

The Incorrighibles

by LAURA GOODMAN SALVERSON

Even the haughtiest pride of a lady must vanish before the attack of a small boy—and a goat



"Bless my soul," said Anna Jalsen. "Now listen to me boy. I'll have no such talk as this if you come to live with me. You shall have enough to eat—the wretched villagers take me for a child-starver?"

THERE really was nothing very wrong with little Hals, though to be sure his ears did protrude a bit as if in perpetual hope of hearing something startling. But his ten-year-old body was straight as a ski-pole, his legs filled his red stockings healthily, and his eyes were bright as new buttons.

None the less, Anna Jalsen shook her head as she considered him standing straight and eager before her. He ought not to grin that way, she thought, with his mother just dead and his father nothing but a questionable memory. Besides, his teeth certainly needed straightening and that was sure to prove outrageously expensive.

"Hm, so he thinks he could run errands and mind the store for me," said Miss Jalsen, shifting her gaze to the tortoise shell cat at her feet, thinking aloud as was frequently her custom.

Hals' grin spread like a sunset and his bright button eyes began a hopeful and interested survey of Miss Jalsen's living room. It would be fun to fill that pot-bellied stove with its glowing mica belt, which stood, pompous and fixed as a bishop, in the alcove behind her. And, judging by the remnants of her meal, Anna Jalsen lived well, for all she was an old maid and queer at that.

"Well, well," Miss Jalsen drummed with silver-sheathed finger on the rosewood sewing table beside her. "Well, hm, hm. He seems healthy and good-natured; though to be sure one never knows about boys. Why don't you say something, child? Surely to goodness the parson didn't forget to put words in your mouth."

Hals laughed. "Parson said to his wife no doubt you'd think I ate too much. And I was just to say I never lied and knew the catechism up to the second quarter."

"And do you—never lie, I mean?" Anna Jalsen fired back at him sharply and snipped a thread with small, very white teeth. Young Hals pursed his mouth and his clean pink ears quivered expectantly.

"Ho! It's plain to be seen you're no wiser than the

parson," he informed her in a dancing voice that made the cat unsheathe its claws and twitch its tail nervously. "It's plain as can be, miss, you wasn't raised by a 'small tippler'."

Anna Jalsen bit off another length of thread, but instead of rethreading her needle she jabbed it fiercely into the fat pink elephant pin cushion on her sewing table. "Bless my soul! Now listen to me, boy. I'll have no such talk as this if you come to live with me. You shall have enough to eat. The idea! Do the wretched villagers take me for a child starver? And you must tell the truth—whenever possible. Now what do you say to that?"

Again young Hals laughed, this time so heartily that the cat leaped up and fled behind the stove. "Sure, I thank you kindly, miss. That's what the parson said I must say in any case, but not to promise I'd come until I'd seen Captain Peder Otteson."

Miss Jalsen froze into repelling dignity. "So! He said that, did he? But, of course, he would. Thick as thieves in harvest, that's what men are; and never a thought of the innocent victim. But mind now, speak the truth. Do you know that—that captain person, parson mentioned?"

"Who doesn't," giggled Hals, "and if it wasn't for his goat I'd have gone there first without deciding."

"Oh, so you think a vain brass-buttoned bachelor would make a better foster parent? Except for a goat I'd not have been considered. A fine beginning for a son!"

Hals was accustomed to erratic argument. Instead of replying he began a systematic scratching of the polished floor with the one strong bare toe that had defied sock and running shoe; it was great fun really. Besides what was the good of saying anything until Miss Jalsen had finished? Women folk didn't want an answer until they ran out of breath.

Sure enough a moment later Miss Jalsen caught her lips hard on the heels of a formidable word and stared at young Hals in lively suspicion. "Now what's this nonsense, anyway? Hals Bergstrom, if you can't be truthful at least try not to be ridiculous. Why, now I come to think of it, I've always been told that boys adored goats."

Hals stopped his delightful toe scraping, stopped, poised like a stork and treated his interlocutor to a swift vengeful frown. "He killed Pudge, that darn goat did! And I can't very well murder him if Captain Otteson is keeping me, now can I?" he fired at her with fierce, astonishing logic.

Anna Jalsen's reaction was perhaps no less astonishing. "Ha, had! He did, did he?" she thrilled and, jumping to her feet sped to a black cupboard which, with its heavy clawed feet and multiple brass-hinged doors painted in green

and gold dragons, had been an object of silent wonder to Hals for all of five minutes. The interest magnified now that Miss Jalsen opened a top compartment and brought out a silver dish filled with

stuffed prunes and home-candied citron peel. Still gleeful, she sang out: "Here, boy, hold out your hands. So, he's come to this, the grey monster! Well, I always said—but never mind what I said; best tell the parson to send over your box tomorrow. You shall have another dog, and as for that nonsense about eating you needn't worry on that score. Here, let me put the rest of these in your pocket."

