

The Railway Children

by E. Nesbit

THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

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To my dear son Paul Bland,
behind whose knowledge of railways
my ignorance confidently shelters.

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Chapter I. The beginning of things.

They were not railway children to begin with. I don't suppose they had ever thought about railways except as a means of getting to Maskelyne and Cook's, the Pantomime, Zoological Gardens, and Madame Tussaud's. They were just ordinary suburban children, and they lived with their Father and Mother in an ordinary red-brick-fronted villa, with coloured glass in the front door, a tiled passage that was called a hall, a bath-room with hot and cold water, electric bells, French windows, and a good deal of white paint, and 'every modern convenience', as the house-agents say.

There were three of them. Roberta was the eldest. Of course, Mothers never have favourites, but if their Mother HAD had a favourite, it might have been Roberta. Next came Peter, who wished to be an Engineer when he grew up; and the youngest was Phyllis, who meant extremely well.

Mother did not spend all her time in paying dull calls to dull ladies, and sitting dully at home waiting for dull ladies to pay calls to her. She was almost always there, ready to play with the children, and read to them, and help them to do their home-lessons. Besides this she used to write stories for them while they were at school, and read them

aloud after tea, and she always made up funny pieces of poetry for their birthdays and for other great occasions, such as the christening of the new kittens, or the refurnishing of the doll's house, or the time when they were getting over the mumps.

These three lucky children always had everything they needed: pretty clothes, good fires, a lovely nursery with heaps of toys, and a Mother Goose wall-paper. They had a kind and merry nursemaid, and a dog who was called James, and who was their very own. They also had a Father who was just perfect--never cross, never unjust, and always ready for a game--at least, if at any time he was NOT ready, he always had an excellent reason for it, and explained the reason to the children so interestingly and funnily that they felt sure he couldn't help himself.

You will think that they ought to have been very happy. And so they were, but they did not know HOW happy till the pretty life in the Red Villa was over and done with, and they had to live a very different life indeed.

The dreadful change came quite suddenly.

Peter had a birthday--his tenth. Among his other presents was a model engine more perfect than you could ever have dreamed of. The other presents were full of charm, but the Engine was fuller of charm than any of the others were.

Its charm lasted in its full perfection for exactly three days. Then, owing either to Peter's inexperience or Phyllis's good intentions, which had been rather pressing, or to some other cause, the Engine suddenly went off with a bang. James was so frightened that he went out and did not come back all day. All the Noah's Ark people who were in the tender were broken to bits, but nothing else was hurt except the poor little engine and the feelings of Peter. The others said he cried over it--but of course boys of ten do not cry, however terrible the tragedies may be which darken their lot. He said that his eyes were red because he had a cold. This turned out to be true, though Peter did not know it was when he said it, the next day he had to go to bed and stay there. Mother began to be afraid that he might be sickening for measles, when suddenly he sat up in bed and said:

"I hate gruel--I hate barley water--I hate bread and milk. I want to get up and have something REAL to eat."

"What would you like?" Mother asked.

"A pigeon-pie," said Peter, eagerly, "a large pigeon-pie. A very large one."

So Mother asked the Cook to make a large pigeon-pie. The pie was made. And when the pie was made, it was cooked. And when it was cooked, Peter ate some of it. After that his cold was better. Mother made a piece of

poetry to amuse him while the pie was being made. It began by saying what an unfortunate but worthy boy Peter was, then it went on:

He had an engine that he loved
With all his heart and soul,
And if he had a wish on earth
It was to keep it whole.

One day--my friends, prepare your minds;
I'm coming to the worst--
Quite suddenly a screw went mad,
And then the boiler burst!

With gloomy face he picked it up
And took it to his Mother,
Though even he could not suppose
That she could make another;

For those who perished on the line
He did not seem to care,
His engine being more to him
Than all the people there.

And now you see the reason why
Our Peter has been ill:
He soothes his soul with pigeon-pie
His gnawing grief to kill.

He wraps himself in blankets warm
And sleeps in bed till late,
Determined thus to overcome
His miserable fate.

And if his eyes are rather red,
His cold must just excuse it:
Offer him pie; you may be sure
He never will refuse it.

Father had been away in the country for three or four days. All Peter's hopes for the curing of his afflicted Engine were now fixed on his Father, for Father was most wonderfully clever with his fingers. He could mend all sorts of things. He had often acted as veterinary surgeon to the wooden rocking-horse; once he had saved its life when all human aid was despaired of, and the poor creature was given up for lost, and even the carpenter said he didn't see his way to do anything. And it was Father who mended the doll's cradle when no one else could; and with a little glue and some bits of wood and a pen-knife made all the Noah's Ark beasts as strong on their pins as ever they were, if not stronger.

Peter, with heroic unselfishness, did not say anything about his Engine till after Father had had his dinner and his after-dinner cigar. The

unselfishness was Mother's idea--but it was Peter who carried it out. And needed a good deal of patience, too.

At last Mother said to Father, "Now, dear, if you're quite rested, and quite comfy, we want to tell you about the great railway accident, and ask your advice."

"All right," said Father, "fire away!"

So then Peter told the sad tale, and fetched what was left of the Engine.

"Hum," said Father, when he had looked the Engine over very carefully.

The children held their breaths.

"Is there NO hope?" said Peter, in a low, unsteady voice.

"Hope? Rather! Tons of it," said Father, cheerfully; "but it'll want something besides hope--a bit of brazing say, or some solder, and a new valve. I think we'd better keep it for a rainy day. In other words, I'll give up Saturday afternoon to it, and you shall all help me."

"CAN girls help to mend engines?" Peter asked doubtfully.

"Of course they can. Girls are just as clever as boys, and don't you forget it! How would you like to be an engine-driver, Phil?"

"My face would be always dirty, wouldn't it?" said Phyllis, in unenthusiastic tones, "and I expect I should break something."

"I should just love it," said Roberta--"do you think I could when I'm grown up, Daddy? Or even a stoker?"

"You mean a fireman," said Daddy, pulling and twisting at the engine.

"Well, if you still wish it, when you're grown up, we'll see about making you a fire-woman. I remember when I was a boy--"

Just then there was a knock at the front door.

"Who on earth!" said Father. "An Englishman's house is his castle, of course, but I do wish they built semi-detached villas with moats and drawbridges."

Ruth--she was the parlour-maid and had red hair--came in and said that two gentlemen wanted to see the master.

"I've shown them into the Library, Sir," said she.

"I expect it's the subscription to the Vicar's testimonial," said Mother, "or else it's the choir holiday fund. Get rid of them quickly, dear. It does break up an evening so, and it's nearly the children's bedtime."

But Father did not seem to be able to get rid of the gentlemen at all quickly.

"I wish we HAD got a moat and drawbridge," said Roberta; "then, when we

didn't want people, we could just pull up the drawbridge and no one else could get in. I expect Father will have forgotten about when he was a boy if they stay much longer."

Mother tried to make the time pass by telling them a new fairy story about a Princess with green eyes, but it was difficult because they could hear the voices of Father and the gentlemen in the Library, and Father's voice sounded louder and different to the voice he generally used to people who came about testimonials and holiday funds.

Then the Library bell rang, and everyone heaved a breath of relief.

