

BEING THE ADVENTURES OF
THE BASTABLE CHILDREN
IN SEARCH OF A FORTUNE
TO OSWALD BARRON
WITHOUT WHOM THIS BOOK COULD
NEVER HAVE BEEN WRITTEN
“THE TREASURE SEEKERS” IS DEDICATED
IN MEMORY OF CHILDHOODS
IDENTICAL BUT FOR THE
ACCIDENTS OF TIME
AND SPACE

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Chapter I

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; and scarlet was a nice change. Father does not like you to ask for new things. That was one way we had of knowing that the fortunes of the ancient House of Bastable were really fallen. Another way was that there was no more pocket-money – except a penny now and then to the little ones, and people did not come to dinner any more, like they used to, with pretty dresses, driving

up in cabs—and the carpets got holes in them—and when the legs came off things they were not sent to be mended, and we gave *up* having the gardener except for the front garden, and not that very often. And the silver in the big oak plate-chest that is lined with green baize all went away to the shop to have the dents and scratches taken out of it, and it never came back. We think Father hadn't enough money to pay the silver man for taking out the dents and scratches. The new spoons and forks were yellowy-white, and not so heavy as the old ones, and they never shone after the first day or two.

Father was very ill after Mother died; and while he was ill his business-partner went to Spain—and there was never much money afterwards. I don't know why. Then the servants left and there was only one, a General. A great deal of your comfort and happiness depends on having a good General. The last but one was nice: she used to make jolly good currant puddings for us, and let us have the dish on the floor and pretend it was a wild boar we were killing with our forks. But the General we have now nearly always makes sago puddings, and they are the watery kind, and you cannot pretend anything with them, not even islands, like you do with porridge.

Then we left off going to school, and Father said we should go to a good school as soon as he could manage it. He said a holiday would do us all good.

We thought he was right, but we wished he had told us he couldn't afford it. For of course we knew.

Then a great many people used to come to the door with envelopes with no stamps on them, and sometimes they got very angry, and said they were calling for the last time before putting it in other hands. I asked Eliza what that meant, and she kindly explained to me, and I was so sorry for Father.

And once a long, blue paper came; a policeman brought it, and we were so frightened. But Father said it was all right, only when he went up to kiss the girls after they were in bed they said he had been crying, though I'm sure that's not true. Because only cowards and snivellers cry, and my Father is the bravest man in the world.

So you see it was time we looked for treasure and Oswald said so, and Dora said it was all very well. But the others agreed with Oswald. So we held a council. Dora was in the chair—the big dining-room chair, that we let the fireworks off from, the Fifth of November when we had the measles and couldn't do it in the garden. The hole has never been mended, so now we have that chair in the nursery, and I think it was cheap at the blowing-up we boys got when the hole was burnt.

'We must do something,' said Alice, 'because the exchequer is empty.' She rattled the money-box as she spoke, and it really did rattle because we always keep the bad sixpence in it for luck.

‘Yes—but what shall we do?’ said Dicky. ‘It’s so jolly easy to say let’s do *something*.’ Dicky always wants everything settled exactly. Father calls him the Definite Article.

‘Let’s read all the books again. We shall get lots of ideas out of them.’ It was Noel who suggested this, but we made him shut up, because we knew well enough he only wanted to get back to his old books. Noel is a poet. He sold some of his poetry once—and it was printed, but that does not come in this part of the story.

Then Dicky said, ‘Look here. We’ll be quite quiet for ten minutes by the clock—and each think of some way to find treasure. And when we’ve thought we’ll try all the ways one after the other, beginning with the eldest.’

‘I shan’t be able to think in ten minutes, make it half an hour,’ said H. O. His real name is Horace Octavius, but we call him H. O. because of the advertisement, and it’s not so very long ago he was afraid to pass the hoarding where it says ‘Eat H. O.’ in big letters. He says it was when he was a little boy, but I remember last Christmas but one, he woke in the middle of the night crying and howling, and they said it was the pudding. But he told me afterwards he had been dreaming that they really *had* come to eat H. O., and it couldn’t have been the pudding, when you come to think of it, because it was so very plain.

Well, we made it half an hour—and we all sat quiet,

and thought and thought. And I made up my mind before two minutes were over, and I saw the others had, all but Dora, who is always an awful time over everything. I got pins and needles in my leg from sitting still so long, and when it was seven minutes H.O. cried out – ‘Oh, it must be more than half an hour!’

