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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: Prisoners and captives (5/14)

It was one day when Mother had gone to Maidbridge. She had gone alone, but the children were to go to the station to meet her. And, loving the station as they did, it was only natural that they should be there a good hour before there was any chance of Mother's train arriving, even if the train were punctual, which was most unlikely. No doubt they would have been just as early, even if it had been a fine day, and all the delights of woods and fields and rocks and rivers had been open to them. But it happened to be a very wet day and, for July, very cold. There was a wild wind that drove flocks of dark purple clouds across the sky "like herds of dream-elephants," as Phyllis said. And the rain stung sharply, so that the way to the station was finished at a run. Then the rain fell faster and harder, and beat slantwise against the windows of the booking office and of the chill place that had General Waiting Room on its door.

"It's like being in a besieged castle," Phyllis said; "look at the arrows of the foe striking against the battlements!"

"It's much more like a great garden-squirt," said Peter.

They decided to wait on the up side, for the down platform looked very wet indeed, and the rain was

driving right into the little bleak shelter where down-passengers have to wait for their trains.

The hour would be full of incident and of interest, for there would be two up trains and one down to look at before the one that should bring Mother back.

"Perhaps it'll have stopped raining by then," said Bobbie; "anyhow, I'm glad I brought Mother's waterproof and umbrella."

They went into the desert spot labelled General Waiting Room, and the time passed pleasantly enough in a game of advertisements. You know the game, of course? It is something like dumb Crambo. The players take it in turns to go out, and then come back and look as like some advertisement as they can, and the others have to guess what advertisement it is meant to be. Bobbie came in and sat down under Mother's umbrella and made a sharp face, and everyone knew she was the fox who sits under the umbrella in the advertisement.

Phyllis tried to make a Magic Carpet of Mother's waterproof, but it would not stand out stiff and raft-like as a Magic Carpet should, and nobody could guess it.

Everyone thought Peter was carrying things a little too far when he blacked his face all over with coal-dust and struck a spidery attitude and said he was the blot that advertises somebody's Blue Black Writing Fluid.

It was Phyllis's turn again, and she was trying to look like the Sphinx that advertises What's-his-name's Personally Conducted Tours up the Nile when the sharp ting of the signal announced the up train. The children rushed out to see it pass. On its engine were the

particular driver and fireman who were now numbered among the children's dearest friends. Courtesies passed between them. Jim asked after the toy engine, and Bobbie pressed on his acceptance a moist, greasy package of toffee that she had made herself.

Charmed by this attention, the engine-driver consented to consider her request that some day he would take Peter for a ride on the engine.

"Stand back, Mates," cried the engine-driver, suddenly, "and horf she goes."

And sure enough, off the train went. The children watched the tail-lights of the train till it disappeared round the curve of the line, and then turned to go back to the dusty freedom of the General Waiting Room and the joys of the advertisement game.

They expected to see just one or two people, the end of the procession of passengers who had given up their tickets and gone away. Instead, the platform round the door of the station had a dark blot round it, and the dark blot was a crowd of people.

"Oh!" cried Peter, with a thrill of joyous excitement, "something's happened! Come on!"

They ran down the platform. When they got to the crowd, they could, of course, see nothing but the damp backs and elbows of the people on the crowd's outside. Everybody was talking at once. It was evident that something had happened.

"It's my belief he's nothing worse than a natural," said a farmerish-looking person. Peter saw his red, clean-shaven face as he spoke.

"If you ask me, I should say it was a Police Court case," said a young man with a black bag.

"Not it; the Infirmary more like—"

Then the voice of the Station Master was heard, firm and official:—

"Now, then—move along there. I'll attend to this, if YOU please."

But the crowd did not move. And then came a voice that thrilled the children through and through. For it spoke in a foreign language. And, what is more, it was a language that they had never heard. They had heard French spoken and German. Aunt Emma knew German, and used to sing a song about *bedeuten* and *zeiten* and *bin* and *sin*. Nor was it Latin. Peter had been in Latin for four terms.

It was some comfort, anyhow, to find that none of the crowd understood the foreign language any better than the children did.

"What's that he's saying?" asked the farmer, heavily.

"Sounds like French to me," said the Station Master, who had once been to Boulogne for the day.

"It isn't French!" cried Peter.

