

# WINKIBOO.

By LAURENCE HOUSMAN.



VERY day, at the same hour in the morning, Winkiboo saluted his mother honourably, and set out from his poor hovel of a home on his road to school. There was nothing in life that he less liked doing than that; and this not because he was indolent, but because he was heavy of understanding; his skull was thick, and his brain small and difficult to get at, so learning came hard to him.

And as he went each day along the path by the rice-fields, and across the small channels, thick with fennel and burdock, which carried water into all the surrounding country, he would repeat to himself the lessons he had to get ready—the spelling and the tables and the pieces of verse, conning them from the rough clay tablets that hung round his neck; but however often he repeated them, it was no good at all: when he came into school and tried to remember them, he would find he had forgotten them all.

There was no doubt at all that he was the greatest dunce in the school. Almost on all days the schoolmaster would beat him, trying to put a little sense into his head, but it was not the least good; even the smallest of the scholars would jeer and point at him because he was such a dunce.

They would do that not only in school, but out of school as well. Those who overtook him on the way, with their own lessons well learned and packed safe inside their self-satisfied little brains, would come round and laugh and interrupt his tardy efforts to master the task he had been set. "It is no use," they would cry; "why does Winkiboo try to learn when he knows he must be whipped?"

Thus they gave him smaller chance than ever to escape the flogging they wished him.

It was very amusing to see, however hard he might try, how sure he was not to escape a beating in one day out of two.

And the worst of it was that Winkiboo really wished to learn: so when his school-fellows began regularly to hinder him, he took to going another way by a much worse road, which led through a tangled bit of wood wherein stood an old ruined temple with the statue of Buddha, the calm, peaceable god, still seated in its shade, though no worshipper ever came near it now. "After all," thought he, "being a longer road, it will give me more time than I get by the other way."

At first Winkiboo was a little afraid when he came within the shadow of the wood, for the place was very overgrown and lonely; but before long he had got used to it, and would look up as he went by, to see the god always sitting there with empty hands and the same quiet smile upon his face, not seeming to care what went on round him, or, for the matter of that, for what no longer went on.

In a little while, Winkiboo came to have quite a friendly feeling for the lonely deity sitting in a shrine that had fallen out of fashion; so on his way he would pull flowers, and as he went by he would stand on tip-toe and drop them into the god's lap as a remembrance. But he could never tell if the god cared at all for such things now, for his face wore always that same smile of a mind given not to the outward things of the world, but inwardly to the things of the spirit. Winkiboo did not doubt that inside his black marble covering the god was very wise and knew many things that the rest of the world had forgotten long ago. There, then, was one who was far more wise than any schoolmaster; and yet he always looked kindly and never seemed to upbraid.

Winkiboo soon came very much to prefer going by the longer and lonelier way, till at last his school-fellows, never meeting him, would wonder what had become of him and how it was that he got to school at all. But though they questioned him, Winkiboo seemed to be dense, and would not say anything.

Now, there was something strange about



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Winkiboo's mind, for all that it was so slow at learning; it wasn't cleverness in the least, but it was a sort of hope that lived there and never quite died. Every morning, when he set out with his tablets to school, he could imagine that just for once he was going to get his lesson quite off by heart; and though the hope had failed him hundreds of times before, it was always the same again

next morning, never any more and never any less. And always when he got as far as the ruined shrine, with the calm figure of the god seated within, holding its peace so wisely at all the world, always then Winkiboo would think that he knew his lesson better than he had ever done before, and would look up cheerfully and nod his head and cry: "O Thou!" as he threw up flowers to the god's

knees before passing on his way. And while he did this he never remembered how the day before, and the day before that, and again the day before that, he had had quite the same idea, and yet had not received one stroke the less when the event proved him as much a dunce as ever.

But one day when Winkiboo was starting on his road to school, carrying his clay tablets with him, he saw in the water-channel by the way some yellow irises, which seemed to him more beautiful than any he had yet taken to offer at the shrine; and as he stayed and reached over the stream to get them, suddenly the string that was about his neck snapped, and the three clay tablets that hung there fell off into the water and were drowned.

All his hope was gone.

Winkiboo had no heart to pick more than a single flower, for he knew for certain that none of his lessons would be learned that morning, and that his master would be sure to beat him worse than ever he had done before. He went on his way weeping.

And when he came to the shrine, he reached up his hand and laid the yellow iris between the smooth, black knees of the statue, saying nothing, because his heart was so heavy and had no hope left in it.

Then he turned to go on, when far up over his head he heard a soft, slow voice saying: "O thou!" It was the statue speaking to him. Winkiboo stood still as the rivet in a dead man's coffin, wondering with his slow mind what next. "O thou!" said the voice again, "what is it ails thee to-day?"

Winkiboo smudged the half-dried tears out of his eyes to make room for fresh ones, and began sobbing once more. "Getting this flower for you," he said, "I dropped my tablets into the stream; so now, as I can't learn my lessons, I know I shall be beaten!"

He was about to start sobbing louder than ever, when he heard the statue overhead say: "Oh, no, you won't be."

"Won't I? Why not?" asked Winkiboo, still doubtful of the matter.

"Climb up on to my knee," said the statue, "and I will show you."

