



## THE STOLEN ELEPHANT.

BY E. NESBIT.

ILLUSTRATED BY A. E. JACKSON.

TO look at us no one, except of unsound mind, would ever say that we looked as if we had descended to the lowest abysses of crime. Yet such, I am sorry to own, is the fact. We were sorry when we were told that it was wrong, but at the time, as is so often the case, it did not seem so. And I shall always feel sorry for criminals who do our kind of crime, because now I know the dangers and difficulties of doing it, and what you have to put up with both during and afterwards; and I also know that we should never have done it if other people had not behaved to us in a way no free-born Englishman could be expected to bear, especially when one of them had a passionate Southern nature. And we do not know the sad pasts of criminals, or what drove them to it, or perhaps we should be kinder to them than we are, and not put them in prison so much, but just teach them better. We were quite ready to learn better the moment we were taught, and we were really sorry for doing what we had, especially as father and mother did not like it. All the same it was a lark.

It happened like this. At the beginning of the holidays we discovered, with sinking hearts, that mother had asked Miss Knox to stay over Christmas. This comes of mother's having such a kind heart. She is always asking people she doesn't want, just because they have nowhere else to go. Father calls them the Undesirables, and never takes any notice of them at all except to say, "Ha, good-morning, Miss Knox. Quite well? That's right!" in a very jolly and kind way, and then takes no more notice of them till it is time to say, "Good-night, Miss Knox. Sleep well!" in a manner as kind and jolly as the other.

We, however, are not allowed to behave like this. We have to be polite to Undesirables just the same as if they were anybody else.

And Miss Knox was awful. You always felt she was always trying to get something out of mother, and she was full of gentle, patient cheerfulness, and that is very wearing, as I daresay you have noticed. And she would call people "Dear Mrs. —whatever-their-name-was,"

and say "Have we not?" and "Do we not?" instead of "Haven't we?" and "Don't we?" like other people. And I do not like her voice, or the shape of her face, or the way she does her hair, or the smell of her handkerchief, or the way she drinks, or eats bread-and-butter. Mother says this is called prejudice and is very wrong. I am sorry I have this dreadful fault, but I would rather have it than be like Miss Knox all the same. And so would the others.

(The others are Lotty, Martin, Olive, Alan, and Madeline. Madeline is a cousin, and her real parents are in India, as you will see from the following narrative.)

I do not wish to be unjust, so I will own that Miss Knox did a lot for the bazaar. Father said that Miss Knox spread bazaars like a disease wherever she went, but mother said, "hush!" But the bazaar had been Miss Knox's idea all the same when she was down in the summer, and we had the pig-fight. Father said she liked bazaars because then people *had* to take notice of her, and she could talk to people she wasn't introduced to. But mother said "hush!" again, and got up and shut the door that we were sitting in the room at the other side of.

I do not like bazaars. I never can see why people can't give their money to decayed curates, or lost dogs, or whatever it is, without getting something Miss Knox has made in exchange. But this is one of the many subjects where the author's powerful mind causes him to think thoughts unshared by others. And perhaps, I had better get on with the story.

We made things for the bazaar, of course. The girls made pin-cushions and kettle-holders, and dressed dolls. I should not like to be a girl. We boys made sealing-wax hatpins, and elephants. Elephants are rather jolly to make. You get a bit of board and hammer four nails through it where you want the elephant's legs to be. Then you put hot mixed glue and whitening on the nails, and quickly cover them with clay. This sticks the clay to the nails. You put a lump of lead inside the body of the elephant to make it heavy, and you take your time modelling it. The man who does the taps and unstops the kitchen sink will always give you a bit of sheet-

lead if you are polite to him, and do not mess about with his tool-basket when he is not looking. The honour of an Englishman makes me say that it was Miss Knox who taught us to make elephants. They ought to put that on her tombstone—if they cannot think of anything else. And when it is modelled as well as you can, you paint it over, wood and all, with silver paint, and it is a paper-weight. But the village people bought all the ones we made, and put them on their mantelpieces for ornaments, so that now we cannot go into any of our friends' cottages without meeting one of those elephants face to face.

We wished to make them as life-like as we could, so we got down Madeline's silver elephant, which is solid and as big as your fist and came from India, where her sorrowing relatives are.

