HARDING'S LUCK

E. Nesbit

WINDERMERE PRESS VINTAGE REPRINTS

THIS BOOK BELONGS TO

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FRONT COVER ARTWORK:
Sunflowers in the Front Yard
by A. Kaufmann (1904)

Harding's Luck

E. NESBIT

ILLUSTRATED BY H. R. MILLAR

WINDERMERE PRESS
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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This edition was prepared from the first edition of *Harding's Luck*, published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1909, and the first American edition published by the Frederick A. Stokes Company in 1910. The contents of the book are presented as originally published and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Windermere Press.

DEDICATION

TO

Rosamund Philipa Philips

WITH

E. Nesbit's Love

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One

Tinkler and the Moonflower

Dickie lived at New Cross. At least the address was New Cross, but really the house where he lived was one of a row of horrid little houses built on the slope where once green fields ran down the hill to the river, and the old houses of the Deptford merchants stood stately in their pleasant gardens and fruitful orchards. All those good fields and happy gardens are built over now. It is as though some wicked giant had taken a big brush full of yellow ochre paint, and another full of mud color, and had painted out the green in streaks of dull yellow and filthy brown; and the brown is the roads and the yellow is the houses. Miles and miles and miles of them, and not a green thing to be seen except the cabbages in the greengrocers' shops, and here and there some poor trails of creeping-jenny drooping from a dirty window-sill. There is a little yard at the back of each house; this is called "the garden," and some of

these show green—but they only show it to the houses' back windows. You cannot see it from the street. These gardens are green, because green is the color that most pleases and soothes men's eyes; and however you may shut people up between bars of yellow and mud color, and however hard you may make them work, and however little wage you may pay them for working, there will always be found among those people some men who are willing to work a little longer, and for no wages at all, so that they may have green things growing near them.

But there were no green things growing in the garden at the back of the house where Dickie lived with his aunt. There were stones and bones, and bits of brick, and dirty old dish-cloths matted together with grease and mud, worn-out broom-heads and broken shovels, a bottomless pail, and the mouldy remains of a hutch where once rabbits had lived. But that was a very long time ago, and Dickie had never seen the rabbits. A boy had brought a brown rabbit to school once, buttoned up inside his jacket, and he had let Dickie hold it in his hands for several minutes before the teacher detected its presence and shut it up in a locker

till school should be over. So Dickie knew what rabbits were like. And he was fond of the hutch for the sake of what had once lived there.

And when his aunt sold the poor remains of the hutch to a man with a barrow who was ready to buy anything, and who took also the pails and the shovels, giving threepence for the lot, Dickie was almost as unhappy as though the hutch had really held a furry friend. And he hated the man who took the hutch away, all the more because there were empty rabbit-skins hanging sadly from the back of the barrow.

It is really with the going of that rabbit-hutch that this story begins. Because it was then that Dickie, having called his aunt a Beast, and hit at her with his little dirty fist, was well slapped and put out into the bereaved yard to "come to himself," as his aunt said. He threw himself down on the ground and cried and wriggled with misery and pain, and wished—ah, many things.

"Wot's the bloomin' row now?" the Man Next Door suddenly asked; "been hittin' of you?"

"They've took away the 'utch," said Dickie.

"Well, there warn't nothin' in it."

"I diden want it took away," wailed Dickie.

"Leaves more room," said the Man Next Door, leaning on his spade. It was Saturday afternoon and the next-door garden was one of the green ones. There were small grubby daffodils in it, and dirty-faced little primroses, and an arbor beside the water-butt, bare at this time of the year, but still a real arbor. And an elder-tree that in the hot weather had flat, white flowers on it big as tea-plates. And a lilac-tree with brown buds on it. Beautiful. "Say, matey, just you chuck it! Chuck it, I say! How in thunder can I get on with my digging with you 'owlin' yer 'ead off?" inquired the Man Next Door. "You get up and peg along in an' arst your aunt if she'd be agreeable for me to do up her garden a bit. I could do it odd times. You'd like that."

