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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Box-Car Children: Cherry Picking (9/17)

Henry meditated awhile all to himself early the next morning as to whether he ought to take any one with him for the cherry picking. "He certainly said he could use more than one," he mused.

Failing to decide the question, he laid it before his sisters as they ate bread and milk for breakfast.

"I can't see any reason, except one, why we shouldn't all go," said Jess.

"What's that?" asked Henry.

"Well, you see there are four of us, and supposing grandfather is looking for us, it will be easier to find four than one."

"True," agreed Henry. "But supposing we went down the hill and through the streets two by two? And you took Watch?"

It was finally agreed that Henry and Benny would attract very little attention together; Violet and Jess would follow with the dog, who would trace Henry. And so they set out. They took down the clothesline and closed the car door. Everything instantly looked as lonesome as heart could wish. Even the merry little brook looked deserted.

When the children arrived at the McAllister orchard they soon saw that they were not the only workers.

Two hired men and the young doctor himself were carrying ladders and baskets from the barn, and the Irish cook was bringing piles of square baskets from the house—the kind that strawberries are sold in.

"The girls can pick cherries as well as I can," said Henry, introducing his sisters. "Benny ought not to climb very tall trees, but we had to bring him."

"Benny can carry the baskets, perhaps," suggested the doctor, much amused. "You see, this is a cherry year, and we have to work quickly when we once begin. Perhaps he could fill the small baskets from the big ones."

It was a "cherry year," certainly. There were two varieties in the orchard, the pale yellow kind with a red cheek, and the deep crimson ones which were just as red in the center as they were on the outside. The red ones were huge, bursting with juice, and the trees were laden full with the luscious fruit. Even the air was perfumed.

It was a pretty sight that the doctor finally turned his back upon when he went on his calls. Henry, slim, tanned, and graceful, picked rapidly from the tallest ladder in the largest tree. The two girls in their sensible bloomer suits could climb like cats. They leaned against the ladders easily about halfway up, their fluffy short hair gleaming in the sun. Benny trotted to and fro, waiting upon the busy pickers, his cheeks as red as the cherries themselves.

"Eat all you want," Dr. McAllister called back. They did not really obey this command, but occasionally a set of white teeth bit into one of the glorious oxhearts.

In less than an hour Benny had made five firm friends. The hired men joked with him, the cook petted him, the young doctor laughed at him delightedly, and sweet Mrs. McAllister fell in love with him. Finally he seated himself comfortably at her side under the trees and filled square boxes with great care under her direction.

"I never had such a cheerful crowd of cherry pickers before," Mrs. McAllister said at last. "I'd much rather stay out here than go into the house where it is cool." Evidently Mary the cook felt the same way, for she kept coming to the orchard for some reason or other. When the doctor returned at lunch time his orchard was ringing with laughter, and good-natured barks from Watch who could not feel easy in his mind with his mistress so high up in a tree where he couldn't follow. Dr. McAllister paused in the garage long enough to give a sniff to the boiling cherries in the kitchen, and then made his way to the orchard, where he received a warm welcome.

"There's no use in your going home to lunch," he smilingly observed, at the same time watching Henry's face carefully. "You can eat right here in the orchard, unless your mother will be worrying about you."

This remark met with an astounding silence. Henry was the first to collect his wits. "No, our mother is dead," he said evenly, without embarrassment.

It was the doctor who hastened to change the subject he had introduced. "I smelled something when I came in," he said to Benny.

"What did it smell like?" inquired Benny.

"It smelled like cherry slump," replied the doctor with twinkling eyes.

"Cherry what?" asked Jess, struggling down her ladder with a full basket.

"I think that's what they call it—slump," repeated Dr. McAllister. "Do you care to try it?"

At this moment Mary appeared in the orchard with an enormous tray. And at the first sight of her cookery, nobody cared the least what its name was. It was that rare combination of dumpling beaten with stoned cherries, and cooked gently in the juice of the oxheart cherries in a real "cherry year." It was steaming in the red juice, with the least suspicion of melted butter over the whole.

"Do get two more, Mary," begged Mrs. McAllister, laughing. "It tastes so much better under the cherry trees!"

This was another meal that nobody ever forgot. Even the two hired men sitting under another tree devouring the delicious pudding, paused to hear Benny laugh. Nowadays those two men sometimes meet Henry—but



that's another story. Anyway, they never will forget that cherry slump made by Irish Mary.

Almost as soon as lunch was over Benny rolled over on the grass and went to sleep, his head, as usual, on the dog's back. But the others worked on steadily. Mrs. McAllister kept an eye on them from the screened porch without their knowledge.

"Just see how those children keep at it," she said to her son. "There is good stuff in them. I should like to know where they come from."

Dr. McAllister said nothing. He sauntered out into the orchard when he thought they had worked long enough. He paid them four dollars and gave them all the cherries they could carry, although they tried to object.

"You see, you're better than most pickers, because you're so cheerful."

He noticed that they did not all leave the yard at the same time.

When the cherry pickers returned to their little home they examined everything carefully. Nothing had been disturbed. The door was still shut, and the milk and butter stood untouched in the refrigerator. They made a hilarious meal of raw cherries and bread and butter, and before the stars came out they were fast asleep—happy and dreamless.

That evening, very much later, a young man sat in his study with the evening paper. He read the news idly, and was just on the point of tossing the paper aside when this advertisement caught his eye:

Lost. Four children, aged thirteen, twelve, ten and five. Somewhere around the region of Middlesex and Townsend. \$5000 reward for information.

James Henry Cordyce

"Whew!" whistled the young man. "James Henry Cordyce!"

He sat in perfect silence for a long time, thinking. Then he went to bed. But long after he had gone upstairs he whistled again, and could have been heard to say—if anyone had been awake to hear it—"James Henry Cordyce! Of all people!"