English Comprehension: Medium Practice Paper 4

Read this passage carefully, then answer the questions that follow.

The Walking Trees

by E. Nesbit

From The Railway Children (1906). Roberta (who is called Bobbie), Peter and Phyllis have moved with their mother to a cottage called Three Chimneys, beside a railway line in the country. On this morning they have walked to the mouth of the railway tunnel to pick cherries, taking their lunch in a basket and their mother's silver watch so that they should not be late for tea. The cutting is the steep-sided gap through the rock that the railway runs along, and the 11.29 is the next train due down the line. This extract has been shortened in places.

When they got to the top of the cutting, they leaned over the fence and looked down to where the railway lines lay at the bottom of what, as Phyllis said, was exactly like a mountain gorge.

And they were almost at the gate when Bobbie said:—

"Hush. Stop! What's that?"

"That" was a very odd noise indeed—a soft noise, but quite plainly to be heard through the sound of the wind in tree branches, and the hum and whir of the telegraph wires. It was a sort of rustling, whispering sound. As they listened it stopped, and then it began again.

"Look"—cried Peter, suddenly—"the tree over there!"

As Peter pointed, the tree was moving—not just the way trees ought to move when the wind blows through them, but all in one piece, as though it were a live creature and were walking down the side of the cutting.

"It's moving!" cried Bobbie. "Oh, look! and so are the others."

"It's magic," said Phyllis, breathlessly. "I always knew this railway was enchanted."

It really did seem a little like magic. For all the trees for about twenty yards of the opposite bank seemed to be slowly walking down towards the railway line, the tree with the grey leaves bringing up

the rear like some old shepherd driving a flock of green sheep.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" said Phyllis; "it's much too magic for me. I don't like it. Let's go home."

But Bobbie and Peter clung fast to the rail and watched breathlessly.

The trees moved on and on. Some stones and loose earth fell down and rattled on the railway metals far below.

"It's ALL coming down," Peter tried to say, but he found there was hardly any voice to say it with. And, indeed, just as he spoke, the great rock, on the top of which the walking trees were, leaned slowly forward. And then rock and trees and grass and bushes, with a rushing sound, slipped right away from the face of the cutting and fell on the line with a blundering crash that could have been heard half a mile off. A cloud of dust rose up.

"Look what a great mound it's made!" said Bobbie.

"Yes," said Peter, slowly. He was still leaning on the fence. "Yes," he said again, still more slowly. Then he stood upright.

"The 11.29 down hasn't gone by yet. We must let them know at the station, or there'll be a most frightful accident."

"Let's run," said Bobbie, and began.

But Peter cried, "Come back!" and looked at Mother's watch. He was very prompt and businesslike, and his face looked whiter than they had ever seen it.

"No time," he said; "it's two miles away, and it's past eleven."

"Couldn't we," suggested Phyllis, breathlessly, "couldn't we climb up a telegraph post and do something to the wires?"

"We don't know how," said Peter. "If we had anything red, we could get down on the line and wave it."

They got down the steep stairs. Phyllis was red-faced and damp with anxiety.

"Oh, how hot I am!" she said; "and I thought it was going to be cold; I wish we hadn't put on our—" she stopped short, and then ended in quite a different tone—"our flannel petticoats."

Bobbie turned at the bottom of the stairs. “Oh, yes,” she cried; “THEY'RE red! Let's take them off.”

They did, and with the petticoats rolled up under their arms, ran along the railway. They reached the corner that hid the mound from the straight line of railway that ran half a mile without curve or corner.

“Now,” said Peter, taking hold of the largest flannel petticoat. She took the red flannel petticoat from him and tore it off an inch from the band.

“There!” said Peter, tearing in his turn. He divided each petticoat into three pieces. “Now, we've got six flags.” He looked at the watch again. “And we've got seven minutes. We must have flagstaffs.”