"They're going now," said Phyllis; "he's rung to have them shown out."

But instead of showing anybody out, Ruth showed herself in, and she looked queer, the children thought.

"Please'm," she said, "the Master wants you to just step into the study. He looks like the dead, mum; I think he's had bad news. You'd best prepare yourself for the worst, 'm--p'raps it's a death in the family or a bank busted or--"

"That'll do, Ruth," said Mother gently; "you can go."

Then Mother went into the Library. There was more talking. Then the bell rang again, and Ruth fetched a cab. The children heard boots go out and down the steps. The cab drove away, and the front door shut. Then Mother came in. Her dear face was as white as her lace collar, and her eyes looked very big and shining. Her mouth looked like just a line of pale red--her lips were thin and not their proper shape at all.

"It's bedtime," she said. "Ruth will put you to bed."

"But you promised we should sit up late tonight because Father's come home," said Phyllis.

"Father's been called away--on business," said Mother. "Come, darlings, go at once."

They kissed her and went. Roberta lingered to give Mother an extra hug and to whisper:

"It wasn't bad news, Mammy, was it? Is anyone dead--or--"

"Nobody's dead--no," said Mother, and she almost seemed to push Roberta away. "I can't tell you anything tonight, my pet. Go, dear, go NOW."

So Roberta went.

Ruth brushed the girls' hair and helped them to undress. (Mother almost always did this herself.) When she had turned down the gas and left them she found Peter, still dressed, waiting on the stairs.

"I say, Ruth, what's up?" he asked.

"Don't ask me no questions and I won't tell you no lies," the red-headed Ruth replied. "You'll know soon enough."

Late that night Mother came up and kissed all three children as they lay asleep. But Roberta was the only one whom the kiss woke, and she lay mousey-still, and said nothing.

"If Mother doesn't want us to know she's been crying," she said to herself as she heard through the dark the catching of her Mother's breath, "we WON'T know it. That's all."

When they came down to breakfast the next morning, Mother had already gone out.

"To London," Ruth said, and left them to their breakfast.

"There's something awful the matter," said Peter, breaking his egg.

"Ruth told me last night we should know soon enough."

"Did you ASK her?" said Roberta, with scorn.

"Yes, I did!" said Peter, angrily. "If you could go to bed without caring whether Mother was worried or not, I couldn't. So there."

"I don't think we ought to ask the servants things Mother doesn't tell us," said Roberta.

"That's right, Miss Goody-goody," said Peter, "preach away."

"I'M not goody," said Phyllis, "but I think Bobbie's right this time."

"Of course. She always is. In her own opinion," said Peter.

"Oh, DON'T!" cried Roberta, putting down her egg-spoon; "don't let's be horrid to each other. I'm sure some dire calamity is happening. Don't let's make it worse!"

"Who began, I should like to know?" said Peter.

Roberta made an effort, and answered:--

"I did, I suppose, but--"

"Well, then," said Peter, triumphantly. But before he went to school he thumped his sister between the shoulders and told her to cheer up.

The children came home to one o'clock dinner, but Mother was not there. And she was not there at tea-time.

It was nearly seven before she came in, looking so ill and tired that the children felt they could not ask her any questions. She sank into an arm-chair. Phyllis took the long pins out of her hat, while Roberta took off her gloves, and Peter unfastened her walking-shoes and fetched her soft velvety slippers for her.

When she had had a cup of tea, and Roberta had put eau-de-Cologne on her poor head that ached, Mother said:--

"Now, my darlings, I want to tell you something. Those men last night did bring very bad news, and Father will be away for some time. I am very worried about it, and I want you all to help me, and not to make

things harder for me."

"As if we would!" said Roberta, holding Mother's hand against her face.

"You can help me very much," said Mother, "by being good and happy and not quarrelling when I'm away"--Roberta and Peter exchanged guilty glances--"for I shall have to be away a good deal."

"We won't quarrel. Indeed we won't," said everybody. And meant it, too.

"Then," Mother went on, "I want you not to ask me any questions about this trouble; and not to ask anybody else any questions."

Peter cringed and shuffled his boots on the carpet.

"You'll promise this, too, won't you?" said Mother.

"I did ask Ruth," said Peter, suddenly. "I'm very sorry, but I did."

"And what did she say?"

"She said I should know soon enough."

"It isn't necessary for you to know anything about it," said Mother; "it's about business, and you never do understand business, do you?"

"No," said Roberta; "is it something to do with Government?" For Father was in a Government Office.

"Yes," said Mother. "Now it's bed-time, my darlings. And don't YOU worry. It'll all come right in the end."

"Then don't YOU worry either, Mother," said Phyllis, "and we'll all be as good as gold."

Mother sighed and kissed them.

"We'll begin being good the first thing tomorrow morning," said Peter, as they went upstairs.

"Why not NOW?" said Roberta.

"There's nothing to be good ABOUT now, silly," said Peter.

"We might begin to try to FEEL good," said Phyllis, "and not call names."

"Who's calling names?" said Peter. "Bobbie knows right enough that when I say 'silly', it's just the same as if I said Bobbie."

"WELL," said Roberta.

"No, I don't mean what you mean. I mean it's just a--what is it Father calls it?--a germ of endearment! Good night."

The girls folded up their clothes with more than usual neatness--which was the only way of being good that they could think of.

"I say," said Phyllis, smoothing out her pinafore, "you used to say it was so dull--nothing happening, like in books. Now something HAS happened."

"I never wanted things to happen to make Mother unhappy," said Roberta.
"Everything's perfectly horrid."

Everything continued to be perfectly horrid for some weeks.

Mother was nearly always out. Meals were dull and dirty. The between-maid was sent away, and Aunt Emma came on a visit. Aunt Emma was much older than Mother. She was going abroad to be a governess. She was very busy getting her clothes ready, and they were very ugly, dingy clothes, and she had them always littering about, and the sewing-machine seemed to whir--on and on all day and most of the night. Aunt Emma believed in keeping children in their proper places. And they more than returned the compliment. Their idea of Aunt Emma's proper place was anywhere where they were not. So they saw very little of her. They preferred the company of the servants, who were more amusing. Cook, if in a good temper, could sing comic songs, and the housemaid, if she happened not to be offended with you, could imitate a hen that has laid an egg, a bottle of champagne being opened, and could mew like two cats fighting. The servants never told the children what the bad news was that the gentlemen had brought to Father. But they kept hinting that they could tell a great deal if they chose--and this was not comfortable.

One day when Peter had made a booby trap over the bath-room door, and it had acted beautifully as Ruth passed through, that red-haired parlour-maid caught him and boxed his ears.

"You'll come to a bad end," she said furiously, "you nasty little limb, you! If you don't mend your ways, you'll go where your precious Father's gone, so I tell you straight!"

Roberta repeated this to her Mother, and next day Ruth was sent away.

Then came the time when Mother came home and went to bed and stayed there two days and the Doctor came, and the children crept wretchedly about the house and wondered if the world was coming to an end.

Mother came down one morning to breakfast, very pale and with lines on her face that used not to be there. And she smiled, as well as she could, and said:--

"Now, my pets, everything is settled. We're going to leave this house, and go and live in the country. Such a ducky dear little white house. I know you'll love it."