Then shaking herself, frill by frill, Anna Jalsen added, doubtless for her own benefit since Hals was already disappearing through the doorway: "As a matter of fact the boy's cot is already in the loft. Ha! I might have known it. Peder Otteson can't even keep a goat out of mischief, let alone a child."

DURING the days that followed, Hals discovered a good many interesting qualities in his new benefactress. In the first place she was not half so old as he had imagined. Why, of a morning, when she stood before her gold-framed mirror brushing out her hair, she looked exactly like a frizzy Christmas-card angel; only much gayer, for her eyes caught and held the blue of morning like the sea itself. And even if she did talk at him in that detached, third person way, as if he were some genii in a bottle, she had a jolly little laugh that leaped out now and then surprising them both. And once when they had just discovered something especially amusing and the room vibrated so gaily that the tea-kettle hop-skipped on the stove, Hals made bold to ask why the villagers referred to Miss Jalsen as "that eccentric old maid." The adjective was something of a bother but she seemed to understand him well enough.

"What a boy!" she laughed, tossing back her small head. Then she ran to rescue the exploding kettle. "Ho! That's good, that is. But what would you have, boy Hals? Yes, what should the poor things call a woman who refuses to take to aprons and stew-pots just to keep some man fat as a herring? Old maid! Old maid! And what could be more derogatory unless perhaps eccentric old maid! For look now, you must have guessed that old maids, just plain old maids, mind you, are nothing more or less than natural failures; but an eccentric old maid is, in fact, a freak. A creature who, neither cross-eyed nor half-witted, prefers to mind her own business and be no man's flattering mirror! Now be a good boy and tell me what you think about it yourself?"

Hals always longed for an opportunity to engage in battle for Miss Jalsen when she smiled at him as she did now; with a twinkle in her blue eyes that gave way to



wistfulness which challenged the secret chivalry of his ragamuffin heart.

"Shucks!" said he, taking careful aim at the dosing cat with a paper wad. "I don't think nothing; nothing a-tall, 'cept maybe you didn't want to get married—not to Captain Otteson, anyhow."

SEVERAL days thereafter Hals broached an all important subject. It had to do with the promised dog. Miss Jalsen had suggested a respectably pedigreed puppy which she intended to buy on its becoming old enough to leave the kennels. Now Hals had a better plan. A boy in the village had told him that the pound-master had picked up a collie, a big yellow dog with regular spirit. And it was true; Hals had been out to the pound to see for himself. The yellow collie was a great dog; he had almost bitten the keeper, and yet, miraculously, had evinced an instant trust in Hals. And, best of all, he wouldn't cost Miss Jalsen a cent.

"Humm!" Miss Jalsen was not so sure of that. "What about Paddy, always nervous of big dogs?" she asked, stitching rapidly to keep from surrendering at once. Little boys, she had discovered, wore such speaking faces. Paddy was the cat and a personage of parts. Hals blinked. To tell the truth, his opinion of Paddy was not flattering. But Miss Jalsen was fast winning the blossoming affection of his starved young heart—and Paddy was her cat.

Awake to the complications this might entail, Hals, none the less, decided to put a good face on the matter: "Gosh, Miss Jalsen, dogs aren't dumb," he returned with bold emphasis. "Sure you can teach a great dog like that to leave your cat be. 'Sides look how he'd watch the store. I bet he'd attack anything. Why, I bet he'd even attack—"

Uncanny caution stayed further prophecy. Despite her good sense, Hals suspected that Miss Jalsen might not altogether approve of the high hope he entertained of that yellow wanderer's combative powers.

ON WEDNESDAYS, in keeping with modern practice, Miss Jalsen closed her fancy goods store at one o'clock sharp. But, by coming to a side door which opened into the box-like hall leading to her cheerful living room, customers who came to be fitted for the dainty lingerie she specialized in, could always be accommodated. To avoid embarrassment to her modest customers, Miss Jalsen had hit upon the plan of letting Hals play from four until six on this

mid-week holiday lest he come plunging in all unannounced. He was to do as he pleased, go where he pleased, but she was strict about his being back in time for tea.

But now had come a Wednesday and no Hals burst, bright-faced and hungry, into the quiet room on the stroke of six. Anna Jalsen tried not to notice how long the moments seemed, how queer her heart was behaving, what ridiculous nonsense kept popping into her head. It was just what one must expect from a boy, she told herself sharply, and carefully covered his pudding with a hot towel. A healthy boy was bound to tumble into mischief now and again. Ah!

