

Who is a Slave?

James kicked his football as hard as he possibly could. It went over the fence, across the lane and into the wood on the other side.

‘What did you do that for?’ his friend, Chris, called from the next-door bedroom window.

James swung round and grinned. ‘How long have you been watching me?’

But he spoke to an empty window. Chris was on his way downstairs. He would answer the question face to face.

‘So how long were you spying?’ James demanded. ‘Did you see me doing thirty-four headers against the wall without dropping the ball?’

Chris admitted that he had. ‘But I can do better than that!’ he added.

‘Let’s see you,’ James challenged.

His friend shrugged. ‘I would if there was a ball. And you’ve still not told me why you kicked it into the wood.’

James wasn’t about to tell Chris that he’d kicked the ball into the wood because he was cross for being sent out for some fresh air and exercise. James had wanted to stay in and play with the computer. Smirking at

Chris, James yelled, 'Race you to the ball!' and sprinted off in the direction of the garden gate.

The pair of them ran across the lane and ducked under a branch that had broken the fence at the side of the wood. It was where they always went through. And it led to where they'd had a den until they were too big for it.

'Did you see where the ball landed?' James asked. 'I didn't notice.'

Chris looked around. 'Over beside the stumps, I think.'

They walked deeper into the wood.

'I've won!' James yelled, grabbing the ball from behind a clump of long grass before his friend saw it.

Sitting down on the tree stumps, the two boys discussed Saturday's football match. The local team was playing at home against a team at the top of the league.

'They haven't a chance of winning,' Chris decided, 'not unless they take you through the tunnel with them. That was some kick I saw from the window.'

James knew his friend was fishing for what was bothering him.

'It's not fair,' he said. 'I wasn't disturbing anyone and nobody else wanted to use the computer. But Dad had made his mind up. I got the usual story, "When I was your age I was out kicking a ball around until bedtime. Your generation is going to grow up without ever having been young. You're just a slave to that computer."'

Chris grinned.

'I've had the same lecture,' Chris admitted, 'but it usually blows over by the time I come and play some of your computer games!'

Grabbing the ball from his friend, Chris headed it against a chestnut tree.

'You'll never get thirty-four there,' teased James. 'The tree's too rough.'

And it was. After only eight headers, the ball hit a branch and fell too far to the side for Chris to head it back again.

'Want to go back and be a slave to your computer again?' the boy asked.

Shaking his head, James said he thought it was still a bit too soon for his dad to have changed his mind.

The two boys sat down on the stumps again.

'I wonder what it would be like to be a slave to a computer,' commented Chris. 'You'd have to delete everything because one key says delete. And you'd have to insert things every time you looked at the insert key.'

James laughed. 'Everything you wrote would be in capitals because you'd have to obey the key that says Caps Lock.'

Chris pointed out that they'd have to leave the computer every time they noticed the key that said Shift!

'I think Dad must have been looking at the keyboard and saw the Escape key and that's why he told me to take a break from it!'

‘Which all goes to prove that you’re not a slave to the computer because slaves couldn’t escape!’

‘Try telling Dad that,’ grumped James.

‘I wonder what it was like for real slaves,’ Chris said, after a couple of minutes.

James looked at him. ‘You shouldn’t have spoken then,’ he said. ‘I was thinking about the Pause key.’

‘Yes, I should,’ Chris announced. ‘And whether you like it or not we’re going to talk about what it was like for real slaves until we can get back to the computer.’

‘Why should I?’ James grunted.

‘Because I’m using the Control key!’ Chris laughed.

That knocked James out of his bad mood and he smiled

‘OK,’ he agreed. ‘You win. Slaves it is.’

Chris, who had always been a good storyteller, looked around where they were sitting.

‘Imagine this is a forest in Africa,’ he began. ‘And we’re the village lookouts. Rumours are spreading that strange creatures have been seen in the deepest and darkest parts of the forest.’

‘What kind of strange creatures?’ James asked.

