

KIND LITTLE EDMUND,

OR THE CAVES
AND THE COCKATRICE



A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

BY E. NESBIT.

EDMUND was a boy. The people who did not like him said that he was the most tiresome boy that ever lived, but his grandmother and his other friends said he had an inquiring mind. And his granny often added that he was the best of boys. But she was very kind and very old.

Edmund loved to find out about things. Perhaps you will think that in that case he was constant in his attendance at school, since there, if anywhere, we may learn whatever there is to be learned. But Edmund did not want to learn things: he wanted to find things out, which is quite different. His inquiring mind led him to take clocks to pieces to see what made them go, to take locks off doors to see what made them stick. It was Edmund who cut open the india-rubber ball to see what made it bounce, and he never *did* see, any more than you did when you tried the same experiment.

Edmund lived with his grandmother. She loved him very much—in spite of his in-

quiring mind, and hardly scolded him at all when he frizzled up her tortoiseshell comb in his anxiety to find out whether it was made of real tortoiseshell or of something that would burn. Edmund went to school, of course, now and then, and sometimes he could not prevent himself from learning something, but he never did it on purpose.

"It is such waste of time," said he; "they only know what everybody knows. I want to find out new things that nobody has thought of but me."

"I don't think you're likely to find out anything that none of the wise men in the whole world have thought of all these thousands of years," said granny.

But Edmund did not agree with her. He played truant whenever he could, for he was a kind-hearted boy, and could not bear to think of a master's time and labour being thrown away on a boy like himself, who did not wish to learn, only to find out—when there were so many worthy lads thirsting for instruction in geography and history, and reading and ciphering, and Mr. Smiles's Self-Help.

Other boys played truant too, of course—and these went nutting or blackberrying or wild-plum gathering, but Edmund never went on the side of the town where the green woods and hedges grew. He always went up the mountain where the great rocks were, and the tall, dark pine trees, and where other people were afraid to go because of the strange noises that came out of the caves.

Edmund was not afraid of these noises—though they were very strange and terrible. He wanted to find out what made them. And one day he did. He had invented, all by himself, a very ingenious and new kind of lantern, made with a turnip and a tumbler, and when he had taken the candle out of granny's bedroom candlestick to put in it, it gave quite a splendid light.

He had to go to school next day, and he was caned for being absent without leave—although he very straightforwardly explained that he had been too busy making the lantern to have time to come to school.

But the day after he got up very early, and took the lunch granny had got ready for him to take to school—two boiled eggs and an apple turnover—and he took his lantern and went off as straight as a dart to the mountains to explore the caves.

The caves were very dark, but his lantern lighted them up beautifully; and they were most interesting caves, with stalactites and stalagmites and fossils, and all the things you read about in the instructive books for the young. But Edmund did not care for any of these things just then. He wanted to find out what made the noises that people were afraid of, and there was nothing in the caves to tell him.

Presently he sat down in the biggest cave and listened very carefully, and it seemed to him that he could distinguish three different sorts of noises. There was a heavy, rumbling sound, like a very large old gentleman asleep after dinner; and there was a smaller sort of rumble going on at the same time, and there was a sort of crowing, clucking sound, such as a chicken might make if it happened to be as big as a haystack.

"It seems to me," said Edmund to himself, "that the clucking is nearer than the others." So he started up again and explored the caves once more. He found out nothing, only, about half-way up the wall of the cave, he saw a hole. And, being a boy, he climbed up to it and crept in; and it was the entrance to a rocky passage. And now the clucking sounded more plainly than before, and he could hardly hear the rumbling at all.

"I am going to find out something at last," said Edmund, and on he went. The passage wound and twisted, and twisted and turned, and turned and wound—but Edmund kept on.

"My lantern's burning better and better," said he presently, but the next minute he saw that all the light did not come from his lantern. It was a pale yellow light, and it shone down the passage far ahead of him through what looked like the chink of a door.

"I expect it's the fire in the middle of the earth," said Edmund, who had not been able to help learning about that at school.

But quite suddenly the fire ahead gave a pale flicker and went down—and the clucking ceased.

The next moment Edmund turned a corner and found himself in front of a rocky door. The door was ajar. He went in, and there was a round cave, like the dome of St. Paul's. In the middle of the cave was a hole like a very big wash-hand basin, and in the middle of the basin Edmund saw a large pale person sitting. This person had a man's face and a griffin's body, and big, feathery wings, and a snake's tail, and a cock's comb and neck-feathers.

