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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: The hound's grandfather (13/14)

Mother did not get back to her writing all that day, for the red-jerseyed hound whom the children had brought to Three Chimneys had to be put to bed. And then the Doctor came, and hurt him most horribly. Mother was with him all through it, and that made it a little better than it would have been, but "bad was the best," as Mrs. Viney said.

The children sat in the parlour downstairs and heard the sound of the Doctor's boots going backwards and forwards over the bedroom floor. And once or twice there was a groan.

"It's horrible," said Bobbie. "Oh, I wish Dr. Forrest would make haste. Oh, poor Jim!"

"It IS horrible," said Peter, "but it's very exciting. I wish Doctors weren't so stuck-up about who they'll have in the room when they're doing things. I should most awfully like to see a leg set. I believe the bones crunch like anything."

"Don't!" said the two girls at once.

"Rubbish!" said Peter. "How are you going to be Red Cross Nurses, like you were talking of coming home, if you can't even stand hearing me say about bones crunching? You'd have to HEAR them crunch on the field

of battle—and be steeped in gore up to the elbows as likely as not, and—”

“Stop it!” cried Bobbie, with a white face; “you don't know how funny you're making me feel.”

“Me, too,” said Phyllis, whose face was pink.

“Cowards!” said Peter.

“I'm not,” said Bobbie. “I helped Mother with your rake-wounded foot, and so did Phil—you know we did.”

“Well, then!” said Peter. “Now look here. It would be a jolly good thing for you if I were to talk to you every day for half an hour about broken bones and people's insides, so as to get you used to it.”

A chair was moved above.

“Listen,” said Peter, “that's the bone crunching.”

“I do wish you wouldn't,” said Phyllis. “Bobbie doesn't like it.”

“I'll tell you what they do,” said Peter. I can't think what made him so horrid. Perhaps it was because he had been so very nice and kind all the earlier part of the day, and now he had to have a change. This is called reaction. One notices it now and then in oneself. Sometimes when one has been extra good for a longer time than usual, one is suddenly attacked by a violent fit of not being good at all. “I'll tell you what they do,” said Peter; “they strap the broken man down so that he can't resist or interfere with their doctorish designs, and then someone holds his head, and someone holds his leg—the broken one, and pulls it till the bones fit in—with a crunch, mind you! Then they strap it up and—let's play at bone-setting!”

"Oh, no!" said Phyllis.

But Bobbie said suddenly: "All right—LET'S! I'll be the doctor, and Phil can be the nurse. You can be the broken boner; we can get at your legs more easily, because you don't wear petticoats."

"I'll get the splints and bandages," said Peter; "you get the couch of suffering ready."

The ropes that had tied up the boxes that had come from home were all in a wooden packing-case in the cellar. When Peter brought in a trailing tangle of them, and two boards for splints, Phyllis was excitedly giggling.

"Now, then," he said, and lay down on the settle, groaning most grievously.

"Not so loud!" said Bobbie, beginning to wind the rope round him and the settle. "You pull, Phil."

"Not so tight," moaned Peter. "You'll break my other leg." Bobbie worked on in silence, winding more and more rope round him.

"That's enough," said Peter. "I can't move at all. Oh, my poor leg!" He groaned again.

"SURE you can't move?" asked Bobbie, in a rather strange tone.

"Quite sure," replied Peter. "Shall we play it's bleeding freely or not?" he asked cheerfully.

"YOU can play what you like," said Bobbie, sternly, folding her arms and looking down at him where he lay all wound round and round with cord. "Phil and I are going away. And we shan't untie you till you promise

never, never to talk to us about blood and wounds unless we say you may. Come, Phil!"

"You beast!" said Peter, writhing. "I'll never promise, never. I'll yell, and Mother will come."

"Do," said Bobbie, "and tell her why we tied you up! Come on, Phil. No, I'm not a beast, Peter. But you wouldn't stop when we asked you and—"

"Yah," said Peter, "it wasn't even your own idea. You got it out of Stalky!"

Bobbie and Phil, retiring in silent dignity, were met at the door by the Doctor. He came in rubbing his hands and looking pleased with himself.