The young saplings had to be broken off. Two of the flags were set up in heaps of loose stones between the sleepers of the down line. Then Phyllis and Roberta took each a flag, and stood ready to wave it as soon as the train came in sight. And Bobbie began to feel sick with suspense.

And then came the distant rumble and hum of the metals, and a puff of white steam showed far away along the stretch of line.

“Stand firm,” said Peter, “and wave like mad! When it gets to that big furze bush step back, but go on waving! Don't stand ON the line, Bobbie!”

The train came rattling along very, very fast.

The two little flags on the line swayed as the nearing train shook and loosened the heaps of loose stones that held them up. One of them slowly leaned over and fell on the line. Bobbie jumped forward and caught it up, and waved it; her hands did not tremble now.

“Stand back!” cried Peter, suddenly, and he dragged Phyllis back by the arm.

But Bobbie cried, “Not yet, not yet!” and waved her two flags right over the line. The front of the engine looked black and enormous. Its voice was loud and harsh.

“Oh, stop, stop, stop!” cried Bobbie. No one heard her. But afterwards she used to wonder whether the engine itself had not heard her. It seemed almost as though it had—for it slackened

swiftly, slackened and stopped, not twenty yards from the place where Bobbie's two flags waved over the line.

When the others turned towards her she was lying across the line with her hands flung forward and still gripping the sticks of the little red flannel flags.

The engine-driver picked her up, carried her to the train, and laid her on the cushions of a first-class carriage. "Gone right off in a faint," he said, "poor little woman. And no wonder."

Please answer these questions. (Look at the passage again if you need to.) You should choose the best answer and mark its letter on your answer sheet.

Q1. Why did the children stop when they were almost at the gate?

A. Peter had noticed that a tree had fallen across the line.

B. Bobbie had heard an odd noise and told the others to listen.

C. Phyllis said that she did not want to go any further.

D. They had stopped to look at Mother's watch to see the time.

E. The wind in the telegraph wires had grown too loud to talk over.

Q2. What was strange about the noise the children heard?

A. It was soft, and yet they could still hear it through the wind and the wires.

B. It was so loud that it drowned the wind in the tree branches.

C. It came from inside the tunnel and echoed back to them.

D. Only Bobbie was able to hear it at all.

E. It sounded exactly like a train coming round the corner.

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Q3. "as though it were a live creature and were walking down the side of the cutting" (lines 13-15)

What does this description suggest about the tree?

A. It was being shaken hard by the wind.

B. It was moving all in one piece, as if it were alive.

C. It was falling apart branch by branch.

D. It had been cut down by someone at the top of the cutting.

E. It was the only tree still standing on the bank.

Q4. "I always knew this railway was enchanted" (lines 17-18)

What does this tell us about Phyllis?

A. She had seen the trees move on an earlier visit to the cutting.

B. She is the first of the three to understand what is really happening.

C. She would sooner call something magic than work out what it is.

D. She does not really believe that the trees are moving at all.

E. She is teasing the others in order to make them laugh.

Q5. "like some old shepherd driving a flock of green sheep" (line 22)

This is an example of:

A. a simile

B. a metaphor

C. personification

D. alliteration

E. onomatopoeia

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Q6. “clung fast to the rail and watched breathlessly” (lines 25–26)

What does this tell us about Bobbie and Peter?

A. They were afraid of falling down into the cutting.

B. They were bored and were leaning on the fence to rest.

C. They were trying to stop Phyllis from running home.

D. They had not yet noticed that the trees were moving.

E. They were held by what they were watching, even though it alarmed them.

Q7. “metals” (line 28)

What does this word mean here?

A. the rails of the railway track

B. the coins in Peter's pocket

C. the iron gate at the top of the steps

D. the wheels of the engine

E. the wire of the telegraph

Q8. “Yes,” said Peter, slowly. He was still leaning on the fence. “Yes,” he said again, still more slowly. (lines 37–38)

Why has the author written Peter's answer in this way?