"Not 'arf!" said Dickie, getting up.

"Come to yourself, eh?" sneered the aunt. "You mind, and let it be the last time you come your games with me, my beauty. You and your tantrums!"

Dickie said what it was necessary to say, and got back to the "garden."

"She says she ain't got no time to waste, an' if you 'ave she don't care what you does with it."

"There's a dirty mug you've got on you," said the Man Next Door, leaning over to give Dickie's face a rub with a handkerchief hardly cleaner. "Now I'll come over and make a start." He threw his leg over the fence. "You just peg about an' be busy pickin' up all them fancy articles, and nex' time your aunt goes to Buckingham Palace for the day we'll have a bonfire."

"Fifth o' November?" said Dickie, sitting down and beginning to draw to himself the rubbish that covered the ground.

"Fifth of anything you like, so long as *she* ain't about," said he, driving in the spade. "'Ard as any old door-step it is. Never mind, we'll turn it over, and we'll get some little seedses and some little plantses and we shan't know ourselves."

"I got a 'apenny," said Dickie.

"Well, I'll put one to it, and you leg 'long and buy seedses. That's wot you do."

Dickie went. He went slowly, because he was lame. And he was lame because his "aunt" had dropped him when he was a baby. She was

not a nice woman, and I am glad to say that she goes out of this story almost at once. But she did keep Dickie when his father died, and she might have sent him to the work-house. For she was not really his aunt, but just the woman of the house where his father had lodged. It was good of her to keep Dickie, even if she wasn't very kind to him. And as that is all the good I can find to say about her, I will say no more. With his little crutch, made out of a worn-out broom cut down to his little height, he could manage quite well in spite of his lameness.

He found the corn-chandler's—a really charming shop that smelled like stables and had deep dusty bins where he would have liked to play. Above the bins were delightful little square-fronted drawers, labelled Rape, Hemp, Canary, Millet, Mustard, and so on; and above the drawers pictures of the kind of animals that were fed on the kind of things that the shop sold. Fat, oblong cows that had eaten Burley's Cattle Food, stout pillows of wool that Ovis's Sheep Spice had fed, and, brightest and best of all, an incredibly smooth-plumaged parrot, rainbow-colored, cocking a black eye

bright with the intoxicating qualities of Perrokett's Artistic Bird Seed.

"Gimme," said Dickie, leaning against the counter and pointing a grimy thumb at the wonder—"gimme a penn'orth o' that there!"

"Got the penny?" the shopman asked carefully.

Dickie displayed it, parted with it, and came home nursing a paper bag full of rustling promises.

"Why," said the Man Next Door, "that ain't seeds. It's parrot food, that is."

"It said the Ar-something Bird Seed," said Dickie, downcast; "I thought it 'ud come into flowers like birds—same colors as wot the poll parrot was, dontcherknow?"

"And so it will like as not," said the Man Next Door comfortably. "I'll set it along this end soon's I've got it turned over. I lay it'll come up something pretty."

So the seed was sown. And the Man Next Door promised two more pennies later for *real* seed. Also he transplanted two of the primroses whose faces wanted washing.

It was a grand day for Dickie. He told the whole story of it that night when he went to


PERROKETTS
ARTISTIC
BIRD
SEED
WHOLE
MEAL

bed to his only confidant, from whom he hid nothing. The confidant made no reply, but Dickie was sure this was not because the confidant didn't care about the story. The confidant was a blackened stick about five inches long, with little blackened bells to it like the bells on dogs' collars. Also a rather crooked bit of something whitish and very hard, good to suck, or to stroke with your fingers, or to dig holes in the soap with. Dickie had no idea what it was. His father had given it to him in the hospital where Dickie was taken to say good-bye to him. Good-bye had to be said because of father having fallen off the scaffolding where he was at work and not getting better. "You stick to that," father had said, looking dreadfully clean in the strange bed among all those other clean beds; "it's yourn, your very own. My dad give it to me, and it belonged to his dad. Don't you let any one take it away. Some old lady told the old man it 'ud bring us luck. So long, old chap."