‘Very strange. There were four of them, two lots of two. And they looked like white monkeys, only they weren’t hairy.’

‘Where were they last seen?’ James asked, looking around him at the trees.

‘Down by the river,’ Chris replied, really getting into his story. ‘But I’ve not told you the worst yet.’

‘What’s that?’

‘These creatures are cleverer than monkeys because they have made a fire and are cooking on it. Now imagine that we’ve suddenly been jumped on. We realise that these creatures are not monkeys but two white men!’

‘Even more scary!’ James pretended to shiver. ‘Especially if you’d never seen a white man before!’

Chris stood up for the next part of the story. ‘Now they tie your right hand to my left hand and your right ankle to my left ankle. Then they tie one end of a rope round my neck and the other end round your neck.’

‘Why do they do that? If they want us for slaves there is no point in strangling us.’

‘That is the point! They tie us like that so we can’t run away. And they lead us back to where they have other captured villagers.’

‘Is anyone we know there?’ asked James.

Chris pretended to look around. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No one. And nobody speaks our language. We’ve got no idea what is going to happen to us or where we are being taken. We will never see anyone we know ever again. By the way, the only food we will get are plant roots, leaves and nuts.’ Chris was getting really carried away. ‘Then we are tied to total strangers and led for miles and miles through the forest until we come to the coast. Then we are dumped in the hold of a ship and we never see Africa ever again. And when the ship

goes out to sea we are terrified because we have never seen the sea before and we think that we will drop off the edge of it!’

James had just picked up the ball when both boys stopped dead. There was the sound of cracking twigs close by, though they couldn’t see what had made the noise.

A voice called, ‘James! Chris! Can you hear me?’

‘It’s Dad!’ James sighed, relieved that it wasn’t a fearsome slave trader or worse.

‘I thought I might find you here,’ he said. ‘I’m glad you’ve discovered your den again.’

The boys looked at each other, each thinking the same thing. It was years since they’d played in their den. After all, they weren’t kids anymore!

‘When I suggested you went out to play,’ said Mr Dawson, ‘I didn’t expect you still to be away at dinner time.’

James suddenly realised that his stomach was rumbling.

‘I hope we get more than plant roots, leaves and nuts for dinner,’ Chris commented.

Mr Dawson looked at Chris, ‘Have your parents become vegetarians or something?’

Chris and James laughed so much they could hardly breathe.

‘Will you come in later?’ James asked, as he and Chris parted company at the garden gate.

Chris looked at Mr Dawson.

‘OK,’ the man smiled. ‘You’ve had some fresh air and exercise. You can play on the computer tonight.’

‘Play!’ said James, trying to sound both surprised and indignant. ‘We don’t want to play. We’ve got some research to do.’

He winked at his friend.

‘Historical research,’ Chris agreed. ‘Eighteenth century, I think.’

Mr Dawson decided he’d missed out on something and dropped the subject.

‘That’ll be Chris,’ Dad said, when the doorbell rang less than an hour later.

James let his friend in.

‘Is it all right if we use the computer?’ he asked his father.

‘Yes,’ Mr Dawson said. ‘Provided you don’t waste too long on games.’

‘We’re not going to be playing games,’ Chris reminded him. ‘We want to do some research about slavery.’

‘Is this homework?’ Dad asked.

‘No,’ his son said. ‘Just something we’re interested in.’

‘What inspired that sudden interest?’ queried Mr Dawson.

James smiled at his father. ‘You did,’ he told him. ‘It was something you said this afternoon.’

Mr Dawson picked up his newspaper.

‘Slavery,’ he thought. ‘I never even mentioned the word!’

In the hour that followed, James and Chris researched the subject of slavery and were both fascinated and appalled by what they read.

‘Look,’ Chris said, as they prepared to close down the computer. ‘There’s a bit here about a book for teenagers. It says it’s about a slave ship captain. He’s called John Newton.’

‘I’ll ask Dad if we can send for it,’ decided James.

‘John Newton might be just the man to tell us what slavery was really like.’