

Archibald the Unpleasant

By Edith Nesbit

THE house of Bastable was once in poor, but honest, circs. That was when it lived in a semi-detached house in the Lewisham Road, and looked for treasure. There were six scions of the house who looked for it--in fact there were seven, if you count Father. I am sure he looked right enough, but he did not do it the right way. And we did. And so we found a treasure of a great-uncle, and we and Father went to live with him in a very affluent mansion on Blackheath--with gardens and vineries and pineries and everything jolly you can think of. And then, when we were no longer so beastly short of pocket-money, we tried to be good, and sometimes it came out right, and sometimes it didn't. Something like sums.

And then it was the Christmas holidays--and we had a bazaar and raffled the most beautiful goat you ever saw, and we gave the money to the poor and needy.

And then we felt it was time to do something new, because we were as rich as our worthy relative, the uncle, and our Father--now also wealthy, at least, compared to what he used to be--thought right for us; and we were as good as we could be without being good for nothing and muffs, which I hope no one calling itself a Bastable will ever stoop to.

So then Oswald, so often the leader in hazardous enterprises, thought long and deeply in his interior self, and he saw that something must be done, because, though there was still the goat left over, unclaimed by its fortunate winner at the Bazaar, somehow no really fine idea seemed to come out of it, and nothing else was happening. Dora was getting a bit domineering, and Alice was too much taken up with trying to learn to knit. Dicky was bored and so was Oswald, and Noel was writing far more poetry than could be healthy for any poet, however young, and H.O. was simply a nuisance. His boots are always much louder when he is not amused, and that gets the rest of us into rows, because there are hardly any grown-up persons who can tell the difference between his boots and mine. Oswald decided to call a council (because even if nothing comes of a council it always means getting Alice to drop knitting, and making Noel chuck the poetical influences, that are no use and only make him silly),

and he went into the room that is our room. It is called the common-room, like in colleges, and it is very different from the room that was ours when we were poor, but honest. It is a jolly room, with a big table and a big couch, that is most useful for games, and a thick carpet because of H.O.'s boots.

Alice was knitting by the fire; it was for Father, but I am sure his feet are not at all that shape. He has a high and beautifully formed instep like Oswald's. Noel was writing poetry, of course.

"My dear sister sits
And knits,
I hope to goodness the stocking fits,"

was as far as he had got.

"It ought to be 'my dearest sister' to sound right," he said, "but that wouldn't be kind to Dora."

"Thank you," said Dora, "You needn't trouble to be kind to me, if you don't want to."

"Shut up, Dora!" said Dicky, "Noel didn't mean anything."

"He never does," said H.O., "nor yet his poetry doesn't neither."

"_And_ his poetry doesn't _either_," Dora corrected; "and besides, you oughtn't to say that at all, it's unkind----"

"You're too jolly down on the kid," said Dicky.

And Alice said, "Eighty-seven, eighty-eight--oh, do be quiet half a sec!-- eighty-nine, ninety--now I shall have to count the stitches all over again!"

Oswald alone was silent and not cross. I tell you this to show that the sort of worryingness was among us that is catching, like measles. Kipling calls it the cameelious hump, and, as usual, that great and good writer is quite correct.

So Oswald said, "Look here, let's have a council. It says in Kipling's book when you've got the hump go and dig till you gently perspire. Well, we can't do that, because it's simply pouring, but----"

The others all interrupted him, and said they hadn't got the hump and they didn't know what he meant. So he shrugged his shoulders patiently (it is not his fault that the others hate him to shrug his shoulders patiently) and he said no more.

Then Dora said, "Oh, don't be so disagreeable, Oswald, for goodness' sake!"

I assure you she did, though he had done simply nothing.

Matters were in this cryptical state when the door opened and Father came in.

"Hullo, kiddies!" he remarked kindly. "Beastly wet day, isn't it? And dark too. I can't think why the rain can't always come in term time. It seems a poor arrangement to have it in 'vac.,' doesn't it?"

I think every one instantly felt better. I know one of us did, and it was me.

Father lit the gas, and sat down in the armchair and took Alice on his knee.

"First," he said, "here is a box of chocs." It was an extra big and beautiful one and Fuller's best. "And besides the chocs., a piece of good news! You're all asked to a party at Mrs. Leslie's. She's going to have all sorts of games and things, with prizes for every one, and a conjurer and a magic lantern."

