

Years 7 & 8  
3rd Place: Ella Sarson  
Year 8, Home Schooled

### **Codes and Crosswords**

The noise in the streets of England was deafening as the wealthy townsfolk of Newcastle pushed and shoved their way towards the wooden podium. A gleeful auctioneer in a fashionable tail-coat stood on the stage in front of a line of grubby children with dirt smudged on their cheeks and bruises on their arms and legs. The haughty auctioneer on the podium smiled triumphantly as the rich folks waved handfuls of money in the air, desperately trying to buy what the man had to offer. It was 1873, and the auctioneer on the stage indeed had something big to offer: servants. Child servants, to be exact.

The children in question were orphans from the local orphanage. The auctioneer had arrived at their orphanage the day before and paid the owners a great deal of money so that they would allow him to take the children. The children were then lined up on the stage, confused and scared, and put up for sale. The deal was that if a child (or multiple children) were purchased, then their services were required in the home of their new owner until the age of 18. They would cook and clean, so long as they were kept alive and somewhat healthy.

The whole idea of child labour was, and still is, completely barbaric and entirely unsettling, but that was how it was among the rich folk in the 1800s. The wealthier side of the crowd in England those days was full of wealthy, morally desensitised citizens, so when they heard talk of the sale, they came running with fists full of money, happy to pay as much as was necessary for their very own child servant.

The auctioneer cleared his throat, and the noise from the excited crowd died down. He announced that the bidding for the servants was open, and caused a cheer to erupt from the crowd. Some of the older, less clueless children in the line of orphans scowled hatefully at the horrid enthusiasm. But they could do nothing. They were helpless, hopeless, and homeless. At least being a servant to someone would put a roof over their heads.

The auctioneer grabbed the youngest child by his shirt collar, a boy of about six years old with wide brown eyes and messy hair, and dragged him forward to face the crowd. Then the bidding began. There were shouts from the crowd, each number rising after the next until the price was so high that some of the richest members of the crowd were getting worried that they wouldn't win their prize. Eventually, the price was settled, and the young boy was handed off to an elderly man with a wooden cane in his hand and a stern expression – the poor boy's new owner. The boy was dragged away, never to be seen again, much to the deepest sorrows of his closest friends from the orphanage.

And so, the brutal bidding continued until there were no children left. Those of the crowd who hadn't snagged a servant miserably walked back to their families and their fortunes empty-handed. And those who did manage to purchase a child? They

delightedly set their new labourer to work, carrying bags, cooking dinner and washing dishes, never to lead a normal childhood again.

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The sound of crinkled paper echoed around the attic as twelve-year-old Bethany unfolded her scrunched up newspaper and flattened it on the floor of her bedroom. In the top left corner, her name was scribbled in smudged ink where she had signed it the day before. She tenderly turned the pages of the local newspaper until she got to the crossword at the back, the one that was just waiting for her to solve. Bethany had anticipated this moment all day – the moment where she could finally use her brain for something other than cooking and cleaning.

She was a servant girl to the Herbert family, a family of six people, not including Bethany herself. Bethany had been bought at the fifth annual servant auction by the Herbert's. It wasn't the thought of cleaning and cooking that made her blood boil – after all, that's all she had ever done at the orphanage. It was the fact that she had been separated from her older sister, and best friend, Rosalie.

On the dreadful day of the auction, a naive Bethany had assumed that she and her sister would have been kept together, and a kind family would have provided a home for both of them. But those dreams shattered beyond repair when the Herbert's declared that "they already had enough mouths to feed, and one servant would be enough." They refused to take Rosalie, and Bethany was dragged away towards what she was sure would be her demise, kicking and screaming all the while.

Luckily enough, the home that Rosalie was sent to happened to be inhabited by the owner of the local newspaper. Mr. Arthur Wilkinson obviously needed help with the business, as jobs were scarce in those days and workers were slim, so he assigned Rosalie to packaging the newspapers and marking them so that they could be sent to the correct address. Now Rosalie, being a bright young girl of fifteen, knew quite well that the Herbert's always ordered the weekly newspaper – or, to be more accurate, *Bethany* always ordered it (unbeknownst to the Herbert's, of course), as it was her only source of reading material.

