Chapter VII. For valour.

I hope you don't mind my telling you a good deal about Roberta. The fact is I am growing very fond of her. The more I observe her the more I love her. And I notice all sorts of things about her that I like.

For instance, she was quite oddly anxious to make other people happy. And she could keep a secret, a tolerably rare accomplishment. Also she had the power of silent sympathy. That sounds rather dull, I know, but it's not so dull as it sounds. It just means that a person is able to know that you are unhappy, and to love you extra on that account, without bothering you by telling you all the time how sorry she is for you. That was what Bobbie was like. She knew that Mother was unhappy—and that Mother had not told her the reason. So she just loved Mother more and never said a single word that could let Mother know how earnestly her little girl wondered what Mother was unhappy about. This needs practice. It is not so easy as you might think.

Whatever happened—and all sorts of nice, pleasant ordinary things happened—such as picnics, games, and buns for tea, Bobbie always had these thoughts at the back of her mind. “Mother's unhappy. Why? I don't know. She doesn't want me to know. I won't try to find out. But she IS unhappy. Why? I don't know. She doesn't—” and so on, repeating and repeating like a tune that you don't know the stopping part of.

The Russian gentleman still took up a good deal of everybody's thoughts. All the editors and secretaries of Societies and Members of Parliament had answered Mother's letters as politely as they knew how; but none of them could tell where the wife and children of Mr. Szezcpansky would be likely to be. (Did I tell you that the Russian's very Russian name was that?)

Bobbie had another quality which you will hear differently described by different people. Some of them call it interfering in other people's business—and some call it “helping lame dogs over stiles,” and some call it “loving-kindness.” It just means trying to help people.

She racked her brains to think of some way of helping the Russian gentleman to find his wife and children. He had learned a few words of English now. He could say “Good morning,” and “Good night,” and “Please,” and “Thank you,” and “Pretty,” when the children brought him flowers, and “Ver' good,” when they asked him how he had slept.

The way he smiled when he “said his English,” was, Bobbie felt, “just too sweet for anything.” She used to think of his face because she fancied it would help her to some way of helping him. But it did not. Yet his being there cheered her because she saw that it made Mother happier.

“She likes to have someone to be good to, even beside us,” said Bobbie. “And I know she hated to let him have Father's clothes. But I suppose it 'hurt nice,' or she wouldn't have.”

For many and many a night after the day when she and Peter and Phyllis had saved the train from wreck by waving their little red flannel flags, Bobbie used to wake screaming and shivering, seeing again that horrible mound, and the poor, dear trustful engine rushing on towards it—just thinking that it was doing its swift duty, and that everything was clear and safe. And then a warm thrill of pleasure used to run through her at the remembrance of how she and Peter and Phyllis and the red flannel petticoats had really saved everybody.

One morning a letter came. It was addressed to Peter and Bobbie and Phyllis. They opened it with enthusiastic curiosity, for they did not often get letters.

The letter said:—

“Dear Sir, and Ladies,—It is proposed to make a small presentation to you, in commemoration of your prompt and courageous action in warning the train on the —- inst., and thus averting what must, humanly speaking, have been a terrible accident. The presentation will take place at the —- Station at three o'clock on the 30th inst., if this time and place will be convenient to you.

“Yours faithfully,

“Jabez Inglewood.
“Secretary, Great Northern and Southern Railway Co.”

There never had been a prouder moment in the lives of the three children. They rushed to Mother with the letter, and she also felt proud and said so, and this made the children happier than ever.

“But if the presentation is money, you must say, 'Thank you, but we'd rather not take it,'” said Mother. “I'll wash your Indian muslins at once,” she added. “You must look tidy on an occasion like this.”

“Phil and I can wash them,” said Bobbie, “if you'll iron them, Mother.”

Washing is rather fun. I wonder whether you've ever done it? This particular washing took place in the back kitchen, which had a stone floor and a very big stone sink under its window.

“Let's put the bath on the sink,” said Phyllis; “then we can pretend we're out-

of-doors washerwomen like Mother saw in France.”

“But they were washing in the cold river,” said Peter, his hands in his pockets, “not in hot water.”

“This is a HOT river, then,” said Phyllis; “lend a hand with the bath, there's a dear.”

“I should like to see a deer lending a hand,” said Peter, but he lent his.

“Now to rub and scrub and scrub and rub,” said Phyllis, hopping joyously about as Bobbie carefully carried the heavy kettle from the kitchen fire.

