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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: What Bobbie brought home (12/14)

"Oh, look up! Speak to me! For MY sake, speak!" The children said the words over and over again to the unconscious hound in a red jersey, who sat with closed eyes and pale face against the side of the tunnel.

"Wet his ears with milk," said Bobbie. "I know they do it to people that faint—with eau-de-Cologne. But I expect milk's just as good."

So they wetted his ears, and some of the milk ran down his neck under the red jersey. It was very dark in the tunnel. The candle end Peter had carried, and which now burned on a flat stone, gave hardly any light at all.

"Oh, DO look up," said Phyllis. "For MY sake! I believe he's dead."

"For MY sake," repeated Bobbie. "No, he isn't."

"For ANY sake," said Peter; "come out of it." And he shook the sufferer by the arm.

And then the boy in the red jersey sighed, and opened his eyes, and shut them again and said in a very small voice, "Chuck it."

"Oh, he's NOT dead," said Phyllis. "I KNEW he wasn't," and she began to cry.

"What's up? I'm all right," said the boy.

"Drink this," said Peter, firmly, thrusting the nose of the milk bottle into the boy's mouth. The boy struggled, and

some of the milk was upset before he could get his mouth free to say:—

“What is it?”

“It's milk,” said Peter. “Fear not, you are in the hands of friends. Phil, you stop bleating this minute.”

“Do drink it,” said Bobbie, gently; “it'll do you good.”

So he drank. And the three stood by without speaking to him.

“Let him be a minute,” Peter whispered; “he'll be all right as soon as the milk begins to run like fire through his veins.”

He was.

“I'm better now,” he announced. “I remember all about it.” He tried to move, but the movement ended in a groan. “Bother! I believe I've broken my leg,” he said.

“Did you tumble down?” asked Phyllis, sniffing.

“Of course not—I'm not a kiddie,” said the boy, indignantly; “it was one of those beastly wires tripped me up, and when I tried to get up again I couldn't stand, so I sat down. Gee whillikins! it does hurt, though. How did YOU get here?”

“We saw you all go into the tunnel and then we went across the hill to see you all come out. And the others did—all but you, and you didn't. So we are a rescue party,” said Peter, with pride.

“You've got some pluck, I will say,” remarked the boy.

“Oh, that's nothing,” said Peter, with modesty. “Do you think you could walk if we helped you?”

“I could try,” said the boy.

He did try. But he could only stand on one foot; the other dragged in a very nasty way.

"Here, let me sit down. I feel like dying," said the boy.

"Let go of me—let go, quick—" He lay down and closed his eyes. The others looked at each other by the dim light of the little candle.

"What on earth!" said Peter.

"Look here," said Bobbie, quickly, "you must go and get help. Go to the nearest house."

"Yes, that's the only thing," said Peter. "Come on."

"If you take his feet and Phil and I take his head, we could carry him to the manhole."

They did it. It was perhaps as well for the sufferer that he had fainted again.

"Now," said Bobbie, "I'll stay with him. You take the longest bit of candle, and, oh—be quick, for this bit won't burn long."

"I don't think Mother would like me leaving you," said Peter, doubtfully. "Let me stay, and you and Phil go."

"No, no," said Bobbie, "you and Phil go—and lend me your knife. I'll try to get his boot off before he wakes up again."

"I hope it's all right what we're doing," said Peter.

"Of course it's right," said Bobbie, impatiently. "What else WOULD you do? Leave him here all alone because it's dark? Nonsense. Hurry up, that's all."

So they hurried up.

Bobbie watched their dark figures and the little light of the little candle with an odd feeling of having come to the end of everything. She knew now, she thought,

what nuns who were bricked up alive in convent walls felt like. Suddenly she gave herself a little shake.

"Don't be a silly little girl," she said. She was always very angry when anyone else called her a little girl, even if the adjective that went first was not "silly" but "nice" or "good" or "clever." And it was only when she was very angry with herself that she allowed Roberta to use that expression to Bobbie.

She fixed the little candle end on a broken brick near the red-jerseyed boy's feet. Then she opened Peter's knife. It was always hard to manage—a halfpenny was generally needed to get it open at all. This time Bobbie somehow got it open with her thumbnail. She broke the nail, and it hurt horribly. Then she cut the boy's bootlace, and got the boot off. She tried to pull off his stocking, but his leg was dreadfully swollen, and it did not seem to be the proper shape. So she cut the stocking down, very slowly and carefully. It was a brown, knitted stocking, and she wondered who had knitted it, and whether it was the boy's mother, and whether she was feeling anxious about him, and how she would feel when he was brought home with his leg broken. When Bobbie had got the stocking off and saw the poor leg, she felt as though the tunnel was growing darker, and the ground felt unsteady, and nothing seemed quite real.

