

THE NOBLENESS OF OSWALD.

By E. NESBIT.*

Illustrated by FRANCES EWAN.



HE part about his nobleness only comes at the end, but you would not understand it unless you knew how it began. It began, like nearly everything else

just then, with treasure-seeking. We had several ideas about that time, but having so little chink always stood in the way. This was the case with H. O.'s idea of setting up a cocoanut shy on this side of the Heath, where there are none generally. We had no sticks or wooden balls, and the greengrocer said he could not book so many as twelve dozen cocoanuts without Mr. Bastable's written order. And when Alice dressed up Pincher in some of the dolls' clothes, and we made up our minds to take him round with an organ as soon as we had taught him to dance, we were stopped at once by Dicky's remembering how he had heard that an organ cost seven hundred pounds. Of course this was the big church kind, but even the ones on three legs cannot be got for one and sevenpence, which was all we had when we first thought of it. So we gave that up, too.

It was a wet day, I remember, and mutton hash for dinner, very tough, with pale gravy with lumps in it. I think the others would have left a good deal on the sides of their plates, although they know better, only Oswald said it was a savoury stew made of red deer that Edward shot. So then we were the children of the New Forest, and the mutton tasted much better. No one in the New Forest minds venison being tough and the gravy pale.

Then we had some liquorice water to wind up with, and then Dicky said, "This reminds me."

So we said, "What of?"

Dicky answered us at once, though his mouth was full of bread with liquorice stuck in

it to look like cake. You should not speak with your mouth full, even to your own relations, and you should not wipe your mouth on the back of your hand, but on your handkerchief if you have one. Dicky did not do this. He said—

"Everyone in the world wants money. Some people get it. The people who get it are the people who see things. I have seen one thing."

Oswald said, "Out with it."

"I see that glass bottles only cost a penny. H. O., if you dare to snigger I'll send you round selling old bottles, and you shan't have any sweets except out of the money you get for them. And the same with you, Noel."

"Noel wasn't sniggering," said Alice in a hurry; "it is only his taking so much interest in what you were saying makes him look like that. Be quiet, H. O. Do go on, Dicky, dear."

So Dicky went on.

"There must be hundreds of millions of bottles of medicine sold every year, because all the different medicines say, 'Thousands of cures daily'; and if you only take that as two thousand, which it must be at least, it mounts up. And the people who sell them must make a great deal of money by them, because they are nearly always two and ninepence the bottle, and three and sixpence for one nearly-double the size. Now the bottles, as I was saying, don't cost anything like that."

"It's the medicine that costs the money," said Dora; "look how expensive jujubes are at the chemist's."

"That's only because they're nice," Dicky explained; "nasty things are not dear. Look what a lot of brimstone you get for a penny, and the same with alum. We would not put the nice kinds of chemists' things in our medicines."

Then he went on to tell us that when we had invented our medicine we would write and tell the editor about it, and he would put it in the paper, and then people would send their two and ninepence, and three and six for the bottle nearly double the size, and then when the medicine had cured them they would write to the paper and their letters would be printed, saying how they had been sufferers for years and never thought to get

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“Dicky went right into the water with his boots on.”

about again, but thanks to the blessing of our ointment —”

Dora interrupted and said, “Not ointment, it’s so messy”; and Alice thought so, too. And Dicky said he did not mean it, he was quite decided to let it be in bottles. So now it was all settled, and we only had to invent the medicine. You might think that was easy, because of the number of them you see in the paper; but it is much harder than you think. First, we had to decide what sort of illness we should like to cure, and a “heated discussion ensued,” like in Parliament.

