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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: The amateur firemen (8/14)

"That's a likely little brooch you've got on, Miss," said Perks the Porter; "I don't know as ever I see a thing more like a buttercup without it WAS a buttercup."

"Yes," said Bobbie, glad and flushed by this approval. "I always thought it was more like a buttercup almost than even a real one—and I NEVER thought it would come to be mine, my very own—and then Mother gave it to me for my birthday."

"Oh, have you had a birthday?" said Perks; and he seemed quite surprised, as though a birthday were a thing only granted to a favoured few.

"Yes," said Bobbie; "when's your birthday, Mr. Perks?"

The children were taking tea with Mr. Perks in the Porters' room among the lamps and the railway almanacs. They had brought their own cups and some jam turnovers. Mr. Perks made tea in a beer can, as usual, and everyone felt very happy and confidential.

"My birthday?" said Perks, tipping some more dark brown tea out of the can into Peter's cup. "I give up keeping of my birthday afore you was born."

"But you must have been born SOMETIME, you know," said Phyllis, thoughtfully, "even if it was twenty years ago—or thirty or sixty or seventy."

"Not so long as that, Missie," Perks grinned as he answered. "If you really want to know, it was thirty-two years ago, come the fifteenth of this month."

"Then why don't you keep it?" asked Phyllis.

"I've got something else to keep besides birthdays," said Perks, briefly.

"Oh! What?" asked Phyllis, eagerly. "Not secrets?"

"No," said Perks, "the kids and the Missus."

It was this talk that set the children thinking, and, presently, talking. Perks was, on the whole, the dearest friend they had made. Not so grand as the Station Master, but more approachable—less powerful than the old gentleman, but more confidential.

"It seems horrid that nobody keeps his birthday," said Bobbie. "Couldn't WE do something?"

"Let's go up to the Canal bridge and talk it over," said Peter. "I got a new gut line from the postman this morning. He gave it me for a bunch of roses that I gave him for his sweetheart. She's ill."

"Then I do think you might have given her the roses for nothing," said Bobbie, indignantly.

"Nyang, nyang!" said Peter, disagreeably, and put his hands in his pockets.

"He did, of course," said Phyllis, in haste; "directly we heard she was ill we got the roses ready and waited by the gate. It was when you were making the brekker-toast. And when he'd said 'Thank you' for the roses so many times—much more than he need have—he pulled out the line and gave it to Peter. It wasn't exchange. It was the grateful heart."

"Oh, I BEG your pardon, Peter," said Bobbie, "I AM so sorry."

"Don't mention it," said Peter, grandly, "I knew you would be."

So then they all went up to the Canal bridge. The idea was to fish from the bridge, but the line was not quite long enough.

"Never mind," said Bobbie. "Let's just stay here and look at things. Everything's so beautiful."

It was. The sun was setting in red splendour over the grey and purple hills, and the canal lay smooth and shiny in the shadow—no ripple broke its surface. It was like a grey satin ribbon between the dusky green silk of the meadows that were on each side of its banks.

"It's all right," said Peter, "but somehow I can always see how pretty things are much better when I've something to do. Let's get down on to the towpath and fish from there."

Phyllis and Bobbie remembered how the boys on the canal-boats had thrown coal at them, and they said so.

"Oh, nonsense," said Peter. "There aren't any boys here now. If there were, I'd fight them."

Peter's sisters were kind enough not to remind him how he had NOT fought the boys when coal had last been thrown. Instead they said, "All right, then," and cautiously climbed down the steep bank to the towing-path. The line was carefully baited, and for half an hour they fished patiently and in vain. Not a single nibble came to nourish hope in their hearts.

All eyes were intent on the sluggish waters that earnestly pretended they had never harboured a single minnow when a loud rough shout made them start.

"Hi!" said the shout, in most disagreeable tones, "get out of that, can't you?"

An old white horse coming along the towing-path was within half a dozen yards of them. They sprang to their feet and hastily climbed up the bank.