“Oh, no!” said Bobbie, greatly shocked; “you don't rub muslin. You put the boiled soap in the hot water and make it all frothy-lathery—and then you shake the muslin and squeeze it, ever so gently, and all the dirt comes out. It's only clumsy things like tablecloths and sheets that have to be rubbed.”

The lilac and the Gloire de Dijon roses outside the window swayed in the soft breeze.

“It's a nice drying day—that's one thing,” said Bobbie, feeling very grown up. “Oh, I do wonder what wonderful feelings we shall have when we WEAR the Indian muslin dresses!”

“Yes, so do I,” said Phyllis, shaking and squeezing the muslin in quite a professional manner.

“NOW we squeeze out the soapy water. NO—we mustn't twist them—and then rinse them. I'll hold them while you and Peter empty the bath and get clean water.”

“A presentation! That means presents,” said Peter, as his sisters, having duly washed the pegs and wiped the line, hung up the dresses to dry. “Whatever will it be?”

“It might be anything,” said Phyllis; “what I've always wanted is a Baby elephant—but I suppose they wouldn't know that.”

“Suppose it was gold models of steam-engines?” said Bobbie.

“Or a big model of the scene of the prevented accident,” suggested Peter, “with a little model train, and dolls dressed like us and the engine-driver and fireman and passengers.”

“Do you LIKE,” said Bobbie, doubtfully, drying her hands on the rough towel that hung on a roller at the back of the scullery door, “do you LIKE us being rewarded for saving a train?”

“Yes, I do,” said Peter, downrightly; “and don't you try to come it over us that

you don't like it, too. Because I know you do."

"Yes," said Bobbie, doubtfully, "I know I do. But oughtn't we to be satisfied with just having done it, and not ask for anything more?"

"Who did ask for anything more, silly?" said her brother; "Victoria Cross soldiers don't ASK for it; but they're glad enough to get it all the same. Perhaps it'll be medals. Then, when I'm very old indeed, I shall show them to my grandchildren and say, 'We only did our duty,' and they'll be awfully proud of me."

"You have to be married," warned Phyllis, "or you don't have any grandchildren."

"I suppose I shall HAVE to be married some day," said Peter, "but it will be an awful bother having her round all the time. I'd like to marry a lady who had trances, and only woke up once or twice a year."

"Just to say you were the light of her life and then go to sleep again. Yes. That wouldn't be bad," said Bobbie.

"When *I* get married," said Phyllis, "I shall want him to want me to be awake all the time, so that I can hear him say how nice I am."

"I think it would be nice," said Bobbie, "to marry someone very poor, and then you'd do all the work and he'd love you most frightfully, and see the blue wood smoke curling up among the trees from the domestic hearth as he came home from work every night. I say—we've got to answer that letter and say that the time and place WILL be convenient to us. There's the soap, Peter. WE'RE both as clean as clean. That pink box of writing paper you had on your birthday, Phil."

It took some time to arrange what should be said. Mother had gone back to her writing, and several sheets of pink paper with scalloped gilt edges and green four-leaved shamrocks in the corner were spoiled before the three had decided what to say. Then each made a copy and signed it with its own name.

The threefold letter ran:—

"Dear Mr. Jabez Inglewood,—Thank you very much. We did not want to be rewarded but only to save the train, but we are glad you think so and thank you very much. The time and place you say will be quite convenient to us. Thank you very much.

"Your affecate little friend,"

Then came the name, and after it:—

"P.S. Thank you very much."

“Washing is much easier than ironing,” said Bobbie, taking the clean dry dresses off the line. “I do love to see things come clean. Oh—I don't know how we shall wait till it's time to know what presentation they're going to present!”

When at last—it seemed a very long time after—it was THE day, the three children went down to the station at the proper time. And everything that happened was so odd that it seemed like a dream. The Station Master came out to meet them—in his best clothes, as Peter noticed at once—and led them into the waiting room where once they had played the advertisement game. It looked quite different now. A carpet had been put down—and there were pots of roses on the mantelpiece and on the window ledges—green branches stuck up, like holly and laurel are at Christmas, over the framed advertisement of Cook's Tours and the Beauties of Devon and the Paris Lyons Railway. There were quite a number of people there besides the Porter—two or three ladies in smart dresses, and quite a crowd of gentlemen in high hats and frock coats—besides everybody who belonged to the station. They recognized several people who had been in the train on the red-flannel-petticoat day. Best of all their own old gentleman was there, and his coat and hat and collar seemed more than ever different from anyone else's. He shook hands with them and then everybody sat down on chairs, and a gentleman in spectacles—they found out afterwards that he was the District Superintendent—began quite a long speech—very clever indeed. I am not going to write the speech down. First, because you would think it dull; and secondly, because it made all the children blush so, and get so hot about the ears that I am quite anxious to get away from this part of the subject; and thirdly, because the gentleman took so many words to say what he had to say that I really haven't time to write them down. He said all sorts of nice things about the children's bravery and presence of mind, and when he had done he sat down, and everyone who was there clapped and said, “Hear, hear.”