The shadow of doom seemed to be lifted from each young brow, and we felt how much fonder we were of each other than any one would have thought. At least Oswald felt this, and Dicky told me afterwards he felt Dora wasn't such a bad sort after all.

"It's on Tuesday week," said Father. "I see the prospect pleases. Number three is that your cousin Archibald has come here to stay a week or two.

His little sister has taken it into her head to have whooping-cough. And he's downstairs now, talking to your uncle."

We asked what the young stranger was like, but Father did not know, because he and cousin Archibald's father had not seen much of each other for some years. Father said this, but we knew it was because Archibald's father hadn't bothered to see ours when he was poor and honest, but now he was the wealthy sharer of the red-brick, beautiful Blackheath house it was different. This made us not like Uncle Archibald very much, but we were too just to blame it on to young Archibald. All the same we should have liked him better if his father's previous career had not been of such a worldly and stuck-up sort. Besides, I do think Archibald is quite the most rotten sort of name. We should have called him Archie, of course, if he had been at all decent.

"You'll be as jolly to him as you can, I know," Father said; "he's a bit older than you, Oswald. He's not a bad-looking chap."

Then Father went down and Oswald had to go with him, and there was Archibald sitting upright in a chair and talking to our Indian uncle as if he was some beastly grown-up. Our cousin proved to be dark and rather tall, and though he was only fourteen he was always stroking his lip to see if his moustache had begun to come.

Father introduced us to each other, and we said, "How do you do?" and looked at each other, and neither of us could think of anything else to say. At least Oswald couldn't. So then we went upstairs. Archibald shook hands with the others, and every one was silent except Dora, and she only whispered to H.O. to keep his feet still.

You cannot keep for ever in melancholy silence however few things you have to say, and presently some one said it was a wet day, and this well-chosen remark made us able to begin to talk.

I do not wish to be injurious to anybody, especially one who was a Bastable, by birth at least if not according to the nobler attributes, but I must say that Oswald never did dislike a boy so much as he did that young Archibald. He was as cocky as though he'd done something to speak of--been captain of his eleven, or passed a beastly exam., or something--but we never could find that he had done anything. He was always bragging about the things he had at home, and the things he was

allowed to do, and all the things he knew all about, but he was a most untruthful chap. He laughed at Noel's being a poet--a thing we never do, because it makes him cry and crying makes him ill--and of course Oswald and Dicky could not punch his head in their own house because of the laws of hospitableness, and Alice stopped it at last by saying she didn't care if it was being a sneak, she would tell Father the very next time. I don't think she would have, because we made a rule, when we were poor and honest, not to bother Father if we could possibly help it. And we keep it up still. But Archibald didn't know that. Then this cousin, who is, I fear, the black sheep of the Bastables, and hardly worthy to be called one, used to pull the girls' hair, and pinch them at prayers when they could not call out or do anything to him back.

And he was awfully rude to the servants, ordering them about, and playing tricks on them, not amusing tricks like other Bastables might have done--such as booby-traps and mice under dish-covers, which seldom leaves any lasting ill-feeling--but things no decent boy would do--like hiding their letters and not giving them to them for days, and then it was too late to meet the young man the letter was from, and squirting ink on their aprons when they were just going to open the door, and once he put a fish-hook in the cook's pocket when she wasn't looking. He did not do anything to Oswald at that time. I suppose he was afraid. I just tell you this to show you that Oswald didn't cotton to him for no selfish reason, but because Oswald has been taught to feel for others.

He called us all kids--and he was that kind of boy we knew at once it was no good trying to start anything new and jolly--so Oswald, ever discreet and wary, shut up entirely about the council. We played games with him sometimes, not really good ones, but Snap and Beggar my Neighbour, and even then he used to cheat. I hate to say it of one of our blood, but I can hardly believe he was. I think he must have been changed at nurse like the heirs to monarchies and dukeries.

Well, the days passed slowly. There was Mrs. Leslie's party shining starrishly in the mysteries of the future. Also we had another thing to look forward to, and that was when Archibald would have to go back to school. But we could not enjoy that foreshadowing so much because of us having to go back at nearly the same time.

Oswald always tries to be just, no matter how far from easy, and so I will say that I am not quite sure that it was Archibald that set the pipes

leaking, but we were all up in the loft the day before, snatching a golden opportunity to play a brief game of robbers in a cave, while Archibald had gone down to the village to get his silly hair cut. Another thing about him that was not natural was his being always looking in the glass and wanting to talk about whether people were handsome or not; and he made as much fuss about his ties as though he had been a girl. So when he was gone Alice said--

"Hist! The golden moment. Let's be robbers in the loft, and when he comes back he won't know where we are."

