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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Box-Car Children: At Home (7/17)

Jess and Henry had a short committee meeting next morning before the others awoke. It was agreed that nobody should be allowed to stray off into the woods alone, not even the dog. And with much mystery Henry left some orders with all of them, as to what they should build for him during the morning.

"What for?" asked Benny.

"Shan't tell, old fellow," teased Henry. "You just build it, and you'll see later."

So Henry walked briskly through the woods, feeling sure that the noise in the night had been made by a rabbit.

Having no watch, Henry made a slight mistake by appearing at the young doctor's door before eight o'clock. He was just in time to meet the doctor coming in from a night call.

If Henry had not been so eager to begin work, he would have noticed how the young man's dark eyes examined him from head to foot, even to his plastered hair, wet with brook water. It was not the doctor who directed his work, but the doctor's mother—the sweet-faced Mrs. McAllister, whose heart was centered in her son and her vegetable garden.

Her heart warmed to the boy when she saw how carefully he thinned out the carrots, which had been sadly neglected.

"I have been so busy," she declared, "that I have actually stayed awake nights worrying about these carrots. There—see that?" She pulled out a fairly good-sized carrot as she spoke. It had to come out, for it was much too near its neighbors. In fact, when Henry had thinned out half a row he had quite a little pile of eatable carrots, each as large as his thumb. When Mrs. McAllister saw Henry deftly press the earth back again around the carrots which remained standing, she left him quietly with a smile. Here was a gardener whom she could trust.

Henry worked steadily in the hot sun, completing row after row of carrots, parsnips, and onions. When the mill bells rang at noon he worked on, without noticing that his employer was again watching him.

When he did at last notice her he asked her, smiling, what she wanted done with the things he had pulled up.

"Oh, throw them away," she said indifferently. "Toss them over into the orchard, and sometime we'll burn them when they get dry."

"Do you mind if I take them myself?" asked Henry, hesitatingly.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. McAllister cordially. "Have you chickens? That will be fine."

Henry was thankful that she went right along without waiting for an answer. But in a way he did have chickens, he thought.

"You must stop working now," she said. "Any time you want to do something, there will be a place for you here." She gave him a dollar bill, and left the delighted boy with the piles of precious little



vegetables. As long as Henry expected to return so soon, he hastily selected an orderly bunch of the largest of the carrots and the smallest of the onions. He added a few of the miniature parsnips for good measure. They looked like dolls' vegetables. When Henry walked down the drive with his "bouquet," he would have seen a face at the window if he had looked up. But he did not look up. He was too anxious to get to the little old man's shop and order his meat.

So it happened that Henry walked in upon his little family at about two o'clock with all the materials for a feast. The feast could not be made ready before night, Jess hastened to explain to Benny, who was perfectly satisfied anyway with bread and milk in his pink cup. "Your building is done," Benny informed his brother. "I builded lots of it."

"He really did," agreed Violet, leading the way to the sunny open spot a trifle behind the house. The "building" was a fireplace. With an enormous amount of labor, the children had made quite a hollow at the base

of a rock. This was lined completely with flat stones. More flat stones had been set on end to keep out the wind. On top of the stones lay the most wonderful collection of firewood that you can imagine, all ready to light. There were chips and bits of crumpled paper, pine cones, and dry twigs. Beside the big rock was a woodpile. The children had apparently been working like beavers all the morning. Jess had found a heavy wire in the dump, and had fastened it between two trees. On the wire the kettle swung merrily.

"Fine! Fine!" shouted Henry when he saw it. "I couldn't have done it so well myself." And he honestly believed it.

"We have dinner at night, here," observed Jess impressively. "What did you buy?"

When the girls saw the tiny vegetables they began with cries of delight to cut them from their stalks with Henry's knife and a broken paring knife. They scrubbed them in the "washtub," filled the kettle half full of water from the "well," and proceeded in great excitement to cut the raw meat into cubes. When this had been dropped into the kettle, Henry lighted the fire. It burned frantically, as if it were trying to encourage the stew to do its best. Violet laid the tin plate over the top for a cover, and they all stood by to hear the first bubble. Soon the savory stuff in the kettle began to boil in good earnest. Watch sat down gravely near it, and gave an approving sniff at intervals.

"Keep it boiling," advised Henry as he departed again. "When I come home tonight I'll bring some salt. And for mercy's sake, don't get on fire."

Violet pointed silently at the big teapot. The little girl had filled it with water in case of emergency. "That's if Benny gets on fire," she explained—"or Watch."

