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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: The pride of Perks (9/14)

It was breakfast-time. Mother's face was very bright as she poured the milk and ladled out the porridge. "I've sold another story, Chickies," she said; "the one about the King of the Mussels, so there'll be buns for tea. You can go and get them as soon as they're baked. About eleven, isn't it?"

Peter, Phyllis, and Bobbie exchanged glances with each other, six glances in all. Then Bobbie said:—

"Mother, would you mind if we didn't have the buns for tea to-night, but on the fifteenth? That's next Thursday."

"I don't mind when you have them, dear," said Mother, "but why?"

"Because it's Perks's birthday," said Bobbie; "he's thirty-two, and he says he doesn't keep his birthday any more, because he's got other things to keep—not rabbits or secrets—but the kids and the missus."

"You mean his wife and children," said Mother.

"Yes," said Phyllis; "it's the same thing, isn't it?"

"And we thought we'd make a nice birthday for him. He's been so awfully jolly decent to us, you know, Mother," said Peter, "and we agreed that next bun-day we'd ask you if we could."

"But suppose there hadn't been a bun-day before the fifteenth?" said Mother.

"Oh, then, we meant to ask you to let us anti-antipate it, and go without when the bun-day came."

"Anticipate," said Mother. "I see. Certainly. It would be nice to put his name on the buns with pink sugar, wouldn't it?"

"Perks," said Peter, "it's not a pretty name."

"His other name's Albert," said Phyllis; "I asked him once."

"We might put A. P.," said Mother; "I'll show you how when the day comes."

This was all very well as far as it went. But even fourteen halfpenny buns with A. P. on them in pink sugar do not of themselves make a very grand celebration.

"There are always flowers, of course," said Bobbie, later, when a really earnest council was being held on the subject in the hay-loft where the broken chaff-cutting machine was, and the row of holes to drop hay through into the hay-racks over the mangers of the stables below.

"He's got lots of flowers of his own," said Peter.

"But it's always nice to have them given you," said Bobbie, "however many you've got of your own. We can use flowers for trimmings to the birthday. But there must be something to trim besides buns."

"Let's all be quiet and think," said Phyllis; "no one's to speak until it's thought of something."

So they were all quiet and so very still that a brown rat thought that there was no one in the loft and came out very boldly. When Bobbie sneezed, the rat was quite shocked and hurried away, for he saw that a hay-loft where such things could happen was no place for a respectable middle-aged rat that liked a quiet life.

"Hooray!" cried Peter, suddenly, "I've got it." He jumped up and kicked at the loose hay.

"What?" said the others, eagerly.

"Why, Perks is so nice to everybody. There must be lots of people in the village who'd like to help to make him a birthday. Let's go round and ask everybody."

"Mother said we weren't to ask people for things," said Bobbie, doubtfully.

"For ourselves, she meant, silly, not for other people. I'll ask the old gentleman too. You see if I don't," said Peter.

"Let's ask Mother first," said Bobbie.

"Oh, what's the use of bothering Mother about every little thing?" said Peter, "especially when she's busy.

Come on. Let's go down to the village now and begin."

So they went. The old lady at the Post-office said she didn't see why Perks should have a birthday any more than anyone else.

"No," said Bobbie, "I should like everyone to have one. Only we know when his is."

"Mine's to-morrow," said the old lady, "and much notice anyone will take of it. Go along with you."

So they went.

And some people were kind, and some were crusty. And some would give and some would not. It is rather

difficult work asking for things, even for other people, as you have no doubt found if you have ever tried it. When the children got home and counted up what had been given and what had been promised, they felt that for the first day it was not so bad. Peter wrote down the lists of the things in the little pocket-book where he kept the numbers of his engines. These were the lists:—

GIVEN.

A tobacco pipe from the sweet shop.

Half a pound of tea from the grocer's.

A woollen scarf slightly faded from the draper's, which was the

other side of the grocer's.

A stuffed squirrel from the Doctor.

PROMISED.

A piece of meat from the butcher.

Six fresh eggs from the woman who lived in the old turnpike cottage.

A piece of honeycomb and six bootlaces from the cobbler, and an

iron shovel from the blacksmith's.