Do not be afraid: I will not tell you more than I can help about the bazaar. It was on Christmas Eve, and it was just like they all are. Except for one awful fact. The following is *it*.

Miss Knox—it was just exactly like her—took the silver elephant down to the schoolroom by mistake with the rest—and sold it for sixpence, the same as she sold the others!

It was Clifford, ever alert, who saw the elephant helpless in the grey kid grasp of a thin, smart lady with a lot of powder on her nose.

With the promptness of Napoleon or Nelson he rushed to Miss Knox and said, "You've sold the silver elephant!"

She smiled her gentle, patient smile, and said, "Yes, dear Clifford, every one of them."

Clifford did not shake her.

"I mean the *real* silver one," he said, as patient as she was, but not so cheerful. She said she hadn't.

Clifford is strong and active for his age. He got her out from behind her stall and told Olive to keep watch, and before she had stopped being surprised enough to resist he had led Miss Knox kindly but firmly to the door that the thin, powdery-nosed lady was just going out of. (Resistance would have been vain, anyhow, for our hero's blood was up.)

"There," he said; "tell her you've made a mistake," and he shoved Miss Knox forward politely but unmistakably.

She did say something to the lady, Clifford owns that. And the lady said

something about a bargain being a bargain—he heard that, and then a herd of raffles swept between; and when the horizon cleared the lady had got into a motor with the helpless elephant, and Miss Knox was standing like a mock turtle, with her mouth open, looking after her.

"It is but a little sacrifice, after all, is it not, dear Clifford?" she said in reply to what Clifford said, "and dear Madeline, I am sure, will only be too pleased to make it. We must give what we can, must we not, dear child?"

Were you ever called "dear child" by anybody like Miss Knox? If so, you *know*. If not, you never can.

Of course I had to tell Madeline; her passionate Southern nature—you know she was born in India—caused her to burst into tears in the middle of the bazaar, before every one, and say she wished Miss Knox was dead. Fortunately this was unheard by any but people who had no right to send her home without her tea and say "Bed!"

Clifford calmed her by promising, on his honour, to get the elephant back.

He tried to get at mother to tell her about it and ask for justice, but she was surrounded by the rich and affluent, and he knew that several of these were coming home to dinner. Of course he would have waited till they had relieved the house of their hated presence, and then told mother, but for the discovery which rewarded his detective-like researches. The thin, powdery lady, Clifford learned from the Dodds' footman, was the one who had taken the Warings' house for three months and turned it upside down, and she and her friends were going to have an early dinner, and motor up to London that very night. So what was an honourable boy to do?

Clifford tried to disentangle Martin from the sale of hatpins, and told him the fell truth. Madeline was clinging to him in a way Clifford would never have allowed at other times.

"Get out," said Martin, "I'm busy."

"Come out," said Clifford in a dauntless whisper, "it is *war*. And no quarter. Prompt attention to business alone guarantees success!"

So then Martin saw that it was serious, and hastily letting a nasty lady have two hatpins for eightpence instead of the

correct price, which was a shilling each, he joined us at the door.

"This scene of revelry," said Clifford, "is a hollow mockery to the bereaved Madeline"; and in a few well-chosen words he revealed the terrible preceding events.

"The question is," said Martin, when Clifford had done revealing, "what are we to do?"

"Prompt attention and cetera," murmured Clifford, lost in deep, masterly reflections.

"Warings' is a good mile and a half," said Martin.

"Madeline," said Clifford in a hollow voice, "what would you do to get back the elephant you love?"

"Anything," said Madeline, with feeble sniffs.

"Would you be a *burglar*?" he asked, his rich voice growing deeper.

"Yes, if any one would teach me how," said the bereaved one, sniffing more firmly.

"And you?" Clifford turned to Martin, who briefly signified that he was on.

"Then, follow me," said our hero. "Silence! To the death!"

Our three conspirators went home through the snow arm in arm, with the wronged Madeline in the middle.

Every one was at the bazaar except the servants, who were getting the rich and affluent's dinner ready.

We faced each other in the schoolroom by the light of Clifford's bedroom candle, and Clifford remarked:

"Never shall it be said that visitors from India's coral strand had their innocent elephants stolen, with no one to lift a hand in defence of the helpless stranger. Martin, the dressing-up things!"

We kept these in a big bag hanging inside the schoolroom cupboard door. Clifford hastily examined them, electing, with the rapidness of a born dissembler, suitable disguises for all.