"We'll slip down again when they've gone by," said Bobbie.

But, alas, the barge, after the manner of barges, stopped under the bridge.

"She's going to anchor," said Peter; "just our luck!"

The barge did not anchor, because an anchor is not part of a canal-boat's furniture, but she was moored with ropes fore and aft—and the ropes were made fast to the palings and to crowbars driven into the ground.

"What you staring at?" growled the Bargee, crossly.

"We weren't staring," said Bobbie; "we wouldn't be so rude."

"Rude be blessed," said the man; "get along with you!"

"Get along yourself," said Peter. He remembered what he had said about fighting boys, and, besides, he felt safe halfway up the bank. "We've as much right here as anyone else."

"Oh, 'AVE you, indeed!" said the man. "We'll soon see about that." And he came across his deck and began to climb down the side of his barge.

"Oh, come away, Peter, come away!" said Bobbie and Phyllis, in agonised unison.

"Not me," said Peter, "but YOU'D better."

The girls climbed to the top of the bank and stood ready to bolt for home as soon as they saw their brother out of danger. The way home lay all down hill. They knew that they all ran well. The Bargee did not look as if HE did. He was red-faced, heavy, and beefy. But as soon as his foot was on the towing-path the children saw that they had misjudged him.

He made one spring up the bank and caught Peter by the leg, dragged him down—set him on his feet with a shake—took him by the ear—and said sternly:—

"Now, then, what do you mean by it? Don't you know these 'ere waters is preserved? You ain't no right catching fish 'ere—not to say nothing of your precious cheek."

Peter was always proud afterwards when he remembered that, with the Bargee's furious fingers tightening on his ear, the Bargee's crimson countenance close to his own, the Bargee's hot breath on his neck, he had the courage to speak the truth.

"I WASN'T catching fish," said Peter.

"That's not YOUR fault, I'll be bound," said the man, giving Peter's ear a twist—not a hard one—but still a twist.

Peter could not say that it was. Bobbie and Phyllis had been holding on to the railings above and skipping with anxiety. Now suddenly Bobbie slipped through the railings and rushed down the bank towards Peter, so impetuously that Phyllis, following more temperately, felt certain that her sister's descent would end in the

waters of the canal. And so it would have done if the Bargee hadn't let go of Peter's ear—and caught her in his jerseyed arm.

"Who are you a-shoving of?" he said, setting her on her feet.

"Oh," said Bobbie, breathless, "I'm not shoving anybody. At least, not on purpose. Please don't be cross with Peter. Of course, if it's your canal, we're sorry and we won't any more. But we didn't know it was yours."

"Go along with you," said the Bargee.

"Yes, we will; indeed we will," said Bobbie, earnestly; "but we do beg your pardon—and really we haven't caught a single fish. I'd tell you directly if we had, honour bright I would."

She held out her hands and Phyllis turned out her little empty pocket to show that really they hadn't any fish concealed about them.

"Well," said the Bargee, more gently, "cut along, then, and don't you do it again, that's all."

The children hurried up the bank.

"Chuck us a coat, M'ria," shouted the man. And a red-haired woman in a green plaid shawl came out from the cabin door with a baby in her arms and threw a coat to him. He put it on, climbed the bank, and slouched along across the bridge towards the village.

"You'll find me up at the 'Rose and Crown' when you've got the kid to sleep," he called to her from the bridge. When he was out of sight the children slowly returned. Peter insisted on this.

"The canal may belong to him," he said, "though I don't believe it does. But the bridge is everybody's. Doctor Forrest told me it's public property. I'm not going to be bounced off the bridge by him or anyone else, so I tell you."

Peter's ear was still sore and so were his feelings.

The girls followed him as gallant soldiers might follow the leader of a forlorn hope.

"I do wish you wouldn't," was all they said.

"Go home if you're afraid," said Peter; "leave me alone. I'M not afraid."