And then the old gentleman got up and said things, too. It was very like a prize-giving. And then he called the children one by one, by their names, and gave each of them a beautiful gold watch and chain. And inside the watches were engraved after the name of the watch's new owner:—

“From the Directors of the Northern and Southern Railway in grateful recognition of the courageous and prompt action which averted an accident on —- 1905.”

The watches were the most beautiful you can possibly imagine, and each one had a blue leather case to live in when it was at home.

“You must make a speech now and thank everyone for their kindness,” whispered the Station Master in Peter's ear and pushed him forward. “Begin

'Ladies and Gentlemen,'" he added.

Each of the children had already said "Thank you," quite properly.

"Oh, dear," said Peter, but he did not resist the push.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said in a rather husky voice. Then there was a pause, and he heard his heart beating in his throat. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he went on with a rush, "it's most awfully good of you, and we shall treasure the watches all our lives—but really we don't deserve it because what we did wasn't anything, really. At least, I mean it was awfully exciting, and what I mean to say —thank you all very, very much."

The people clapped Peter more than they had done the District Superintendent, and then everybody shook hands with them, and as soon as politeness would let them, they got away, and tore up the hill to Three Chimneys with their watches in their hands.

It was a wonderful day—the kind of day that very seldom happens to anybody and to most of us not at all.

"I did want to talk to the old gentleman about something else," said Bobbie, "but it was so public—like being in church."

"What did you want to say?" asked Phyllis.

"I'll tell you when I've thought about it more," said Bobbie.

So when she had thought a little more she wrote a letter.

"My dearest old gentleman," it said; "I want most awfully to ask you something. If you could get out of the train and go by the next, it would do. I do not want you to give me anything. Mother says we ought not to. And besides, we do not want any THINGS. Only to talk to you about a Prisoner and Captive. Your loving little friend,

"Bobbie."

She got the Station Master to give the letter to the old gentleman, and next day she asked Peter and Phyllis to come down to the station with her at the time when the train that brought the old gentleman from town would be passing through.

She explained her idea to them—and they approved thoroughly.

They had all washed their hands and faces, and brushed their hair, and were looking as tidy as they knew how. But Phyllis, always unlucky, had upset a jug of lemonade down the front of her dress. There was no time to change—and the wind happening to blow from the coal yard, her frock was soon powdered with

grey, which stuck to the sticky lemonade stains and made her look, as Peter said, “like any little gutter child.”

It was decided that she should keep behind the others as much as possible.

“Perhaps the old gentleman won't notice,” said Bobbie. “The aged are often weak in the eyes.”

There was no sign of weakness, however, in the eyes, or in any other part of the old gentleman, as he stepped from the train and looked up and down the platform.

The three children, now that it came to the point, suddenly felt that rush of deep shyness which makes your ears red and hot, your hands warm and wet, and the tip of your nose pink and shiny.

“Oh,” said Phyllis, “my heart's thumping like a steam-engine—right under my sash, too.”

“Nonsense,” said Peter, “people's hearts aren't under their sashes.”

“I don't care—mine is,” said Phyllis.

“If you're going to talk like a poetry-book,” said Peter, “my heart's in my mouth.”

“My heart's in my boots—if you come to that,” said Roberta; “but do come on—he'll think we're idiots.”

“He won't be far wrong,” said Peter, gloomily. And they went forward to meet the old gentleman.

“Hullo,” he said, shaking hands with them all in turn. “This is a very great pleasure.”

“It WAS good of you to get out,” Bobbie said, perspiring and polite.

He took her arm and drew her into the waiting room where she and the others had played the advertisement game the day they found the Russian. Phyllis and Peter followed. “Well?” said the old gentleman, giving Bobbie's arm a kind little shake before he let it go. “Well? What is it?”

“Oh, please!” said Bobbie.