"What is it, then?" asked more than one voice. The crowd fell back a little to see who had spoken, and Peter pressed forward, so that when the crowd closed up again he was in the front rank.

"I don't know what it is," said Peter, "but it isn't French. I know that." Then he saw what it was that the crowd had for its centre. It was a man—the man, Peter did not doubt, who had spoken in that strange tongue. A man

with long hair and wild eyes, with shabby clothes of a cut Peter had not seen before—a man whose hands and lips trembled, and who spoke again as his eyes fell on Peter.

“No, it's not French,” said Peter.

“Try him with French if you know so much about it,” said the farmer-man.

“Parlay voo Frongsay?” began Peter, boldly, and the next moment the crowd recoiled again, for the man with the wild eyes had left leaning against the wall, and had sprung forward and caught Peter's hands, and begun to pour forth a flood of words which, though he could not understand a word of them, Peter knew the sound of.

“There!” said he, and turned, his hands still clasped in the hands of the strange shabby figure, to throw a glance of triumph at the crowd; “there; THAT'S French.”

“What does he say?”

“I don't know.” Peter was obliged to own it.

“Here,” said the Station Master again; “you move on if you please. I'LL deal with this case.”

A few of the more timid or less inquisitive travellers moved slowly and reluctantly away. And Phyllis and Bobbie got near to Peter. All three had been TAUGHT French at school. How deeply they now wished that they had LEARNED it! Peter shook his head at the stranger, but he also shook his hands as warmly and looked at him as kindly as he could. A person in the crowd, after some hesitation, said suddenly, “No

comprenny!" and then, blushing deeply, backed out of the press and went away.

"Take him into your room," whispered Bobbie to the Station Master. "Mother can talk French. She'll be here by the next train from Maidbridge."



The Station Master took the arm of the stranger, suddenly but not unkindly. But the man wrenched his arm away, and cowered back coughing and trembling and trying

to push the Station Master away.

"Oh, don't!" said Bobbie; "don't you see how frightened he is? He thinks you're going to shut him up. I know he does—look at his eyes!"

"They're like a fox's eyes when the beast's in a trap," said the farmer.

"Oh, let me try!" Bobbie went on; "I do really know one or two French words if I could only think of them."

Sometimes, in moments of great need, we can do wonderful things—things that in ordinary life we could hardly even dream of doing. Bobbie had never been anywhere near the top of her French class, but she must have learned something without knowing it, for now, looking at those wild, hunted eyes, she actually remembered and, what is more, spoke, some French words. She said:—

"Vous attendre. Ma mere parlez Francais. Nous—what's the French for 'being kind'?"

Nobody knew.

"Bong is 'good,'" said Phyllis.

"Nous etre bong pour vous."

I do not know whether the man understood her words, but he understood the touch of the hand she thrust into his, and the kindness of the other hand that stroked his shabby sleeve.

She pulled him gently towards the inmost sanctuary of the Station Master. The other children followed, and the Station Master shut the door in the face of the crowd, which stood a little while in the booking office talking and looking at the fast closed yellow door, and then by ones and twos went its way, grumbling.

Inside the Station Master's room Bobbie still held the stranger's hand and stroked his sleeve.

"Here's a go," said the Station Master; "no ticket—doesn't even know where he wants to go. I'm not sure now but what I ought to send for the police."

"Oh, DON'T!" all the children pleaded at once. And suddenly Bobbie got between the others and the stranger, for she had seen that he was crying.

By a most unusual piece of good fortune she had a handkerchief in her pocket. By a still more uncommon accident the handkerchief was moderately clean.

Standing in front of the stranger, she got out the handkerchief and passed it to him so that the others did not see.

"Wait till Mother comes," Phyllis was saying; "she does speak French beautifully. You'd just love to hear her."

"I'm sure he hasn't done anything like you're sent to prison for," said Peter.

"Looks like without visible means to me," said the Station Master. "Well, I don't mind giving him the benefit of the doubt till your Mamma comes. I SHOULD like to know what nation's got the credit of HIM, that I should."

Then Peter had an idea. He pulled an envelope out of his pocket, and showed that it was half full of foreign stamps.

"Look here," he said, "let's show him these—"

Bobbie looked and saw that the stranger had dried his eyes with her handkerchief. So she said: "All right."