The sound of the man's footsteps died away along the quiet road. The peace of the evening was not broken by the notes of the sedge-warblers or by the voice of the woman in the barge, singing her baby to sleep. It was a sad song she sang. Something about Bill Bailey and how she wanted him to come home.

The children stood leaning their arms on the parapet of the bridge; they were glad to be quiet for a few minutes because all three hearts were beating much more quickly.

"I'm not going to be driven away by any old bargeman, I'm not," said Peter, thickly.

"Of course not," Phyllis said soothingly; "you didn't give in to him! So now we might go home, don't you think?"

"NO," said Peter.

Nothing more was said till the woman got off the barge, climbed the bank, and came across the bridge. She hesitated, looking at the three backs of the children, then she said, "Ahem."

Peter stayed as he was, but the girls looked round.

"You mustn't take no notice of my Bill," said the woman; "is bark's worse'n 'is bite. Some of the kids down Farley way is fair terrors. It was them put 'is back up calling out about who ate the puppy-pie under Marlow bridge." "Who DID?" asked Phyllis.

"I dunno," said the woman. "Nobody don't know! But somehow, and I don't know the why nor the wherefore of it, them words is p'ison to a barge-master. Don't you take no notice. 'E won't be back for two hours good. You might catch a power o' fish afore that. The light's good an' all," she added.

"Thank you," said Bobbie. "You're very kind. Where's your baby?"

"Asleep in the cabin," said the woman. "'E's all right. Never wakes afore twelve. Reg'lar as a church clock, 'e is."

"I'm sorry," said Bobbie; "I would have liked to see him, close to."

"And a finer you never did see, Miss, though I says it." The woman's face brightened as she spoke.

"Aren't you afraid to leave it?" said Peter.

"Lor' love you, no," said the woman; "who'd hurt a little thing like 'im? Besides, Spot's there. So long!"

The woman went away.

"Shall we go home?" said Phyllis.

"You can. I'm going to fish," said Peter briefly.

"I thought we came up here to talk about Perks's birthday," said Phyllis.

"Perks's birthday'll keep."

So they got down on the towing-path again and Peter fished. He did not catch anything.

It was almost quite dark, the girls were getting tired, and as Bobbie said, it was past bedtime, when suddenly Phyllis cried, "What's that?"

And she pointed to the canal boat. Smoke was coming from the chimney of the cabin, had indeed been curling softly into the soft evening air all the time—but now other wreaths of smoke were rising, and these were from the cabin door.



"It's on fire—that's all," said Peter, calmly. "Serve him right."

"Oh—how CAN you?" cried Phyllis.

"Think of the poor dear dog."

"The BABY!" screamed Bobbie.

In an instant all three made for the barge.

Her mooring ropes were slack, and the little breeze, hardly strong enough to be felt, had yet been strong enough to drift her stern against the bank. Bobbie was first—then came Peter, and it was Peter who slipped and fell. He went into the canal up to his neck, and his feet could not feel the bottom, but his arm was on the edge of the barge. Phyllis caught at his hair. It hurt, but it helped him to get out. Next minute he had leaped on to the barge, Phyllis following.

"Not you!" he shouted to Bobbie; "ME, because I'm wet." He caught up with Bobbie at the cabin door, and flung her aside very roughly indeed; if they had been playing,

such roughness would have made Bobbie weep with tears of rage and pain. Now, though he flung her on to the edge of the hold, so that her knee and her elbow were grazed and bruised, she only cried:—

“No—not you—ME,” and struggled up again. But not quickly enough.

Peter had already gone down two of the cabin steps into the cloud of thick smoke. He stopped, remembered all he had ever heard of fires, pulled his soaked handkerchief out of his breast pocket and tied it over his mouth. As he pulled it out he said:—

“It's all right, hardly any fire at all.”

And this, though he thought it was a lie, was rather good of Peter. It was meant to keep Bobbie from rushing after him into danger. Of course it didn't.