Very early next morning Bobbie got up and woke Phyllis. This had been agreed on between them. They had not told Peter because they thought he would think it silly. But they told him afterwards, when it had turned out all right.

They cut a big bunch of roses, and put it in a basket with the needle-book that Phyllis had made for Bobbie

on her birthday, and a very pretty blue necktie of Phyllis's. Then they wrote on a paper: 'For Mrs. Ransome, with our best love, because it is her birthday,' and they put the paper in the basket, and they took it to the Post-office, and went in and put it on the counter and ran away before the old woman at the Post-office had time to get into her shop.

When they got home Peter had grown confidential over helping Mother to get the breakfast and had told her their plans.

"There's no harm in it," said Mother, "but it depends HOW you do it. I only hope he won't be offended and



think it's CHARITY. Poor people are very proud, you know."

"It isn't because he's poor," said Phyllis; "it's because we're fond of him."

"I'll find some things that Phyllis has outgrown," said Mother, "if you're quite sure you can give them to him without his being offended.

I should like to do some little thing for him because he's been so kind to you. I can't do much because we're poor ourselves. What are you writing, Bobbie?"

"Nothing particular," said Bobbie, who had suddenly begun to scribble. "I'm sure he'd like the things, Mother."

The morning of the fifteenth was spent very happily in getting the buns and watching Mother make A. P. on them with pink sugar. You know how it's done, of course? You beat up whites of eggs and mix powdered sugar with them, and put in a few drops of cochineal. And then you make a cone of clean, white paper with a little hole at the pointed end, and put the pink egg-sugar in at the big end. It runs slowly out at the pointed end, and you write the letters with it just as though it were a great fat pen full of pink sugar-ink. The buns looked beautiful with A. P. on every one, and, when they were put in a cool oven to set the sugar, the children went up to the village to collect the honey and the shovel and the other promised things.

The old lady at the Post-office was standing on her doorstep. The children said "Good morning," politely, as they passed.

"Here, stop a bit," she said.

So they stopped.

"Those roses," said she.

"Did you like them?" said Phyllis; "they were as fresh as fresh. I made the needle-book, but it was Bobbie's present." She skipped joyously as she spoke.

"Here's your basket," said the Post-office woman. She went in and brought out the basket. It was full of fat, red gooseberries.

"I dare say Perks's children would like them," said she.

"You ARE an old dear," said Phyllis, throwing her arms around the old lady's fat waist. "Perks WILL be pleased."

"He won't be half so pleased as I was with your needle-book and the tie and the pretty flowers and all," said the old lady, patting Phyllis's shoulder. "You're good little souls, that you are. Look here. I've got a pram round the back in the wood-lodge. It was got for my Emmie's first, that didn't live but six months, and she never had but that one. I'd like Mrs. Perks to have it. It 'ud be a help to her with that great boy of hers. Will you take it along?"

"OH!" said all the children together.

When Mrs. Ransome had got out the perambulator and taken off the careful papers that covered it, and dusted it all over, she said:—

"Well, there it is. I don't know but what I'd have given it to her before if I'd thought of it. Only I didn't quite know if she'd accept of it from me. You tell her it was my Emmie's little one's pram—"

"Oh, ISN'T it nice to think there is going to be a real live baby in it again!"

"Yes," said Mrs. Ransome, sighing, and then laughing; "here, I'll give you some peppermint cushions for the little ones, and then you run along before I give you the roof off my head and the clothes off my back."

All the things that had been collected for Perks were packed into the perambulator, and at half-past three Peter and Bobbie and Phyllis wheeled it down to the little yellow house where Perks lived.

The house was very tidy. On the window ledge was a jug of wild-flowers, big daisies, and red sorrel, and feathery, flowery grasses.

There was a sound of splashing from the wash-house, and a partly washed boy put his head round the door. "Mother's a-changing of herself," he said.

"Down in a minute," a voice sounded down the narrow, freshly scrubbed stairs.

The children waited. Next moment the stairs creaked and Mrs. Perks came down, buttoning her bodice. Her hair was brushed very smooth and tight, and her face shone with soap and water.

"I'm a bit late changing, Miss," she said to Bobbie, "owing to me having had a extry clean-up to-day, along o' Perks happening to name its being his birthday. I don't know what put it into his head to think of such a thing. We keeps the children's birthdays, of course; but him and me—we're too old for such like, as a general rule."

