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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Box-Car Children: A New Home (4/17)

"Keep still!" whispered Jess.

Benny obeyed. The three children were as motionless as stone images, huddled inside the freight car. Jess opened her mouth in order to breathe at all, her heart was thumping so wildly. She watched like a cat through the open door, in the direction of the rustling noise. And in a moment the trembling bushes parted, and out crawled a dog. He was an Airedale and was pulling himself along on three legs, whimpering softly. Jess drew a long breath of relief, and said to the children, "It's all right. Only a dog. But he seems to be hurt."

At the sound of her voice the dog lifted his eyes and wagged his tail feebly. He held up his front foot.

"Poor doggie," murmured Jess soothingly, as she clambered out of the car. "Let Jess see your poor lame foot." She approached the dog carefully, for she remembered that her mother had always told her never to touch a strange dog unless he wagged his tail. But this dog's tail was wagging, certainly, so Jess bent over without fear to look at the paw. An exclamation of pity escaped her when she saw it, for a stiff, sharp thorn had been driven completely through one of the

cushions of the dog's foot, and around it the blood had dried.

"I guess I can fix that," said Jess briskly. "But taking the thorn out is going to hurt you, old fellow."

The dog looked up at her as she laid his paw down, and licked her hand.

"Come here, Violet and Benny," directed Jess.

She took the animal gently in her lap and turned him on his side. She patted his head and stroked his nose with one finger, and offered him the rest of her breadcrust, which she had put in her apron pocket. The dog snapped it up as if he were nearly starved. Then she held the soft paw firmly with her left hand, and pulled steadily on the thorn with her right hand. The dog did not utter a sound. He lay motionless in her lap, until the thorn suddenly let go and lay in Jess' hand.

"Good, good!" cried Violet.

"Wet my handkerchief," Jess ordered briskly.

Violet did so, dipping it in the running brook. Jess wrapped the cool, wet folds around the hot paw, and gently squeezed it against the wound, the dog meanwhile trying to lick her hands.

"We'll s'prise Henry, won't we?" laughed Benny delightedly. "Now we got a dog!"

"To be sure," said Jess, struck with the thought, "but that isn't what I intended for a surprise. You know I was intending to get a lot of blueberries, and maybe find some old dishes in a dump or something—"

"Can't we look while you hold the dog?" asked Violet anxiously.

"Of course you can, Pet!" said Jess. "Look over there by those rocks."

Benny and Violet scrambled through the underbrush to the place Jess pointed out, and investigated. But they did not hunt long, for the blueberries were so thick that the bushes almost bent over with their weight.

"O Jessy," screamed Benny, "you never saw so many in your life! What'll we pick 'em into?"

"Come and get a clean towel," said Jess, who noticed that Benny was already "picking into" his own mouth.

"But that's just as well," she thought. "Because he won't get so hungry waiting for the milk." She watched the two children a moment as they dropped handfuls of the bluish globes on the towel. Then she carefully got up with her little patient and went over and sat down in the center of the patch. The berries were so thick she did not have to change her position before the towel held over a quart.

"Oh, dear," sighed Jess. "I wish I could hunt for some dishes, so we could have blueberries and milk."

"Never mind tonight," said Violet. "We can just eat a handful of berries and then take a drink of milk, when Henry comes."

But it was even better than that, for when Henry came he had two bottles of milk under one arm, a huge loaf of brown bread under the other, and some golden cheese in waxed paper in his pocket.

But you should have seen Henry stare when he saw what Jess was holding!

"Where in the world—" began the boy.

"He came to us," volunteered Benny. "He came for a surprise for you. And he's a nice doggie."



Henry knelt down to look at the visitor, who wagged his tail. "It wouldn't be a bad thing to have a watchdog," said Henry. "I worried about you all the time I was gone."

"Did you bring some milk?" inquired Benny, trying to be polite, but looking at the bottles with longing eyes.

"Bless his heart!" said Jess, struggling to her feet with the dog. "We'll have dinner right away—or is it supper?"

