

THE
STORY
OF THE
TREASURE
SEEKERS

EDITH NESBIT



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BOOKS

an imprint of canonpress

MOSCOW, IDAHO

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INTRODUCTION

C.S. Lewis, at the beginning of his book *The Magician's Nephew*, makes two literary allusions. One you may be familiar with, but one you may not be:

This is a story about something that happened long ago when your grandfather was a child. It is a very important story because it shows how all the comings and goings between our own world and the land of Narnia first began. In those days Mr. Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street *and the Bastables were looking for treasure in the Lewisham Road.* [emphasis added]

The book that C.S. Lewis is alluding to here is *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, a novel about the adventures of the Bastable children—the one you hold in your hands. The story opens in

Victorian London, where the six Bastables have lost their mother and watched their father's business partner run away with most of their money. Making do with poorer food and fewer toys, the children decide to acquire treasure to restore their family wealth and make everything good again. The ideas they come up with include newspaper writing, curing the common cold, banditry, selling wine, rescuing a rich old man in deadly peril, and of course, digging for buried treasure.

If this sounds like a sentimental Victorian novel to you, I can assure you that nothing could be farther from the truth. This book is one of the funniest classics from the 1900s. Nesbit's children are not hellions that need a nanny to tame them, nor are they boring little angels in child form. The thing that makes this novel so good is that Edith Nesbit understands that children are people, too.

The children in this novel—Dora, Oswald, Dicky, Alice, Noel, and Horace Octavius (HO for short) show what it's like to be in a large family as they stick up for each other and argue with each other by turns, take their games too seriously, get into trouble for making messes, and just maybe find a way to restore their family's hopes.

The novel is narrated in first person by Oswald, and Nesbit gets a lot of fun out of his narration. Consider this great paragraph:

I am afraid the last chapter was rather dull. It is always dull in books when people talk and talk, and don't do anything, but I was obliged to put it in, or

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THE COUNCIL OF WAYS AND MEANS

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE DIFFERENT WAYS WE looked for treasure, and I think when you have read it you will see that we were not lazy about the looking.

There are some things I must tell before I begin to tell about the treasure-seeking, because I have read books myself, and I know how beastly it is when a story begins, ““Alas!” said Hildegarde with a deep sigh, “we must look our last on this ancestral home””—and then some one else says something—and you don’t know for pages and pages where the home is, or who Hildegarde is, or anything about it. Our ancestral home is in

the Lewisham Road. It is semi-detached and has a garden, not a large one. We are the Bastables. There are six of us besides Father. Our Mother is dead, and if you think we don't care because I don't tell you much about her you only show that you do not understand people at all. Dora is the eldest. Then Oswald—and then Dicky. Oswald won the Latin prize at his preparatory school—and Dicky is good at sums. Alice and Noel are twins: they are ten, and Horace Octavius is my youngest brother. It is one of us that tells this story—but I shall not tell you which: only at the very end perhaps I will. While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't. It was Oswald who first thought of looking for treasure. Oswald often thinks of very interesting things. And directly he thought of it he did not keep it to himself, as some boys would have done, but he told the others, and said—

‘I'll tell you what, we must go and seek for treasure: it is always what you do to restore the fallen fortunes of your House.’

Dora said it was all very well. She often says that. She was trying to mend a large hole in one of Noel's stockings. He tore it on a nail when we were playing shipwrecked mariners on top of the chicken-house the day H. O. fell off and cut his chin: he has the scar still. Dora is the only one of us who ever tries to mend anything. Alice tries to make things sometimes. Once she knitted a red scarf for Noel because his chest is delicate, but it was much wider at one end than the other, and he wouldn't wear it. So we used it as a pennon, and it did very well, because most of our things are black or grey since Mother died;