Dora wanted it to be something to make the complexion of dazzling fairness; but we remembered what her face was like when she

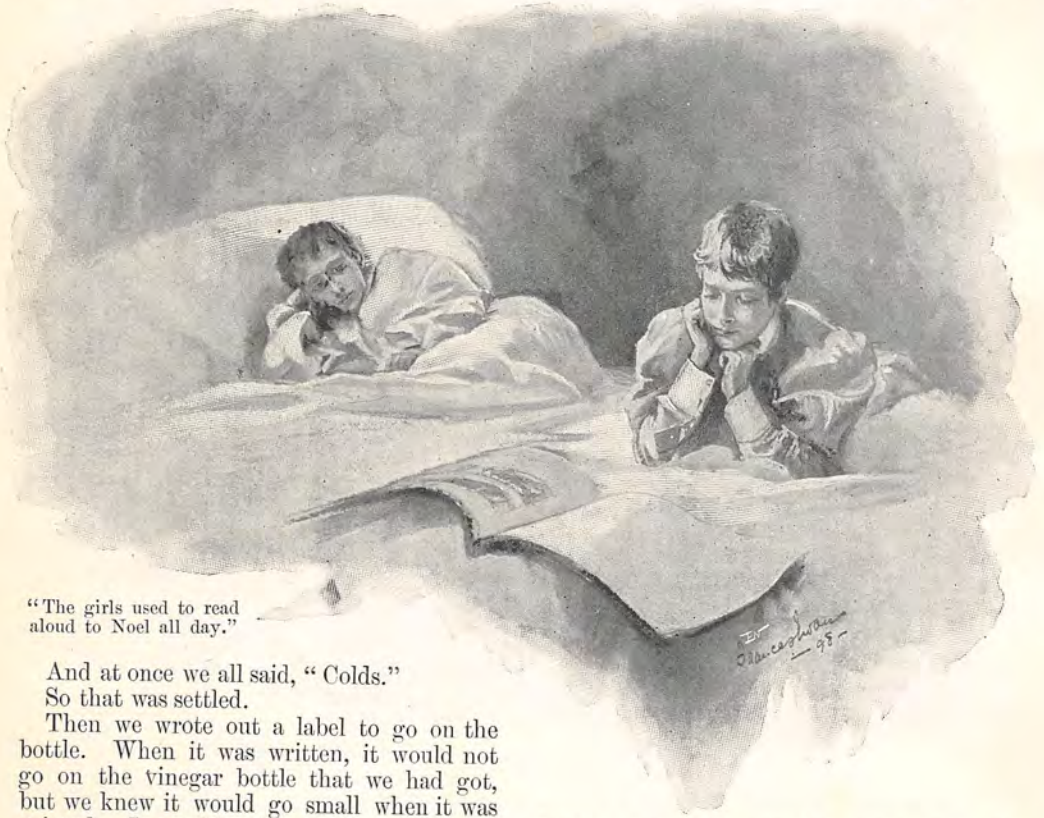
washed it with coal tar soap, and she agreed that perhaps it was better not. Noel wanted to make the medicine first and then find out what it cured; but Dicky thought not, because there are so many more medicines than there are things the matter with you, so it would be easier to choose the disease first.

Oswald would have liked wounds. I still think it was a good idea, and if we had done that, what followed would not have been so; but Dicky said, “Who has wounds, anyway—especially now there aren’t any wars? We shouldn’t sell a bottle a day!” So Oswald gave in, because he knows what manners are, and it was Dicky’s idea. H.O. wanted a cure

for the uncomfortable feeling that they give you powders for, but we explained to him that grown-up people do not have this feeling, however much they eat, and he agreed. Dicky said he didn't care a straw what the loathsome disease was, as long as we settled on something; and then Alice said, "It ought to be something very common, and only one thing. Not the pains in the back and all the hundreds of things the people have in somebody's syrup. What's the commonest thing of all?"

to catch a cold and try what cured it. We all wanted to be the one, but it was Dicky's idea, and he said he wasn't going to be done out of it, so we let him. It was only fair. He left off his vest that very day, and next morning he stood in a draught in his night-gown for quite a long while. And we damped his dayshirt with the nail-brush before he put it on. But all in vain. They always tell you that those things will give you cold, but we found that it was not so.

Next we all went over to the Park, and



"The girls used to read aloud to Noel all day."

And at once we all said, "Colds."

So that was settled.

Then we wrote out a label to go on the bottle. When it was written, it would not go on the vinegar bottle that we had got, but we knew it would go small when it was printed. It was like this:—

BASTABLE'S
CERTAIN CURE FOR COLDS, COUGHS, ASTHMA, AND
SHORTNESS OF BREATH, AND ALL INFECTIONS
OF THE CHEST.

One dose gives immediate relief.