"Call it supper," suggested Henry, "for it's the last thing we'll have to eat today."

"And then tomorrow we'll start having three meals every day," laughed Jess.

It was certainly a queer meal, whatever it was. Jess, who liked above all things to be orderly, spread out the big gray laundry bag on the pine needles for a tablecloth. The brown loaf was cut by a very excited little hostess into five thick squares; the cheese into four.

"Dogs don't eat cheese," Benny remarked cheerfully. The poor little fellow was glad of it, too, for he was very hungry. He could hardly wait for Jess to set the milk bottles in the center of the table and heap the blueberries in four little mounds, one at each place.

"I'm sorry we haven't cups," Jess remarked. "We'll just have to drink out of the same bottle."

"No, we won't," said Henry. "We'll drink half of each bottle, so that will make at least two things to drink out of."

"Good for you, Henry," said Jess, much relieved. "You and Benny use one, and Violet and I will use the other."

So the meal began. "Look, Benny," directed Henry. "Eat a handful of blueberries, then take a bite of brown bread, then a nibble of cheese. Now, a drink of milk!"

"It's good! It's good!" mumbled Benny to himself all through the meal.

You must not imagine that the poor wandering dog was neglected, for Jess fed him gently, as he lay in her lap, poking morsels of bread into his mouth and pouring milk into her own hand for him to lap up.

When the meal was over, and exactly half of each bottle of milk remained, Jess said, "We are going to sleep on beds tonight, and just as soon as we get our beds made, we are all going to be washed."

"That'll be fun, Benny," added Violet. "We'll wash our paws in the brook just the way Cinnamon does."

"First, let's gather armfuls of dry pine needles," ordered Jess. "Get those on top that have been lying in the sunshine." Jess laid the dog down on a bed of moss as she spoke, and started energetically to scoop up piles of the fragrant needles. Soon a pile as high as her head stood just under the freight-car door.

"I think we have enough," she said at last. Taking the scissors from Violet's workbag, she cut the laundry bag

carefully into two pieces, saving the cord for a clothesline. One of the big squares was laid across Benny's hay and tucked under. That was the softest bed of all. Violet's apron and her own, she cut off at the belt.

"I'll sleep next to Benny," said Henry, "with my head up by the door. Then I can hear what is going on." A big pile of pine needles was loaded into the freight car for Henry's bed, and covered with the other half of the laundry bag.

The remainder of the needles Jess piled into the farthest corner of the car for herself and Violet. "We'll all sleep on one side, so we can call it the bedroom."

"What'll be the other side?" inquired Benny.

"The other side?" repeated Jess. "Let me think! I guess that'll be the sitting room, and perhaps some of the time the kitchen."

"On rainy days, maybe the dining room," added Henry with a wink.

"Couldn't it be the parlor?" begged Benny.

"Certainly, the parlor! We forgot that," agreed Jess, returning the wink. She was covering the last two soft beds with the two aprons. "The tops of these aprons are washcloths," she said severely. Then armed with the big cake of soap she led the way to the brook. The dog watched them anxiously, but when Jess said, "Lie still," he obeyed. From the moment Jess drew the thorn from his foot he was her dog, to obey her slightest command and to follow her wherever she went.

The clean cool brook was delightful even to Benny. The children rolled up their sleeves and plunged their dusty arms into its waters, quarreling good-naturedly over the soap, and lathering their stained faces and necks with it. When they were well rinsed with clear water they dried themselves with the towel. Then Jess washed both towels nicely with soap, rinsed them, and hung them on the clothesline of tape, which she had stretched between two slender birch trees. They flapped lazily in the wind.

"Looks like home already, Jess," said Henry, smiling at the washing.

The tired children clambered into the "bedroom," Jess coming last with the wounded dog.

"We'll have to leave the door open, it's so hot," said Henry, lying down with a tired sigh.

And in less than ten minutes they were fast asleep, dog and all—asleep at six o'clock, asleep without naming the dog, without locking the door, without fear, for this was the first night in four that they had been able to go to sleep at night, as children should.