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DIGGING FOR TREASURE

I AM AFRAID THE LAST CHAPTER WAS RATHER dull. It is always dull in books when people talk and talk, and don't do anything, but I was obliged to put it in, or else you wouldn't have understood all the rest. The best part of books is when things are happening. That is the best part of real things too. This is why I shall not tell you in this story about all the days when nothing happened. You will not catch me saying, 'thus the sad days passed slowly by'—or 'the years rolled on their weary course'—or 'time went on'—because it is silly; of course time goes on—whether you say so or not. So I shall just tell you the nice, interesting parts—and in between you will understand

that we had our meals and got up and went to bed, and dull things like that. It would be sickening to write all that down, though of course it happens. I said so to Albert-next-door's uncle, who writes books, and he said, 'Quite right, that's what we call selection, a necessity of true art.' And he is very clever indeed. So you see.

I have often thought that if the people who write books for children knew a little more it would be better. I shall not tell you anything about us except what I should like to know about if I was reading the story and you were writing it. Albert's uncle says I ought to have put this in the preface, but I never read prefaces, and it is not much good writing things just for people to skip. I wonder other authors have never thought of this.

Well, when we had agreed to dig for treasure we all went down into the cellar and lighted the gas. Oswald would have liked to dig there, but it is stone flags. We looked among the old boxes and broken chairs and fenders and empty bottles and things, and at last we found the spades we had to dig in the sand with when we went to the seaside three years ago. They are not silly, babyish, wooden spades, that split if you look at them, but good iron, with a blue mark across the top of the iron part, and yellow wooden handles. We wasted a little time getting them dusted, because the girls wouldn't dig with spades that had cobwebs on them. Girls would never do for African explorers or anything like that, they are too beastly particular.

It was no use doing the thing by halves. We marked out a sort of square in the mouldy part of the garden, about three

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BEING DETECTIVES

THE NEXT THING THAT HAPPENED TO US WAS very interesting. It was as real as the half-crowns—not just pretending. I shall try to write it as like a real book as I can. Of course we have read Mr Sherlock Holmes, as well as the yellow-covered books with pictures outside that are so badly printed; and you get them for fourpence-halfpenny at the bookstall when the corners of them are beginning to curl up and get dirty, with people looking to see how the story ends when they are waiting for trains. I think this is most unfair to the boy at the bookstall. The books are written by a gentleman named Gaboriau, and Albert's uncle says they are the worst translations

in the world—and written in vile English. Of course they're not like Kipling, but they're jolly good stories. And we had just been reading a book by Dick Diddlington—that's not his right name, but I know all about libel actions, so I shall not say what his name is really, because his books are rot. Only they put it into our heads to do what I am going to narrate.

It was in September, and we were not to go to the seaside because it is so expensive, even if you go to Sheerness, where it is all tin cans and old boots and no sand at all. But every one else went, even the people next door—not Albert's side, but the other. Their servant told Eliza they were all going to Scarborough, and next day sure enough all the blinds were down and the shutters up, and the milk was not left any more. There is a big horse-chestnut tree between their garden and ours, very useful for getting conkers out of and for making stuff to rub on your chilblains. This prevented our seeing whether the blinds were down at the back as well, but Dicky climbed to the top of the tree and looked, and they were.

It was jolly hot weather, and very stuffy indoors—we used to play a good deal in the garden. We made a tent out of the kitchen clothes-horse and some blankets off our beds, and though it was quite as hot in the tent as in the house it was a very different sort of hotness. Albert's uncle called it the Turkish Bath. It is not nice to be kept from the seaside, but we know that we have much to be thankful for. We might be poor little children living in a crowded alley where even at summer noon hardly a ray of sunlight penetrates; clothed in rags and with bare feet—though

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GOOD HUNTING

WHEN WE HAD GOT THAT FOUR SHILLINGS BY digging for treasure we ought, by rights, to have tried Dicky's idea of answering the advertisement about ladies and gentlemen and spare time and two pounds a week, but there were several things we rather wanted.

Dora wanted a new pair of scissors, and she said she was going to get them with her eight-pence. But Alice said—

'You ought to get her those, Oswald, because you know you broke the points off hers getting the marble out of the brass thimble.'