"Well," he said, "THAT job's done. It's a nice clean fracture, and it'll go on all right, I've no doubt. Plucky young chap, too—hullo! what's all this?"

His eye had fallen on Peter who lay mousy-still in his bonds on the settle.

"Playing at prisoners, eh?" he said; but his eyebrows had gone up a little. Somehow he had not thought that Bobbie would be playing while in the room above someone was having a broken bone set.

"Oh, no!" said Bobbie, "not at PRISONERS. We were playing at setting bones. Peter's the broken boner, and I was the doctor."

The Doctor frowned.

"Then I must say," he said, and he said it rather sternly, "that's it's a very heartless game. Haven't you enough imagination even to faintly picture what's been going on upstairs? That poor chap, with the drops of sweat on his

forehead, and biting his lips so as not to cry out, and every touch on his leg agony and—”

“YOU ought to be tied up,” said Phyllis; “you're as bad as—”

“Hush,” said Bobbie; “I'm sorry, but we weren't heartless, really.”

“I was, I suppose,” said Peter, crossly. “All right, Bobbie, don't you go on being noble and screening me, because I jolly well won't have it. It was only that I kept on talking about blood and wounds. I wanted to train them for Red Cross Nurses. And I wouldn't stop when they asked me.”

“Well?” said Dr. Forrest, sitting down.

“Well—then I said, 'Let's play at setting bones.' It was all rot. I knew Bobbie wouldn't. I only said it to tease her. And then when she said 'yes,' of course I had to go through with it. And they tied me up. They got it out of Stalky. And I think it's a beastly shame.”

He managed to writhe over and hide his face against the wooden back of the settle.

“I didn't think that anyone would know but us,” said Bobbie, indignantly answering Peter's unspoken reproach. “I never thought of your coming in. And hearing about blood and wounds does really make me feel most awfully funny. It was only a joke our tying him up. Let me untie you, Pete.”

“I don't care if you never untie me,” said Peter; “and if that's your idea of a joke—”

“If I were you,” said the Doctor, though really he did not quite know what to say, “I should be untied before

your Mother comes down. You don't want to worry her just now, do you?"

"I don't promise anything about not saying about wounds, mind," said Peter, in very surly tones, as Bobbie and Phyllis began to untie the knots.

"I'm very sorry, Pete," Bobbie whispered, leaning close to him as she fumbled with the big knot under the settle; "but if you only knew how sick you made me feel."

"You've made ME feel pretty sick, I can tell you," Peter rejoined. Then he shook off the loose cords, and stood up.

"I looked in," said Dr. Forrest, "to see if one of you would come along to the surgery. There are some things that your Mother will want at once, and I've given my man a day off to go and see the circus; will you come, Peter?"

Peter went without a word or a look to his sisters.

The two walked in silence up to the gate that led from the Three Chimneys field to the road. Then Peter said:—

"Let me carry your bag. I say, it is heavy—what's in it?"

"Oh, knives and lancets and different instruments for hurting people. And the ether bottle. I had to give him ether, you know—the agony was so intense."

Peter was silent.

"Tell me all about how you found that chap," said Dr. Forrest.

Peter told. And then Dr. Forrest told him stories of brave rescues; he was a most interesting man to talk to, as Peter had often remarked.

Then in the surgery Peter had a better chance than he had ever had of examining the Doctor's balance, and his microscope, and his scales and measuring glasses. When all the things were ready that Peter was to take back, the Doctor said suddenly:—

“You'll excuse my shoving my oar in, won't you? But I should like to say something to you.”

“Now for a rowing,” thought Peter, who had been wondering how it was that he had escaped one.

“Something scientific,” added the Doctor.

“Yes,” said Peter, fiddling with the fossil ammonite that the Doctor used for a paper-weight.

“Well then, you see. Boys and girls are only little men and women. And WE are much harder and hardier than they are—” (Peter liked the “we.” Perhaps the Doctor had known he would.)—“and much stronger, and things that hurt THEM don't hurt US. You know you mustn't hit a girl—”

“I should think not, indeed,” muttered Peter, indignantly.

“Not even if she's your own sister. That's because girls are so much softer and weaker than we are; they have to be, you know,” he added, “because if they weren't, it wouldn't be nice for the babies. And that's why all the animals are so good to the mother animals. They never fight them, you know.”