"Whatever are you?" said Edmund.

"I'm a poor starving cockatrice," answered the pale person, in a very faint voice, "and I shall die—oh, I know I shall! My fire's gone out! I can't think how it happened; I must have been asleep. I have to stir it seven times round with my tail once in a hundred years to keep it alight, and my watch must have been wrong. And now I shall die."

I think I have said before what a kind-hearted boy Edmund was.

"Cheer up," said he. "I'll light your fire for you," and off he went, and in a few minutes he came back with a great armful of sticks from the pine trees outside, and with these and a lesson book or two that he had forgotten to lose before, and which, quite by an oversight, were safe in his pocket, he lighted a fire all round the cockatrice. The wood blazed up, and presently something in the basin caught fire, and Edmund saw that it was a sort of liquid that burned like the brandy in a snapdragon. And now the cockatrice stirred it with his tail, and flapped his wings in it, so that some of it splashed out on Edmund's hand and burnt it rather badly. But the cockatrice grew red and strong and happy, and its comb grew scarlet, its feathers glossy, and it lifted itself up and crowed, "Cock-a-trice-a-doodle-doo!" very loudly and clearly.



"COCK A-TRICE-A-DOODLE-DOO."

Edmund's kindly nature was charmed to see the cockatrice so much improved in health, and he said :—

"Don't mention it; delighted, I'm sure," when the cockatrice began to thank him.

"But what can I do for you?" said the creature.

"Tell me stories," said Edmund.

"What about?" said the cockatrice.

"About true things that they don't know at school," said Edmund.

So the cockatrice began, and it told him about mines and treasures, and geological formations, and about gnomes and fairies and dragons, and glaciers and the stone age, and the beginning of the world, and about the unicorn and the phoenix, and about Magic, black and white.

And Edmund ate his eggs and his turnover, and listened. And when he got hungry again he said good-bye and went home. But he came again next day for more stories, and the next day, and the next, for a long time.

He told the boys at school about the cockatrice and its wonderful true tales, and the boys liked the stories; but when he told the master he was caned for untruthfulness.

"But it's true," said Edmund; "just you look where the fire burnt my hand."

"I see you've been playing with fire—in

mischief as usual," said the master, and he caned Edmund harder than ever. The master was ignorant and unbelieving: but I am told that some schoolmasters are not like that.

Now, one day Edmund made a new lantern out of something chemical which he sneaked from the school laboratory. And with it he went exploring again to see if he could find the things that made the other sorts of noises. And in quite another part of the mountain he found a dark passage, all lined with brass, so that it was like the inside of a huge telescope, and at the very end of it he found a bright green door. There was a brass plate on the door which said: "Mrs. D. knock and ring," and a white label which said: "Call me at three." Edmund had a watch: it had been given to him on his birthday two days before, and he had not yet had time to take it to pieces and see what made it go, so it was still going. He looked at it now. It said :—

"A quarter to three."

Did I tell you before what a kind-hearted boy Edmund was? He sat down on the brass door-step and waited till three o'clock. Then he knocked and rang, and there was a rattling and puffing inside. The great door flew open, and Edmund had only just time to hide behind it when out came an immense yellow dragon and wriggled off down the

brass cave like a long, rattling worm—or perhaps more like a monstrous centipede.

Edmund crept slowly out, and saw the dragon stretching herself on the rocks in the sun, and he crept past the great creature and tore down the hill into the town and burst into school, crying out:—

“There’s a great dragon coming! Somebody ought to do something, or we shall all be destroyed.”

He was caned for untruthfulness without any delay. His master was never one for postponing a duty.

“But it’s true,” said Edmund; “you just see if it isn’t.”

He pointed out of the window, and everyone could see a vast yellow cloud rising up into the air above the mountain.