Like a dash of cold water a really alarming thought burst upon her. That goat! That abominable goat was at the bottom of this. How stupid she had been not to anticipate something of this sort this noon when Hals was explaining how badly the collie needed exercise—a run in the country. The suspicion fixed, Miss Jalsen found herself equally fretted by a dozen other recollections having no bearing upon dogs or truant little boys. In no time at all she was jerking on her green sweater and tam in a fine white rage.

Leaving the house, Anna Jalsen directed her feet into paths she had stubbornly avoided for six long years. Her modest house, surrounded by its neat old-fashioned garden, stood at the extreme end of the last street in the village. A few paces carried her into open fields that rolled in green undulations to the foot of a gently sloping hill covered in slender white birch trees. Small and determined, Anna Jalsen sped across the fields, each step increasing her anger which, true to feminine causerie, had nothing whatever to do with her protégé's possible misadventure. Yet her indignation challenged the wind.

"Oh, I might have known it," she flung out fiercely. "I might indeed. Sure, wasn't it Peder who stepped in with his nonsense when poor Neils came to fetch me that Easter Sunday six years ago? Always interfering in my affairs—to say nothing of pleasure. Fine talk he set going, holding Neils up at the point of a gun, threatening monstrous absurdities if the poor young man attempted to keep his promise or ever again to take me out in his new buggy. A fine mess and no mistake!"

But, angry though she undoubtedly was, something verging upon a smile touched her lips. "Idiot!" she snapped. "Intolerable old fool to sit three hours on the doorstep arguing!" As if she could have permitted herself to be seen in his company after such crazy behavior.

She had reached the white birches now. Something of their eternal springtime seemed to flow out to meet and melt her anger. She stopped, thrilled by strange expectancy. Oh, well, she had loved this spot once. How good to breathe again the warm air, laden with aromatic riches of winey leaf and black mold! A sigh rose to her lips. How beautiful, how more beautiful than her dreams of it was this birch wood! Its myriad leaves vibrated like so many bright green jewels in the glamorous light of the setting sun. And all at once so much loveliness pressed in on her smug conceits and left her feeling very miserable, very old and useless.

Forcefulness ebbed, all the vigorous independence of her thirty years deserted her; for an intolerable moment the past and present united to oppress her. And the tall stately birches assumed human quality to mock and intimidate her. They were his—Peder's, these proud white trees, and all that now separated her from him and his house.

Grateful that the hill afforded an excuse for loitering, Miss Jalsen pressed against the bole of a tree, shutting her eyes tight as was her childish wont when unruly thoughts distressed her. Bitterly she chided herself. She was no better than a fool to dash along in this fashion. Why, she was shaking like a cat in fright and her heart burned in her side. But worse than this, what possessed her to keep harping back to events best forgotten? Why must she go reviving that other spring day?

THAT long gone spring day when Peder had once again sat stubborn as an Indian on her inhospitable steps; a shameless siege hours long for all the village to crow about. She could almost hear him now in fancy, alternating banter and tender pleading in his last attempt to break down her resistance. Telling her at the close of each dragging hour that now he was sixty minutes nearer the sea or paradise, just as she wished!

Well, he had gone to sea, he and that grey goat of his. Even after all these years the thought of Peder, dark, indomitable, his eyes flashing, his every step a challenge as he marched past her house on his way to the wharf, brought a flush of shame to her face, for there, trailing behind him, had trotted that mirth-provoking goat decked out in green ribbons lettered with her name. Anna! Anna! Sweet Mascot, Anna!

Small wonder her heart warmed toward Hals for hating that obnoxious animal. Small [Continued on page 53]

Illustrated by Jack Keay

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wonder she could wish the boy luck in his mischief. But the sea and the goat had apparently satisfied Peder. That he had been home now for several months was due to a broken leg that refused to mend satisfactorily. Otherwise he was well content to let hired men look after his property.

Miss Jalsón frowned, laying hold upon ancient displeasure as a knight upon a lance and set off again muttering darkly: "Idiot, since he had to go breaking something why didn't he break the head of that cantankerous beast before it butted Hals's poor little puppy to death! Yes, and why—"

Once again Spartan mood gave way to ignoble fear. Suppose little Hals had suffered actual injury; suppose—this anxious panic lent her wings. She ran headlong, oblivious now to her surroundings, yet seeing, as through a haze, Peder's yellow bungalow far down the slope. Her breath caught hard. Oh, it was a pretty house! As pretty as they had dreamed it would be when planning it together down there beside that silvery brook threading through his land. Her house, her dear little house; yet her eyes had not beheld it before. Oh, Anna Jalsón recognized the wanton folly of her stubbornness now. Sure, it approached sacrilege to let a man build such a house and dedicate it to a goat!