A whirling week of packing followed--not just packing clothes, like when you go to the seaside, but packing chairs and tables, covering their tops with sacking and their legs with straw.

All sorts of things were packed that you don't pack when you go to the seaside. Crockery, blankets, candlesticks, carpets, bedsteads, saucepans, and even fenders and fire-irons.

The house was like a furniture warehouse. I think the children enjoyed it very much. Mother was very busy, but not too busy now to talk to them, and read to them, and even to make a bit of poetry for Phyllis to cheer her up when she fell down with a screwdriver and ran it into her hand.

"Aren't you going to pack this, Mother?" Roberta asked, pointing to the beautiful cabinet inlaid with red turtleshell and brass.

"We can't take everything," said Mother.

"But we seem to be taking all the ugly things," said Roberta.

"We're taking the useful ones," said Mother; "we've got to play at being Poor for a bit, my chickabiddy."

When all the ugly useful things had been packed up and taken away in a van by men in green-baize aprons, the two girls and Mother and Aunt Emma slept in the two spare rooms where the furniture was all pretty. All their beds had gone. A bed was made up for Peter on the drawing-room sofa.

"I say, this is larks," he said, wriggling joyously, as Mother tucked him up. "I do like moving! I wish we moved once a month."

Mother laughed.

"I don't!" she said. "Good night, Peterkin."

As she turned away Roberta saw her face. She never forgot it.

"Oh, Mother," she whispered all to herself as she got into bed, "how brave you are! How I love you! Fancy being brave enough to laugh when you're feeling like THAT!"

Next day boxes were filled, and boxes and more boxes; and then late in the afternoon a cab came to take them to the station.

Aunt Emma saw them off. They felt that THEY were seeing HER off, and they were glad of it.

"But, oh, those poor little foreign children that she's going to governess!" whispered Phyllis. "I wouldn't be them for anything!"

At first they enjoyed looking out of the window, but when it grew dusk they grew sleepier and sleepier, and no one knew how long they had been in the train when they were roused by Mother's shaking them gently and saying:--

"Wake up, dears. We're there."

They woke up, cold and melancholy, and stood shivering on the draughty platform while the baggage was taken out of the train. Then the engine, puffing and blowing, set to work again, and dragged the train away. The children watched the tail-lights of the guard's van disappear into the darkness.

This was the first train the children saw on that railway which was in time to become so very dear to them. They did not guess then how they would grow to love the railway, and how soon it would become the centre of their new life, nor what wonders and changes it would bring to them. They only shivered and sneezed and hoped the walk to the new house would not be long. Peter's nose was colder than he ever remembered it to have been before. Roberta's hat was crooked, and the elastic seemed tighter than usual. Phyllis's shoe-laces had come undone.

"Come," said Mother, "we've got to walk. There aren't any cabs here."

The walk was dark and muddy. The children stumbled a little on the rough road, and once Phyllis absently fell into a puddle, and was picked up damp and unhappy. There were no gas-lamps on the road, and the road was uphill. The cart went at a foot's pace, and they followed the gritty crunch of its wheels. As their eyes got used to the darkness, they could see the mound of boxes swaying dimly in front of them.

A long gate had to be opened for the cart to pass through, and after that the road seemed to go across fields--and now it went down hill. Presently a great dark lumpish thing showed over to the right.

"There's the house," said Mother. "I wonder why she's shut the shutters."

"Who's SHE?" asked Roberta.

"The woman I engaged to clean the place, and put the furniture straight and get supper."

There was a low wall, and trees inside.

"That's the garden," said Mother.

"It looks more like a dripping-pan full of black cabbages," said Peter.

The cart went on along by the garden wall, and round to the back of the house, and here it clattered into a cobble-stoned yard and stopped at the back door.

There was no light in any of the windows.

Everyone hammered at the door, but no one came.

The man who drove the cart said he expected Mrs. Viney had gone home.

"You see your train was that late," said he.

"But she's got the key," said Mother. "What are we to do?"

"Oh, she'll have left that under the doorstep," said the cart man; "folks do hereabouts." He took the lantern off his cart and stooped.

"Ay, here it is, right enough," he said.

He unlocked the door and went in and set his lantern on the table.

"Got e'er a candle?" said he.

"I don't know where anything is." Mother spoke rather less cheerfully than usual.

He struck a match. There was a candle on the table, and he lighted it. By its thin little glimmer the children saw a large bare kitchen with a stone floor. There were no curtains, no hearth-rug. The kitchen table from home stood in the middle of the room. The chairs were in one corner, and the pots, pans, brooms, and crockery in another. There was no fire, and the black grate showed cold, dead ashes.

As the cart man turned to go out after he had brought in the boxes, there was a rustling, scampering sound that seemed to come from inside the walls of the house.

"Oh, what's that?" cried the girls.

"It's only the rats," said the cart man. And he went away and shut the door, and the sudden draught of it blew out the candle.

"Oh, dear," said Phyllis, "I wish we hadn't come!" and she knocked a chair over.

"ONLY the rats!" said Peter, in the dark.

Chapter II. Peter's coal-mine.

"What fun!" said Mother, in the dark, feeling for the matches on the table. "How frightened the poor mice were--I don't believe they were rats at all."

She struck a match and relighted the candle and everyone looked at each other by its wink, blinky light.

"Well," she said, "you've often wanted something to happen and now it has. This is quite an adventure, isn't it? I told Mrs. Viney to get us some bread and butter, and meat and things, and to have supper ready. I suppose she's laid it in the dining-room. So let's go and see."

The dining-room opened out of the kitchen. It looked much darker than the kitchen when they went in with the one candle. Because the kitchen was whitewashed, but the dining-room was dark wood from floor to ceiling, and across the ceiling there were heavy black beams. There was a muddled maze of dusty furniture--the breakfast-room furniture from the old home where they had lived all their lives. It seemed a very long time ago, and a very long way off.

There was the table certainly, and there were chairs, but there was no supper.

"Let's look in the other rooms," said Mother; and they looked. And in each room was the same kind of blundering half-arrangement of furniture, and fire-irons and crockery, and all sorts of odd things on the floor, but there was nothing to eat; even in the pantry there were only a rusty cake-tin and a broken plate with whitening mixed in it.

"What a horrid old woman!" said Mother; "she's just walked off with the money and not got us anything to eat at all."

"Then shan't we have any supper at all?" asked Phyllis, dismayed, stepping back on to a soap-dish that cracked responsively.

"Oh, yes," said Mother, "only it'll mean unpacking one of those big cases that we put in the cellar. Phil, do mind where you're walking to, there's a dear. Peter, hold the light."

The cellar door opened out of the kitchen. There were five wooden steps leading down. It wasn't a proper cellar at all, the children thought, because its ceiling went up as high as the kitchen's. A bacon-rack hung under its ceiling. There was wood in it, and coal. Also the big cases.

Peter held the candle, all on one side, while Mother tried to open the great packing-case. It was very securely nailed down.

"Where's the hammer?" asked Peter.

"That's just it," said Mother. "I'm afraid it's inside the box. But there's a coal-shovel--and there's the kitchen poker."

And with these she tried to get the case open.