"He'll hear us," said Noel, biting his pencil.

"No, he won't. We'll be the Whispering Band of Weird Bandits. Come on, Noel; you can finish the poetry up here."

"It's about him," said Noel gloomily, "when he's gone back to----" (Oswald will not give the name of Archibald's school for the sake of the other boys there, as they might not like everybody who reads this to know about there being a chap like him in their midst.) "I shall do it up in an envelope and put a stamp on it and post it to him, and----"

"Haste!" cried Alice. "Bard of the Bandits, haste while yet there's time."

So we tore upstairs and put on our slippers and socks over them, and we got the high-backed chair out of the girls' bedroom, and the others held it steady while Oswald agilitively mounted upon its high back and opened the trap-door and got up into the place between the roof and the ceiling (the boys in "Stalky & Co." found this out by accident, and they were surprised and pleased, but we have known all about it ever since we can remember).

Then the others put the chair back, and Oswald let down the rope ladder that we made out of bamboo and clothes-line after uncle told us the story of the missionary lady who was shut up in a rajah's palace, and some one shot an arrow to her with a string tied to it, and it might have killed her I should have thought, but it didn't, and she hauled in the string and there was a rope and a bamboo ladder, and so she escaped, and we made one like it on purpose for the loft. No one had ever told us not to make ladders.

The others came up by the rope-ladder (it was partly bamboo, but rope-ladder does for short) and we shut the trap-door down. It is jolly up there. There are two big cisterns, and one little window in a gable that gives you just enough light. The floor is plaster with wooden things going across, beams and joists they are called. There are some planks laid on top of these here and there. Of course if you walk on the plaster you will go through with your foot into the room below.

We had a very jolly game, in whispers, and Noel sat by the little window, and was quite happy, being the bandit bard. The cisterns are rocks you hide behind. But the jolliest part was when we heard Archibald shouting out, "Hullo! kids, where are you?" and we all stayed as still as mice, and heard Jane say she thought we must have gone out. Jane was the one that hadn't got her letter, as well as having her apron inked all over.

Then we heard Archibald going all over the house looking for us. Father was at business and uncle was at his club. And we were there. And so Archibald was all alone. And we might have gone on for hours enjoying the spectacle of his confusion and perplexedness, but Noel happened to sneeze--the least thing gives him cold and he sneezes louder for his age than any one I know--just when Archibald was on the landing underneath. Then he stood there and said--

"I know where you are. Let me come up."

We cautiously did not reply. Then he said:

"All right. I'll go and get the step-ladder."

We did not wish this. We had not been told not to make rope-ladders, nor yet about not playing in the loft; but if he fetched the step-ladder Jane would know, and there are some secrets you like to keep to yourself.

So Oswald opened the trap-door and squinted down, and there was that Archibald with his beastly hair cut. Oswald said--

"We'll let you up if you promise not to tell you've been up here."

So he promised, and we let down the rope-ladder. And it will show you the kind of boy he was that the instant he had got up by it he began to find fault with the way it was made.

Then he wanted to play with the ball-cock. But Oswald knows it is better not to do this.

"I daresay you're forbidden," Archibald said, "little kids like you. But I know all about plumbing."

And Oswald could not prevent his fiddling with the pipes and the ball-cock a little. Then we went down. All chance of further banditry was at an end. Next day was Sunday. The leak was noticed then. It was slow, but steady, and the plumber was sent for on Monday morning.

Oswald does not know whether it was Archibald who made the leak, but he does know about what came after.

I think our displeasing cousin found that piece of poetry that Noel was beginning about him, and read it, because he is a sneak. Instead of having it out with Noel he sucked up to him and gave him a six-penny fountain-pen which Noel liked, although it is really no good for him to try to write poetry with anything but a pencil, because he always sucks whatever he writes with, and ink is poisonous, I believe.

Then in the afternoon he and Noel got quite thick, and went off together. And afterwards Noel seemed very peacocky about something, but he would not say what, and Archibald was grinning in a way Oswald would have liked to pound his head for.

Then, quite suddenly, the peaceable quietness of that happy Blackheath home was brought to a close by screams. Servants ran about with brooms and pails, and the water was coming through the ceiling of uncle's room like mad, and Noel turned white and looked at our unattractive cousin and said: "Send him away."

Alice put her arm round Noel and said: "Do go, Archibald."