Henry laughed and went on his way happily enough. He wished he might share the delightful task of keeping the fire going and sniffing the stew, but when he found out his afternoon's duties, he changed his mind abruptly.

"Think you can clean up this garage?" asked Dr. McAllister quizzically when he appeared.

Henry flashed a look around the place, and met the young man's eyes with a smile. It did need cleaning rather badly. When its owner purred out in his high-powered little car, Henry drew a long breath and began in earnest. He opened all the chests of drawers to begin with. Then he arranged all the tools in the largest deep drawer, and with a long-handled brush and a can of black paint that was nearly dry, he labeled the drawer TOOLS with neat lettering. Another drawer he lettered NAILS, and assorted its contents into a few of the many boxes that were lying around. He folded up the robes he found, swept off the shelves and arranged the oil cans in orderly ranks, sorted out innumerable pairs of gloves, and then swept the floor. He washed the cement floor with the hose, and while waiting for it to dry he rinsed his brushes in turpentine.

To tell the truth, Henry had found a few things in the rubbish which he had stored in his own pocket. The treasure consisted in this case of a quantity of bent and rusty nails of all sizes, and a few screws and nuts. When Dr. McAllister returned at six o'clock he found Henry corking up the turpentine and arranging the brushes on the shelf.

"My word!" he exclaimed, staring at his garage with his mouth open. Then he threw back his head and laughed till his mother came down the walk to see what the matter was.

"Look at my gloves, Mother," he said, wiping his eyes. "All mated up. They never met each other before, that I remember."

Mrs. McAllister looked the garage over, and observed the newly labeled drawers. Her son opened one of them, and looked at his four hammers.

"My tack hammer, Mother," he said, "your tack hammer, and two other hammers! That last one I never expected to see again. If you can use it, you may have it, my boy."

Now, it is no exaggeration to say that at that moment if Henry had been asked what he wanted most of anything in the world he would have answered without any hesitation whatever, "A hammer."

He accepted it gratefully, hardly able to stand still, so anxious was he to put it into use on the hill he called home.

"Tomorrow's Sunday," said the doctor. "Shall I see you on Monday?"

"Oh, yes," replied Henry, who had lost all track of the days.

"The cherries need picking," said his new friend. "We could use any number of cherry pickers, if they were as careful as you." He gave him an odd look.

"Could you?" asked Henry eagerly. "I'll surely come down."

With that, he bade his friends good-bye and started for home, richer by another dollar, two doughnuts the cook had given him, a pocket full of crooked nails, and the rest of the vegetables.

When he reached his freight-car home a delicious savor greeted him.

"Onions!" he shouted, running up to the kettle. The cook stood by and took off the cover and put in the salt. It was absolutely the most tantalizing odor that Henry had ever smelled. Years afterward Jess tried to duplicate it with the same kettle, vegetables from the same garden and all stirred with the same spoon, but it didn't equal this stew in flavor.

"A ladle, as sure as I live!" gasped Henry. Jess had found a tin cup in the dump, and fastened on a wooden handle with a bit of wire. And when she ladled out four portions on four plates of all sizes, some of them tin, and laid a spoon in each, the children felt that the world held no greater riches. The tiny onions floated around like pearls; the carrots melted in your mouth; and the shreds of meat were as tender as possible from long boiling. A bit of bread in one hand helped the

feast along wonderfully. The little wanderers ate until they could eat no more.

"I have time before dark to make Benny's cart," observed Henry, biting a crisp, sweet carrot.

"With my wheels?" asked Benny.

"Yes, sir, with your wheels," agreed Henry. "Only, when it's done, you'll have to cart stones in it."

"Sure," said Benny with satisfaction. "Cart stones or anything."

"We'll need it in making the dam," explained Henry for the benefit of his sisters. "Tomorrow's Sunday, so I shan't work down in the town. Do you think it's all right to build the pool on Sunday, Jess?"

"I certainly do," replied Jess with emphasis. "We're just building the dam so we can keep clean. I guess if Sunday is your only day off, it'll be all right."

Henry's conscience was set at rest as he began with great delight to hammer out his bent nails. He and Benny ran about finding pieces of wood to fasten the wheels on. A visit to the dump was necessary at last, in order to find just the right piece of timber for a tongue, but before it was too dark to see, Henry had pounded the last nail in place and trundled the flat cart back and forth just to see it go. The cart seemed valuable enough to all of them to take into the house for the night. And Henry could not afford to laugh at Benny for going to sleep with his hand upon one of his precious wheels, for he himself had tucked his new hammer under his pillow.