"Let me do it," said Peter, thinking he could do it better himself. Everyone thinks this when he sees another person stirring a fire, or opening a box, or untying a knot in a bit of string.

"You'll hurt your hands, Mammy," said Roberta; "let me."

"I wish Father was here," said Phyllis; "he'd get it open in two shakes. What are you kicking me for, Bobbie?"

"I wasn't," said Roberta.

Just then the first of the long nails in the packing-case began to come out with a scrunch. Then a lath was raised and then another, till all four stood up with the long nails in them shining fiercely like iron teeth in the candle-light.

"Hooray!" said Mother; "here are some candles--the very first thing! You girls go and light them. You'll find some saucers and things. Just drop a little candle-grease in the saucer and stick the candle upright in it."

"How many shall we light?"

"As many as ever you like," said Mother, gaily. "The great thing is to be cheerful. Nobody can be cheerful in the dark except owls and dormice."

So the girls lighted candles. The head of the first match flew off and stuck to Phyllis's finger; but, as Roberta said, it was only a little burn, and she might have had to be a Roman martyr and be burned whole if she had happened to live in the days when those things were fashionable.

Then, when the dining-room was lighted by fourteen candles, Roberta fetched coal and wood and lighted a fire.

"It's very cold for May," she said, feeling what a grown-up thing it was to say.

The fire-light and the candle-light made the dining-room look very different, for now you could see that the dark walls were of wood, carved here and there into little wreaths and loops.

The girls hastily 'tidied' the room, which meant putting the chairs against the wall, and piling all the odds and ends into a corner and partly hiding them with the big leather arm-chair that Father used to sit in after dinner.

"Bravo!" cried Mother, coming in with a tray full of things. "This is something like! I'll just get a tablecloth and then--"

The tablecloth was in a box with a proper lock that was opened with a key and not with a shovel, and when the cloth was spread on the table, a real feast was laid out on it.

Everyone was very, very tired, but everyone cheered up at the sight of the funny and delightful supper. There were biscuits, the Marie and the plain kind, sardines, preserved ginger, cooking raisins, and candied peel and marmalade.

"What a good thing Aunt Emma packed up all the odds and ends out of the Store cupboard," said Mother. "Now, Phil, DON'T put the marmalade spoon in among the sardines."

"No, I won't, Mother," said Phyllis, and put it down among the Marie biscuits.

"Let's drink Aunt Emma's health," said Roberta, suddenly; "what should we have done if she hadn't packed up these things? Here's to Aunt Emma!"

And the toast was drunk in ginger wine and water, out of willow-patterned tea-cups, because the glasses couldn't be found.

They all felt that they had been a little hard on Aunt Emma. She wasn't a nice cuddly person like Mother, but after all it was she who had thought of packing up the odds and ends of things to eat.

It was Aunt Emma, too, who had aired all the sheets ready; and the men who had moved the furniture had put the bedsteads together, so the beds were soon made.

"Good night, chickies," said Mother. "I'm sure there aren't any rats. But I'll leave my door open, and then if a mouse comes, you need only scream, and I'll come and tell it exactly what I think of it."

Then she went to her own room. Roberta woke to hear the little travelling clock chime two. It sounded like a church clock ever so far away, she always thought. And she heard, too, Mother still moving about

in her room.

Next morning Roberta woke Phyllis by pulling her hair gently, but quite enough for her purpose.

"Wassermarrer?" asked Phyllis, still almost wholly asleep.

"Wake up! wake up!" said Roberta. "We're in the new house--don't you remember? No servants or anything. Let's get up and begin to be useful. We'll just creep down mouse-quietly, and have everything beautiful before Mother gets up. I've woke Peter. He'll be dressed as soon as we are."

So they dressed quietly and quickly. Of course, there was no water in their room, so when they got down they washed as much as they thought was necessary under the spout of the pump in the yard. One pumped and the other washed. It was splashy but interesting.

"It's much more fun than basin washing," said Roberta. "How sparkly the weeds are between the stones, and the moss on the roof--oh, and the flowers!"

The roof of the back kitchen sloped down quite low. It was made of thatch and it had moss on it, and house-leeks and stonecrop and wallflowers, and even a clump of purple flag-flowers, at the far corner.

"This is far, far, far and away prettier than Edgcombe Villa," said Phyllis. "I wonder what the garden's like."

"We mustn't think of the garden yet," said Roberta, with earnest energy. "Let's go in and begin to work."

They lighted the fire and put the kettle on, and they arranged the crockery for breakfast; they could not find all the right things, but a glass ash-tray made an excellent salt-cellar, and a newish baking-tin seemed as if it would do to put bread on, if they had any.

When there seemed to be nothing more that they could do, they went out again into the fresh bright morning.

"We'll go into the garden now," said Peter. But somehow they couldn't find the garden. They went round the house and round the house. The yard occupied the back, and across it were stables and outbuildings. On the other three sides the house stood simply in a field, without a yard of garden to divide it from the short smooth turf. And yet they had certainly seen the garden wall the night before.

It was a hilly country. Down below they could see the line of the railway, and the black yawning mouth of a tunnel. The station was out of sight. There was a great bridge with tall arches running across one end of the valley.

"Never mind the garden," said Peter; "let's go down and look at the railway. There might be trains passing."

"We can see them from here," said Roberta, slowly; "let's sit down a bit."

So they all sat down on a great flat grey stone that had pushed itself up out of the grass; it was one of many that lay about on the hillside, and when Mother came out to look for them at eight o'clock, she found them deeply asleep in a contented, sun-warmed bunch.

They had made an excellent fire, and had set the kettle on it at about half-past five. So that by eight the fire had been out for some time, the water had all boiled away, and the bottom was burned out of the kettle. Also they had not thought of washing the crockery before they set the table.

"But it doesn't matter--the cups and saucers, I mean," said Mother. "Because I've found another room--I'd quite forgotten there was one. And it's magic! And I've boiled the water for tea in a saucepan."

The forgotten room opened out of the kitchen. In the agitation and half darkness the night before its door had been mistaken for a cupboard's. It was a little square room, and on its table, all nicely set out, was a joint of cold roast beef, with bread, butter, cheese, and a pie.

"Pie for breakfast!" cried Peter; "how perfectly ripping!"

"It isn't pigeon-pie," said Mother; "it's only apple. Well, this is the supper we ought to have had last night. And there was a note from Mrs. Viney. Her son-in-law has broken his arm, and she had to get home early. She's coming this morning at ten."

That was a wonderful breakfast. It is unusual to begin the day with cold apple pie, but the children all said they would rather have it than meat.

"You see it's more like dinner than breakfast to us," said Peter, passing his plate for more, "because we were up so early."

The day passed in helping Mother to unpack and arrange things. Six small legs quite ached with running about while their owners carried clothes and crockery and all sorts of things to their proper places. It was not till quite late in the afternoon that Mother said:--

"There! That'll do for to-day. I'll lie down for an hour, so as to be as fresh as a lark by supper-time."

Then they all looked at each other. Each of the three expressive countenances expressed the same thought. That thought was double, and consisted, like the bits of information in the Child's Guide to Knowledge, of a question and an answer.

Q. Where shall we go?

A. To the railway.

So to the railway they went, and as soon as they started for the railway

they saw where the garden had hidden itself. It was right behind the stables, and it had a high wall all round.