“I know,” said Peter, interested; “two buck rabbits will fight all day if you let them, but they won't hurt a doe.”

"No; and quite wild beasts—lions and elephants—they're immensely gentle with the female beasts. And we've got to be, too."

"I see," said Peter.

"And their hearts are soft, too," the Doctor went on, "and things that we shouldn't think anything of hurt them dreadfully. So that a man has to be very careful, not only of his fists, but of his words. They're awfully brave, you know," he went on. "Think of Bobbie waiting alone in the tunnel with that poor chap. It's an odd thing—the softer and more easily hurt a woman is the better she can screw herself up to do what HAS to be done. I've seen some brave women—your Mother's one," he ended abruptly.

"Yes," said Peter.

"Well, that's all. Excuse my mentioning it. But nobody knows everything without being told. And you see what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes," said Peter. "I'm sorry. There!"

"Of course you are! People always are—directly they understand. Everyone ought to be taught these scientific facts. So long!"

They shook hands heartily. When Peter came home, his sisters looked at him doubtfully.

"It's Pax," said Peter, dumping down the basket on the table. "Dr. Forrest has been talking scientific to me. No, it's no use my telling you what he said; you wouldn't understand. But it all comes to you girls being poor, soft, weak, frightened things like rabbits, so us men have just got to put up with them. He said you were

female beasts. Shall I take this up to Mother, or will you?"

"I know what BOYS are," said Phyllis, with flaming cheeks; "they're just the nastiest, rudest—"

"They're very brave," said Bobbie, "sometimes."

"Ah, you mean the chap upstairs? I see. Go ahead, Phil—I shall put up with you whatever you say because you're a poor, weak, frightened, soft—"

"Not if I pull your hair you won't," said Phyllis, springing at him.

"He said 'Pax,'" said Bobbie, pulling her away. "Don't you see," she whispered as Peter picked up the basket and stalked out with it, "he's sorry, really, only he won't say so? Let's say we're sorry."

"It's so goody goody," said Phyllis, doubtfully; "he said we were female beasts, and soft and frightened—"

"Then let's show him we're not frightened of him thinking us goody goody," said Bobbie; "and we're not any more beasts than he is."

And when Peter came back, still with his chin in the air, Bobbie said:—

"We're sorry we tied you up, Pete."

"I thought you would be," said Peter, very stiff and superior.

This was hard to bear. But—

"Well, so we are," said Bobbie. "Now let honour be satisfied on both sides."

"I did call it Pax," said Peter, in an injured tone.

"Then let it BE Pax," said Bobbie. "Come on, Phil, let's get the tea. Pete, you might lay the cloth."

"I say," said Phyllis, when peace was really restored, which was not till they were washing up the cups after tea, "Dr. Forrest didn't REALLY say we were female beasts, did he?"

"Yes," said Peter, firmly, "but I think he meant we men were wild beasts, too."

"How funny of him!" said Phyllis, breaking a cup.

* * * * *

"May I come in, Mother?" Peter was at the door of Mother's writing room, where Mother sat at her table with two candles in front of her. Their flames looked orange and violet against the clear grey blue of the sky where already a few stars were twinkling.



"Yes, dear," said Mother, absently, "anything wrong?" She wrote a few more words and then laid down her pen and began to fold up what she had written. "I was just writing to Jim's grandfather. He lives near here, you know."

"Yes, you said so at tea. That's what I want to say. Must you write to him, Mother? Couldn't we keep Jim, and not say anything to his people till he's well? It would be such a surprise for them."

"Well, yes," said Mother, laughing, "I think it would."

"You see," Peter went on, "of course the girls are all right and all that—I'm not saying anything against

THEM. But I should like it if I had another chap to talk to sometimes."

"Yes," said Mother, "I know it's dull for you, dear. But I can't help it. Next year perhaps I can send you to school—you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I do miss the other chaps, rather," Peter confessed; "but if Jim could stay after his leg was well, we could have awful larks."

"I've no doubt of it," said Mother. "Well—perhaps he could, but you know, dear, we're not rich. I can't afford to get him everything he'll want. And he must have a nurse."