Dickie remembered every word of that speech, and he kept the treasure. There had been another thing with it, tied on with string. But Aunt Maud had found that, and taken it away "to take care of," and he had never seen

it again. It was brassy, with a white stone and some sort of pattern on it. He had the treasure, and he had not the least idea what it was, with its bells that jangled such pretty music, and its white spike so hard and smooth. He did not know—but I know. It was a rattle—a baby's old-fashioned rattle—or, if you would rather call it that, a "coral and bells."

"And we shall 'ave the fairest flowers of hill and dale," said Dickie, whispering comfortably in his dirty sheets, "and greensward. Oh! Tinkler dear, 'twill indeed be a fair scene. The gayest colors of the rainbow amid the Ague Able green of fresh leaves. I do love the Man Next Door. He has indeed a 'art of gold."

That was how Dickie talked to his friend Tinkler. You know how he talked to his aunt and the Man Next Door. I wonder whether you know that most children can speak at least two languages, even if they have never had a foreign nurse or been to foreign climes—or whether you think that you are the only child who can do this.

Believe me, you are not. Parents and guardians would be surprised to learn that dear little Charlie has a language quite

different from the one he uses to them—a language in which he talks to the cook and the housemaid. And yet another language—spoken with the real accent too—in which he converses with the boot-boy and the grooms.

Dickie, however, had learned his second language from books. The teacher at his school had given him six—"Children of the New Forest," "Quentin Durward," "Hereward the Wake," and three others—all paper-backed. They made a new world for Dickie. And since the people in books talked in this nice, if odd, way, he saw no reason why he should not—to a friend whom he could trust.

I hope you're not getting bored with all this.

You see, I must tell you a little about the kind of boy Dickie was and the kind of way he lived, or you won't understand his adventures. And he had adventures—no end of adventures—as you will see presently.

Dickie woke, gay as the spring sun that was trying to look in at him through his grimy windows.

"Perhaps he'll do some more to the garden today!" he said, and got up very quickly.

He got up in the dirty, comfortless room and dressed himself. But in the evening he was undressed by kind, clean hands, and washed in a big bath half-full of hot, silvery water, with soap that smelled like the timber-yard at the end of the street. Because, going along to school, with his silly little head full of Artistic Bird Seeds and flowers rainbow-colored, he had let his crutch slip on a banana-skin and had tumbled down, and a butcher's cart had gone over his poor lame foot. So they took the hurt foot to the hospital, and of course he had to go with it, and the hospital was much more like the heaven he read of in his books than anything he had ever come across before.

He noticed that the nurses and the doctors spoke in the kind of words that he had found in his books, and in a voice that he had not found anywhere; so when on the second day a round-faced, smiling lady in a white cap said, "Well, Tommy, and how are we today?" he replied—

"My name is far from being Tommy, and I am in Lux Ury and Af Fluence, I thank you, gracious lady."

At which the lady laughed and pinched his cheek.

When she grew to know him better, and found out where he had learned to talk like that, she produced more books. And from them he learned more new words. They were very nice to him at the hospital, but when they sent him home they put his lame foot into a thick boot with a horrid, clumpy sole and iron things that went up his leg.

His aunt and her friends said, "How kind!" but Dickie hated it. The boys at school made game of it—they had got used to the crutch—and that was worse than being called "Old Dot-and-go-one," which was what Dickie had got used to—so used that it seemed almost like a pet name.

And on that first night of his return he found that he had been robbed. They had taken his Tinkler from the safe corner in his bed where the ticking was broken, and there was a soft flock nest for a boy's best friend.

He knew better than to ask what had become of it. Instead he searched and searched the house in all its five rooms. But he never found Tinkler.

Instead he found next day, when his aunt had gone out shopping, a little square of cardboard at the back of the dresser drawer,

among the dirty dusters and clothes pegs and string and corks and novelettes.

It was a pawn-ticket—"Rattle. One shilling."