"Oh, never mind about the garden now!" cried Peter. "Mother told me this morning where it was. It'll keep till to-morrow. Let's get to the railway."

The way to the railway was all down hill over smooth, short turf with here and there furze bushes and grey and yellow rocks sticking out like candied peel from the top of a cake.

The way ended in a steep run and a wooden fence--and there was the railway with the shining metals and the telegraph wires and posts and signals.

They all climbed on to the top of the fence, and then suddenly there was a rumbling sound that made them look along the line to the right, where the dark mouth of a tunnel opened itself in the face of a rocky cliff; next moment a train had rushed out of the tunnel with a shriek and a snort, and had slid noisily past them. They felt the rush of its passing, and the pebbles on the line jumped and rattled under it as it went by.

"Oh!" said Roberta, drawing a long breath; "it was like a great dragon tearing by. Did you feel it fan us with its hot wings?"

"I suppose a dragon's lair might look very like that tunnel from the outside," said Phyllis.

But Peter said:--

"I never thought we should ever get as near to a train as this. It's the most ripping sport!"

"Better than toy-engines, isn't it?" said Roberta.

(I am tired of calling Roberta by her name. I don't see why I should. No one else did. Everyone else called her Bobbie, and I don't see why I shouldn't.)

"I don't know; it's different," said Peter. "It seems so odd to see ALL of a train. It's awfully tall, isn't it?"

"We've always seen them cut in half by platforms," said Phyllis.

"I wonder if that train was going to London," Bobbie said. "London's where Father is."

"Let's go down to the station and find out," said Peter.

So they went.

They walked along the edge of the line, and heard the telegraph wires humming over their heads. When you are in the train, it seems such a little way between post and post, and one after another the posts seem to catch up the wires almost more quickly than you can count them. But

when you have to walk, the posts seem few and far between.

But the children got to the station at last.

Never before had any of them been at a station, except for the purpose of catching trains--or perhaps waiting for them--and always with grown-ups in attendance, grown-ups who were not themselves interested in stations, except as places from which they wished to get away.

Never before had they passed close enough to a signal-box to be able to notice the wires, and to hear the mysterious 'ping, ping,' followed by the strong, firm clicking of machinery.

The very sleepers on which the rails lay were a delightful path to travel by--just far enough apart to serve as the stepping-stones in a game of foaming torrents hastily organised by Bobbie.

Then to arrive at the station, not through the booking office, but in a freebooting sort of way by the sloping end of the platform. This in itself was joy.

Joy, too, it was to peep into the porters' room, where the lamps are, and the Railway almanac on the wall, and one porter half asleep behind a paper.

There were a great many crossing lines at the station; some of them just ran into a yard and stopped short, as though they were tired of business and meant to retire for good. Trucks stood on the rails here, and on one side was a great heap of coal--not a loose heap, such as you see in your coal cellar, but a sort of solid building of coals with large square blocks of coal outside used just as though they were bricks, and built up till the heap looked like the picture of the Cities of the Plain in 'Bible Stories for Infants.' There was a line of whitewash near the top of the coaly wall.

When presently the Porter lounged out of his room at the twice-repeated tingling thrill of a gong over the station door, Peter said, "How do you do?" in his best manner, and hastened to ask what the white mark was on the coal for.

"To mark how much coal there be," said the Porter, "so as we'll know if anyone nicks it. So don't you go off with none in your pockets, young gentleman!"

This seemed, at the time but a merry jest, and Peter felt at once that the Porter was a friendly sort with no nonsense about him. But later the words came back to Peter with a new meaning.

Have you ever gone into a farmhouse kitchen on a baking day, and seen the great crock of dough set by the fire to rise? If you have, and if you were at that time still young enough to be interested in everything you saw, you will remember that you found yourself quite unable to resist the temptation to poke your finger into the soft round of dough

that curved inside the pan like a giant mushroom. And you will remember that your finger made a dent in the dough, and that slowly, but quite surely, the dent disappeared, and the dough looked quite the same as it did before you touched it. Unless, of course, your hand was extra dirty, in which case, naturally, there would be a little black mark.

Well, it was just like that with the sorrow the children had felt at Father's going away, and at Mother's being so unhappy. It made a deep impression, but the impression did not last long.

They soon got used to being without Father, though they did not forget him; and they got used to not going to school, and to seeing very little of Mother, who was now almost all day shut up in her upstairs room writing, writing, writing. She used to come down at tea-time and read aloud the stories she had written. They were lovely stories.

The rocks and hills and valleys and trees, the canal, and above all, the railway, were so new and so perfectly pleasing that the remembrance of the old life in the villa grew to seem almost like a dream.

Mother had told them more than once that they were 'quite poor now,' but this did not seem to be anything but a way of speaking. Grown-up people, even Mothers, often make remarks that don't seem to mean anything in particular, just for the sake of saying something, seemingly. There was always enough to eat, and they wore the same kind of nice clothes they had always worn.

But in June came three wet days; the rain came down, straight as lances, and it was very, very cold. Nobody could go out, and everybody shivered. They all went up to the door of Mother's room and knocked.

"Well, what is it?" asked Mother from inside.

"Mother," said Bobbie, "mayn't I light a fire? I do know how."

And Mother said: "No, my ducky-love. We mustn't have fires in June--coal is so dear. If you're cold, go and have a good romp in the attic. That'll warm you."

"But, Mother, it only takes such a very little coal to make a fire."

"It's more than we can afford, chickeny-love," said Mother, cheerfully.

"Now run away, there's darlings--I'm madly busy!"

"Mother's always busy now," said Phyllis, in a whisper to Peter. Peter did not answer. He shrugged his shoulders. He was thinking.

Thought, however, could not long keep itself from the suitable furnishing of a bandit's lair in the attic. Peter was the bandit, of course. Bobbie was his lieutenant, his band of trusty robbers, and, in due course, the parent of Phyllis, who was the captured maiden for whom a magnificent ransom--in horse-beans--was unhesitatingly paid.

They all went down to tea flushed and joyous as any mountain brigands.

But when Phyllis was going to add jam to her bread and butter, Mother said:--

"Jam OR butter, dear--not jam AND butter. We can't afford that sort of reckless luxury nowadays."

Phyllis finished the slice of bread and butter in silence, and followed it up by bread and jam. Peter mingled thought and weak tea.

After tea they went back to the attic and he said to his sisters:--

"I have an idea."

"What's that?" they asked politely.

"I shan't tell you," was Peter's unexpected rejoinder.

"Oh, very well," said Bobbie; and Phil said, "Don't, then."

"Girls," said Peter, "are always so hasty tempered."

"I should like to know what boys are?" said Bobbie, with fine disdain.

"I don't want to know about your silly ideas."

"You'll know some day," said Peter, keeping his own temper by what looked exactly like a miracle; "if you hadn't been so keen on a row, I might have told you about it being only noble-heartedness that made me not tell you my idea. But now I shan't tell you anything at all about it--so there!"

And it was, indeed, some time before he could be induced to say anything, and when he did it wasn't much. He said:--

"The only reason why I won't tell you my idea that I'm going to do is because it MAY be wrong, and I don't want to drag you into it."