H. O. is eight years old, but he cannot tell the clock yet. Oswald could tell the clock when he was six.

We all stretched ourselves and began to speak at once, but Dora put up her hands to her ears and said – ‘One at a time, please. We aren’t playing Babel.’ (It is a very good game. Did you ever play it?)

So Dora made us all sit in a row on the floor, in ages, and then she pointed at us with the finger that had the brass thimble on. Her silver one got lost when the last General but two went away. We think she must have forgotten it was Dora’s and put it in her box by mistake. She was a very forgetful girl. She used to forget what she had spent money on, so that the change was never quite right.

Oswald spoke first. ‘I think we might stop people on Blackheath – with crape masks and horse-pistols – and say “Your money or your life! Resistance is useless, we are armed to the teeth” – like Dick Turpin and Claude Duval. It wouldn’t matter about not having horses, because coaches have gone out too.’

Dora screwed up her nose the way she always does when she is going to talk like the good elder sister in books, and said, ‘That would be very wrong: it’s

like pickpocketing or taking pennies out of Father's great-coat when it's hanging in the hall.'

I must say I don't think she need have said that, especially before the little ones—for it was when I was only four.

But Oswald was not going to let her see he cared, so he said—

'Oh, very well. I can think of lots of other ways. We could rescue an old gentleman from deadly Highwaymen.'

'There aren't any,' said Dora.

'Oh, well, it's all the same—from deadly peril, then. There's plenty of that. Then he would turn out to be the Prince of Wales, and he would say, "My noble, my cherished preserver! Here is a million pounds a year. Rise up, Sir Oswald Bastable."'

But the others did not seem to think so, and it was Alice's turn to say.

She said, 'I think we might try the divining-rod. I'm sure I could do it. I've often read about it. You hold a stick in your hands, and when you come to where there is gold underneath the stick kicks about. So you know. And you dig.'

'Oh,' said Dora suddenly, 'I have an idea. But I'll say last. I hope the divining-rod isn't wrong. I believe it's wrong in the Bible.'

'So is eating pork and ducks,' said Dicky. 'You can't go by that.'

‘Anyhow, we’ll try the other ways first,’ said Dora. ‘Now, H. O.’

‘Let’s be Bandits,’ said H. O. ‘I dare say it’s wrong but it would be fun pretending.’

‘I’m sure it’s wrong,’ said Dora.

And Dicky said she thought everything wrong. She said she didn’t, and Dicky was very disagreeable. So Oswald had to make peace, and he said—

‘Dora needn’t play if she doesn’t want to. Nobody asked her. And, Dicky, don’t be an idiot: do dry up and let’s hear what Noel’s idea is.’

Dora and Dicky did not look pleased, but I kicked Noel under the table to make him hurry up, and then he said he didn’t think he wanted to play any more. That’s the worst of it. The others are so jolly ready to quarrel. I told Noel to be a man and not a snivelling pig, and at last he said he had not made up his mind whether he would print his poetry in a book and sell it, or find a princess and marry her.

‘Whichever it is,’ he added, ‘none of you shall want for anything, though Oswald did kick me, and say I was a snivelling pig.’

‘I didn’t,’ said Oswald, ‘I told you not to be.’ And Alice explained to him that that was quite the opposite of what he thought. So he agreed to drop it.

Then Dicky spoke.

‘You must all of you have noticed the advertisements in the papers, telling you that ladies and gentlemen

can easily earn two pounds a week in their spare time, and to send two shillings for sample and instructions, carefully packed free from observation. Now that we don't go to school all our time is spare time. So I should think we could easily earn twenty pounds a week each. That would do us very well. We'll try some of the other things first, and directly we have any money we'll send for the sample and instructions. And I have another idea, but I must think about it before I say.'

We all said, 'Out with it—what's the other idea?'

But Dicky said, 'No.' That is Dicky all over. He never will show you anything he's making till it's quite finished, and the same with his inmost thoughts. But he is pleased if you seem to want to know, so Oswald said—

'Keep your silly old secret, then. Now, Dora, drive ahead. We've all said except you.'

Then Dora jumped up and dropped the stocking and the thimble (it rolled away, and we did not find it for days), and said—

'Let's try my way *now*. Besides, I'm the eldest, so it's only fair. Let's dig for treasure. Not any tiresome divining-rod—but just plain digging. People who dig for treasure always find it. And then we shall be rich and we needn't try your ways at all. Some of them are rather difficult: and I'm certain some of them are wrong—and we must always remember that wrong things—'

But we told her to shut up and come on, and she did.

I couldn't help wondering as we went down to the garden, why Father had never thought of digging there for treasure instead of going to his beastly office every day.