her eyes, still sobbing.

"That's the style," said he. "Look here, we're like people in a book. Two travellers in misfortune meet upon a wild moor and exchange narratives. Come, tell me, what's up?"

"You tell first," said Charling, rubbing her eyes very hard; "but swear eternal friendship before you begin, then we can't tell each other's secrets to the enemy."

He looked at her with a nascent approval. She understood how to play, then, this forlorn child in the torn white frock.

He took her hand and said solemnly—  
"I swear."

"Your name," she interrupted. "I, N or M, swear, you know."

"Oh, yes. Well, I, Harry Basingstoke, swear to you—"

"Charling," she interpolated; "the other names don't matter. I've got six of them."

"That we will support—no, maintain—eternal friendship."

"And I, Charling, swear the same to you, Harry."

"Why do they call you Charling?"

"Oh! because my name's Charlotte, and mother used to sing a song about Charlie being her darling, and I was her darling,

only I couldn't speak properly then; and I got it mixed up into Charling, father says. But let's be getting on. Tell me your sad history, poor fellow-wanderer."

"My father was a king," said Harry gravely; but Charling turned such sad eyes on him that he stopped.

"Won't you tell me the real true truth?" she said. "I will you."

"Well," said he, "the real true truth is, Charling, I've run away from home, and I'm going to sea."

Charling clapped her hands. "Oh! so have I! So am I! Let me come with you. Would they take a cabin-girl on the ship you're going to, do you think? And why did you run away? Did they beat you and starve you at home? Or have you a cruel stepmother, or stepfather, or something?"

"No," said he grimly; "I haven't any step-relations, and I'm jolly well not going to have any, either. I ran away because I didn't choose to have a strange chap set over me, and that's all I am going to tell you. But about you? How far have you come to-day?"

"About ninety miles, I should think," said Charling; "at least, my legs feel exactly like that."

"And what made you do such a silly thing?" he said, smiling at her, and she thought his blue eyes looked quite different now, so that she did not mind his calling her silly. "You know, it's no good girls running away; they always get caught, and then they're put into convents or something." She slipped her hand confidingly under his arm, and put her head against the sleeve of his Norfolk jacket.

"Not girls with eternal friends, they don't," she said. "You'll take care of me now? You won't let them catch me?"

"Tell me why you did it, then."

Charling told him at some length.

"And father never told me a word about it," she ended; "and I wasn't going to stay to be made to wash the dishes and things, like Cinderella. I wouldn't stand that, not if I had to run away every day for a year. Besides, nobody wants me; nobody will miss me."

This was about the time when they found the white geranium in the churchyard, and began to send grooms about the country on horses. And Murchison was striding about the lanes gnawing his grizzled beard and calling on his God to take him, too, if harm had come to the child.

"But perhaps the stepmother would be nice," the boy said.

"Not she. Stepmothers never are. I know just what she'll be like—a horrid old hag with red hair and a hump!"

"Then you've not seen her?"

"No."

"You might have waited till you had."

"It would have been too late then," said Charling tragically.

"But your father wouldn't have let you be treated unkindly, silly."

"Fathers generally die when the stepmother comes; or else they can't help themselves. You know that as well as I do."

"I suppose your father is a good sort?"

"He's the best man there is," said Charling indignantly, "and the kindest and bravest, and cleverest and amusingest, and he can sit any horse like wax; and he can fence with real swords, and sing all the songs in all the world. There!"

Harry was silent, racking his brain in the effort to find arguments to lead this small rebel back into the paths of common sense.

"Look here, kiddie," he said slowly, "if your father's such a good sort, he'd have more sense than to choose a stepmother who wasn't nice. He's a much finer chap than the fathers in fairy tales. You never read of *them* being able to do all the things your father can do."

"No," said Charling, "that's true."

"He's sure to have chosen someone quite jolly, really," Harry went on, more confidently.

Charling looked up suddenly. "Who was it chose the chap that you weren't going to stand having set over you?" she said.

The boy bit his lip.

"I swore eternal friendship, so I can never tell your secrets, you know," said Charling softly, "and *I've* told *you* every single thing."

"Well, it's my sister, then," said he abruptly, "and she's married a chap I've never seen—and I'm to go and live with them—and she told me once she was never going to marry, and it was always going to be just us two; and now she's found this fellow she knew when she was a little girl and he was a boy—as it might be us, you know—and she's forgotten all about what she said, and married him. And I wasn't asked to the wedding because they wanted to be married quietly; and they come home from their hateful honeymoon this evening, and the holidays begin to-day, and I was to go to this new chap's house to spend them. And I only got her letter this morning, and I just took my journey money and ran away. My boxes

were sent on straight from school, though—so I've got no clothes but these. I'm just going to look at the place where she's to live, and then I'm off to sea."