Winkiboo climbed up with some difficulty, and when he had got so far safely, there among the dried stalks of all the flowers he had brought on previous days, he saw three little clay tablets lying. He looked at them, and there was no doubt about it—they contained the words and the numbers and

the verses which he ought to have been getting by heart that morning.

"Sit where you are," said the statue, for Winkiboo was just going to snatch up the tablets and slip off again. "Sit where you are and read them once through; then I will let you go."

So Winkiboo sat between the statue's knees and read the tablets once through. And no sooner had he done that than he found he knew them all by heart, forwards and backwards, and inside out and upside down, and all ways imaginable. He was almost frightened to find himself possessing so much knowledge. "O Thou!" he cried in a great hurry, and slipping off the statue's knee, ran off as hard as he could to catch up the time that he had been losing.

In school that day, Winkiboo stood up unashamed and repeated his lesson without missing a word. The schoolmaster could not believe his ears: he thought there must be some trick about it, and tried to catch him tripping, by all the means that a schoolmaster knows so well. But Winkiboo tripped like a dewdrop on a blade of grass, or water on a duck's back, and rolled it out backwards and forwards, upside down and inside out, with the ease of the nightingale when he is love-making. The whole school became silent with envy, dudgeon, and astonishment.

Winkiboo ran all the way home; and when he got there, he sat down on the doorstep and cried because he was so happy. The way to learn his lessons had been revealed to him at last; and how easy it was!—simply to sit in the lap of an ancient and a wise god, whom other folks had forgotten, and at once the whole thing came like Nature.

The next day, when he set out to school, he took with him a large bunch of yellow irises in grateful offering to his benefactor; and when he stood up in class, he said his lesson just as well as he had done the day before, inside out and upside down and hind before, without missing a word.

The big, clever, lazy, fat top boy of the school, whose name was Boh-boh, which means chief, and who could only say his lessons in the ordinary, straightforward way, grew ill with envy to hear him. And as soon as school was over, he got hold of Winkiboo and said to him: "Tell me what it is you have done to make yourself so clever all of a sudden. If you do not tell me, I will do something that will make you wish yourself dead."

Winkiboo did not want to tell him at all. So what he said was this: "Take three hairs

"Winkiboo had no heart to pick more than a single flower."



day he came to school looking very ill indeed. He did not know his lessons nearly so well as he ought to have done; Winkiboo harassed him easily.

After school, Boh-boh said to Winkiboo: "Why did you tell me those things would make me wiser? They have only made me feel very ill."

"In that case," said Winkiboo, "they have made you wiser, because now you know they are not good for eating; you would have known that before had you only been wiser."

When he heard that, Boh-boh became very angry and threatened to do all manner of things to Winkiboo if he would not tell him the true way to become wiser and learn everything just as he now did.

"Well," said Winkiboo, "the way to make yourself really wiser is this. Get a flea that has bitten a dog, that has bitten a cat, that has bitten a rat, that has bitten a mouse, that has bitten a piece of cheese that you have bitten; and when you have been bitten by that flea, then your mind will go round and round in circles, and you will be wiser than you have ever been in your life before."

The next day when Boh-boh came to school, he was so exhausted he could hardly creep or sit up; he did worse than ever at his lessons, and by the time they were over,

out of a cow's tail, and three quills off a hedgehog's back, and three bones out of a lizard's spine, and swallow them; and when you have swallowed them, you will be wiser than you are now."

Boh-boh believed him easily, and the next

where before he had been at the top, he now found himself at the bottom.

So when school was over, Winkiboo, who was beginning to feel quite sorry for him, said : " Did you catch that flea ? "

" Yes," said Boh-boh, " and much good has it done me ! It took a lot of catching."

" Of course," said Winkiboo ; " I could have told you that yesterday. And didn't the doing of it make you feel giddy ? "

" Giddy ! " cried Boh-Boh. " Why, my brain has been going round in circles ever since ! "

" That is just what I told you would happen," said Winkiboo. " Don't you feel wiser now than you have ever done before ? "

Then Boh-boh became greatly enraged, and he caught little Winkiboo up by the scruff of his neck and shook him, crying : " If you don't tell me how you have learned to grow wise all of a sudden, as you have done, I will break every bone in your back. And if you play me one other trick like this, for that also will I break you when I catch you ! "

So then Winkiboo said meekly and in haste : " When I learn my lessons, I go and sit on the statue in the ruined shrine that is in the wood ; and that is how I grow wiser."

When Boh-boh heard that, then truly he believed that he had got to the secret of the whole business ; so for the time he let Winkiboo go. And the next morning very early he went to the wood where the statue lay, that he might sit on it and learn his lesson and regain the place that he had lost.

But as soon as Buddha saw the big, fat, lazy, clever boy coming to be taught of him, he fell softly forward upon his face, so that whereas he had formerly been seated, what before was lowest now came uppermost.

So Boh-boh, coming to the shrine and finding the image thus prostrate, climbed up and sat himself down on the statue where he found things most convenient for sitting on.

But no sooner had he conned his lesson once through, than he forgot it utterly ; and when he got to school that day, he received the due reward of his foolishness, while away in the wood the solitary god sat up and smiled.

But as for Winkiboo, his memory remained unimpaired, and his brain spread ; and he became in course of time a paragon of learning, a fathomer of riddles, a trisector of triangles, a worker in logarithms, and a solver of acrostics : for between him and the statue there was a perfect understanding.