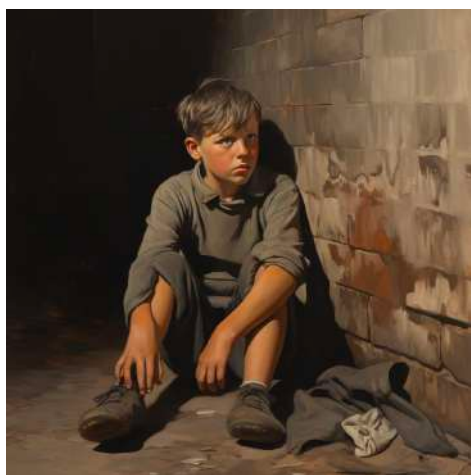
"SILLY little girl!" said Roberta to Bobbie, and felt better.

"The poor leg," she told herself; "it ought to have a cushion—ah!"

She remembered the day when she and Phyllis had torn up their red flannel petticoats to make danger signals to stop the train and prevent an accident. Her flannel petticoat to-day was white, but it would be quite as soft as a red one. She took it off.

"Oh, what useful things flannel petticoats are!" she said; "the man who invented them ought to have a statue directed to him." And she said it aloud, because it seemed that any voice, even her own, would be a comfort in that darkness.

"WHAT ought to be directed? Who to?" asked the boy, suddenly and very feebly.



"Oh," said Bobbie, "now you're better! Hold your teeth and don't let it hurt too much. Now!"

She had folded the petticoat, and lifting his leg laid it on the cushion of folded flannel.

"Don't faint again, PLEASE don't," said Bobbie, as he groaned. She hastily wetted her handkerchief

with milk and spread it over the poor leg.

"Oh, that hurts," cried the boy, shrinking. "Oh—no, it doesn't—it's nice, really."

"What's your name?" said Bobbie.

"Jim."

"Mine's Bobbie."

"But you're a girl, aren't you?"

"Yes, my long name's Roberta."

"I say—Bobbie."

"Yes?"

"Wasn't there some more of you just now?"

"Yes, Peter and Phil—that's my brother and sister. They've gone to get someone to carry you out."

"What rum names. All boys'."

"Yes—I wish I was a boy, don't you?"

"I think you're all right as you are."

"I didn't mean that—I meant don't you wish YOU were a boy, but of course you are without wishing."

"You're just as brave as a boy. Why didn't you go with the others?"

"Somebody had to stay with you," said Bobbie.

"Tell you what, Bobbie," said Jim, "you're a brick. Shake."

He reached out a red-jerseyed arm and Bobbie squeezed his hand.

"I won't shake it," she explained, "because it would shake YOU, and that would shake your poor leg, and that would hurt. Have you got a hanky?"

"I don't expect I have." He felt in his pocket. "Yes, I have. What for?"

She took it and wetted it with milk and put it on his forehead.

"That's jolly," he said; "what is it?"

"Milk," said Bobbie. "We haven't any water—"

"You're a jolly good little nurse," said Jim.

"I do it for Mother sometimes," said Bobbie—"not milk, of course, but scent, or vinegar and water. I say, I must put the candle out now, because there mayn't be enough of the other one to get you out by."

"By George," said he, "you think of everything."

Bobbie blew. Out went the candle. You have no idea how black-velvety the darkness was.

"I say, Bobbie," said a voice through the blackness, "aren't you afraid of the dark?"

"Not—not very, that is—"

"Let's hold hands," said the boy, and it was really rather good of him, because he was like most boys of his age and hated all material tokens of affection, such as kissing and holding of hands. He called all such things "pawings," and detested them.

The darkness was more bearable to Bobbie now that her hand was held in the large rough hand of the red-jerseyed sufferer; and he, holding her little smooth hot paw, was surprised to find that he did not mind it so much as he expected. She tried to talk, to amuse him, and "take his mind off" his sufferings, but it is very difficult to go on talking in the dark, and presently they found themselves in a silence, only broken now and then by a—

"You all right, Bobbie?"

or an—

"I'm afraid it's hurting you most awfully, Jim. I AM so sorry."

And it was very cold.

* * * * *

Peter and Phyllis tramped down the long way of the tunnel towards daylight, the candle-grease dripping over Peter's fingers. There were no accidents unless you count Phyllis's catching her frock on a wire, and tearing

a long, jagged slit in it, and tripping over her bootlace when it came undone, or going down on her hands and knees, all four of which were grazed.

"There's no end to this tunnel," said Phyllis—and indeed it did seem very very long.

"Stick to it," said Peter; "everything has an end, and you get to it if you only keep all on."

Which is quite true, if you come to think of it, and a useful thing to remember in seasons of trouble—such as measles, arithmetic, impositions, and those times when you are in disgrace, and feel as though no one would ever love you again, and you could never—never again—love anybody.