“Yes?” said the old gentleman.

“What I mean to say—” said Bobbie.

“Well?” said the old gentleman.

“It's all very nice and kind,” said she.

“But?” he said.

“I wish I might say something,” she said.

“Say it,” said he.

“Well, then,” said Bobbie—and out came the story of the Russian who had written the beautiful book about poor people, and had been sent to prison and to Siberia for just that.

“And what we want more than anything in the world is to find his wife and children for him,” said Bobbie, “but we don't know how. But you must be most horribly clever, or you wouldn't be a Direction of the Railway. And if YOU knew how—and would? We'd rather have that than anything else in the world. We'd go without the watches, even, if you could sell them and find his wife with the money.”

And the others said so, too, though not with so much enthusiasm.

“Hum,” said the old gentleman, pulling down the white waistcoat that had the big gilt buttons on it, “what did you say the name was—Fryingpansky?”

“No, no,” said Bobbie earnestly. “I'll write it down for you. It doesn't really look at all like that except when you say it. Have you a bit of pencil and the back of an envelope?” she asked.

The old gentleman got out a gold pencil-case and a beautiful, sweet-smelling, green Russian leather note-book and opened it at a new page.

“Here,” he said, “write here.”

She wrote down “Szezcpansky,” and said:—

“That's how you write it. You CALL it Shepansky.”

The old gentleman took out a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles and fitted them on his nose. When he had read the name, he looked quite different.

“THAT man? Bless my soul!” he said. “Why, I've read his book! It's translated into every European language. A fine book—a noble book. And so your mother took him in—like the good Samaritan. Well, well. I'll tell you what, youngsters—your mother must be a very good woman.”

“Of course she is,” said Phyllis, in astonishment.

“And you're a very good man,” said Bobbie, very shy, but firmly resolved to be polite.

“You flatter me,” said the old gentleman, taking off his hat with a flourish. “And now am I to tell you what I think of you?”

“Oh, please don't,” said Bobbie, hastily.

“Why?” asked the old gentleman.

“I don't exactly know,” said Bobbie. “Only—if it's horrid, I don't want you to; and if it's nice, I'd rather you didn't.”

The old gentleman laughed.

“Well, then,” he said, “I'll only just say that I'm very glad you came to me about this—very glad, indeed. And I shouldn't be surprised if I found out something very soon. I know a great many Russians in London, and every Russian knows HIS name. Now tell me all about yourselves.”

He turned to the others, but there was only one other, and that was Peter. Phyllis had disappeared.

“Tell me all about yourself,” said the old gentleman again. And, quite naturally, Peter was stricken dumb.

“All right, we'll have an examination,” said the old gentleman; “you two sit on the table, and I'll sit on the bench and ask questions.”

He did, and out came their names and ages—their Father's name and business—how long they had lived at Three Chimneys and a great deal more.

The questions were beginning to turn on a herring and a half for three halfpence, and a pound of lead and a pound of feathers, when the door of the waiting room was kicked open by a boot; as the boot entered everyone could see that its lace was coming undone—and in came Phyllis, very slowly and carefully.

In one hand she carried a large tin can, and in the other a thick slice of bread and butter.

“Afternoon tea,” she announced proudly, and held the can and the bread and butter out to the old gentleman, who took them and said:—

“Bless my soul!”

“Yes,” said Phyllis.

“It's very thoughtful of you,” said the old gentleman, “very.”

“But you might have got a cup,” said Bobbie, “and a plate.”

“Perks always drinks out of the can,” said Phyllis, flushing red. “I think it was very nice of him to give it me at all—let alone cups and plates,” she added.

“So do I,” said the old gentleman, and he drank some of the tea and tasted the bread and butter.

And then it was time for the next train, and he got into it with many good-byes and kind last words.

“Well,” said Peter, when they were left on the platform, and the tail-lights of

the train disappeared round the corner, “it's my belief that we've lighted a candle to-day—like Latimer, you know, when he was being burned—and there'll be fireworks for our Russian before long.”

And so there were.

It wasn't ten days after the interview in the waiting room that the three children were sitting on the top of the biggest rock in the field below their house watching the 5.15 steam away from the station along the bottom of the valley. They saw, too, the few people who had got out at the station straggling up the road towards the village—and they saw one person leave the road and open the gate that led across the fields to Three Chimneys and to nowhere else.

“Who on earth!” said Peter, scrambling down.

“Let's go and see,” said Phyllis.