"Can't you nurse him, Mother? You do nurse people so beautifully."

"That's a pretty compliment, Pete—but I can't do nursing and my writing as well. That's the worst of it."

"Then you **MUST** send the letter to his grandfather?"

"Of course—and to his schoolmaster, too. We telegraphed to them both, but I must write as well. They'll be most dreadfully anxious."

"I say, Mother, why can't his grandfather pay for a nurse?" Peter suggested. "That would be ripping. I expect the old boy's rolling in money. Grandfathers in books always are."

"Well, this one isn't in a book," said Mother, "so we mustn't expect him to roll much."

"I say," said Peter, musingly, "wouldn't it be jolly if we all WERE in a book, and you were writing it? Then you could make all sorts of jolly things happen, and make

Jim's legs get well at once and be all right to-morrow, and Father come home soon and—"

"Do you miss your Father very much?" Mother asked, rather coldly, Peter thought.

"Awfully," said Peter, briefly.

Mother was enveloping and addressing the second letter.

"You see," Peter went on slowly, "you see, it's not only him BEING Father, but now he's away there's no other man in the house but me—that's why I want Jim to stay so frightfully much. Wouldn't you like to be writing that book with us all in it, Mother, and make Daddy come home soon?"

Peter's Mother put her arm round him suddenly, and hugged him in silence for a minute. Then she said:—

"Don't you think it's rather nice to think that we're in a book that God's writing? If I were writing the book, I might make mistakes. But God knows how to make the story end just right—in the way that's best for us."

"Do you really believe that, Mother?" Peter asked quietly.

"Yes," she said, "I do believe it—almost always—except when I'm so sad that I can't believe anything. But even when I can't believe it, I know it's true—and I try to believe. You don't know how I try, Peter. Now take the letters to the post, and don't let's be sad any more.

Courage, courage! That's the finest of all the virtues! I dare say Jim will be here for two or three weeks yet."

For what was left of the evening Peter was so angelic that Bobbie feared he was going to be ill. She was quite

relieved in the morning to find him plaiting Phyllis's hair on to the back of her chair in quite his old manner. It was soon after breakfast that a knock came at the door. The children were hard at work cleaning the brass candlesticks in honour of Jim's visit.

"That'll be the Doctor," said Mother; "I'll go. Shut the kitchen door—you're not fit to be seen."

But it wasn't the Doctor. They knew that by the voice and by the sound of the boots that went upstairs. They did not recognise the sound of the boots, but everyone was certain that they had heard the voice before.

There was a longish interval. The boots and the voice did not come down again.

"Who can it possibly be?" they kept on asking themselves and each other.

"Perhaps," said Peter at last, "Dr. Forrest has been attacked by highwaymen and left for dead, and this is the man he's telegraphed for to take his place. Mrs. Viney said he had a local tenant to do his work when he went for a holiday, didn't you, Mrs. Viney?"

"I did so, my dear," said Mrs. Viney from the back kitchen.

"He's fallen down in a fit, more likely," said Phyllis, "all human aid despaired of. And this is his man come to break the news to Mother."

"Nonsense!" said Peter, briskly; "Mother wouldn't have taken the man up into Jim's bedroom. Why should she? Listen—the door's opening. Now they'll come down. I'll open the door a crack."

He did.

"It's not listening," he replied indignantly to Bobbie's scandalised remarks; "nobody in their senses would talk secrets on the stairs. And Mother can't have secrets to talk with Dr. Forrest's stable-man—and you said it was him."

"Bobbie," called Mother's voice.

They opened the kitchen door, and Mother leaned over the stair railing.

"Jim's grandfather has come," she said; "wash your hands and faces and then you can see him. He wants to see you!" The bedroom door shut again.

"There now!" said Peter; "fancy us not even thinking of that! Let's have some hot water, Mrs. Viney. I'm as black as your hat."

The three were indeed dirty, for the stuff you clean brass candlesticks with is very far from cleaning to the cleaner.

They were still busy with soap and flannel when they heard the boots and the voice come down the stairs and go into the dining-room. And when they were clean, though still damp—because it takes such a long time to dry your hands properly, and they were very impatient to see the grandfather—they filed into the dining-room. Mother was sitting in the window-seat, and in the leather-covered armchair that Father always used to sit in at the other house sat—

THEIR OWN OLD GENTLEMAN!