It was quite true, though I had almost forgotten it, but then it was H. O. who jammed the marble into the thimble first of all. So I said—

‘It’s H. O.’s fault as much as mine, anyhow. Why shouldn’t he pay?’

Oswald didn’t so much mind paying for the beastly scissors, but he hates injustice of every kind.

‘He’s such a little kid,’ said Dicky, and of course H. O. said he wasn’t a little kid, and it very nearly came to being a row between them. But Oswald knows when to be generous; so he said—

‘Look here! I’ll pay sixpence of the scissors, and H. O. shall pay the rest, to teach him to be careful.’

H. O. agreed: he is not at all a mean kid, but I found out afterwards that Alice paid his share out of her own money.

Then we wanted some new paints, and Noel wanted a pencil and a halfpenny account-book to write poetry with, and it does seem hard never to have any apples. So, somehow or other nearly all the money got spent, and we agreed that we must let the advertisement run loose a little longer.

‘I only hope,’ Alice said, ‘that they won’t have got all the ladies and gentlemen they want before we have got the money to write for the sample and instructions.’

And I was a little afraid myself, because it seemed such a splendid chance; but we looked in the paper every day, and the advertisement was always there, so we thought it was all right.

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THE POET AND THE EDITOR

It was not bad sport—being in London entirely on our own hook. We asked the way to Fleet Street, where Father says all the newspaper offices are. They said straight on down Ludgate Hill—but it turned out to be quite another way. At least *we* didn't go straight on.

We got to St Paul's. Noel *would* go in, and we saw where Gordon was buried—at least the monument. It is very flat, considering what a man he was.

When we came out we walked a long way, and when we asked a policeman he said we'd better go back through Smithfield. So we did. They don't burn people any more there now,

so it was rather dull, besides being a long way, and Noel got very tired. He's a peaky little chap; it comes of being a poet, I think. We had a bun or two at different shops—out of the shillings—and it was quite late in the afternoon when we got to Fleet Street. The gas was lighted and the electric lights. There is a jolly Bovril sign that comes off and on in different coloured lamps. We went to the Daily Recorder office, and asked to see the Editor. It is a big office, very bright, with brass and mahogany and electric lights.

They told us the Editor wasn't there, but at another office. So we went down a dirty street, to a very dull-looking place. There was a man there inside, in a glass case, as if he was a museum, and he told us to write down our names and our business. So Oswald wrote—

OSWALD BASTABLE

NOEL BASTABLE

BUSINESS VERY PRIVATE INDEED

Then we waited on the stone stairs; it was very draughty. And the man in the glass case looked at us as if we were the museum instead of him. We waited a long time, and then a boy came down and said—

'The Editor can't see you. Will you please write your business?' And he laughed. I wanted to punch his head.

But Noel said, 'Yes, I'll write it if you'll give me a pen and ink, and a sheet of paper and an envelope.'

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NOEL'S PRINCESS

SHE HAPPENED QUITE ACCIDENTALLY. WE WERE not looking for a Princess at all just then; but Noel had said he was going to find a Princess all by himself; and marry her—and he really did. Which was rather odd, because when people say things are going to befall, very often they don't. It was different, of course, with the prophets of old.

We did not get any treasure by it, except twelve chocolate drops; but we might have done, and it was an adventure, anyhow.

Greenwich Park is a jolly good place to play in, especially the parts that aren't near Greenwich. The parts near the Heath

are first-rate. I often wish the Park was nearer our house; but I suppose a Park is a difficult thing to move.

Sometimes we get Eliza to put lunch in a basket, and we go up to the Park. She likes that—it saves cooking dinner for us; and sometimes she says of her own accord, ‘I’ve made some pasties for you, and you might as well go into the Park as not. It’s a lovely day.’

She always tells us to rinse out the cup at the drinking-fountain, and the girls do; but I always put my head under the tap and drink. Then you are an intrepid hunter at a mountain stream—and besides, you’re sure it’s clean. Dicky does the same, and so does H. O. But Noel always drinks out of the cup. He says it is a golden goblet wrought by enchanted gnomes.