So they did. And when they got near enough to see who the person was, they saw it was their old gentleman himself, his brass buttons winking in the afternoon sunshine, and his white waistcoat looking whiter than ever against the green of the field.

“Hullo!” shouted the children, waving their hands.

“Hullo!” shouted the old gentleman, waving his hat.

Then the three started to run—and when they got to him they hardly had breath left to say:—

“How do you do?”

“Good news,” said he. “I've found your Russian friend's wife and child—and I couldn't resist the temptation of giving myself the pleasure of telling him.”

But as he looked at Bobbie's face he felt that he COULD resist that temptation.

“Here,” he said to her, “you run on and tell him. The other two will show me the way.”

Bobbie ran. But when she had breathlessly panted out the news to the Russian and Mother sitting in the quiet garden—when Mother's face had lighted up so beautifully, and she had said half a dozen quick French words to the Exile—Bobbie wished that she had NOT carried the news. For the Russian sprang up with a cry that made Bobbie's heart leap and then tremble—a cry of love and longing such as she had never heard. Then he took Mother's hand and kissed it gently and reverently—and then he sank down in his chair and covered his face with his hands and sobbed. Bobbie crept away. She did not want to see the others just then.

But she was as gay as anybody when the endless French talking was over, when Peter had torn down to the village for buns and cakes, and the girls had got tea ready and taken it out into the garden.

The old gentleman was most merry and delightful. He seemed to be able to talk in French and English almost at the same moment, and Mother did nearly as well. It was a delightful time. Mother seemed as if she could not make enough fuss about the old gentleman, and she said yes at once when he asked if he might present some “goodies” to his little friends.

The word was new to the children—but they guessed that it meant sweets, for the three large pink and green boxes, tied with green ribbon, which he took out of his bag, held unheard-of layers of beautiful chocolates.

The Russian's few belongings were packed, and they all saw him off at the station.

Then Mother turned to the old gentleman and said:—

“I don't know how to thank you for EVERYTHING. It has been a real pleasure to me to see you. But we live very quietly. I am so sorry that I can't ask you to come and see us again.”

The children thought this very hard. When they HAD made a friend—and such a friend—they would dearly have liked him to come and see them again.

What the old gentleman thought they couldn't tell. He only said:—

“I consider myself very fortunate, Madam, to have been received once at your house.”

“Ah,” said Mother, “I know I must seem surly and ungrateful—but—”

“You could never seem anything but a most charming and gracious lady,” said the old gentleman, with another of his bows.

And as they turned to go up the hill, Bobbie saw her Mother's face.

“How tired you look, Mammy,” she said; “lean on me.”

“It's my place to give Mother my arm,” said Peter. “I'm the head man of the family when Father's away.”

Mother took an arm of each.

“How awfully nice,” said Phyllis, skipping joyfully, “to think of the dear Russian embracing his long-lost wife. The baby must have grown a lot since he saw it.”

“Yes,” said Mother.

“I wonder whether Father will think I'VE grown,” Phyllis went on, skipping

still more gaily. “I have grown already, haven't I, Mother?”

“Yes,” said Mother, “oh, yes,” and Bobbie and Peter felt her hands tighten on their arms.

“Poor old Mammy, you ARE tired,” said Peter.

Bobbie said, “Come on, Phil; I'll race you to the gate.”

And she started the race, though she hated doing it. YOU know why Bobbie did that. Mother only thought that Bobbie was tired of walking slowly. Even Mothers, who love you better than anyone else ever will, don't always understand.

The Railway Children Chapter 7 Questions

1. Why was Bobbie happy that Mr Szezcpansky was still staying with them?

2. What was making Bobbie wake up in the night feeling scared?

3. What was the letter addressed to the children about?

4. What present does Phyliss hope they will get at the presentation?

5. Why is Bobbie unsure if it's right that they're being rewarded for saving the train?

6. One the day of the presentation, what was different about the waiting room at the station?

7. What are the children presented with at the ceremony?

8. Which of the children gives a speech at the presentation?

9. Who is at the presentation?

10. What does Bobbie write to the old gentleman about?

11. How does the old gentleman know who Mr Szezcpansky is?

12. Why does Phyllis look untidy when they meet the old gentleman at the station?

13. What does Phyllis come back with after she disappears from the waiting room?

14. How does Mr Szezcpansky respond when Bobbie tells him they have found his wife and child?

15. Why do you think that Bobbie starts a race with Phyllis at the end of the chapter?