The cabin glowed red. A paraffin lamp was burning calmly in an orange mist.

“Hi,” said Peter, lifting the handkerchief from his mouth for a moment. “Hi, Baby—where are you?” He choked.

“Oh, let ME go,” cried Bobbie, close behind him. Peter pushed her back more roughly than before, and went on.

Now what would have happened if the baby hadn't cried I don't know—but just at that moment it DID cry. Peter felt his way through the dark smoke, found something small and soft and warm and alive, picked it up and backed out, nearly tumbling over Bobbie who was close behind. A dog snapped at his leg—tried to bark, choked.

"I've got the kid," said Peter, tearing off the handkerchief and staggering on to the deck.

Bobbie caught at the place where the bark came from, and her hands met on the fat back of a smooth-haired dog. It turned and fastened its teeth on her hand, but very gently, as much as to say:—

"I'm bound to bark and bite if strangers come into my master's cabin, but I know you mean well, so I won't REALLY bite."

Bobbie dropped the dog.

"All right, old man. Good dog," said she. "Here—give me the baby, Peter; you're so wet you'll give it cold."

Peter was only too glad to hand over the strange little bundle that squirmed and whimpered in his arms.

"Now," said Bobbie, quickly, "you run straight to the 'Rose and Crown' and tell them. Phil and I will stay here with the precious. Hush, then, a dear, a duck, a darling! Go NOW, Peter! Run!"

"I can't run in these things," said Peter, firmly; "they're as heavy as lead. I'll walk."

"Then I'LL run," said Bobbie. "Get on the bank, Phil, and I'll hand you the dear."

The baby was carefully handed. Phyllis sat down on the bank and tried to hush the baby. Peter wrung the water from his sleeves and knickerbocker legs as well as he could, and it was Bobbie who ran like the wind across the bridge and up the long white quiet twilight road towards the 'Rose and Crown.'

There is a nice old-fashioned room at the 'Rose and Crown; where Bargees and their wives sit of an evening

drinking their supper beer, and toasting their supper cheese at a glowing basketful of coals that sticks out into the room under a great hooded chimney and is warmer and prettier and more comforting than any other fireplace I ever saw.

There was a pleasant party of barge people round the fire. You might not have thought it pleasant, but they did; for they were all friends or acquaintances, and they liked the same sort of things, and talked the same sort of talk. This is the real secret of pleasant society. The Bargee Bill, whom the children had found so disagreeable, was considered excellent company by his mates. He was telling a tale of his own wrongs—always a thrilling subject. It was his barge he was speaking about.

“And 'e sent down word 'paint her inside hout,' not namin' no colour, d'ye see? So I gets a lotter green paint and I paints her stem to stern, and I tell yer she looked A1. Then 'E comes along and 'e says, 'Wot yer paint 'er all one colour for?' 'e says. And I says, says I, 'Cause I thought she'd look fust-rate,' says I, 'and I think so still.' An' he says, 'DEW yer? Then ye can just pay for the bloomin' paint yerself,' says he. An' I 'ad to, too.” A murmur of sympathy ran round the room. Breaking noisily in on it came Bobbie. She burst open the swing door—crying breathlessly:—

“Bill! I want Bill the Bargeman.”

There was a stupefied silence. Pots of beer were held in mid-air, paralysed on their way to thirsty mouths.

"Oh," said Bobbie, seeing the bargewoman and making for her. "Your barge cabin's on fire. Go quickly."

The woman started to her feet, and put a big red hand to her waist, on the left side, where your heart seems to be when you are frightened or miserable.

"Reginald Horace!" she cried in a terrible voice; "my Reginald Horace!"

"All right," said Bobbie, "if you mean the baby; got him out safe. Dog, too." She had no breath for more, except, "Go on—it's all alight."

Then she sank on the ale-house bench and tried to get that breath of relief after running which people call the 'second wind.' But she felt as though she would never breathe again.