"We knew it was his birthday," said Peter, "and we've got some presents for him outside in the perambulator." As the presents were being unpacked, Mrs. Perks gasped. When they were all unpacked, she surprised and horrified the children by sitting suddenly down on a wooden chair and bursting into tears.

"Oh, don't!" said everybody; "oh, please don't!" And Peter added, perhaps a little impatiently: "What on earth is the matter? You don't mean to say you don't like it?"

Mrs. Perks only sobbed. The Perks children, now as shiny-faced as anyone could wish, stood at the wash-house door, and scowled at the intruders. There was a silence, an awkward silence.

"DON'T you like it?" said Peter, again, while his sisters patted Mrs. Perks on the back.

She stopped crying as suddenly as she had begun. "There, there, don't you mind me. I'M all right!" she said. "Like it? Why, it's a birthday such as Perks never 'ad, not even when 'e was a boy and stayed with his uncle, who was a corn chandler in his own account. He failed afterwards. Like it? Oh—" and then she went on and said all sorts of things that I won't write down, because I am sure that Peter and Bobbie and Phyllis would not like me to. Their ears got hotter and hotter, and their faces redder and redder, at the kind things Mrs. Perks said. They felt they had done nothing to deserve all this praise.

At last Peter said: "Look here, we're glad you're pleased. But if you go on saying things like that, we must go home. And we did want to stay and see if Mr. Perks is pleased, too. But we can't stand this."

"I won't say another single word," said Mrs. Perks, with a beaming face, "but that needn't stop me thinking, need it? For if ever—"

"Can we have a plate for the buns?" Bobbie asked abruptly. And then Mrs. Perks hastily laid the table for tea, and the buns and the honey and the gooseberries were displayed on plates, and the roses were put in two glass jam jars, and the tea-table looked, as Mrs. Perks said, "fit for a Prince."

"To think!" she said, "me getting the place tidy early, and the little 'uns getting the wild-flowers and all—when never did I think there'd be anything more for him except the ounce of his pet particular that I got o'

Saturday and been saving up for 'im ever since. Bless us! 'e IS early!"

Perks had indeed unlatched the latch of the little front gate.

"Oh," whispered Bobbie, "let's hide in the back kitchen, and YOU tell him about it. But give him the tobacco first, because you got it for him. And when you've told him, we'll all come in and shout, 'Many happy returns!'"

It was a very nice plan, but it did not quite come off. To begin with, there was only just time for Peter and Bobbie and Phyllis to rush into the wash-house, pushing the young and open-mouthed Perks children in front of them. There was not time to shut the door, so that, without at all meaning it, they had to listen to what went on in the kitchen. The wash-house was a tight fit for the Perks children and the Three Chimneys children, as well as all the wash-house's proper furniture, including the mangle and the copper.

"Hullo, old woman!" they heard Mr. Perks's voice say; "here's a pretty set-out!"

"It's your birthday tea, Bert," said Mrs. Perks, "and here's a ounce of your extry particular. I got it o' Saturday along o' your happening to remember it was your birthday to-day."

"Good old girl!" said Mr. Perks, and there was a sound of a kiss.

"But what's that pram doing here? And what's all these bundles? And where did you get the sweetstuff, and—"

The children did not hear what Mrs. Perks replied, because just then Bobbie gave a start, put her hand in her pocket, and all her body grew stiff with horror.

"Oh!" she whispered to the others, "whatever shall we do? I forgot to put the labels on any of the things! He won't know what's from who. He'll think it's all US, and that we're trying to be grand or charitable or something horrid."

"Hush!" said Peter.

And then they heard the voice of Mr. Perks, loud and rather angry.

"I don't care," he said; "I won't stand it, and so I tell you straight."

"But," said Mrs. Perks, "it's them children you make such a fuss about—the children from the Three Chimneys."

"I don't care," said Perks, firmly, "not if it was a angel from Heaven. We've got on all right all these years and no favours asked. I'm not going to begin these sort of charity goings-on at my time of life, so don't you think it, Nell."

"Oh, hush!" said poor Mrs Perks; "Bert, shut your silly tongue, for goodness' sake. The all three of 'ems in the wash-house a-listening to every word you speaks."