But he wouldn't.

So then Noel said he wished he had never been born, and whatever would Father say.

"Why, what is it, Noel?" Alice asked that. "Just tell us, we'll all stand by you. What's he been doing?"

"You won't let him do anything to me if I tell?"

"Tell tale tit," said Archibald.

"He got me to go up into the loft and he said it was a secret, and would I promise not to tell, and I won't tell; only I've done it, and now the water's coming in."

"You've done it? You young ass, I was only kidding you!" said our detestable cousin. And he laughed.

"I don't understand," said Oswald. "What did you tell Noel?"

"He can't tell you because he promised--and I won't--unless you vow by the honour of the house you talk so much about that you'll never tell I had anything to do with it."

That will show you what he was. We had never mentioned the honour of the house except once quite at the beginning, before we knew how discapable he was of understanding anything, and how far we were from wanting to call him Archie.

We had to promise, for Noel was getting greener and more gurgly every minute, and at any moment Father or uncle might burst in foaming for an explanation, and none of us would have one except Noel, and him in this state of all-anyhow.

So Dicky said--

"We promise, you beast, you!" And we all said the same.

Then Archibald said, drawling his words and feeling for the moustache that wasn't there, and I hope he'll be quite old before he gets one--

"It's just what comes of trying to amuse silly little kids. I told the foolish little animal about people having arteries cut, and your having to cut the whole thing to stop the bleeding. And he said, 'Was that what the plumber

would do to the leaky pipe?' And how pleased your governor would be to find it mended. And then he went and did it."

"You told me to," said Noel, turning greener and greener.

"Go along with Alice," said Oswald. "We'll stand by you. And Noel, old chap, you must keep your word and not sneak about that sneaking hound."

Alice took him away, and we were left with the horrid Archibald.

"Now," said Oswald, "I won't break my word, no more will the rest of us. But we won't speak another word to you as long as we live."

"Oh, Oswald," said Dora, "what about the sun going down?"

"Let it jolly well go," said Dicky in furiousness. "Oswald didn't say we'd go on being angry for ever, but I'm with Oswald all the way. I won't talk to cads--no, not even before grown-ups. They can jolly well think what they like."

After this no one spoke to Archibald.

Oswald rushed for a plumber, and such was his fiery eloquence he really caught one and brought him home. Then he and Dicky waited for Father when he came in, and they got him into the study, and Oswald said what they had all agreed on. It was this:

"Father, we are all most awfully sorry, but one of us has cut the pipe in the loft, and if you make us tell you any more it will not be honourable, and we are very sorry. Please, please don't ask who it was did it."

Father bit his moustache and looked worried, and Dicky went on--

"Oswald has got a plumber and he is doing it now."

Then Father said, "How on earth did you get into the loft?"

And then of course the treasured secret of the rope-ladder had to be revealed. We had never been told not to make rope-ladders and go into the loft, but we did not try to soften the anger of our Father by saying

this. It would not have been any good either. We just had to stick it. And the punishment of our crime was most awful. It was that we weren't to go to Mrs. Leslie's party. And Archibald was to go, because when Father asked him if he was in it with the rest of us, he said "No." I cannot think of any really gentle, manly, and proper words to say what I think about my unnatural cousin.

We kept our word about not speaking to him, and I think Father thought we were jealous because he was going to that conjuring, magic lantern party and we were not. Noel was the most unhappy, because he knew we were all being punished for what he had done. He was very affectionate and tried to write pieces of poetry to us all, but he was so unhappy he couldn't even write, and he went into the kitchen and sat on Jane's knee and said his head ached.

Next day it was the day of the party and we were plunged in gloom. Archibald got out his Etons and put his clean shirt ready, and a pair of flashy silk socks with red spots, and then he went into the bath-room.

Noel and Jane were whispering on the stairs. Jane came up and Noel went down, Jane knocked at the bath-room door and said--

"Here's the soap, Master Archerbald. I didn't put none in to-day."

He opened the door and put out his hand.

"Half a moment," said Jane, "I've got something else in my hand."

As she spoke the gas all over the house went down blue, and then went out. We held our breaths heavily.

"Here it is," she said; "I'll put it in your hand. I'll go down and turn off the burners and see about the gas. You'll be late, sir. If I was you I should get on a bit with the washing of myself in the dark. I daresay the gas'll be five or ten minutes, and it's five o'clock now."

It wasn't, and of course she ought not to have said it, but it was useful all the same.