“It’s only a thunder-shower,” said the master, and caned Edmund more than ever. This master was not like some masters I know: he was very obstinate, and would not believe his own eyes if they told him anything different to what he had been saying

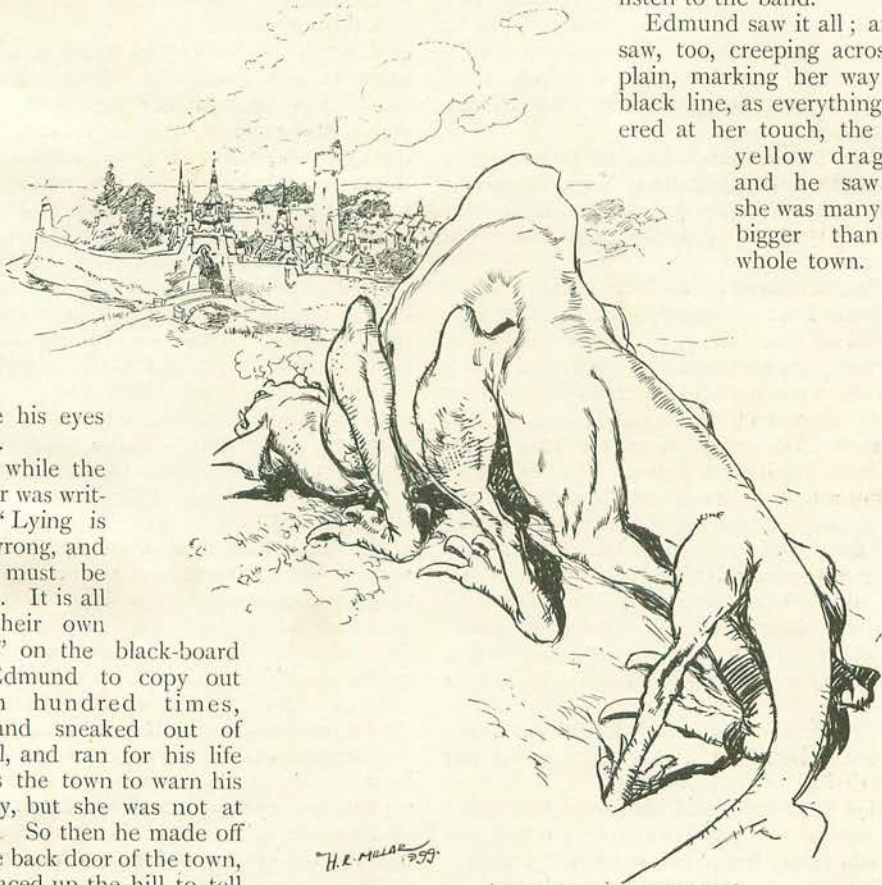
the cockatrice, and ask for its help. It never occurred to him that the cockatrice might not believe him. You see, he had heard so many wonderful tales from it and had believed them all—and when you believe all a person’s stories they ought to believe yours. This is only fair.

At the mouth of the cockatrice’s cave Edmund stopped, very much out of breath, to look back at the town. As he ran he had felt his little legs tremble and shake, while the shadows of the great yellow cloud fell upon him. Now he stood once more between warm earth and blue sky, and looked down on the green plain, dotted with fruit trees and red-roofed farms and plots of gold corn. In the middle of that plain the grey town lay, with its strong walls, with the holes pierced for the archers, and its square towers with holes in for dropping melted lead on the heads of strangers, its bridges, and its steeples, the quiet river edged with willow and alder, and the pleasant green garden-place in the middle of the town, where people sat on holidays to smoke their pipes and listen to the band.

Edmund saw it all; and he saw, too, creeping across the plain, marking her way by a black line, as everything withered at her touch, the great yellow dragon—and he saw that she was many times bigger than the whole town.

before his eyes spoke.

So while the master was writing, “Lying is very wrong, and liars must be caned. It is all for their own good,” on the black-board for Edmund to copy out seven hundred times, Edmund sneaked out of school, and ran for his life across the town to warn his granny, but she was not at home. So then he made off by the back door of the town, and raced up the hill to tell



“CREEPING ACROSS THE PLAIN.”

"Oh, my poor, dear granny," said Edmund, for he had a feeling heart, as I ought to have told you before.

The yellow dragon crept nearer and nearer, licking her greedy lips with her long, red tongue, and Edmund knew that in the school his master was still teaching earnestly, and still not believing Edmund's tale the least little bit.

"He'll jolly well *have* to believe it soon, anyhow," said Edmund to himself—and though he was a very tender-hearted boy—I think it only fair to tell you that he was this—I am afraid he was not so sorry as he ought to have been to think of the way in which his master was going to learn how to believe what Edmund said. Then the dragon opened her jaws wider and wider and wider. Edmund shut his eyes close, for though his master *was* in the town, yet the amiable Edmund shrank from beholding the awful sight.