The day the Princess happened was a fine, hot day, last October, and we were quite tired with the walk up to the Park.

We always go in by the little gate at the top of Croom’s Hill. It is the postern gate that things always happen at in stories. It was dusty walking, but when we got in the Park it was ripping, so we rested a bit, and lay on our backs, and looked up at the trees, and wished we could play monkeys. I have done it before now, but the Park-keeper makes a row if he catches you.

When we’d rested a little, Alice said—

‘It was a long way to the enchanted wood, but it is very nice now we are there. I wonder what we shall find in it?’

‘We shall find deer,’ said Dicky, ‘if we go to look; but they go on the other side of the Park because of the people with buns.’

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BEING BANDITS

NOEL WAS QUITE TIRESOME FOR EVER SO LONG after we found the Princess. He would keep on wanting to go to the Park when the rest of us didn't, and though we went several times to please him, we never found that door open again, and all of us except him knew from the first that it would be no go.

So now we thought it was time to do something to rouse him from the stupor of despair, which is always done to heroes when anything baffling has occurred. Besides, we were getting very short of money again—the fortunes of your house cannot be restored (not so that they will last, that is), even by the one pound eight we got when we had the 'good hunting.' We spent a

good deal of that on presents for Father's birthday. We got him a paper-weight, like a glass bun, with a picture of Lewisham Church at the bottom; and a blotting-pad, and a box of preserved fruits, and an ivory penholder with a view of Greenwich Park in the little hole where you look through at the top. He was most awfully pleased and surprised, and when he heard how Noel and Oswald had earned the money to buy the things he was more surprised still. Nearly all the rest of our money went to get fireworks for the Fifth of November. We got six Catherine wheels and four rockets; two hand-lights, one red and one green; a sixpenny maroon; two Roman-candles—they cost a shilling; some Italian streamers, a fairy fountain, and a tourbillon that cost eighteen-pence and was very nearly worth it.

But I think crackers and squibs are a mistake. It's true you get a lot of them for the money, and they are not bad fun for the first two or three dozen, but you get jolly sick of them before you've let off your sixpenn'orth. And the only amusing way is not allowed: it is putting them in the fire.

It always seems a long time till the evening when you have got fireworks in the house, and I think as it was a rather foggy day we should have decided to let them off directly after breakfast, only Father had said he would help us to let them off at eight o'clock after he had had his dinner, and you ought never to disappoint your father if you can help it.

You see we had three good reasons for trying H. O.'s idea of restoring the fallen fortunes of our house by becoming bandits

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BEING EDITORS

IT WAS ALBERT'S UNCLE WHO THOUGHT OF OUR trying a newspaper. He said he thought we should not find the bandit business a paying industry, as a permanency, and that journalism might be.

We had sold Noel's poetry and that piece of information about Lord Tottenham to the good editor, so we thought it would not be a bad idea to have a newspaper of our own. We saw plainly that editors must be very rich and powerful, because of the grand office and the man in the glass case, like a museum, and the soft carpets and big writing-table. Besides our having seen a whole handful of money that the editor pulled out

quite carelessly from his trousers pocket when he gave me my five bob.

Dora wanted to be editor and so did Oswald, but he gave way to her because she is a girl, and afterwards he knew that it is true what it says in the copy-books about Virtue being its own Reward. Because you've no idea what a bother it is. Everybody wanted to put in everything just as they liked, no matter how much room there was on the page. It was simply awful! Dora put up with it as long as she could and then she said if she wasn't let alone she wouldn't go on being editor; they could be the paper's editors themselves, so there.

Then Oswald said, like a good brother: 'I will help you if you like, Dora,' and she said, 'You're more trouble than all the rest of them! Come and be editor and see how you like it. I give it up to you.' But she didn't, and we did it together. We let Albert-next-door be sub-editor, because he had hurt his foot with a nail in his boot that gathered.