Noel came stumping up the stairs in the dark. He fumbled about and then whispered, "I've turned the little white china knob that locks the bath-room door on the outside."

The water was bubbling and hissing in the pipes inside, and the darkness went on. Father and uncle had not come in yet, which was a fortunate blessing.

"Do be quiet!" said Noel. "Just you wait."

We all sat on the stairs and waited. Noel said--

"Don't ask me yet--you'll see--you wait."

And we waited, and the gas did not come back.

At last Archibald tried to come out--he thought he had washed himself clean, I suppose--and of course the door was fastened. He kicked and he hammered and he shouted, and we were glad.

At last Noel banged on the door and screamed through the keyhole--

"If we let you out will you let us off our promise not to tell about you and the pipes? We won't tell till you've gone back to school."

He wouldn't for a long time, but at last he had to.

"I shan't ever come to your beastly house again," he bellowed through the keyhole, "so I don't mind."

"Turn off the gas-burners then," said Oswald, ever thoughtful, though he was still in ignorance of the beautiful truth.

Then Noel sang out over the stairs, "Light up!" and Jane went round with a taper, and when the landing gas was lighted Noel turned the knob of the bath-room, and Archibald exited in his Indian red and yellow dressing-gown that he thought so much of. Of course we expected his face to be red with rage, or white with passion, or purple with mixed emotions, but you cannot think what our feelings were--indeed, we hardly knew what they were ourselves--when we saw that he was not red or white or purple, but black. He looked like an uneven sort of bluish

nigger. His face and hands were all black and blue in streaks, and so were the bits of his feet that showed between his Indian dressing-gown and his Turkish slippers.

The word "Krikey" fell from more than one lip.

"What are you staring at?" he asked.

We did not answer even then, though I think it was less from keep-your-wordishness than amazement. But Jane did.

"Nyang, Nyang!" she uttered tauntingly. "You thought it was soap I was giving you, and all the time it was Maple's dark bright navy-blue indelible dye--won't wash out." She flashed a looking-glass in his face, and he looked and saw the depth of his dark bright navy-blueness.

Now, you may think that we shouted with laughing to see him done brown and dyed blue like this, but we did not. There was a spellbound silence. Oswald, I know, felt a quite uncomfortable feeling inside him.

When Archibald had had one good look at himself he did not want any more. He ran to his room and bolted himself in.

"_He_ won't go to no parties," said Jane, and she flounced downstairs.

We never knew how much Noel had told her. He is very young, and not so strong as we are, and we thought it better not to ask.

Oswald and Dicky and H.O.--particularly H.O.--told each other it served him right, but after a bit Dora asked Noel if he would mind her trying to get some of it off our unloved cousin, and he said "No."

But nothing would get it off him; and when Father came home there was an awful row. And he said we had disgraced ourselves and forgotten the duties of hospitality. We got it pretty straight, I can tell you. And we bore it all. I do not say we were martyrs to the honour of our house and to our plighted word, but I do say that we got it very straight indeed, and we did not tell the provocativeness we had had from our guest that drove the poet Noel to this wild and desperate revenge.

But some one told, and I have always thought it was Jane, and that is why we did not ask too many questions about what Noel had told her, because late that night Father came and said he now understood that we had meant to do right, except perhaps the one who cut the pipe with a chisel, and that must have been more silliness than naughtiness; and perhaps the being dyed blue served our cousin rather right. And he gave Archibald a few remarks in private, and when the dye began to come off-- it was not a fast dye, though it said so on the paper it was wrapped in-- Archibald, now a light streaky blue, really did seem to be making an effort to be something like decent. And when, now merely a pale grey, he had returned to school, he sent us a letter. It said:--

"My dear Cousins,--

"I think that I was beastlier than I meant to be, but I am not accustomed to young kids. And I think uncle was right, and the way you stand up for the honour of our house is not all nonsense, like I said it was. If we ever meet in the future life I hope you will not keep a down on me about things. I don't think you can expect me to say more. From your affectionate cousin,

"Archibald Bastable."

So I suppose rays of remorse penetrated that cold heart, and now perhaps he will be a reformed Bastable. I am sure I hope so, but I believe it is difficult, if not impossible, for a leopard to change his skin.

Still, I remember how indelibly black he looked when he came out of the fatal bath-room; and it nearly all wore off. And perhaps spots on the honourable inside parts of your soul come off with time. I hope so. The dye never came off the inside of the bath though. I think that was what annoyed our good great-uncle the most.