When he opened his eyes again there was no town—only a bare place where it had stood, and the dragon licking her lips and curling herself up to go to sleep, just as pussy does when she has quite finished with a mouse. Edmund gasped once or twice, and then ran into the cave to tell the cockatrice.

"Well," said the cockatrice, thoughtfully, when the tale had been told, "what then?"

"I don't think you quite understand," said Edmund, gently; "the dragon has swallowed up the town."

"Does it matter?" said the cockatrice.

"But I live there," said Edmund, blankly.

"Never mind," said the cockatrice, turning over in the pool of fire to warm its other side, which was chilly, because Edmund had, as usual, forgotten to close the cave door, "you can live here with me."

"I'm afraid I haven't made my meaning clear," said Edmund, patiently. "You see, my granny is in the town, and I can't bear to lose my granny like this."

"I don't know what a granny may be," said the cockatrice, who seemed to be growing weary of the subject; "but if it's a possession to which you attach any importance—"

"Of course it is," said Edmund, losing patience at last. "Oh—do help me. What can I do?"

"If I were you," said his friend, stretching itself out in the pool of flame so that the waves covered it up to the chin, "I should find the drakling and bring it here."

"But why?" said Edmund. He had got into the habit of asking why at school, and the master had always found it trying. As for the cockatrice, it was not going to stand that sort of thing for a moment.

"Oh, don't talk to me!" it said, splashing angrily in the flames. "I give you advice; take it or leave it—I sha'n't bother about you any more. If you bring the drakling here to me, I'll tell you what to do next. If not, not."

And the cockatrice drew the fire up close round it shoulders, tucked itself up in it, and went to sleep.

Now this was exactly the right way to manage Edmund, only no one had ever thought of trying to do it before.

He stood for a moment looking at the cockatrice; it looked at him out of the corner of its eye, and began to snore very loud, and Edmund understood, once and for all, that it wasn't going to put up with any nonsense. He respected the cockatrice very much from that moment, and set off at once to do exactly as he was told—for perhaps the first time in his life.

Though he had played truant so often, he knew one or two things that perhaps you don't know, though you have always been so good and gone to school regularly. For instance, he knew that a drakling is a dragon's baby, and he felt sure that what he had to do was to find the third of the three noises that people used to hear coming from the mountains. Of course, the clucking had been the cockatrice, and the big noise like a large gentleman asleep after dinner had been the big dragon. So the smaller rumbling must have been the drakling.

He plunged boldly into the caves, and searched and wandered and wandered and searched, and at last he came to a third door in the mountain, and on it was written, "The baby is asleep." Just before the door stood fifty pairs of copper shoes, and no one could have looked at them for a moment without seeing what sort of feet they were made for, for each shoe had five holes in it for the drakling's five claws. And there were fifty pairs, because the drakling took after his mother, and had a hundred feet—no more and no less. He was the kind called *Draco centipedis* in the learned books.

Edmund was a good deal frightened, but he remembered the grim expression of the cockatrice's eye, and the fixed determination of its snore still rang in his ears, in spite of the snoring of the drakling, which was, in itself, considerable. He screwed up his

courage, flung the door open, and called out:—

“Halloa, you drakling. Get out of bed this minute.”

The drakling stopped snoring and said, sleepily, “It ain’t time yet.”

“Your mother says you are to, anyhow; and look sharp about it, what’s more,” said Edmund, gaining courage from the fact that the drakling had not yet eaten him.

The drakling sighed, and Edmund could hear it getting out of bed. The next moment it began to come out of its room and to put on its shoes. It was not nearly so big as its mother; only about the size of a Baptist chapel.

“Hurry up,” said Edmund, as it fumbled clumsily with the seventeenth shoe.

“Mother said I was never to go out without my shoes,” said the drakling; so Edmund had to help it to put them on. It took some time, and was not a comfortable occupation.

At last the drakling said it was ready, and Edmund, who had forgotten to be frightened, said, “Come on then,” and they went back to the cockatrice.

The cave was rather narrow for the drakling, but it made itself thin, as you may see a fat worm do when it wants to get through a narrow crack in a piece of hard earth.

“Here it is,” said Edmund, and the cockatrice woke up at once and asked the drakling very politely to sit down and wait. “Your mother will be here presently,” said the cockatrice, stirring up its fire.

The drakling sat down and waited, but it watched the fire with hungry eyes.

“I beg your pardon,” it said at last, “but I am always accustomed to have a little basin of fire directly I get up, and I feel rather faint. Might I?”

It reached out a claw towards the cockatrice’s basin.