Martin wore the old striped riding-cloak we called "Joseph" because of its many colours, and a felt hat with a feather that had been Olive's in happier days. Madeline wore a black skirt of mother's that we use for Mary Queen of Scots, and a fur cape that is mangy all round the edges. Clifford got an old hat of father's and slouched it over his eyes—most burglarlike it was. Also he wore that old coat of Aunt Lucilla's, with



*"Madeline wore a black skirt of mother's that we use for Mary Queen of Scots, and a fur cape that is many all round the edges."*

three capes—the one that makes you look like a highwayman. There was a large black crape veil. I don't know where it came from, but I think that I have heard that a great-aunt's face was once hid behind it. The flower-scissors from the table-drawer in the hall enabled us to convert this into masks, with holes for eyes, and tied round the back of the head with string. And the parts of our faces that the masks didn't cover we blacked with the burnt cork of the cough-mixture bottle, out of the night nursery. We blacked our hands, too, inside and out. We went and looked at ourselves in the long swing glass in mother's room.

We were terrible!

To get out without the servants seeing us was a triumph of dipsplomacy. But we did it. Then we set out for Warings'. Madeline was trembling in every pore. But we have often explained to her that traitors and sneaks are loathed by the good and brave, so when Clifford stopped in the drive and said "Don't come if you don't want to," she said: "Oh, but I do!"

(Vote. Is it better to be cowardly or untruthful? The author does not know the answer.)

It was at the gate that Martin said: "I say, Cliff, perhaps we hadn't better, don't you know?"

"Hadn't better what?" asked our hero, who had steadily refused until now to unclothe his plans.

"Whatever it is you're going to," said Martin.

Thus, you see, two of the burglars hung back; not because of its being wrong, but from funk. Clifford alone stood firm. He did not think it was wrong until father had carefully explained that it was.

"I'm going to," he said, "but don't you, either of you, if you don't want to."

They said they did want to, and having thus up-hearted his followers, the desperate leader disfolded his fell scheme.

It was "simple, sensible, and sublime," as the poet Milton, I believe, said all great things should be.

"We'll just walk straight up to Warings'. If we're nabbed we're *Waits*. You can do 'Nowell, Nowell,' I suppose? Well, then! if no one sees us we'll just go straight in and search the house till we find the elephant. It's ours—at least it's Mad's—so it's not stealing. It's an

adventure, full of glory and renown. You go on back, if you haven't the heart for it, and I'll carry off that elephant single-handed. I don't care. Go on back."

Of course they didn't, after that.

In silent heartbeatingness we went up the snowy avenue to Warings'. The house was lighted at most of the windows. We had thought of climbing in at the pantry window. We knew the house well, of course, because the Warings are friends of ours when they don't let their house. But it seemed best to try the front door first. It was unlocked. Front doors mostly are, in the country, you know. So we just quietly opened the door and went in, and Clifford cautiously closed the door after them.

So far all was well, the adventure was running on oiled wheels, as the author of "The Worst Boy in Bermondsey" so beautifully remarks. And I am certain that the oil would have held out till the end but for Madeline.

(Moral: never you go burgling with a girl, even if it is her elephant that you are after.)

Alas! the passionate Southern nature does not fit you to be a burglar. The moment the front door was closed and she found herself alone in the hall with the stuffed foxes and the carved oak and the tall ticking clock and us, in our beautiful burglars' clothes, she said "Oh!" in a stifling whisper and bolted up the stairs like a hare when you're coursing it.

We had to follow.

By a piece of At double-first luck, there were no servants about. We reached the carpeted landing. Madeline had bunked into the big state bedroom. We came up with her just in time to stop her from creeping under the bed. She was already lying on her front on the carpet, preparing for the under-bed act.

"Don't!" said Clifford in stern undertones. "Come out of it!"

"I must go under," she said wildly; "burglars always do."

"Not *swell* burglars," Martin said, "only commones. Why did you bolt like that?"

"It was you," she said, "when I saw you in the hall light. Walking up in the dark I'd forgotten how perfectly awful you look."

How like a girl to blame it on to us!

All these remarks were in deepwhispers.