When it was done Albert-next-door's uncle had it copied for us in typewriting, and we sent copies to all our friends, and then of course there was no one left that we could ask to buy it. We did not think of that until too late. We called the paper the Lewisham Recorder; Lewisham because we live there, and Recorder in memory of the good editor. I could write a better paper on my head, but an editor is not allowed to write all the paper. It is very hard, but he is not. You just have to fill up with what you can get from other writers. If I ever have time I will write a paper all by myself. It won't be patchy. We had no time

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THE G. B.

BEING EDITORS IS NOT THE BEST WAY TO WEALTH. We all feel this now, and highwaymen are not respected any more like they used to be.

I am sure we had tried our best to restore our fallen fortunes. We felt their fall very much, because we knew the Bastables had been rich once. Dora and Oswald can remember when Father was always bringing nice things home from London, and there used to be turkeys and geese and wine and cigars come by the carrier at Christmas-time, and boxes of candied fruit and French plums in ornamental boxes with silk and velvet and gilding on them. They were called prunes, but the prunes you

buy at the grocer's are quite different. But now there is seldom anything nice brought from London, and the turkey and the prune people have forgotten Father's address.

'How *can* we restore those beastly fallen fortunes?' said Oswald. 'We've tried digging and writing and princesses and being editors.'

'And being bandits,' said H. O.

'When did you try that?' asked Dora quickly. 'You know I told you it was wrong.'

'It wasn't wrong the way we did it,' said Alice, quicker still, before Oswald could say, 'Who asked you to tell us anything about it?' which would have been rude, and he is glad he didn't. 'We only caught Albert-next-door.'

'Oh, Albert-next-door!' said Dora contemptuously, and I felt more comfortable; for even after I didn't say, 'Who asked you, and cetera,' I was afraid Dora was going to come the good elder sister over us. She does that a jolly sight too often.

Dicky looked up from the paper he was reading and said, 'This sounds likely,' and he read out—

'L100 secures partnership in lucrative business for sale of useful patent. L10 weekly. No personal attendance necessary.

-Jobbins, 300, Old Street Road.'

'I wish we could secure that partnership,' said Oswald. He is twelve, and a very thoughtful boy for his age.

Alice looked up from her painting. She was trying to paint a fairy queen's frock with green bice, and it wouldn't rub. There

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LORD TOTTENHAM

OSWALD IS A BOY OF FIRM AND UNSWERVING character, and he had never wavered from his first idea. He felt quite certain that the books were right, and that the best way to restore fallen fortunes was to rescue an old gentleman in distress. Then he brings you up as his own son: but if you preferred to go on being your own father's son I expect the old gentleman would make it up to you some other way. In the books the least thing does it—you put up the railway carriage window—or you pick up his purse when he drops it—or you say a hymn when he suddenly asks you to, and then your fortune is made.

The others, as I said, were very slack about it, and did not seem to care much about trying the rescue. They said there wasn't any deadly peril, and we should have to make one before we could rescue the old gentleman from it, but Oswald didn't see that that mattered. However, he thought he would try some of the easier ways first, by himself.

So he waited about the station, pulling up railway carriage windows for old gentlemen who looked likely—but nothing happened, and at last the porters said he was a nuisance. So that was no go. No one ever asked him to say a hymn, though he had learned a nice short one, beginning 'New every morning'—and when an old gentleman did drop a two-shilling piece just by Ellis's the hairdresser's, and Oswald picked it up, and was just thinking what he should say when he returned it, the old gentleman caught him by the collar and called him a young thief. It would have been very unpleasant for Oswald if he hadn't happened to be a very brave boy, and knew the policeman on that beat very well indeed. So the policeman backed him up, and the old gentleman said he was sorry, and offered Oswald sixpence. Oswald refused it with polite disdain, and nothing more happened at all.

When Oswald had tried by himself and it had not come off, he said to the others, 'We're wasting our time, not trying to rescue the old gentleman in deadly peril. Come—buck up! Do let's do something!'