“Certainly not,” said the cockatrice, sharply; “where were you brought up? Did they never teach you that ‘we must not ask for all we see’? Eh?”

“I beg your pardon,” said the drakling, humbly; “but I am really very hungry.”

The cockatrice beckoned Edmund

to the side of the basin, and whispered in his ear so long and so earnestly that one side of the dear boy’s hair was quite burnt off. And he never once interrupted the cockatrice to ask why. But when the whispering was over, Edmund—whose heart, as I may have mentioned, was very tender—said to the drakling:—

“If you are really hungry, poor thing, I can show you where there is plenty of fire.” And off he went through the caves, and the drakling followed.

When Edmund came to the proper place he stopped.

There was a round iron thing in the floor, like the ones the men shoot the coals down into your cellar, only much larger. Edmund heaved it up by a hook that stuck out at one side, and a rush of hot air came up that nearly choked him. But the drakling came close, and looked down with one eye, and sniffed, and said:—

“That smells good, eh?”

“Yes,” said Edmund; “well, that’s the fire in the middle of the earth. There’s



“THAT SMELLS GOOD, EH?”

plenty of it, all done to a turn. You'd better go down and begin your breakfast, hadn't you?"

So the drakling wriggled through the hole, and began to crawl faster and faster down the slanting shaft that leads to the fire in the middle of the earth. And Edmund, doing exactly as he had been told, for a wonder, caught the end of the drakling's tail, and ran the iron hook through it, so that the drakling was held fast. And it could not turn round and wriggle up again to look after its poor tail, because, as everyone knows, the way to the fires below is very easy to go down, but quite impossible to come back on. There is something about it in Latin, beginning: "*Facilis descensus.*"

So there was the drakling, fast by the silly tail of it, and there was Edmund very busy and important, and very pleased with himself, hurrying back to the cockatrice.

"Now," said he.

"Well, now," said it, "go to the mouth of the cave and laugh at the dragon so that she hears you."

Edmund very nearly said, "Why?" but he stopped in time, and instead, said:—

"She won't hear me——"

"Oh, very well," said the cockatrice, "no doubt you know best," and it began to tuck itself up again in the fire, so Edmund did as he was bid.

And when he began to laugh his laughter echoed in the mouth of the cave till it sounded like the laughter of a whole castleful of giants.

And the dragon, lying asleep in the sun, woke up and said, very crossly:—

"What are you laughing at?"

"At you," said Edmund, and went on laughing. The dragon bore it as long as she could, but, like everyone else, she couldn't stand being made fun of—so presently she dragged herself up the mountain very slowly, because she had just had a rather heavy meal, and stood outside, and said, "What are you laughing at?" in a voice that made Edmund feel as if he should never laugh again.

Then the good cockatrice called out:—

"At you! You've eaten your own drakling—swallowed it with the town. Your own little drakling! He, he, he! Ha, ha, ha!"

And Edmund found courage to cry "Ha, ha!" which sounded like tremendous laughter in the echo of the cave.

"Dear me," said the dragon. "I thought the town stuck in my throat rather. I must

take it out, and look through it more carefully." And with that he coughed—and choked—and there was the town on the hillside.

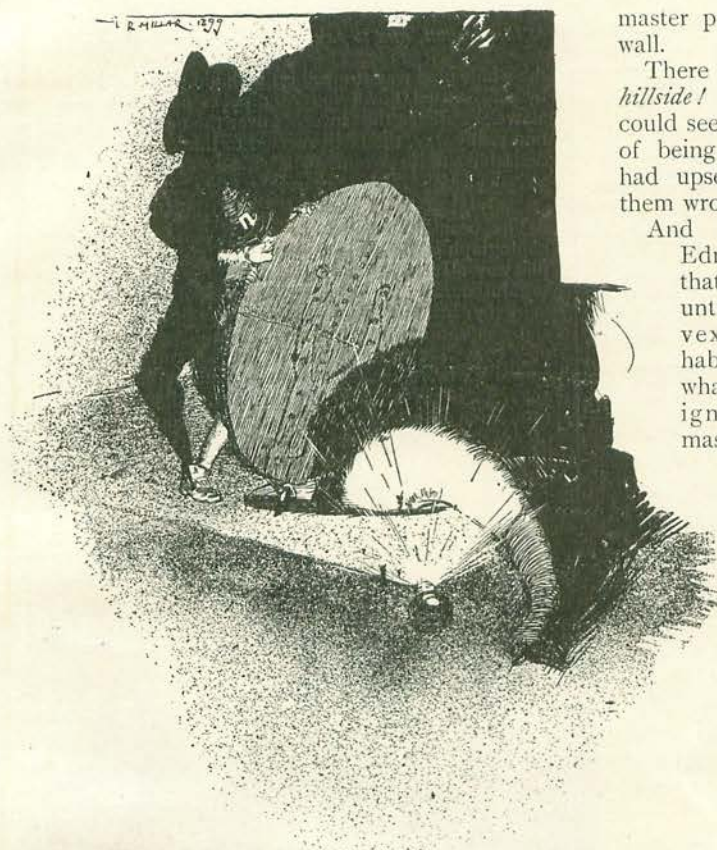
Edmund had run back to the cockatrice, and it had told him what to do. So before the dragon had time to look through the town again for her drakling, the voice of the drakling itself was heard howling miserably from inside the mountain, because Edmund was pinching its tail as hard as he could in the round iron door, like the one where the men pour the coals out of the sacks into the cellar. And the dragon heard the voice and said:—