Dickie knew all about pawn-tickets. You, of course, don't. Well, ask some grown-up person to explain; I haven't time. I want to get on with the story.

Until he had found that ticket he had not been able to think of anything else. He had not even cared to think about his garden and wonder whether the Artistic Bird Seeds had come up parrot-colored. He had been a very long time in the hospital, and it was August now. And the nurses had assured him that the seeds must be up long ago—he would find everything flowering, you see if he didn't.

And now he went out to look. There was a tangle of green growth at the end of the garden, and the next garden was full of weeds. For the Man Next Door had gone off to look for work down Ashford way, where the hop-gardens are, and the house was to let.

A few poor little pink and yellow flowers showed stunted among the green where he had sowed the Artistic Bird Seed. And, towering high above everything else—oh,

three times as high as Dickie himself—there was a flower—a great flower like a sunflower, only white.

"Why," said Dickie, "it's as big as a dinner-plate."

It was.

It stood up, beautiful and stately, and turned its cream-white face towards the sun.

"The stalk's like a little tree," said Dickie; and so it was.

It had great drooping leaves, and a dozen smaller white flowers stood out below it on long stalks, thinner than that needed to support the moonflower itself.

"It *is* a moonflower, of course," he said, "if the other kind's sunflowers. I love it! I love it! I love it!"

He did not allow himself much time for loving it, however; for he had business in hand. He had, somehow or other, to get a shilling. Because without a shilling he could not exchange that square of cardboard with "Rattle" on it for his one friend, Tinkler. And with the shilling he could. (This is part of the dismal magic of pawn-tickets which some grown-up will kindly explain to you.)

"I can't get money by the sweat of my brow," said Dickie to himself; "nobody would let me run their errands when they could get a boy with both legs to do them. Not likely. I wish I'd got something I could sell."

He looked round the yard—dirtier and nastier than ever now in the parts that the Man Next Door had not had time to dig. There was certainly nothing there that any one would want to buy, especially now the rabbit-hutch was gone. Except . . . why, of course—the moon-flowers!

He got the old worn-down knife out of the bowl on the back kitchen sink, where it nestled among potato peelings like a flower among foliage, and carefully cut half a dozen of the smaller flowers. Then he limped up to New Cross Station, and stood outside, leaning on his crutch, and holding out the flowers to the people who came crowding out of the station after the arrival of each train—thick, black crowds of tired people, in too great a hurry to get home to their teas to care much about him or his flowers. Everybody glanced at them, for they were wonderful flowers, as white as water-lilies, only flat—the real sunflower

shape—and their centres were of the purest yellow gold color.

"Pretty, ain't they?" one black-coated person would say to another. And the other would reply—

"No. Yes. I dunno! Hurry up, can't you?"

It was no good. Dickie was tired, and the flowers were beginning to droop. He turned to go home, when a sudden thought brought the blood to his face. He turned again quickly and went straight to the pawnbroker's. You may be quite sure he had learned the address on the card by heart.

He went boldly into the shop, which had three handsome gold balls hanging out above its door, and in its window all sorts of pretty things—rings, and chains, and brooches, and watches, and china, and silk handkerchiefs, and concertinas.

"Well, young man," said the stout gentleman behind the counter, "what can we do for you?"

"I want to pawn my moonflowers," said Dickie.

The stout gentleman roared with laughter, and slapped a stout leg with a stout hand.

"Well, that's a good 'un!" he said, "as good a one as ever I heard. Why, you little duffer, they'd be dead long before you came back to redeem them, that's certain."

"You'd have them while they were alive, you know," said Dickie gently.

"What are they? Don't seem up to much. Though I don't know that I ever saw a flower just like them, come to think of it," said the pawnbroker, who lived in a neat villa at Brockley and went in for gardening in a gentlemanly, you-needn't-suppose-I-can't-afford-a-real-gardener-if-I-like sort of way.

"They're moonflowers," said Dickie, "and I want to pawn them and then get something else out with the money."

"Got the ticket?" said the gentleman, cleverly seeing that he meant "get out of pawn."