"Don't you do it if it's wrong, Peter," said Bobbie; "let me do it." But Phyllis said:--

"_I_ should like to do wrong if YOU'RE going to!"

"No," said Peter, rather touched by this devotion; "it's a forlorn hope, and I'm going to lead it. All I ask is that if Mother asks where I am, you won't blab."

"We haven't got anything TO blab," said Bobbie, indignantly.

"Oh, yes, you have!" said Peter, dropping horse-beans through his fingers. "I've trusted you to the death. You know I'm going to do a lone adventure--and some people might think it wrong--I don't. And if Mother asks where I am, say I'm playing at mines."

"What sort of mines?"

"You just say mines."

"You might tell US, Pete."

"Well, then, COAL-mines. But don't you let the word pass your lips on pain of torture."

"You needn't threaten," said Bobbie, "and I do think you might let us help."

"If I find a coal-mine, you shall help cart the coal," Peter condescended to promise.

"Keep your secret if you like," said Phyllis.

"Keep it if you CAN," said Bobbie.

"I'll keep it, right enough," said Peter.

Between tea and supper there is an interval even in the most greedily regulated families. At this time Mother was usually writing, and Mrs. Viney had gone home.

Two nights after the dawning of Peter's idea he beckoned the girls mysteriously at the twilight hour.

"Come hither with me," he said, "and bring the Roman Chariot."

The Roman Chariot was a very old perambulator that had spent years of retirement in the loft over the coach-house. The children had oiled its works till it glided noiseless as a pneumatic bicycle, and answered to the helm as it had probably done in its best days.

"Follow your dauntless leader," said Peter, and led the way down the hill towards the station.

Just above the station many rocks have pushed their heads out through the turf as though they, like the children, were interested in the railway.

In a little hollow between three rocks lay a heap of dried brambles and heather.

Peter halted, turned over the brushwood with a well-scarred boot, and said:--

"Here's the first coal from the St. Peter's Mine. We'll take it home in the chariot. Punctuality and despatch. All orders carefully attended to. Any shaped lump cut to suit regular customers."

The chariot was packed full of coal. And when it was packed it had to be unpacked again because it was so heavy that it couldn't be got up the hill by the three children, not even when Peter harnessed himself to the handle with his braces, and firmly grasping his waistband in one hand pulled while the girls pushed behind.

Three journeys had to be made before the coal from Peter's mine was added to the heap of Mother's coal in the cellar.

Afterwards Peter went out alone, and came back very black and mysterious.

"I've been to my coal-mine," he said; "to-morrow evening we'll bring home the black diamonds in the chariot."

It was a week later that Mrs. Viney remarked to Mother how well this last lot of coal was holding out.

The children hugged themselves and each other in complicated wriggles of silent laughter as they listened on the stairs. They had all forgotten by now that there had ever been any doubt in Peter's mind as to whether coal-mining was wrong.

But there came a dreadful night when the Station Master put on a pair of old sand shoes that he had worn at the seaside in his summer holiday, and crept out very quietly to the yard where the Sodom and Gomorrah heap of coal was, with the whitewashed line round it. He crept out there, and he waited like a cat by a mousehole. On the top of the heap something small and dark was scrabbling and rattling furtively among the coal.

The Station Master concealed himself in the shadow of a brake-van that had a little tin chimney and was labelled:--

G. N. and S. R.

34576

Return at once to

White Heather Sidings

and in this concealment he lurked till the small thing on the top of the heap ceased to scrabble and rattle, came to the edge of the heap, cautiously let itself down, and lifted something after it. Then the arm of the Station Master was raised, the hand of the Station Master fell on a collar, and there was Peter firmly held by the jacket, with an old carpenter's bag full of coal in his trembling clutch.

"So I've caught you at last, have I, you young thief?" said the Station Master.

"I'm not a thief," said Peter, as firmly as he could. "I'm a coal-miner."

"Tell that to the Marines," said the Station Master.

"It would be just as true whoever I told it to," said Peter.

"You're right there," said the man, who held him. "Stow your jaw, you young rip, and come along to the station."

"Oh, no," cried in the darkness an agonised voice that was not Peter's.

"Not the POLICE station!" said another voice from the darkness.

"Not yet," said the Station Master. "The Railway Station first. Why, it's a regular gang. Any more of you?"

"Only us," said Bobbie and Phyllis, coming out of the shadow of another truck labelled Staveley Colliery, and bearing on it the legend in white chalk: 'Wanted in No. 1 Road.'

"What do you mean by spying on a fellow like this?" said Peter, angrily.

"Time someone did spy on you, _I_ think," said the Station Master. "Come along to the station."

"Oh, DON'T!" said Bobbie. "Can't you decide NOW what you'll do to us? It's our fault just as much as Peter's. We helped to carry the coal away--and we knew where he got it."

"No, you didn't," said Peter.

"Yes, we did," said Bobbie. "We knew all the time. We only pretended we didn't just to humour you."

Peter's cup was full. He had mined for coal, he had struck coal, he had been caught, and now he learned that his sisters had 'humoured' him.

"Don't hold me!" he said. "I won't run away."

The Station Master loosed Peter's collar, struck a match and looked at them by its flickering light.

"Why," said he, "you're the children from the Three Chimneys up yonder. So nicely dressed, too. Tell me now, what made you do such a thing? Haven't you ever been to church or learned your catechism or anything, not to know it's wicked to steal?" He spoke much more gently now, and Peter said:--

"I didn't think it was stealing. I was almost sure it wasn't. I thought if I took it from the outside part of the heap, perhaps it would be. But in the middle I thought I could fairly count it only mining. It'll take thousands of years for you to burn up all that coal and get to the middle parts."

"Not quite. But did you do it for a lark or what?"

"Not much lark carting that beastly heavy stuff up the hill," said Peter, indignantly.

"Then why did you?" The Station Master's voice was so much kinder now that Peter replied:--

"You know that wet day? Well, Mother said we were too poor to have a fire. We always had fires when it was cold at our other house, and--"

"DON'T!" interrupted Bobbie, in a whisper.

"Well," said the Station Master, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll look over it this once. But you remember, young gentleman, stealing is stealing, and what's mine isn't yours, whether you call it mining or whether you don't. Run along home."

"Do you mean you aren't going to do anything to us? Well, you are a brick," said Peter, with enthusiasm.

"You're a dear," said Bobbie.

"You're a darling," said Phyllis.

"That's all right," said the Station Master.

And on this they parted.

"Don't speak to me," said Peter, as the three went up the hill. "You're spies and traitors--that's what you are."

But the girls were too glad to have Peter between them, safe and free, and on the way to Three Chimneys and not to the Police Station, to mind much what he said.

"We DID say it was us as much as you," said Bobbie, gently.

"Well--and it wasn't."

"It would have come to the same thing in Courts with judges," said Phyllis. "Don't be snarky, Peter. It isn't our fault your secrets are so jolly easy to find out." She took his arm, and he let her.

"There's an awful lot of coal in the cellar, anyhow," he went on.

"Oh, don't!" said Bobbie. "I don't think we ought to be glad about THAT."

"I don't know," said Peter, plucking up a spirit. "I'm not at all sure, even now, that mining is a crime."

But the girls were quite sure. And they were also quite sure that he was quite sure, however little he cared to own it.