In dark fury he had told her she might break as many promises as she cared; he should keep his. His house would be builded while he sailed the sea. She should hear the hammers beating out the tune of her inconstancy when she sought the birch wood. But she had not sought the birch wood until now. And now no accusing sounds assailed her ears, yet she felt dizzy and sick and deafened by the clamor of conflicting emotions, and her feet stumbled on the smooth, descending path.

Intriguing as the pipes of Pan, the purling sound of the little brook edged into consciousness. What sweetness it evoked! What tender nonsense, what carefree grace, what ineffably tender dreams! Anna Jalsón bit back a sob.

Well, at any rate they had not dreamed that big red barn on the opposite bank, she told herself fiercely, glaring at the substantial building with hostile eyes. So Peder had bought the Jackson farm and had gone in for pedigreed stock, to judge by the cows in the adjacent pasture.

Engrossed by this further proof of Peder's

ability to do without her, she was unprepared for the sudden frantic command that hurtled at her like a bolt from above.

"Stop, Miss Jalsón. Oh, stop, stop!" Her heart, not her feet, inclined to obey. "Mercy!" she gasped.

That was Hals, her Hals, crying out in terror. Warning her, as if anything could stop her now. Then she saw him gesticulating excitedly from an upper window in Peder's red barn. So, the brute had come to this—locking a child up like a criminal for innocent mischief. Well, she could wish the mischief less innocent, and Peder should hear her say so!

"The heartless wretch! Wait till I get hold of him!" cried little Miss Jalsón, and turned sharply to take the gate that led into Peder's garden. Simultaneously, or so it seemed to her agitated senses, a veritable war whoop broke loose upon the air and from somewhere came the sharp thunder of twinkling hooves.

"The goat! The goat!" screamed Hals, and, almost drowned out by the agitated barking of his dog: "Quick, quick, to the brook—the brook, Miss Jalsón!"

ANNA JALSON had once been fleet as a deer; she was by no means decrepit now. But the grey goat was a winged fury. Hals was right. To attempt the gate was useless; the brook her one salvation. Her feet flew down familiar paths, that inexorable Nemesis after her. What a race it was! Despite the beat of blood in her ears she thrilled savagely to the furious insults Hals kept bawling at her pursuing destroyer. And how the good dog clamored!

Faster, faster, urged necessity; nearer, nearer, thundered the menace. Fresh bedlam broke loose in the barn, indistinguishable, meaningless. The earth uprose to meet her; the glittering waters of the brook fled back at her approach. From somewhere, sharp, metallic, earsplitting explosions blotted out sensation. Anna Jalsón slipped to earth; slipped down, down, down into utter darkness. And yet something shining was going with her; something singing through her blood as Peder's voice had been wont to do. At least she would die beside their brook.

"Anna, Anna! Oh, my darling blockhead! Speak to me just once. Anna, my beloved."

Shivering in earnest now, Anna peered upward through the curtain of her long eyelashes, afraid lest she be dreaming. Ah, she was, she must be, for those were Peder's eyes smiling down at her, quizzical and tenderly anxious. A frightened cry broke from her. Instantly she was caught close in arms whose magic comfort she had never forgotten. But what she read in Peder's face shamed comfort; it was fire and flood, devastation absolute.

She gasped like a spent runner, wondering dizzily if she were actually going mad; for what could be crazier than lying supine in the arms of her ancient tormentor? She should, of course, cry out, struggle violently, even scratch him as high-hearted heroines do in books. Instead, thanks to a sudden staggering revelation, she spoke humbly into his bosom:

"Peder—you—you shot her!"

Peder Otteson shook back his red-brown hair and laughed. Heartless, no doubt, but what sweet music it was to Anna Jalsón! She risked another upward glance and was lost forever. "Oh, Peder," she cried, "you're the most exasperating, self-willed brute in the world! But, oh, how scared I was you might have improved."

Whereupon, to Hals's unutterable disgust, the fiery captain, heretofore so awe-inspiring, actually kissed Miss Jalsón. Not once either! No, he kissed her so often and with such ardor, and Miss Jalsón laughed so prettily, that young Hals buried his freckled nose in the yellow dog's ruff and wished with all his might that he, not Captain Otteson, six foot and gold-braided, had shot that darned old goat!

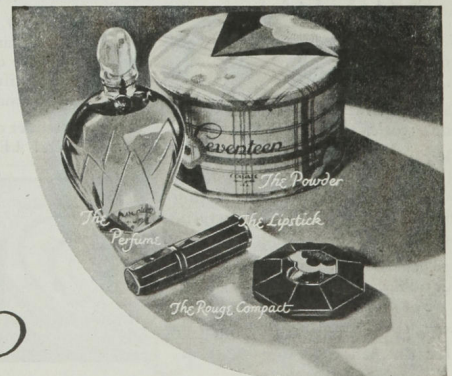


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