"Yes," said Dickie; "and it's my own Tinkler that my daddy gave me before he died, and my aunt Missa propagated it when I was in hospital."

The man looked carefully at the card.

"All right," he said at last; "hand over the flowers. They are not so bad," he added, more willing to prize them now that they were his

(things do look different when they are your own, don't they?). "Here, Humphreys, put these in a jug of water till I go home. And get this out."

A pale young man in spectacles appeared from a sort of dark cave at the back of the shop, took flowers and ticket, and was swallowed up again in the darkness of the cave.

"Oh, thank you!" said Dickie fervently. "I shall live but to repay your bounteous gen'rosity."

"None of your cheek," said the pawnbroker, reddening, and there was an awkward pause.

"It's not cheek; I meant it," said Dickie at last, speaking very earnestly. "You'll see, some of these days. I read an interesting Nar Rataive about a Lion the King of Beasts and a Mouse, that small and Ty Morous animal, which if you have not heard it I will now Pur seed to relite."

"You're a rum little kid, I don't think," said the man. "Where do you learn such talk?"

"It's the wye they talk in books," said Dickie, suddenly returning to the language of his aunt. "You bein' a toff I thought you'd unnerstand. My mistike. No 'fense."


R. MILLAR

"Mean to say you can talk like a book when you like, and cut it off short like that?"

"I can Con-vers like Lords and Lydies," said Dickie, in the accents of the gutter, "and your noble benefacteriness made me seek to express my feelinks with the best words at me Command."

"Fond of books?"

"I believe you," said Dickie, and there were no more awkward pauses.

When the pale young man came back with something wrapped in a bit of clean rag, he said a whispered word or two to the pawnbroker, who unrolled the rag and looked closely at the rattle.

"So it is," he said, "and it's a beauty too, let alone anything else."

"Isn't he?" said Dickie, touched by this praise of his treasured Tinkler.

"I've got something else here that's got the same crest as your rattle."

"Crest?" said Dickie; "isn't that what you wear on your helmet in the heat and press of the Tower Nament?"

The pawnbroker explained that crests no longer live exclusively on helmets, but on all sorts of odd things. And the queer little animal,

drawn in fine scratches on the side of the rattle, was, it seemed, a crest.

"Here, Humphreys," he added, "give it a rub up and bring that seal here."

The pale young man did something to Tinkler with some pinky powder and a brush and a wash-leather, while his master fitted together the two halves of a broken white cornelian.

"It came out of a seal," he said, "and I don't mind making you a present of it."

"Oh!" said Dickie, "you are a real rightern." And he rested his crutch against the counter expressly to clasp his hands in ecstasy as boys in books did.

"My young man shall stick it together with cement," the pawnbroker went on, "and put it in a little box. Don't you take it out till tomorrow and it'll be stuck fast. Only don't go trying to seal with it, or the sealing-wax will melt the cement. It'll bring you luck, I shouldn't wonder."

(It did; and such luck as the kind pawnbroker never dreamed of. But that comes further on in the story.)

Dickie left the shop without his moon-flowers, indeed, but with his Tinkler now

whitely shining, and declared to be "real silver, and mind you take care of it, my lad," his white cornelian seal carefully packed in a strong little cardboard box with metal corners. Also a broken-backed copy of "Ingoldsby Legends" and one of "Mrs. Markham's English History," which had no back at all. "You must go on trying to improve your mind," said the pawnbroker fussily. He was very pleased with himself for having been so kind. "And come back and see me—say next month."

"I will," said Dickie. "A thousand blessings from a grateful heart. I will come back. I say, you are good! Thank you, thank you—I will come back next month, and tell you everything I have learned from the Perru Sal of your books."

"Perusal," said the pawnbroker—"that's the way to pernounce it. Good-bye, my man, and next month."

But next month found Dickie in a very different place from the pawnbroker's shop, and with a very different person from the pawnbroker who in his rural retirement at Brockley gardened in such a gentlemanly way.