It will cure your cold in one bottle, especially
the large size at three and six.

Order at once of the Makers to prevent
disappointment.

Makers:—D. O. R. A. N. and H. O. BASTABLE,
150, Lewisham Road, S.E.

A halfpenny for all bottles returned.

* * * * *

Of course the next thing was for one of us

Dicky went right into the water with his boots on, and stood there as long as he could bear it, for it was rather cold, and we stood and cheered him on. He walked home in his wet clothes, which they say is a sure thing; but it was no go, though his boots were quite spoiled. And three days after Noel began to cough and sneeze.

So then Dicky said it was not fair.

"I can't help it," Noel said; "you should have caught the cold yourself, then it wouldn't have come to me."

And Alice said she had known all along that Noel oughtn't to have stood about on the bank cheering in the cold.

Noel had to go to bed, and then we began to make the medicines. We were sorry he was out of it, but he had the fun of taking the things.

We made a great many medicines. Alice made herb tea. She got sage and thyme and savory and marjoram, and boiled them all up together with salt and water; but she would put parsley in, too. Oswald is sure parsley is not a herb. It is only put on the cold meat, and you are not supposed to eat it. It kills parrots to eat parsley, I believe. I expect it was the parsley that disagreed so with Noel. The medicine did not seem to do the cough any good.

Oswald got a pennyworth of alum, because it is so cheap, and some turpentine, which everybody knows is good for colds, and a little sugar and an aniseed ball. These were mixed in a bottle with water, but Eliza threw it away, and I hadn't any money to get more things with.

Dora made him some gruel, and he said it did his chest good; but of course that was no use, because you cannot put gruel in bottles and say it is medicine. It would not be honest, and, besides, nobody would believe you.

Dick mixed up lemon juice and sugar and a little of the juice of the red flannel that Noel's throat was done up in. It comes out beautifully in hot water. Noel took this and he liked it.

Noel's own idea was liquorice, and we let him have it; but it is too plain and black to sell in bottles at the proper price. He liked H. O.'s medicine the best, which was silly of him, because it was only peppermints melted in hot water and a little cobalt to make it look blue. It's all right, because H. O.'s paint box is the French kind, with "*Couleurs non vénéneuses*" on it. This means you may suck your brushes if you want to, or even the paints, if you are a very little boy.

It was rather jolly while Noel had that cold. He had a fire in his bedroom, which opens out of Dicky's and Oswald's, and the girls used to read aloud to Noel all day; they will not read aloud to you when you are well. Father was away at Liverpool on business and Albert's uncle was at Hastings. We were rather glad of this, because we wished to give all the medicines a fair trial, and grown-ups are much too fond of interfering. As if we should have given him anything poisonous!

His cold went on—it was worst in his head, but it was not one of the kind when he has to have poultices and cannot sit up in bed.

But when it had been in his head a week, Oswald happened to tumble over Alice on the stairs. When we got up she was crying.

"Don't cry, silly," Oswald said; "you know I didn't hurt you."

He was very sorry if he had hurt her; but you ought not to sit on the stairs in the dark and let other people tumble over you. You ought to remember how beastly it is for them if they do hurt you.

"Oh, it's not that, Oswald," Alice said. "Don't be a pig. I am so miserable. Do be kind to me."

So Oswald thumped her on the back and told her to shut up. He is never unkind to those in distress.

"It's about Noel," she said. "I'm sure he's very ill; and playing about with medicines is all very well, but I know he's ill—and Eliza won't send for the doctor; she says it's only a cold. And I know the doctor's bills are awful. I heard father telling Aunt Emily so in the summer. But he is ill, and perhaps he'll die, or something."

Then she began to cry again. Oswald thumped her again, because he knows how a good brother ought to behave, and said, "Cheer up." If we had been in a book, Oswald would have embraced his little sister tenderly and mingled his tears with hers.

Then Oswald said, "Why not write to father?"

And she cried more and more, and said, "I've lost the paper with the address. H. O. had it to draw on the back of, and I can't find it now. I've looked everywhere. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. No, I won't. But I'm going out. Don't tell the others; and, I say, Oswald, do pretend I'm in, if Eliza asks. Promise."