"Then I'll give them something to listen to," said the angry Perks; "I've spoke my mind to them afore now, and I'll do it again," he added, and he took two strides to the wash-house door, and flung it wide open—as wide, that is, as it would go, with the tightly packed children behind it.

"Come out," said Perks, "come out and tell me what you mean by it. 'Ave I ever complained to you of being short, as you comes this charity lay over me?"

"OH!" said Phyllis, "I thought you'd be so pleased; I'll never try to be kind to anyone else as long as I live. No, I won't, not never."

She burst into tears.

"We didn't mean any harm," said Peter.

"It ain't what you means so much as what you does," said Perks.

"Oh, DON'T!" cried Bobbie, trying hard to be braver than Phyllis, and to find more words than Peter had done for explaining in. "We thought you'd love it. We always have things on our birthdays."

"Oh, yes," said Perks, "your own relations; that's different."

"Oh, no," Bobbie answered. "NOT our own relations. All the servants always gave us things at home, and us to them when it was their birthdays. And when it was mine, and Mother gave me the brooch like a buttercup, Mrs. Viney gave me two lovely glass pots, and nobody thought she was coming the charity lay over us."

"If it had been glass pots here," said Perks, "I wouldn't ha' said so much. It's there being all this heaps and heaps of things I can't stand. No—nor won't, neither."

"But they're not all from us—" said Peter, "only we forgot to put the labels on. They're from all sorts of people in the village."

"Who put 'em up to it, I'd like to know?" asked Perks.

"Why, we did," sniffed Phyllis.

Perks sat down heavily in the elbow-chair and looked at them with what Bobbie afterwards described as withering glances of gloomy despair.

"So you've been round telling the neighbours we can't make both ends meet? Well, now you've disgraced us as deep as you can in the neighbourhood, you can just take the whole bag of tricks back w'ere it come from. Very much obliged, I'm sure. I don't doubt but what you meant it kind, but I'd rather not be acquainted with you any longer if it's all the same to you." He deliberately turned the chair round so that his back was turned to the children. The legs of the chair grated on the brick floor, and that was the only sound that broke the silence.

Then suddenly Bobbie spoke.

"Look here," she said, "this is most awful."

"That's what I says," said Perks, not turning round.

"Look here," said Bobbie, desperately, "we'll go if you like—and you needn't be friends with us any more if you don't want, but—"

"WE shall always be friends with YOU, however nasty you are to us," sniffed Phyllis, wildly.

"Be quiet," said Peter, in a fierce aside.

"But before we go," Bobbie went on desperately, "do let us show you the labels we wrote to put on the things."

"I don't want to see no labels," said Perks, "except proper luggage ones in my own walk of life. Do you think I've kept respectable and outer debt on what I gets, and her having to take in washing, to be give away for a laughing-stock to all the neighbours?"

"Laughing?" said Peter; "you don't know."

"You're a very hasty gentleman," whined Phyllis; "you know you were wrong once before, about us not telling you the secret about the Russian. Do let Bobbie tell you about the labels!"

"Well. Go ahead!" said Perks, grudgingly.

"Well, then," said Bobbie, fumbling miserably, yet not without hope, in her tightly stuffed pocket, "we wrote down all the things everybody said when they gave us the things, with the people's names, because Mother said we ought to be careful—because—but I wrote down what she said—and you'll see."

But Bobbie could not read the labels just at once. She had to swallow once or twice before she could begin. Mrs. Perks had been crying steadily ever since her husband had opened the wash-house door. Now she caught her breath, choked, and said:—

"Don't you upset yourself, Missy. I know you meant it kind if he doesn't."

"May I read the labels?" said Bobbie, crying on to the slips as she tried to sort them. "Mother's first. It says:—
"Little Clothes for Mrs. Perks's children.' Mother said, 'I'll find some of Phyllis's things that she's grown out of if you're quite sure Mr. Perks wouldn't be offended and think it's meant for charity. I'd like to do some little thing for him, because he's so kind to you. I can't do much because we're poor ourselves.'"

Bobbie paused.

"That's all right," said Perks, "your Ma's a born lady. We'll keep the little frocks, and what not, Nell."