Dickie went home—his aunt was still out. His books told him that treasure is best hidden

under loose boards, unless of course your house has a secret panel, which his had not. There was a loose board in his room, where the man "saw to" the gas. He got it up, and pushed his treasures as far in as he could—along the rough, crumbly surface of the lath and plaster.

Not a moment too soon. For before the board was coaxed quite back into its place the voice of the aunt screamed up.

"Come along down, can't you? I can hear you pounding about up there. Come along down and fetch me a ha'porth o' wood—I can't get the kettle to boil without a fire, can I?"

When Dickie came down his aunt slightly slapped him, and he took the halfpenny and limped off obediently.

It was a very long time indeed before he came back. Because before he got to the shop with no window to it, but only shutters that were put up at night, where the wood and coal were sold, he saw a Punch and Judy show. He had never seen one before, and it interested him extremely. He longed to see it unpack itself and display its wonders, and he followed it through more streets than he knew; and when he found that it was not going to unpack at all, but was just going home to its bed in an

old coach-house, he remembered the firewood; and the halfpenny clutched tight and close in his hand seemed to reproach him warmly.

He looked about him, and knew that he did not at all know where he was. There was a tall, thin, ragged man lounging against a stable door in the yard where the Punch and Judy show lived. He took his clay pipe out of his mouth to say—

"What's up, matey? Lost your way?"

Dickie explained.

"It's Lavender Terrace where I live," he ended—"Lavender Terrace, Rosemary Street, Deptford."

"I'm going that way myself," said the man, getting away from the wall. "We'll go back by the boat if you like. Ever been on the boat?"

"No," said Dickie.

"Like to?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Dickie.

It was very pleasant with the steamboat going along in such a hurry, pushing the water out of the way, and puffing and blowing, and something beating inside it like a giant's heart. The wind blew freshly, and the ragged man found a sheltered corner behind the funnel. It

was so sheltered, and the wind had been so strong that Dickie felt sleepy. When he said, "'Ave I bin asleep?" the steamer was stopping at a pier at a strange place with trees.

"Here we are!" said the man. "'Ave you been asleep? Not 'alf! Stir yourself, my man; we get off here."

"Is this Deptford?" Dickie asked. And the people shoving and crushing to get off the steamer laughed when he said it.

"Not exackly," said the man, "but it's all right. This 'ere's where we get off. You ain't had yer tea yet, my boy."

It was the most glorious tea Dickie had ever imagined. Fried eggs and bacon—he had one egg and the man had three—bread and butter—and if the bread was thick, so was the butter—and as many cups of tea as you liked to say thank you for. When it was over the man asked Dickie if he could walk a little way, and when Dickie said he could they set out in the most friendly way side by side.

"I like it very much, and thank you kindly," said Dickie presently. "And the tea and all. An' the egg. And this is the prettiest place ever I see. But I ought to be getting 'ome. I shall catch it a fair treat as it is. She was

waitin' for the wood to boil the kettle when I come out."

"Mother?"

"Aunt. Not me real aunt. Only I calls her that."

"She any good?"

"Ain't bad when she's in a good temper."

"That ain't what she'll be in when you gets back. Seems to me you've gone and done it, mate. Why, it's hours and hours since you and me got acquainted. Look! the sun's just going."

It was, over trees more beautiful than anything Dickie had ever seen, for they were now in a country road, with green hedges and green grass growing beside it, in which little round-faced flowers grew—daisies they were—even Dickie knew that.

"I got to stick it," said Dickie sadly. "I'd best be getting home."

"I wouldn't go 'ome, not if I was you," said the man. "I'd go out and see the world a bit, I would."

"What—me?" said Dickie.

"Why not? Come, I'll make you a fair offer. Ye come alonger me an' see life! I'm a-goin' to tramp as far as Brighton and back, all alongside the sea. Ever seed the sea?"

"No," said Dickie. "Oh, no—no, I never."

"Well, you come alonger me. I ain't 'it yer, have I, like what yer aunt do? I give yer a ride in a pleasure boat, only you went to sleep, and I give you a tea fit for a hemperor. Ain't I?"