"Hurray," said Peter, suddenly, "there's the end of the tunnel—looks just like a pin-hole in a bit of black paper, doesn't it?"

The pin-hole got larger—blue lights lay along the sides of the tunnel. The children could see the gravel way that lay in front of them; the air grew warmer and sweeter. Another twenty steps and they were out in the good glad sunshine with the green trees on both sides.

Phyllis drew a long breath.

"I'll never go into a tunnel again as long as ever I live," said she, "not if there are twenty hundred thousand millions hounds inside with red jerseys and their legs broken."

"Don't be a silly cuckoo," said Peter, as usual. "You'd HAVE to."

"I think it was very brave and good of me," said Phyllis.

"Not it," said Peter; "you didn't go because you were brave, but because Bobbie and I aren't skunks. Now where's the nearest house, I wonder? You can't see anything here for the trees."

"There's a roof over there," said Phyllis, pointing down the line.

"That's the signal-box," said Peter, "and you know you're not allowed to speak to signalmen on duty. It's wrong."

"I'm not near so afraid of doing wrong as I was of going into that tunnel," said Phyllis. "Come on," and she started to run along the line. So Peter ran, too.

It was very hot in the sunshine, and both children were hot and breathless by the time they stopped, and bending their heads back to look up at the open windows of the signal-box, shouted "Hi!" as loud as their breathless state allowed. But no one answered. The signal-box stood quiet as an empty nursery, and the handrail of its steps was hot to the hands of the children as they climbed softly up. They peeped in at the open door. The signalman was sitting on a chair tilted back against the wall. His head leaned sideways, and his mouth was open. He was fast asleep.

"My hat!" cried Peter; "wake up!" And he cried it in a terrible voice, for he knew that if a signalman sleeps on duty, he risks losing his situation, let alone all the other dreadful risks to trains which expect him to tell them when it is safe for them to go their ways.

The signalman never moved. Then Peter sprang to him and shook him. And slowly, yawning and stretching, the man awoke. But the moment he WAS awake he leapt to

his feet, put his hands to his head "like a mad maniac," as Phyllis said afterwards, and shouted:—

"Oh, my heavens—what's o'clock?"

"Twelve thirteen," said Peter, and indeed it was by the white-faced, round-faced clock on the wall of the signal-box.

The man looked at the clock, sprang to the levers, and wrenched them this way and that. An electric bell tingled—the wires and cranks creaked, and the man threw himself into a chair. He was very pale, and the sweat stood on his forehead "like large dewdrops on a white cabbage," as Phyllis remarked later. He was trembling, too; the children could see his big hairy hands shake from side to side, "with quite extra-sized trembles," to use the subsequent words of Peter. He drew long breaths. Then suddenly he cried, "Thank God, thank God you come in when you did—oh, thank God!" and his shoulders began to heave and his face grew red again, and he hid it in those large hairy hands of his. "Oh, don't cry—don't," said Phyllis, "it's all right now," and she patted him on one big, broad shoulder, while Peter conscientiously thumped the other.

But the signalman seemed quite broken down, and the children had to pat him and thump him for quite a long time before he found his handkerchief—a red one with mauve and white horseshoes on it—and mopped his face and spoke. During this patting and thumping interval a train thundered by.

"I'm downright shamed, that I am," were the words of the big signalman when he had stopped crying;

"snivelling like a kid." Then suddenly he seemed to get cross. "And what was you doing up here, anyway?" he said; "you know it ain't allowed."

"Yes," said Phyllis, "we knew it was wrong—but I wasn't afraid of doing wrong, and so it turned out right. You aren't sorry we came."

"Lor' love you—if you hadn't 'a' come—" he stopped and then went on. "It's a disgrace, so it is, sleeping on duty. If it was to come to be known—even as it is, when no harm's come of it."

"It won't come to be known," said Peter; "we aren't sneaks. All the same, you oughtn't to sleep on duty—it's dangerous."

"Tell me something I don't know," said the man, "but I can't help it. I know'd well enough just how it 'ud be. But I couldn't get off. They couldn't get no one to take on my duty. I tell you I ain't had ten minutes' sleep this last five days. My little chap's ill—pewmonia, the Doctor says—and there's no one but me and 'is little sister to do for him. That's where it is. The gell must 'ave her sleep. Dangerous? Yes, I believe you. Now go and split on me if you like."

"Of course we won't," said Peter, indignantly, but Phyllis ignored the whole of the signalman's speech, except the first six words.

"You asked us," she said, "to tell you something you don't know. Well, I will. There's a boy in the tunnel over there with a red jersey and his leg broken."

"What did he want to go into the blooming tunnel for, then?" said the man.

"Don't you be so cross," said Phyllis, kindly. "WE haven't done anything wrong except coming and waking you up, and that was right, as it happens."