"Then there's the perambulator and the gooseberries, and the sweets," said Bobbie, "they're from Mrs. Ransome. She said: 'I dare say Mr. Perks's children would like the sweets. And the perambulator was got for my Emmie's first—it didn't live but six months, and she's never had but that one. I'd like Mrs. Perks to have it. It would be a help with her fine boy. I'd have given it before if I'd been sure she'd accept of it from me.' She told me to tell you," Bobbie added, "that it was her Emmie's little one's pram."

"I can't send that pram back, Bert," said Mrs Perks, firmly, "and I won't. So don't you ask me—"

"I'm not a-asking anything," said Perks, gruffly.

"Then the shovel," said Bobbie. "Mr. James made it for you himself. And he said—where is it? Oh, yes, here! He said, 'You tell Mr. Perks it's a pleasure to make a little trifle for a man as is so much respected,' and then he said he wished he could shoe your children and his own children, like they do the horses, because, well, he knew what shoe leather was."

"James is a good enough chap," said Perks.

"Then the honey," said Bobbie, in haste, "and the boot-laces. HE said he respected a man that paid his way—and the butcher said the same. And the old turnpike woman said many was the time you'd lent her a hand with her garden when you were a lad—and things like that came home to roost—I don't know what she meant. And everybody who gave anything said they liked you, and it was a very good idea of ours; and nobody said anything about charity or anything horrid like that. And

the old gentleman gave Peter a gold pound for you, and said you were a man who knew your work. And I thought you'd LOVE to know how fond people are of you, and I never was so unhappy in my life. Good-bye. I hope you'll forgive us some day—"

She could say no more, and she turned to go.

"Stop," said Perks, still with his back to them; "I take back every word I've said contrary to what you'd wish. Nell, set on the kettle."

"We'll take the things away if you're unhappy about them," said Peter; "but I think everybody'll be most awfully disappointed, as well as us."

"I'm not unhappy about them," said Perks; "I don't know," he added, suddenly wheeling the chair round and showing a very odd-looking screwed-up face, "I don't know as ever I was better pleased. Not so much with the presents—though they're an A1 collection—but the kind respect of our neighbours. That's worth having, eh, Nell?"

"I think it's all worth having," said Mrs. Perks, "and you've made a most ridiculous fuss about nothing, Bert, if you ask me."

"No, I ain't," said Perks, firmly; "if a man didn't respect hisself, no one wouldn't do it for him."

"But everyone respects you," said Bobbie; "they all said so."

"I knew you'd like it when you really understood," said Phyllis, brightly.

"Humph! You'll stay to tea?" said Mr. Perks.

Later on Peter proposed Mr. Perks's health. And Mr. Perks proposed a toast, also honoured in tea, and the toast was, "May the garland of friendship be ever green," which was much more poetical than anyone had expected from him.

* * * * *

"Jolly good little kids, those," said Mr. Perks to his wife as they went to bed.

"Oh, they're all right, bless their hearts," said his wife; "it's you that's the aggravatingest old thing that ever was. I was ashamed of you—I tell you—"

"You didn't need to be, old gal. I climbed down handsome soon as I understood it wasn't charity. But charity's what I never did abide, and won't neither."

* * * * *

All sorts of people were made happy by that birthday party. Mr. Perks and Mrs. Perks and the little Perkses by all the nice things and by the kind thoughts of their neighbours; the Three Chimneys children by the success, undoubted though unexpectedly delayed, of their plan; and Mrs. Ransome every time she saw the fat Perks baby in the perambulator. Mrs. Perks made quite a round of visits to thank people for their kind birthday presents, and after each visit felt that she had a better friend than she had thought.

"Yes," said Perks, reflectively, "it's not so much what you does as what you means; that's what I say. Now if it had been charity—"

"Oh, drat charity," said Mrs. Perks; "nobody won't offer you charity, Bert, however much you was to want it, I lay. That was just friendliness, that was."

When the clergyman called on Mrs. Perks, she told him all about it. "It WAS friendliness, wasn't it, Sir?" said she.

"I think," said the clergyman, "it was what is sometimes called loving-kindness."

So you see it was all right in the end. But if one does that sort of thing, one has to be careful to do it in the right way. For, as Mr. Perks said, when he had time to think it over, it's not so much what you do, as what you mean.