"You 'ave that," said Dickie.

"Well, that'll show you the sort of man I am. So now I make you a fair offer. You come longer me, and be my little 'un, and I'll be your daddy, and a better dad, I lay, nor if I'd been born so. What do you say, matey?"

The man's manner was so kind and hearty, the whole adventure was so wonderful and new . . . .

"Is it country where you going?" said Dickie, looking at the green hedge.

"All the way, pretty near," said the man. "We'll tramp it, taking it easy, all round the coast, where gents go for their outings. They've always got a bit to spare then. I lay you'll get some color in them cheeks o' yours. They're like putty now. Come, now. What you say? Is it a bargain?"

"It's very kind of you," said Dickie, "but what call you got to do it? It'll cost a lot—my victuals, I mean. What call you got to do it?"

The man scratched his head and hesitated. Then he looked up at the sky and then down at the road—they were resting on a heap of stones.

At last he said, "You're a sharp lad, you are—bloomin' sharp. Well, I won't deceive you, matey. I want company. Tramping alone ain't no beano to me. An' as I gets my living by the sweat of charitable ladies an' gents it don't do no harm to 'ave a little nipper alongside. They comes down 'andsomer if there's a nipper. An' I like nippers. Some blokes don't, but I do."

Dickie felt that this was true. But—"We'll be beggars, you mean?" he said doubtfully.

"Oh, don't call names," said the man; "we'll take the road, and if kind people gives us a helping hand, well, so much the better for all parties, if wot they learned me at Sunday-school's any good. Well, there it is. Take it or leave it."

The sun shot long golden beams through the gaps in the hedge. A bird paused in its flight on a branch quite close and clung there swaying. A real live bird. Dickie thought of the kitchen at home, the lamp that smoked, the dirty table, the fender full of ashes and dirty

paper, the dry bread that tasted of mice, and the water out of the broken earthenware cup. That would be his breakfast, when he had gone to bed crying after his aunt had slapped him.

"I'll come," said he, "and thank you kindly."

"Mind you," said the man carefully, "this ain't no kidnapping. I ain't 'ticed you away. You come on your own free wish, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"Can you write?"

"Yes," said Dickie, "if I got a pen."

"I got a pencil—hold on a bit." He took out of his pocket a new envelope, a new sheet of paper, and a new pencil ready sharpened by machinery. It almost looked, Dickie thought, as though he had brought them out for some special purpose. Perhaps he had.

"Now," said the man, "you take an' write—make it flat agin the sole of me boot." He lay face downward on the road and turned up his boot, as though boots were the most natural writing-desks in the world.

"Now write what I say: 'Mr. Beale. Dear Sir. Will you please take me on tramp with you? I 'ave no father nor yet mother to be uneasy' (Can you spell 'uneasy'? That's right—

you *are* a scholar!), 'an' I asks you let me come alonger you.' (Got that? All right, I'll stop a bit till you catch up. Then you say) 'If you take me along I promise to give you all what I earns or gets anyhow, and be a good boy, and do what you say. And I shall be very glad if you will. Your obedient servant—' What's your name, eh?"

"Dickie Harding."

"Get it wrote down, then. Done? I'm glad I wasn't born a table to be wrote on. Don't it make yer legs stiff, neither!"

He rolled over, took the paper and read it slowly and with difficulty. Then he folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Now we're square," he said. "That'll stand true and legal in any police-court in England, that will. And don't you forget it."

To the people who live in Rosemary Terrace the words "police-court" are very alarming indeed. Dickie turned a little paler and said, "Why police? I ain't done nothing wrong writin' what you telled me?"

"No, my boy," said the man, "you ain't done no wrong; you done right. But there's bad people in the world—police and such—as

might lay it up to me as I took you away against your will. They could put a man away for less than that."

"But it ain't agin my will," said Dickie; "I want to!"

"That's what *I* say," said the man cheerfully. "So now we're agreed upon it, if you'll step it we'll see about a doss for tonight; and tomorrow we'll sleep in the bed with the green curtains."