Chapter III. The old gentleman.

After the adventure of Peter's Coal-mine, it seemed well to the children to keep away from the station--but they did not, they could not, keep away from the railway. They had lived all their lives in a street where cabs and omnibuses rumbled by at all hours, and the carts of butchers and bakers and candlestick makers (I never saw a candlestick-maker's cart; did you?) might occur at any moment. Here in the deep silence of the sleeping country the only things that went by were the trains. They seemed to be all that was left to link the children to the old life that had once been theirs. Straight down the hill in front of Three Chimneys the daily passage of their six feet began to mark a path across the crisp, short turf. They began to know the hours when certain trains passed, and they gave names to them. The 9.15 up was called the Green Dragon. The 10.7 down was the Worm of Wantley. The midnight town express, whose shrieking rush they sometimes woke from their dreams to hear, was the Fearsome Fly-by-night. Peter got up once, in chill starshine, and, peeping at it through his curtains, named it on the spot.

It was by the Green Dragon that the old gentleman travelled. He was a very nice-looking old gentleman, and he looked as if he were nice, too, which is not at all the same thing. He had a fresh-coloured, clean-shaven face and white hair, and he wore rather odd-shaped collars and a top-hat that wasn't exactly the same kind as other people's. Of

course the children didn't see all this at first. In fact the first thing they noticed about the old gentleman was his hand.

It was one morning as they sat on the fence waiting for the Green Dragon, which was three and a quarter minutes late by Peter's Waterbury watch that he had had given him on his last birthday.

"The Green Dragon's going where Father is," said Phyllis; "if it were a really real dragon, we could stop it and ask it to take our love to Father."

"Dragons don't carry people's love," said Peter; "they'd be above it."

"Yes, they do, if you tame them thoroughly first. They fetch and carry like pet spaniels," said Phyllis, "and feed out of your hand. I wonder why Father never writes to us."

"Mother says he's been too busy," said Bobbie; "but he'll write soon, she says."

"I say," Phyllis suggested, "let's all wave to the Green Dragon as it goes by. If it's a magic dragon, it'll understand and take our loves to Father. And if it isn't, three waves aren't much. We shall never miss them."

So when the Green Dragon tore shrieking out of the mouth of its dark lair, which was the tunnel, all three children stood on the railing and waved their pocket-handkerchiefs without stopping to think whether they were clean handkerchiefs or the reverse. They were, as a matter of fact, very much the reverse.

And out of a first-class carriage a hand waved back. A quite clean hand. It held a newspaper. It was the old gentleman's hand.

After this it became the custom for waves to be exchanged between the children and the 9.15.

And the children, especially the girls, liked to think that perhaps the old gentleman knew Father, and would meet him 'in business,' wherever that shady retreat might be, and tell him how his three children stood on a rail far away in the green country and waved their love to him every morning, wet or fine.

For they were now able to go out in all sorts of weather such as they would never have been allowed to go out in when they lived in their villa house. This was Aunt Emma's doing, and the children felt more and more that they had not been quite fair to this unattractive aunt, when they found how useful were the long gaiters and waterproof coats that they had laughed at her for buying for them.

Mother, all this time, was very busy with her writing. She used to send off a good many long blue envelopes with stories in them--and large envelopes of different sizes and colours used to come to her. Sometimes

she would sigh when she opened them and say:--

"Another story come home to roost. Oh, dear, Oh, dear!" and then the children would be very sorry.

But sometimes she would wave the envelope in the air and say:--"Hooray, hooray. Here's a sensible Editor. He's taken my story and this is the proof of it."

At first the children thought 'the Proof' meant the letter the sensible Editor had written, but they presently got to know that the proof was long slips of paper with the story printed on them.

Whenever an Editor was sensible there were buns for tea.

One day Peter was going down to the village to get buns to celebrate the sensibleness of the Editor of the Children's Globe, when he met the Station Master.

Peter felt very uncomfortable, for he had now had time to think over the affair of the coal-mine. He did not like to say "Good morning" to the Station Master, as you usually do to anyone you meet on a lonely road, because he had a hot feeling, which spread even to his ears, that the Station Master might not care to speak to a person who had stolen coals. 'Stolen' is a nasty word, but Peter felt it was the right one. So he looked down, and said Nothing.

It was the Station Master who said "Good morning" as he passed by. And Peter answered, "Good morning." Then he thought:--

"Perhaps he doesn't know who I am by daylight, or he wouldn't be so polite."

And he did not like the feeling which thinking this gave him. And then before he knew what he was going to do he ran after the Station Master, who stopped when he heard Peter's hasty boots crunching the road, and coming up with him very breathless and with his ears now quite magenta-coloured, he said:--

"I don't want you to be polite to me if you don't know me when you see me."

"Eh?" said the Station Master.

"I thought perhaps you didn't know it was me that took the coals," Peter went on, "when you said 'Good morning.' But it was, and I'm sorry. There."

"Why," said the Station Master, "I wasn't thinking anything at all about the precious coals. Let bygones be bygones. And where were you off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm going to buy buns for tea," said Peter.

"I thought you were all so poor," said the Station Master.

"So we are," said Peter, confidentially, "but we always have three pennyworth of halfpennies for tea whenever Mother sells a story or a poem or anything."

"Oh," said the Station Master, "so your Mother writes stories, does she?"

"The beautifulest you ever read," said Peter.

"You ought to be very proud to have such a clever Mother."

"Yes," said Peter, "but she used to play with us more before she had to be so clever."

"Well," said the Station Master, "I must be getting along. You give us a look in at the Station whenever you feel so inclined. And as to coals, it's a word that--well--oh, no, we never mention it, eh?"

"Thank you," said Peter. "I'm very glad it's all straightened out between us." And he went on across the canal bridge to the village to get the buns, feeling more comfortable in his mind than he had felt since the hand of the Station Master had fastened on his collar that night among the coals.

Next day when they had sent the threefold wave of greeting to Father by the Green Dragon, and the old gentleman had waved back as usual, Peter proudly led the way to the station.

"But ought we?" said Bobbie.

"After the coals, she means," Phyllis explained.

"I met the Station Master yesterday," said Peter, in an offhand way, and he pretended not to hear what Phyllis had said; "he expresspecially invited us to go down any time we liked."

"After the coals?" repeated Phyllis. "Stop a minute--my bootlace is undone again."

"It always IS undone again," said Peter, "and the Station Master was more of a gentleman than you'll ever be, Phil--throwing coal at a chap's head like that."

Phyllis did up her bootlace and went on in silence, but her shoulders shook, and presently a fat tear fell off her nose and splashed on the metal of the railway line. Bobbie saw it.

"Why, what's the matter, darling?" she said, stopping short and putting her arm round the heaving shoulders.

"He called me un-un-ungentlemanly," sobbed Phyllis. "I didn't never call him unladylike, not even when he tied my Clorinda to the firewood bundle and burned her at the stake for a martyr."

Peter had indeed perpetrated this outrage a year or two before.

"Well, you began, you know," said Bobbie, honestly, "about coals and all

that. Don't you think you'd better both unsay everything since the wave, and let honour be satisfied?"

"I will if Peter will," said Phyllis, sniffing.