"Tell me what you're going to do," Oswald said. But she said, "No," and there was a good reason why not. So he said he wouldn't promise, if it came to that. Of course, he meant to, all right, but it did seem mean of her not to tell her kind brother. So Alice went out by the side door while Eliza was setting tea, and she was a long time gone. She was not in to tea. When Eliza asked Oswald where Alice was, he said perhaps she was tidying her corner drawer. Girls often do this and it takes a long time. Noel coughed a good bit after tea and asked for Alice. Oswald told him she was doing something, and it was a secret. Oswald did not tell any lies even to save his sister. When Alice came back, she was very tired, but she whispered to Oswald that it was all right. When it was rather late, Eliza said she was

going out to post a letter. This always takes her an hour, because she will go to the post-office across the Heath, instead of the pillar box. A boy once dropped fuseses in our pillar box and burnt the letters. It was not any of us. Eliza told us about it. And when there was a knock at the door, we thought it was Eliza come back and that she had forgotten the back door key. We made H. O. go down to open the door, because it is his place to run about. His legs are younger than ours. And we heard boots on the stairs, besides H. O.'s—and we listened spell-bound till the door opened, and it was Albert's uncle, and he blinked as he came in, because we had made up such a jolly good fire.

"I am glad you've come," Oswald said; "Alice began to think Noel——"

Alice stopped him and her face was very red; her nose was shiny, too, with having cried so much before tea.

She said, "I only said I thought he ought to have the doctor. Don't you think he ought?" She got hold of Albert's uncle and held on to him.

"Let's have a look at you, young man," said Albert's uncle, and he sat down on the edge of the bed. It is a rather shaky bed. The bar that keeps it steady underneath got broken when we were playing burglars last winter. It was our crowbar. He began to feel Noel's pulse, and went on talking.

"It was revealed to the great Arab physician as he made merry in his tents on the pathless plains of Hastings that the Presence had a cold in its head. So he immediately seated himself on the magic carpet and bade it bear him hither, only pausing in the flight to buy a few sweet-meats in the Bazaar."

He pulled out a jolly lot of chocolates, and he had brought some butterscotch and grapes for Noel. When we had said, "Thank you," he went on—

"The physician's are the words of wisdom; it is high time this kid was asleep. I have spoken. Ye have my leave to depart."

So we bunked, and Dora and Albert's uncle made Noel comfortable for the night. Then they came to the nursery, which we had gone down to, and he sat down in the Guy Fawkes chair and said, "Now, then."

Alice said, "You may tell them what I did. I daresay they'll all be in a wax, but I don't care."

"I think you were very wise," said Albert's uncle, pulling her close to him to sit on his knee. "I am very glad you telegraphed."

So then Oswald understood what Alice's secret was. She had gone out and sent a telegram to Albert's uncle at Hastings. Afterwards she told me what she had put in the telegram. It was, "Come home. We have given Noel a cold, and I think we are killing him." With the address it came to tenpence halfpenny.

Then Albert's uncle began to ask questions, and it all came out, how Dicky had tried to catch the cold, and about the medicines and all. Albert's uncle looked very serious.

"Look here," he said, "you're old enough not to play the fool like this. Health is the best thing you've got. You ought to know better than to play about with it in this way. You might have killed your little brother."

"We gave him medicine," said Dicky, and then we had to tell him exactly what medicines.

"Well," he said, "you've had a lucky escape; but poor Noel——"

"Oh, do you think he's going to die?" Alice asked that, and she was crying again, and so were some of the others.

"No, no," said Albert's uncle; "but look here! Do you see how silly you've been? And I thought you promised your father——" and then he gave us a long talking-to. He can make you feel most awfully small. At last he stopped, and we said we were very sorry, and he said—

"You know I promised to take you all to the pantomime."

So we said, "Yes," and we knew but too well that now he wasn't going to. Then he went on—

"Well, I will take you if you like, or I will take Noel to the sea for a week to cure his cold. Which is it to be?"

Of course he knew we should say, "Take Noel," and we did, but Dicky told us afterwards he thought it was hard on H. O.

Albert's uncle stayed till Eliza came in, and then he said, "Good night," in a way that showed us all was forgiven and forgotten.