"Why, whatever's the matter with baby? He's *not* here!" and made itself thin, and crept into the mountain to find its drakling. The cockatrice kept on laughing as loud as it could, and Edmund kept on pinching, and presently the great dragon—very long and narrow she had made herself—found her head where the round hole was with the iron lid. Her tail was a mile or two off—outside the mountain. When Edmund heard her coming he gave one last nip to the drakling's tail, and then heaved up the lid and stood behind it, so that the dragon could not see him. Then he loosed the drakling's tail from the hook, and the dragon peeped down the hole just in time to see her drakling's tail disappear down the smooth, slanting shaft with one last squeak of pain. Whatever may have been the poor dragon's other faults, she was an excellent mother. She plunged head first into the hole, and slid down the shaft after her baby. Edmund watched her head go—and then the rest of her. She was so long, now she had stretched herself thin, that it took all night. It was like watching a goods train go by in Germany. When the last joint of her tail had gone Edmund slammed down the iron door. He was a kind-hearted boy, as you have guessed, and he was glad to think that dragon and drakling would now have plenty to eat of their favourite food, for ever and ever. He thanked the cockatrice for its kindness, and got home just in time to have breakfast and get to school by nine. Of course, he could not have done this if the town had been in its old place by the river in the middle of the plain, but it had taken root on the hillside just where the dragon left it.

"Well," said the master, "where were you yesterday?"

Edmund explained, and the master at once caned him for not speaking the truth.

"But it *is* true," said Edmund. "Why,



"SHE SLID DOWN THE SHAFT AFTER HER BABY."

the whole town was swallowed by the dragon. You know it was——"

"Nonsense," said the master; "there was a thunderstorm and an earthquake, that's all."

And he caned Edmund more than ever.

"But," said Edmund, who always would argue, even in the least favourable circumstances, "how do you account for the town being on the hillside now, instead of by the river as it used to be?"

"It was *always* on the hillside," said the master. And all the class said the same, for they had more sense than to argue with a person who carried a cane.

"But look at the maps," said Edmund, who wasn't going to be beaten in argument, whatever he might be in the flesh. The

master pointed to the map on the wall.

There was the town, *on the hillside!* And nobody but Edmund could see that of course the shock of being swallowed by the dragon had upset all the maps and put them wrong.

And then the master caned Edmund again, explaining that this time it was not for untruthfulness, but for his vexatious argumentative habits. This will show you what a prejudiced and ignorant man Edmund's master was — how different from the revered Head of the nice school where your good parents are kind enough to send you.

Next day Edmund thought he would prove his tale by showing people the cockatrice, and he actually persuaded some people to go into the cave with him; but the cockatrice had bolted itself in, and would not open the door—so Edmund got nothing by that except a scolding for

taking people on a wild-goose chase.

"A wild goose," said they, "is nothing like a cockatrice."

And poor Edmund could not say a word, though he knew how wrong they were. The only person who believed him was his granny. But then she was very old and very kind, and had always said he was the best of boys.

Only one good thing came of all this long story. Edmund has never been quite the same boy since. He does not argue quite so much, and he agreed to be apprenticed to a locksmith, so that he might some day be able to pick the lock of the cockatrice's front door—and learn some more of the things that other people don't know.

But he is quite an old man now, and he hasn't got that door open yet!