To Bethany's delight, when Rosalie packaged the newspaper that was to be sent to the Herbert's address, she would always slip in a little homemade crossword with a loving note on the back, just to provide a little spark of fun in Bethany's life. Any word from her big sister would make Bethany the most joyous little girl on the face of the earth. But there was something about the way that Rosalie carefully printed the letters of the crossword in her neatest handwriting, and added little drawings on the sides that made Bethany smile. But her favourite part was the hidden messages *inside* the crossword. It was like a code.

Rosalie would provide clues like a normal crossword, and once Bethany had solved the entire puzzle, she would string the resulting words together to form a small story that would give her some clue as to how Rosalie was doing – sort of like a letter but in the form of a code. Rosalie knew that Bethany liked solving puzzles more than anything so she made sure to make it a challenge.

That day, the postman had arrived right on time. When he was gone from sight, Bethany had inconspicuously darted out from the side of the house where she had been crouching among the long grass and snatched up the newspaper from the pile of letters. She had known that nobody would notice that it was missing, for the Herbert's weren't very interested in reading. She'd then wrapped it up in her thin shawl and slipped back inside the house, unnoticed as usual. She did this routine so often that it was almost automatic.

After a long day of work, as she finally sat on the floor of her bedroom (which was actually just the attic), she grinned as she eagerly pulled out the small slip of paper where her sister's coded message awaited. Bethany leaned against the wall, her crossword in hand, flipping it over to read the message she knew was waiting on the back.

*Dearest Bethany,*

*I hope you're doing well. This week was a busy one, as newspaper demand was very high and a lot of workers were unwell so I had to do a lot more work. It was tiring, but not the worst thing in the world. Mr Wilkinson has been getting older and slower, which means that I have twice the amount of work than when I arrived. I don't mind it that much though – it gives me more opportunity to write to you.*

The letter went on, describing every detail of Rosalie's week. There was nothing particularly exciting about what she had written, but Bethany enjoyed reading it nonetheless, as it was the only way she could hear from her sister. The only thing that she hated was not being able to write back.

Bethany flipped the letter over and smiled when she saw the crossword on the back. Her eyes twinkled with excitement at seeing Rosalie's careful handwriting all over the page and the endless list of clues that told Bethany that Rosalie had made an extra challenging puzzle this week. She got to work, slowly crossing off clues and letters on the puzzle until finally, almost two hours later, she was finished. The words swam in front of her eyes and she pieced them together, forming a small bundle of words in an order that made a story.

The story told her that Rosalie had been forced to cut her hair to look like a boy because the townsfolk had been refusing to work with or buy newspapers from a girl. Bethany had winced when she read it, for she knew that Rosalie's long, ginger hair was her pride and joy. As light-hearted as Rosalie had made the situation seem, Bethany knew quite well that it was a big loss to her sister.

As she put the crossword and letter aside, Bethany leaned her head wearily against the wall, the labour of the day catching up with her and crashing upon her like huge waves, almost dragging her down as she longed to close her eyes and drift off to sleep. But alas, the Herbert's needed their dinner and were far too lazy to make it themselves, and so it would be Bethany's job to cook it for them.

As she had done countless times before, she sighed loudly, wishing dearly to be reunited with her sister and freed from the Herbert's and her duties as a servant girl. Something that Rosalie had written near the end of her long letter popped into her

head; *Patience is what will reunite us, whether it's sooner or later. If we're patient, the universe will correct its mistakes and we'll see each other again. All we can do now is wait.*

As soon as she had thought the words, relief like a cool breeze came over her and Bethany was content again. She knew that her sister was always right, and that if she waited long enough, they would see each other again.

With a sudden bounce to her step, Bethany picked up the crossword and letter and placed it under her pillow. She then ran into the kitchen and proceeded to diligently cook dinner for the Herbert's without a fuss and half as much resentment as before.

When dinner was finished and the dishes were done, Bethany lay in her bed on the floor, huddled under her thin, frayed sheets, her head turned towards the window. Starlight lit up her face as she wondered what Rosalie was doing now, and if she would even recognise her when she saw her again.

A flash of light in the sky grabbed Bethany's attention and she sat up in interest. She saw a bright light travel across the sky almost too quick to notice, and Bethany's heart skipped a beat. *A shooting star*, she thought in excitement. She had heard about them before, but never was lucky enough to see one until that night. Shooting stars were said to represent good luck and hope for the future.

Bethany lay back in bed and closed her eyes, a sense of calm settling in her. For some reason, the star had made her feel sure that her future indeed had hope. As her consciousness went to sleep, peace so strong that she had never felt before was in her heart, and she knew that one day she would see her sister again, just as it was meant to be all along.