*"The people who were having dinner swarmed out to witness the unusual spectacle."*

Then we went and hung over the thick carved banisters and listened. Dressing up for our parts had taken some time, and the walk through the snow had taken more, and the powdery woman and her friends were now at their early dinner. We could hear the rattle of plates and silver and people talking and laughing. Everything people say at dinner, when you are not there, always seems to be more amusing than the things they say when you are there.

One of the upsetting things the powdery-nosed woman had done to the Warings' house was turning the largest bedroom into a drawing-room. She thought a drawing-room ought to be on the first floor, because they are so in London. She did not know any better, because her husband was only a soap boiler. "The Boiling King" they called him, because he was so rich. Well, indeed, could his wife, "the Boiling Queen," have afforded to send an express pink-faced messenger boy direct to India to fetch her a much larger silver elephant than Madeline's, if she had really needed one!

A little research landed us in the drawing-room, and a rapid elephant-hunt at once began. Two of the hounds worked silently, but Madeline made a melancholy music all the time.

"I wish we hadn't come—I wish we hadn't come—I wish we hadn't come," she repeated in whispered accents, till Clifford had to pinch her arm to make her stop.

The silver elephant was run to earth on a sofa, among a lot of silly things that had been littering about at home for weeks, and which the Boiling Queen had bought at the bazaar.

Madeline was reaching out for it when Martin caught her arm.

"She paid sixpence for it," he said slowly. "Who's got sixpence to leave here?"

Nobody had, of course.

"We *must* be *honest* burglars, you know," said Martin firmly. And Clifford, who is the soul of honour, had to agree that this was so.

"Couldn't we send it by post?" Madeline asked, "the sixpence, I mean."

But the others were firm.

"Burglary is a ready-money business," Clifford reminded her.

The more we stood and looked at each other the more Clifford and Martin

saw that the game was now entirely up.

"We had better," said Clifford flatly, "go home."

He turned, prompt in retreat as in attack, to lead the way. Martin followed. At the bottom of the stairs which we had descended with tiptoe boots of the darkest caution, we turned. Madeline was still at the top.

"Come on," we said with voiceless mouths, like cats on the other side of a glass window when you can see them new but cannot hear.

"I'm coming," she said, in the same voiceless speech. And she came. But, oh horror, oh woe! In the agitation of the midnight hour she had forgotten to hold up that old black skirt of mother's. Also, her bootlace had come undone, as she owned later.

But why seek to discover the cause of the disaster? Let me just say that as we looked up at Madeline, urging her to come to us, she came. She suddenly stumbled and pitched right down the stairs, absolutely on to us, with a row that I have never heard equalled, even when tobogganing downstairs on tea-trays, which is now forbidden.

Our unwilling bodies broke the force of her fall. Otherwise that fall might have been her last.

You know how bees come out buzzing and thick when you throw half a brick at the hive? It was like that when the dining-room door burst open, and the people who were having dinner swarmed out to witness the unusual spectacle of three masked figures struggling on the fur mat at the foot of the stairs.

"Burglars!"

"Masked, by Jove!"

"Negroes!"

"Several of them!"

Remarks like these burst from more than one observant lip.

A young man with hair like hay collared me. A fat man with a watch chain and seals hanging off the edge of him got Martin, and Madeline was left sitting on the mat, with her feet straight out in front of her, howling like a forgotten foxhound puppy on a wet night. Quite lost to all proper feeling, she was.

Clifford and Martin preserved a dignified silence when they were lugged out of the dim hall into the blazing light of the dining-room, and Madeline was carried in

and put on a chair. She sat there sobbing and loosely holding in her hand . . . not the elephant, but a silver stamp-box in the shape of a pig! This was the last straw of degradedness. We were thieves!

She had crept back to collar her elephant and had grabbed this by mistake. So we were really thieves after all. And taken red-handed! It was indeed a dark and terrible moment: one of the darkest and most terrible that this author has ever known: all these strange faces crowding

boot against the other in stubborn silence. His followers were worse than useless. The bold leader had to face his reversion of fortune alone and unaided. He owns that he did not know how to face it.

"You poor little chap, don't look so frightened. It was a game, wasn't it?" said the powdered lady suddenly, and you will be surprised to learn that she addressed these words to the dauntless leader. She meant well, I do think, but that is not the way to speak to burglars.



"The powder-nosed lady with the diamond stars kissed him before he could resist."

round, all angry, all frightened, all distrustful. It is terrible to be distrusted.