They showed him an Italian stamp, and pointed from him to it and back again, and made signs of question with their eyebrows. He shook his head. Then they showed him a Norwegian stamp—the common blue kind it was—and again he signed No. Then they showed him a Spanish one, and at that he took the envelope from Peter's hand and searched among the stamps with a hand that trembled. The hand that he reached out at last, with a gesture as of one answering a question, contained a RUSSIAN stamp.

"He's Russian," cried Peter, "or else he's like 'the man who was'—in Kipling, you know."

The train from Maidbridge was signalled.

"I'll stay with him till you bring Mother in," said Bobbie.

"You're not afraid, Missie?"

"Oh, no," said Bobbie, looking at the stranger, as she might have looked at a strange dog of doubtful temper. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

She smiled at him, and he smiled back, a queer crooked smile. And then he coughed again. And the heavy rattling swish of the incoming train swept past, and the Station Master and Peter and Phyllis went out to meet it. Bobbie was still holding the stranger's hand when they came back with Mother.

The Russian rose and bowed very ceremoniously.

Then Mother spoke in French, and he replied, haltingly at first, but presently in longer and longer sentences.

The children, watching his face and Mother's, knew that he was telling her things that made her angry and pitying, and sorry and indignant all at once.

"Well, Mum, what's it all about?" The Station Master could not restrain his curiosity any longer.

"Oh," said Mother, "it's all right. He's a Russian, and he's lost his ticket. And I'm afraid he's very ill. If you don't mind, I'll take him home with me now. He's really quite worn out. I'll run down and tell you all about him to-morrow."

"I hope you won't find you're taking home a frozen viper," said the Station Master, doubtfully.

"Oh, no," Mother said brightly, and she smiled; "I'm quite sure I'm not. Why, he's a great man in his own country, writes books—beautiful books—I've read some of them; but I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

She spoke again in French to the Russian, and everyone could see the surprise and pleasure and gratitude in his

eyes. He got up and politely bowed to the Station Master, and offered his arm most ceremoniously to Mother. She took it, but anybody could have seen that she was helping him along, and not he her.

"You girls run home and light a fire in the sitting-room," Mother said, "and Peter had better go for the Doctor." But it was Bobbie who went for the Doctor.

"I hate to tell you," she said breathlessly when she came upon him in his shirt sleeves, weeding his pansy-bed, "but Mother's got a very shabby Russian, and I'm sure he'll have to belong to your Club. I'm certain he hasn't got any money. We found him at the station."

"Found him! Was he lost, then?" asked the Doctor, reaching for his coat.

"Yes," said Bobbie, unexpectedly, "that's just what he was. He's been telling Mother the sad, sweet story of his life in French; and she said would you be kind enough to come directly if you were at home. He has a dreadful cough, and he's been crying."

The Doctor smiled.

"Oh, don't," said Bobbie; "please don't. You wouldn't if you'd seen him. I never saw a man cry before. You don't know what it's like."

Dr. Forrest wished then that he hadn't smiled.

When Bobbie and the Doctor got to Three Chimneys, the Russian was sitting in the arm-chair that had been Father's, stretching his feet to the blaze of a bright wood fire, and sipping the tea Mother had made him.

"The man seems worn out, mind and body," was what the Doctor said; "the cough's bad, but there's nothing

that can't be cured. He ought to go straight to bed, though—and let him have a fire at night.”

“I'll make one in my room; it's the only one with a fireplace,” said Mother. She did, and presently the Doctor helped the stranger to bed.

There was a big black trunk in Mother's room that none of the children had ever seen unlocked. Now, when she had lighted the fire, she unlocked it and took some clothes out—men's clothes—and set them to air by the newly lighted fire. Bobbie, coming in with more wood for the fire, saw the mark on the night-shirt, and looked over to the open trunk. All the things she could see were men's clothes. And the name marked on the shirt was Father's name. Then Father hadn't taken his clothes with him. And that night-shirt was one of Father's new ones. Bobbie remembered its being made, just before Peter's birthday. Why hadn't Father taken his clothes? Bobbie slipped from the room. As she went she heard the key turned in the lock of the trunk. Her heart was beating horribly. WHY hadn't Father taken his clothes? When Mother came out of the room, Bobbie flung tightly clasping arms round her waist, and whispered:—
“Mother—Daddy isn't—isn't DEAD, is he?”