"Well, I never did," said Peter, even before he said, "How do you do?" He was, as he explained afterwards, too

surprised even to remember that there was such a thing as politeness—much less to practise it.

“It's our own old gentleman!” said Phyllis.

“Oh, it's you!” said Bobbie. And then they remembered themselves and their manners and said, “How do you do?” very nicely.

“This is Jim's grandfather, Mr. —” said Mother, naming the old gentleman's name.

“How splendid!” said Peter; “that's just exactly like a book, isn't it, Mother?”

“It is, rather,” said Mother, smiling; “things do happen in real life that are rather like books, sometimes.”

“I am so awfully glad it IS you,” said Phyllis; “when you think of the tons of old gentlemen there are in the world—it might have been almost anyone.”

“I say, though,” said Peter, “you're not going to take Jim away, though, are you?”

“Not at present,” said the old gentleman. “Your Mother has most kindly consented to let him stay here. I thought of sending a nurse, but your Mother is good enough to say that she will nurse him herself.”

“But what about her writing?” said Peter, before anyone could stop him. “There won't be anything for him to eat if Mother doesn't write.”

“That's all right,” said Mother, hastily.

The old gentleman looked very kindly at Mother.

“I see,” he said, “you trust your children, and confide in them.”

“Of course,” said Mother.

"Then I may tell them of our little arrangement," he said. "Your Mother, my dears, has consented to give up writing for a little while and to become a Matron of my Hospital."

"Oh!" said Phyllis, blankly; "and shall we have to go away from Three Chimneys and the Railway and everything?"

"No, no, darling," said Mother, hurriedly.

"The Hospital is called Three Chimneys Hospital," said the old gentleman, "and my unlucky Jim's the only patient, and I hope he'll continue to be so. Your Mother will be Matron, and there'll be a hospital staff of a housemaid and a cook—till Jim's well."

"And then will Mother go on writing again?" asked Peter.

"We shall see," said the old gentleman, with a slight, swift glance at Bobbie; "perhaps something nice may happen and she won't have to."

"I love my writing," said Mother, very quickly.

"I know," said the old gentleman; "don't be afraid that I'm going to try to interfere. But one never knows. Very wonderful and beautiful things do happen, don't they? And we live most of our lives in the hope of them. I may come again to see the boy?"

"Surely," said Mother, "and I don't know how to thank you for making it possible for me to nurse him. Dear boy!"

"He kept calling Mother, Mother, in the night," said Phyllis. "I woke up twice and heard him."

"He didn't mean me," said Mother, in a low voice to the old gentleman; "that's why I wanted so much to keep him."

The old gentleman rose.

"I'm so glad," said Peter, "that you're going to keep him, Mother."

"Take care of your Mother, my dears," said the old gentleman. "She's a woman in a million."

"Yes, isn't she?" whispered Bobbie.

"God bless her," said the old gentleman, taking both Mother's hands, "God bless her! Ay, and she shall be blessed. Dear me, where's my hat? Will Bobbie come with me to the gate?"

At the gate he stopped and said:—

"You're a good child, my dear—I got your letter. But it wasn't needed. When I read about your Father's case in the papers at the time, I had my doubts. And ever since I've known who you were, I've been trying to find out things. I haven't done very much yet. But I have hopes, my dear—I have hopes."

"Oh!" said Bobbie, choking a little.

"Yes—I may say great hopes. But keep your secret a little longer. Wouldn't do to upset your Mother with a false hope, would it?"

"Oh, but it isn't false!" said Bobbie; "I KNOW you can do it. I knew you could when I wrote. It isn't a false hope, is it?"

"No," he said, "I don't think it's a false hope, or I wouldn't have told you. And I think you deserve to be told that there IS a hope."

"And you don't think Father did it, do you? Oh, say you don't think he did."

"My dear," he said, "I'm perfectly CERTAIN he didn't." If it was a false hope, it was none the less a very radiant one that lay warm at Bobbie's heart, and through the days that followed lighted her little face as a Japanese lantern is lighted by the candle within.