Bill the Bargee rose slowly and heavily. But his wife was a hundred yards up the road before he had quite understood what was the matter.

Phyllis, shivering by the canal side, had hardly heard the quick approaching feet before the woman had flung herself on the railing, rolled down the bank, and snatched the baby from her.

"Don't," said Phyllis, reproachfully; "I'd just got him to sleep."

* * * * *

Bill came up later talking in a language with which the children were wholly unfamiliar. He leaped on to the barge and dipped up pails of water. Peter helped him and they put out the fire. Phyllis, the bargewoman, and the baby—and presently Bobbie, too—cuddled together in a heap on the bank.

“Lord help me, if it was me left anything as could catch alight,” said the woman again and again.

But it wasn't she. It was Bill the Bargeman, who had knocked his pipe out and the red ash had fallen on the hearth-rug and smouldered there and at last broken into flame. Though a stern man he was just. He did not blame his wife for what was his own fault, as many bargemen, and other men, too, would have done.

* * * * *

Mother was half wild with anxiety when at last the three children turned up at Three Chimneys, all very wet by now, for Peter seemed to have come off on the others. But when she had disentangled the truth of what had happened from their mixed and incoherent narrative, she owned that they had done quite right, and could not possibly have done otherwise. Nor did she put any obstacles in the way of their accepting the cordial invitation with which the bargeman had parted from them.

“Ye be here at seven to-morrow,” he had said, “and I'll take you the entire trip to Farley and back, so I will, and not a penny to pay. Nineteen locks!”

They did not know what locks were; but they were at the bridge at seven, with bread and cheese and half a soda cake, and quite a quarter of a leg of mutton in a basket.

It was a glorious day. The old white horse strained at the ropes, the barge glided smoothly and steadily through the still water. The sky was blue overhead. Mr. Bill was as nice as anyone could possibly be. No one

would have thought that he could be the same man who had held Peter by the ear. As for Mrs. Bill, she had always been nice, as Bobbie said, and so had the baby, and even Spot, who might have bitten them quite badly if he had liked.

"It was simply ripping, Mother," said Peter, when they reached home very happy, very tired, and very dirty, "right over that glorious aqueduct. And locks—you don't know what they're like. You sink into the ground and then, when you feel you're never going to stop going down, two great black gates open slowly, slowly—you go out, and there you are on the canal just like you were before."

"I know," said Mother, "there are locks on the Thames. Father and I used to go on the river at Marlow before we were married."

"And the dear, darling, ducky baby," said Bobbie; "it let me nurse it for ages and ages—and it WAS so good. Mother, I wish we had a baby to play with."

"And everybody was so nice to us," said Phyllis, "everybody we met. And they say we may fish whenever we like. And Bill is going to show us the way next time he's in these parts. He says we don't know really."

"He said YOU didn't know," said Peter; "but, Mother, he said he'd tell all the bargees up and down the canal that we were the real, right sort, and they were to treat us like good pals, as we were."

"So then I said," Phyllis interrupted, "we'd always each wear a red ribbon when we went fishing by the canal,

so they'd know it was US, and we were the real, right sort, and be nice to us!"

"So you've made another lot of friends," said Mother; "first the railway and then the canal!"

"Oh, yes," said Bobbie; "I think everyone in the world is friends if you can only get them to see you don't want to be UN-friends."

"Perhaps you're right," said Mother; and she sighed.

"Come, Chicks. It's bedtime."

"Yes," said Phyllis. "Oh dear—and we went up there to talk about what we'd do for Perks's birthday. And we haven't talked a single thing about it!"

"No more we have," said Bobbie; "but Peter's saved Reginald Horace's life. I think that's about good enough for one evening."

"Bobbie would have saved him if I hadn't knocked her down; twice I did," said Peter, loyally.

"So would I," said Phyllis, "if I'd known what to do."

"Yes," said Mother, "you've saved a little child's life. I do think that's enough for one evening. Oh, my darlings, thank God YOU'RE all safe!"