"Why," said one of them suddenly, "they're only children—children dressed up! But one of them's stolen your lucky pig, Christine."

"It's not your pig, it's my own elephant," sobbed Madeline. Then, looking down, she saw what it really was, and the deceitful pig dropped from her nerveless fingers and rattled on the floor.

"Come," said a stern voice from above the waistcoat that the seals hung from, "out with it. What's the meaning of all this?"

Madeline sobbed. Martin kicked one

She had diamond stars in her hair, and a necklace of diamonds on her scraggy neck.

"Take off that rubbish," said the hay-haired man. And they tore our disguises from us, and we stood there unmasked. Concealment really was, this time, at an end.

"Come, speak up," said the waistcoat-seal gentleman. "What's the meaning of this tomfoolery?"

Clifford stood alone, like the boy on the burning deck, only he is never beautiful (he would, of course, scorn to be), and just then he did not feel bright, and he did not feel at all able to rule the storm that he saw raging about him.



"What *shall* I say?" he asked himself, and felt with a sinking heart that there was nothing that it would be any good to say, except the truth.

So he drew a long breath and said: "We haven't taken anything but the pig, and I didn't know we'd got that, and Madeline thought it was an elephant."

"Am I mad?" said the powder-nosed lady, who was the nicest of the lot— I will say that for her—"or are you?"

"I'm not," said Clifford; and to this day he knows not why they all laughed so much.

Anyhow, the laugh made it easier to speak. With that clearness that he has often been praised for, and that perhaps you have noticed in this narrative, he told the whole truth from the beginning. It took some time, but he persevered to the end. And when he had done every one clapped, and the powder-nosed lady with the diamond stars kissed him before he could resist. It was most unfair.

"Why, the poor dears!" she said. "I had no idea! I only stuck to the precious elephant because I couldn't stand that soapy-faced woman who wanted to get it back. The poor little dears! And the pluck of them! Get their precious elephant, some one, for goodness' sake!"

They were really very nice people, though they weren't like mother and father. Somebody fetched Madeline's silver elephant, and they got her to stop crying, and kissed her, too—I'm glad she didn't get off that—and gave us all dessert with peaches—it was Christmas Eve, you remember—and the loveliest sweets. And the lady wanted Madeline to have the silver pig as well, but Martin and I wouldn't let her. We knew in our inside selves father wouldn't like us to. And we had a ripping time, and they took us home in one of their motors, with a bump on Madeline's head as big as a teacup, tied up with scent and the powder-nosed lady's hankie. They called Clifford a hero, which was silly, but pleasant.

It was not so pleasant, though, when we had to tell father and mother about it, which we decided had better be done the moment the rich and affluent were gone, before giving ourselves time to

think it over. Father was very angry, and mother was very grieved. They said we had disgraced them. I could not see this, and I never shall. But I was sorry they thought so. And so I said I was sorry. If they said it was wrong, of course it was, so I wished we hadn't. And as it was Christmas Eve we were forgiven at once, and got off any consequences that might have happened on other dates. No one said anything about forgiving Miss Knox, though; and yet, of course, the whole thing was entirely her silly fault.

But next day was Christmas Day, when you ought to forgive everybody everything. So Madeline and I agreed that we should feel more comfortable in our insides if we did. So we went to Miss Knox, and Madeline said what we had agreed on. It was:

"Miss Knox, please, we forgive you about my elephant because it is Christmas Day."

But Madeline mumbled it so that I couldn't hear what she said. No more could Miss Knox. For her reply was:

"Of course I forgive you, dear Madeline. And dear Clifford, too. But we should be more thoughtful for the feelings of others, should we not, dear children? And I am sure you did not mean what you said."

By this we knew that *she* had heard what Madeline said when the elephant was borne away from the bazaar.

So Miss Knox forgave us! And we had to bear it.

But it was Christmas Day, and we had lots of jolly presents. Miss Knox gave us each a box of chocks. This rather choked me off hating her, I own. Not because of the beastly chocks, but because I know she wasn't well off. She must have gone without something to give the chocks to us. Yet I don't trust her any more because of the chocks. I *know* she wants to get things out of mother. But it was kind of her. Life is very difficult to understand.

So I forgive her for forgiving us. But perhaps she isn't so black as she's painted, any more than we were, under the masks, when we were self-sacrificing burglars, and risked our liberty for the sake of the stolen elephant.