Then Peter told how the boy came to be in the tunnel.

"Well," said the man, "I don't see as I can do anything. I can't leave the box."

"You might tell us where to go after someone who isn't in a box, though," said Phyllis.

"There's Brigden's farm over yonder—where you see the smoke a-coming up through the trees," said the man, more and more grumpy, as Phyllis noticed.

"Well, good-bye, then," said Peter.

But the man said, "Wait a minute." He put his hand in his pocket and brought out some money—a lot of pennies and one or two shillings and sixpences and half-a-crown. He picked out two shillings and held them out.

"Here," he said. "I'll give you this to hold your tongues about what's taken place to-day."

There was a short, unpleasant pause. Then:—

"You ARE a nasty man, though, aren't you?" said Phyllis. Peter took a step forward and knocked the man's hand up, so that the shillings leapt out of it and rolled on the floor.

"If anything COULD make me sneak, THAT would!" he said. "Come, Phil," and marched out of the signal-box with flaming cheeks.

Phyllis hesitated. Then she took the hand, still held out stupidly, that the shillings had been in.

"I forgive you," she said, "even if Peter doesn't. You're not in your proper senses, or you'd never have done

that. I know want of sleep sends people mad. Mother told me. I hope your little boy will soon be better, and —”

“Come on, Phil,” cried Peter, eagerly.

“I give you my sacred honour-word we'll never tell anyone. Kiss and be friends,” said Phyllis, feeling how noble it was of her to try to make up a quarrel in which she was not to blame.

The signalman stooped and kissed her.

“I do believe I'm a bit off my head, Sissy,” he said. “Now run along home to Mother. I didn't mean to put you about—there.”

So Phil left the hot signal-box and followed Peter across the fields to the farm.

When the farm men, led by Peter and Phyllis and carrying a hurdle covered with horse-cloths, reached the manhole in the tunnel, Bobbie was fast asleep and so was Jim. Worn out with the pain, the Doctor said afterwards.

“Where does he live?” the bailiff from the farm asked, when Jim had been lifted on to the hurdle.

“In Northumberland,” answered Bobbie.

“I'm at school at Maidbridge,” said Jim. “I suppose I've got to get back there, somehow.”

“Seems to me the Doctor ought to have a look in first,” said the bailiff.

“Oh, bring him up to our house,” said Bobbie. “It's only a little way by the road. I'm sure Mother would say we ought to.”

"Will your Ma like you bringing home strangers with broken legs?"

"She took the poor Russian home herself," said Bobbie.

"I know she'd say we ought."

"All right," said the bailiff, "you ought to know what your Ma 'ud like. I wouldn't take it upon me to fetch him up to our place without I asked the Missus first, and they call me the Master, too."

"Are you sure your Mother won't mind?" whispered Jim.

"Certain," said Bobbie.

"Then we're to take him up to Three Chimneys?" said the bailiff.

"Of course," said Peter.

"Then my lad shall nip up to Doctor's on his bike, and tell him to come down there. Now, lads, lift him quiet and steady. One, two, three!"

* * * * *

Thus it happened that Mother, writing away for dear life at a story about a Duchess, a designing villain, a secret passage, and a missing will, dropped her pen as her work-room door burst open, and turned to see Bobbie hatless and red with running.

"Oh, Mother," she cried, "do come down. We found a hound in a red jersey in the tunnel, and he's broken his leg and they're bringing him home."

"They ought to take him to the vet," said Mother, with a worried frown; "I really CAN'T have a lame dog here."

"He's not a dog, really—he's a boy," said Bobbie, between laughing and choking.

"Then he ought to be taken home to his mother."

"His mother's dead," said Bobbie, "and his father's in Northumberland. Oh, Mother, you will be nice to him? I told him I was sure you'd want us to bring him home. You always want to help everybody."

Mother smiled, but she sighed, too. It is nice that your children should believe you willing to open house and heart to any and every one who needs help. But it is rather embarrassing sometimes, too, when they act on their belief.

"Oh, well," said Mother, "we must make the best of it." When Jim was carried in, dreadfully white and with set lips whose red had faded to a horrid bluey violet colour, Mother said:—

"I am glad you brought him here. Now, Jim, let's get you comfortable in bed before the Doctor comes!"

And Jim, looking at her kind eyes, felt a little, warm, comforting flush of new courage.

"It'll hurt rather, won't it?" he said. "I don't mean to be a coward. You won't think I'm a coward if I faint again, will you? I really and truly don't do it on purpose. And I do hate to give you all this trouble."

"Don't you worry," said Mother; "it's you that have the trouble, you poor dear—not us."

And she kissed him just as if he had been Peter. "We love to have you here—don't we, Bobbie?"

"Yes," said Bobbie—and she saw by her Mother's face how right she had been to bring home the wounded hound in the red jersey.