So we went to bed. It must have been the middle of the night when Oswald woke up suddenly, and there was Alice, with her teeth chattering, shaking him to wake him.

"Oh, Oswald," she said, "I am so unhappy. Suppose I should die in the night."

Oswald told her to go to bed and not gas. But she said, "I must tell you; I wish I'd told Albert's uncle. I'm a thief, and if I die to-night, I know where thieves go to."

So Oswald saw it was no good, and he sat

up in bed, though he was very sleepy, and said, "Go ahead."

So Alice stood shivering in her nightgown and said—

"I hadn't enough money for the telegram. So I took the bad sixpence out of the exchequer. And I paid for it with that and

sixpence. Alice was very unhappy, but not so much as in the night; you can be very miserable indeed in the night if you have done anything wrong and you happen to be awake. I know this for a fact.

None of us had any money, except Eliza, and she wouldn't give us any unless we said



"He sold those flowers in penny bunches."

the fivepence I had, and I wouldn't tell you, because if you'd stopped me doing it I couldn't have borne it, and if you'd helped me, you'd have been a thief, too. And it's quite enough to have one of us a criminal robber. Oh, what shall I do?"

Oswald thought a minute and then he said—

"You'd better have told me. But I think it will be all right if we pay it back. Go to bed. Cross with you? No, stupid! Only, another time, you'd better not keep secrets." So she kissed Oswald, and he let her, and she went back to bed.

The next day Albert's uncle took Noel away, before Oswald had time to persuade Alice that we ought to tell him about the

what for, and of course we could not do that, because of the honour of the family. And Oswald was anxious to get the sixpence to give to the telegraph people, because he feared that the badness of that sixpence might have been found out, and that the police might come up for Alice at any moment. I don't think I ever had such an

unhappy day. Of course we could have written to Albert's uncle, but it would have taken a long time, and every delay added to Alice's danger. We thought and thought, but we couldn't think of any way to get that sixpence. It seems a small sum, but Alice's liberty depended on it, and though Oswald was very anxious to be noble, he could not think of any good way. It was quite late in the afternoon when Oswald met his friend Mrs. Leslie on the Parade. She had a brown fur coat and a lot of yellow flowers in her hands. She stopped to speak to me, and asked how the poet was. I told her he had a cold, and I wondered if she would lend me the sixpence if I asked her, but I could not make up my mind how to begin to say it. She talked to Oswald for a bit, and then she suddenly got into a cab, and said, "I'd no idea it was so late," and told the man where to go. And just as she started she shoved the yellow flowers through the window and said, "For the sick poet, with my love," and was driven off.

Gentle reader, I will not conceal from you what Oswald did. He knew all about not disgracing the family, and he did not like doing what I am going to say; they were really Noel's flowers, only he could not have them sent to Hastings, and Oswald knew he would say, "Yes," if we asked him. Oswald sacrificed his family pride because of his little sister's danger. I do not say he was a noble boy—that is what others said of the way he behaved. I just tell you what he did, and you can decide for yourself about the nobleness.

He put on his oldest clothes. They

are much older than any you would think he had if you saw him when he is tidy; and he took those yellow chrysanthemums, and he walked with them to Greenwich Station and waited for the trains bringing people from London. He sold those flowers in penny bunches and he got tenpence by it.

Then he went to the telegraph office and said to the lady there, "A little girl gave you a bad sixpence yesterday. Here are six good pennies."

The lady said she had not noticed it, and never mind, but Oswald knew that "honesty is the best policy," and he would not deign to take back the pennies. So she said she would put them in the plate on Sunday. She is a nice lady. I like the way she does her hair.

Then Oswald went home to Alice and told her, and she hugged him and said he was a dear, good, kind boy, and he said, "Oh, it's all right."

We bought peppermint bullseyes with the fourpence we had over, and the others wanted to know where we got the money, but we would not tell. Only afterwards, when Noel came home, we told him, because they were his flowers, and he said I was quite right. He made some poetry about it. I only remember one bit of it—

The noble youth of high degree
Consents to play a menial part,
All for his sister Alice's sake,
Who was so dear to his faithful heart.

But Oswald himself has never bragged about what he did.

* * * * *

We got no treasure out of this—unless you count the peppermint bullseyes.