“My darling, no! What made you think of anything so horrible?”

“I—I don't know,” said Bobbie, angry with herself, but still clinging to that resolution of hers, not to see anything that Mother didn't mean her to see.

Mother gave her a hurried hug. “Daddy was quite, QUITE well when I heard from him last,” she said, “and

he'll come back to us some day. Don't fancy such horrible things, darling!"

Later on, when the Russian stranger had been made comfortable for the night, Mother came into the girls' room. She was to sleep there in Phyllis's bed, and Phyllis was to have a mattress on the floor, a most amusing adventure for Phyllis. Directly Mother came in, two white figures started up, and two eager voices called:—

"Now, Mother, tell us all about the Russian gentleman."

A white shape hopped into the room. It was Peter, dragging his quilt behind him like the tail of a white peacock.

"We have been patient," he said, "and I had to bite my tongue not to go to sleep, and I just nearly went to sleep and I bit too hard, and it hurts ever so. DO tell us. Make a nice long story of it."

"I can't make a long story of it to-night," said Mother; "I'm very tired."

Bobbie knew by her voice that Mother had been crying, but the others didn't know.

"Well, make it as long as you can," said Phil, and Bobbie got her arms round Mother's waist and snuggled close to her.

"Well, it's a story long enough to make a whole book of. He's a writer; he's written beautiful books. In Russia at the time of the Czar one dared not say anything about the rich people doing wrong, or about the things that ought to be done to make poor people better and happier. If one did one was sent to prison."

"But they CAN'T," said Peter; "people only go to prison when they've done wrong."

"Or when the Judges THINK they've done wrong," said Mother. "Yes, that's so in England. But in Russia it was different. And he wrote a beautiful book about poor people and how to help them. I've read it. There's nothing in it but goodness and kindness. And they sent him to prison for it. He was three years in a horrible dungeon, with hardly any light, and all damp and dreadful. In prison all alone for three years."

Mother's voice trembled a little and stopped suddenly.

"But, Mother," said Peter, "that can't be true NOW. It sounds like something out of a history book—the Inquisition, or something."

"It WAS true," said Mother; "it's all horribly true. Well, then they took him out and sent him to Siberia, a convict chained to other convicts—wicked men who'd done all sorts of crimes—a long chain of them, and they walked, and walked, and walked, for days and weeks, till he thought they'd never stop walking. And overseers went behind them with whips—yes, whips—to beat them if they got tired. And some of them went lame, and some fell down, and when they couldn't get up and go on, they beat them, and then left them to die. Oh, it's all too terrible! And at last he got to the mines, and he was condemned to stay there for life—for life, just for writing a good, noble, splendid book."

"How did he get away?"

"When the war came, some of the Russian prisoners were allowed to volunteer as soldiers. And he

volunteered. But he deserted at the first chance he got and—”

“But that's very cowardly, isn't it”—said Peter—“to desert? Especially when it's war.”

“Do you think he owed anything to a country that had done THAT to him? If he did, he owed more to his wife and children. He didn't know what had become of them.”

“Oh,” cried Bobbie, “he had THEM to think about and be miserable about TOO, then, all the time he was in prison?”

“Yes, he had them to think about and be miserable about all the time he was in prison. For anything he knew they might have been sent to prison, too. They did those things in Russia. But while he was in the mines some friends managed to get a message to him that his wife and children had escaped and come to England. So when he deserted he came here to look for them.”

“Had he got their address?” said practical Peter.

“No; just England. He was going to London, and he thought he had to change at our station, and then he found he'd lost his ticket and his purse.”

“Oh, DO you think he'll find them?—I mean his wife and children, not the ticket and things.”

“I hope so. Oh, I hope and pray that he'll find his wife and children again.”

Even Phyllis now perceived that mother's voice was very unsteady.

“Why, Mother,” she said, “how very sorry you seem to be for him!”

Mother didn't answer for a minute. Then she just said, "Yes," and then she seemed to be thinking. The children were quiet.

Presently she said, "Dears, when you say your prayers, I think you might ask God to show His pity upon all prisoners and captives."

"To show His pity," Bobbie repeated slowly, "upon all prisoners and captives. Is that right, Mother?"

"Yes," said Mother, "upon all prisoners and captives. All prisoners and captives."