"Why didn't she tell you before?"

"She says she meant it to be a pleasant surprise, because we've been rather hard up since my father died, and this chap's got horses and everything, and she says he's going to adopt me. As if I wanted to be adopted by any old stuck-up money-grubber!"

"But you haven't seen him," said Charling gently. "If *I'm* silly, *you* are, too, aren't you?"

She hid her face on her sleeve to avoid seeing the effect of this daring shot. Only silence answered her.

Presently Harry said—

"Now kiddie, let me take you home, will you? Give the stepmother a fair show, anyhow."

Charling reflected. She was very tired. She stroked Harry's hand absently and after a while said—

"I will if you will."

"Will what?"

"Go back and give your chap a fair trial."

And now the boy reflected. "Done," he said suddenly. "After all, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Come on." He stood up and held out his hand. This was about the time when the cook packed her box and went off, leaving it to be sent after her. Public opinion in the servants' hall was too strong to be longer faced.

The shadows of the trees lay black and level across the pastures when the two children reached the lodge gates. A floral arch was above the gate, and wreaths of flowers and flags made the avenue gay. Charling had grown very tired, and Harry had carried her on his back for the last mile or two—resting often, because Charling was a strong, healthy child and, as he phrased it, "no slouch of a weight."

Now they paused at the gate of the lodge.

"This is my house," said Charling. "They've put all these things up for *her*, I suppose. If you'll write down your address I'll give you mine, and we can write and tell each other what *they* are like afterwards. I've got a bit of chalk somewhere."

She fumbled in the dusty confusion of her little pocket while Harry found the envelope of his sister's letter and tore it in two. Then, one on each side of the lodge gatepost, the children wrote, slowly and carefully, for some moments. Presently they exchanged papers,

and each read the one written by the other. Then suddenly both turned very red.

"But this is *my* address," said she. "The Grange, Falconbridge."

"It's where my sister's gone to live, anyhow," said he.

"Then—then——"

Conviction forced itself first on the boy.

"What a duffer I've been! It's *him* she's married."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Are you *sure* your father's a good sort?"

"How dare you ask!" said Charling. "It's your sister I want to know about."

"She's the dearest old darling!" he cried. "Oh! kiddie, come along; run for all you're worth, and perhaps we can get in the back way, and get tidied up before they come, and they need never know."

He held out his hand; Charling caught at it, and together they raced up the avenue. But getting in the back way was impossible, for Murchison met them full on the terrace, and Charling ran straight into his arms. There should have been scolding and punishment, no doubt, but Charling found none of it. And, now, who so sleek and demure as the runaways—he in Eton jacket and she in spotless white muslin—when the carriage drew up in front of the hall, amid the cheers of the tenants and the bowing of the orderly, marshalled servants?

And then a lady, pretty as a princess in a fairy tale, with eyes as blue as Harry's, was hugging him and Charling both at once; while a man, whom Harry at once owned to be a man, stood looking at the group with grave, kind eyes.

"We'll never, never tell," whispered the boy. The servants had been sworn to

secrecy by Murchison. Charling whispered back, "Never as long as we live."

But long before bedtime came each of the runaways felt that concealment was foolish in the face of the new circumstances, and, with some embarrassment, a tear or two, and a little gentle laughter, the tale was told.

"Oh! Harry, how could you?" said the stepmother, and went quietly out by the long window with her arm round her brother's shoulders.

Charling was left alone with her father.

"Why didn't you tell me, father?"

"I wish I had, childie; but I thought—you see—I was going away—I didn't want to leave you alone for a fortnight to think all sorts of nonsense. And I thought my little girl could trust me." Charling hid her face in her hands. "Well! it's all right now; don't cry, my girlie." He drew her close to him.

"And you'll love Harry very much?"

"I will. He brought you back."

"And I'll love *her* very much. So that's all settled," said Charling cheerfully. Then her face fell again. "But, father, don't you love mother any more? Cook said you didn't."

He sighed and was silent. At last he said, "You are too little to understand, sweetheart. I have loved the lady who came home to-day all my life long, and I shall love your mother as long as I live."

"Cook said it was like being unkind to mother. Does mother mind about it, really?"

He muttered something inaudible—to the cook's address.

"I don't think they either of them mind, my darling Charling," he said. "You cannot understand it, but I think *they* both understand."