A. To show that Peter had not heard what Bobbie said to him.

B. To show that Peter was too tired from the walk to answer properly.

C. To show Peter slowly working out what the fallen rock would mean.

D. To show that Peter was only half interested in the size of the mound.

E. To show that Peter was pretending to be calm to comfort Phyllis.

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Q9. “He was very prompt and businesslike, and his face looked whiter than they had ever seen it.” (lines 42–44)

What does this tell us about Peter?

A. He was pleased to be the one giving the orders.

B. He was angry with Bobbie for beginning to run.

C. He felt ill and needed to sit down for a while.

D. He was badly frightened, but was still thinking clearly.

E. He was calm because he knew there was plenty of time.

Q10. Why did Peter call Bobbie back instead of letting her run to the station?

A. The station was two miles off and it was already past eleven.

B. Mother's watch had stopped during the night.

C. The steps down to the line had been buried by the fall.

D. Phyllis was too hot and tired to run any further.

E. He did not know which station the train would come from.

Q11. “If we had anything red, we could get down on the line and wave it.” (lines 48–49)

Why did Peter want something red in particular?

A. Red was the only colour the girls had with them that day.

B. Red would show up well against the grey stone of the cutting.

C. A red flag would tell the driver which way he should turn.

D. Red is the colour used on a railway to warn a driver to stop.

E. Red was the colour of the flags kept at the station.

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Q12. "Phyllis was red-faced and damp with anxiety" (lines 50–51)

How many adjectives are there in this phrase?

A. one

B. two

C. three

D. four

E. five

Q13. How did the children come to have something red after all?

A. Bobbie was wearing a red ribbon in her hair.

B. They found a red flag lying at the foot of the steps.

C. Peter had a red jersey on under his coat.

D. Mother had packed a red cloth in the lunch basket.

E. Phyllis complained of the heat and mentioned her flannel petticoat.

Q14. How many flags did the children end up with, and how long did Peter say they had?

A. Six flags, and seven minutes.

B. Three flags, and seven minutes.

C. Six flags, and eleven minutes.

D. Two flags, and five minutes.

E. Six flags, and half an hour.

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Q15. “suspense” (line 71)

What does this word mean here?

A. the anxious feeling of waiting for something to happen

B. the sharp pain that comes after running hard

C. a sudden loud noise that makes you jump

D. a firm belief that everything will turn out well

E. the state of being hung up in the air

Q16. “her hands did not tremble now” (line 81)

Why had Bobbie's hands stopped trembling?

A. The train had already begun to slow down.

B. Peter had taken the two flags away from her.

C. Once there was something to do, doing it drove out the fear.

D. She had warmed her cold hands in the sunshine.

E. She no longer believed that the train was really coming.

Q17. “suddenly” (line 82)

What type of word is this?

A. an adjective

B. a noun

C. a verb

D. a conjunction

E. an adverb

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Q18. “The front of the engine looked black and enormous. Its voice was loud and harsh.” (lines 85–86)

Why has the author described the engine in this way?

A. To show how terrifying the train seemed to Bobbie as she stood before it.

B. To show that the engine was old and had been badly looked after.

C. To explain why the driver was unable to see the flags at all.

D. To suggest that the driver was angry with the children.

E. To show that it was a goods train rather than a passenger train.

Q19. What had happened to Bobbie when the others turned towards her? (lines 92–97)

A. She had been knocked down by the front of the engine.

B. She had run back along the line to fetch the other flags.

C. She had fallen asleep from tiredness in the sun.

D. She had fainted and was lying across the line.

E. She had climbed up onto the engine to speak to the driver.

Q20. Which of these would make the best alternative title for the passage?

A. The Children Who Stopped the Train

B. A Morning Among the Cherry Trees

C. Peter's Silver Watch

D. A Quiet Walk Beside the Railway

E. The Magic of the Railway

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