"I see that there in a book," said Dickie, charmed. "He Reward the Wake, the last of the English, and I wunnered what it stood for."

"It stands for laying out," said the man (and so it does, though that's not at all what the author of "Hereward" meant it to mean)—"laying out under a 'edge or a 'aystack or such and lookin' up at the stars till you goes by-by. An' jolly good business, too, fine weather. An' then you 'oofs it a bit and resties a bit, and some one gives you something to 'elp you along the road, and in the evening you 'as a glass of ale at the Publy Kows, and finds another set o' green bed curtains. An' on Saturday you gets in a extra lot of prog, and a Sunday you stays where you be and washes of your shirt."

"Do you have adventures?" asked Dick, recognizing in this description a rough sketch of the life of a modern knight-errant.

"'Ventures? I believe you!" said the man. "Why, only last month a brute of a dog bit me in the leg, at a back door Sutton way. An' once I see a elephant."

"Wild?" asked Dickie, thrilling.

"Not azackly wild—with a circus 'e was. But big! Wild ones ain't 'alf the size, I lay! And you meets soldiers, and parties in red coats ridin' on horses, with spotted dawgs, and motors as run you down and take your 'ead off afore you know you're dead if you don't look alive. Adventures? I should think so!"

"Ah!" said Dickie, and a full silence fell between them.

"Tired?" asked Mr. Beale presently.

"Just a tiddy bit, p'raps," said Dickie bravely, "but I can stick it."

"We'll get summat with wheels for you tomorrow," said the man, "if it's only a sugar-box; an' I can tie that leg of yours up to make it look like as if it was cut off."

"It's this 'ere nasty boot as makes me tired," said Dickie.

"Hoff with it," said the man obligingly; "down you sets on them stones and hoff with it! T'other too if you like. You can keep to the grass."

The dewy grass felt pleasantly cool and clean to Dickie's tired little foot, and when they crossed the road where a water-cart had dripped it was delicious to feel the cool mud squeeze up between your toes. That was charming; but it was pleasant, too, to wash the mud off on the wet grass. Dickie always remembered that moment. It was the first time in his life that he really enjoyed being clean. In the hospital you were almost too clean; and you didn't do it yourself. That made all the difference. Yet it was the memory of the hospital that made him say, "I wish I could 'ave a bath."

"So you shall," said Mr. Beale; "a reg'ler wash all over—this very night. I always like a wash meself. Some blokes think it pays to be dirty. But it don't. If you're clean they say 'Honest Poverty,' an' if you're dirty they say 'Serve you right.' We'll get a pail or something this very night."

"You *are* good," said Dickie. "I do like you."

Mr. Beale looked at him through the deepening twilight—rather queerly, Dickie thought. Also he sighed heavily.

"Oh, well—all's well as has no turning; and things don't always—What I mean to say, you be a good boy and I'll do the right thing by you."

"I know you will," said Dickie, with enthusiasm. "*I* know 'ow good you are!"

"Bless me!" said Mr. Beale uncomfortably. "Well, there. Step out, sonny, or we'll never get there this side Christmas."

✸

Now you see that Mr. Beale may be a cruel, wicked man who only wanted to get hold of Dickie so as to make money out of him; and he may be going to be very unkind indeed to Dickie when once he gets him away into the country, and is all alone with him—and his having that paper and envelope and pencil all ready looks odd, doesn't it? Or he may be a really benevolent person. Well, you'll know all about it presently.

✸

"And—here we are," said Mr. Beale, stopping in a side-street at an open door from which yellow light streamed welcomingly. "Now mind you don't contradict anything wot I say to people. And don't you forget you're my nipper, and you got to call me daddy."

"I'll call you farver," said Dickie. "I got a daddy of my own, you know."

"Why," said Mr. Beale, stopping suddenly, "you said he was dead."

"So he is," said Dickie; "but 'e's my daddy all the same."

"Oh, come on," said Mr. Beale impatiently. And they went in.