"All right," said Peter; "honour is satisfied. Here, use my hankie, Phil, for goodness' sake, if you've lost yours as usual. I wonder what you do with them."

"You had my last one," said Phyllis, indignantly, "to tie up the rabbit-hutch door with. But you're very ungrateful. It's quite right what it says in the poetry book about sharper than a serpent it is to have a toothless child--but it means ungrateful when it says toothless. Miss Lowe told me so."

"All right," said Peter, impatiently, "I'm sorry. THERE! Now will you come on?"

They reached the station and spent a joyous two hours with the Porter. He was a worthy man and seemed never tired of answering the questions that begin with "Why--" which many people in higher ranks of life often seem weary of.

He told them many things that they had not known before--as, for instance, that the things that hook carriages together are called couplings, and that the pipes like great serpents that hang over the couplings are meant to stop the train with.

"If you could get a holt of one o' them when the train is going and pull 'em apart," said he, "she'd stop dead off with a jerk."

"Who's she?" said Phyllis.

"The train, of course," said the Porter. After that the train was never again 'It' to the children.

"And you know the thing in the carriages where it says on it, 'Five pounds' fine for improper use.' If you was to improperly use that, the train 'ud stop."

"And if you used it properly?" said Roberta.

"It 'ud stop just the same, I suppose," said he, "but it isn't proper use unless you're being murdered. There was an old lady once--someone kidded her on it was a refreshment-room bell, and she used it improper, not being in danger of her life, though hungry, and when the train stopped and the guard came along expecting to find someone weltering in their last moments, she says, 'Oh, please, Mister, I'll take a glass of stout and a bath bun,' she says. And the train was seven minutes behind her time as it was."

"What did the guard say to the old lady?"

"_I_ dunno," replied the Porter, "but I lay she didn't forget it in a hurry, whatever it was."

In such delightful conversation the time went by all too quickly.

The Station Master came out once or twice from that sacred inner temple behind the place where the hole is that they sell you tickets through, and was most jolly with them all.

"Just as if coal had never been discovered," Phyllis whispered to her sister.

He gave them each an orange, and promised to take them up into the signal-box one of these days, when he wasn't so busy.

Several trains went through the station, and Peter noticed for the first time that engines have numbers on them, like cabs.

"Yes," said the Porter, "I knowed a young gent as used to take down the numbers of every single one he seed; in a green note-book with silver corners it was, owing to his father being very well-to-do in the wholesale stationery."

Peter felt that he could take down numbers, too, even if he was not the son of a wholesale stationer. As he did not happen to have a green leather note-book with silver corners, the Porter gave him a yellow envelope and on it he noted:--

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and felt that this was the beginning of what would be a most interesting collection.

That night at tea he asked Mother if she had a green leather note-book with silver corners. She had not; but when she heard what he wanted it for she gave him a little black one.

"It has a few pages torn out," said she; "but it will hold quite a lot of numbers, and when it's full I'll give you another. I'm so glad you like the railway. Only, please, you mustn't walk on the line."

"Not if we face the way the train's coming?" asked Peter, after a gloomy pause, in which glances of despair were exchanged.

"No--really not," said Mother.

Then Phyllis said, "Mother, didn't YOU ever walk on the railway lines when you were little?"

Mother was an honest and honourable Mother, so she had to say, "Yes."

"Well, then," said Phyllis.

"But, darlings, you don't know how fond I am of you. What should I do if you got hurt?"

"Are you fonder of us than Granny was of you when you were little?" Phyllis asked. Bobbie made signs to her to stop, but Phyllis never did see signs, no matter how plain they might be.

Mother did not answer for a minute. She got up to put more water in the teapot.

"No one," she said at last, "ever loved anyone more than my mother loved me."

Then she was quiet again, and Bobbie kicked Phyllis hard under the table, because Bobbie understood a little bit the thoughts that were making Mother so quiet--the thoughts of the time when Mother was a little girl and was all the world to HER mother. It seems so easy and natural to run to Mother when one is in trouble. Bobbie understood a little how people do not leave off running to their mothers when they are in trouble even when they are grown up, and she thought she knew a little what it must be to be sad, and have no mother to run to any more.

So she kicked Phyllis, who said:--

"What are you kicking me like that for, Bob?"

And then Mother laughed a little and sighed and said:--

"Very well, then. Only let me be sure you do know which way the trains come--and don't walk on the line near the tunnel or near corners."

"Trains keep to the left like carriages," said Peter, "so if we keep to the right, we're bound to see them coming."

"Very well," said Mother, and I dare say you think that she ought not to have said it. But she remembered about when she was a little girl herself, and she did say it--and neither her own children nor you nor any other children in the world could ever understand exactly what it cost her to do it. Only some few of you, like Bobbie, may understand a very little bit.

It was the very next day that Mother had to stay in bed because her head ached so. Her hands were burning hot, and she would not eat anything, and her throat was very sore.

"If I was you, Mum," said Mrs. Viney, "I should take and send for the doctor. There's a lot of catchy complaints a-going about just now. My sister's eldest--she took a chill and it went to her inside, two years ago come Christmas, and she's never been the same gell since."

Mother wouldn't at first, but in the evening she felt so much worse that Peter was sent to the house in the village that had three laburnum trees by the gate, and on the gate a brass plate with W. W. Forrest, M.D., on it.

W. W. Forrest, M.D., came at once. He talked to Peter on the way back. He seemed a most charming and sensible man, interested in railways, and rabbits, and really important things.

When he had seen Mother, he said it was influenza.

"Now, Lady Grave-airs," he said in the hall to Bobbie, "I suppose you'll

want to be head-nurse."

"Of course," said she.

"Well, then, I'll send down some medicine. Keep up a good fire. Have some strong beef tea made ready to give her as soon as the fever goes down. She can have grapes now, and beef essence--and soda-water and milk, and you'd better get in a bottle of brandy. The best brandy. Cheap brandy is worse than poison."

She asked him to write it all down, and he did.

When Bobbie showed Mother the list he had written, Mother laughed. It WAS a laugh, Bobbie decided, though it was rather odd and feeble.

"Nonsense," said Mother, laying in bed with eyes as bright as beads.

"I can't afford all that rubbish. Tell Mrs. Viney to boil two pounds of scrag-end of the neck for your dinners to-morrow, and I can have some of the broth. Yes, I should like some more water now, love. And will you get a basin and sponge my hands?"

Roberta obeyed. When she had done everything she could to make Mother less uncomfortable, she went down to the others. Her cheeks were very red, her lips set tight, and her eyes almost as bright as Mother's.

She told them what the Doctor had said, and what Mother had said.

"And now," said she, when she had told all, "there's no one but us to do anything, and we've got to do it. I've got the shilling for the mutton."

"We can do without the beastly mutton," said Peter; "bread and butter will support life. People have lived on less on desert islands many a time."

"Of course," said his sister. And Mrs. Viney was sent to the village to get as much brandy and soda-water and beef tea as she could buy for a shilling.

"But even if we never have anything to eat at all," said Phyllis, "you can't get all those other things with our dinner money."

"No," said Bobbie, frowning, "we must find out some other way. Now THINK, everybody, just as hard as ever you can."

They did think. And presently they talked. And later, when Bobbie had gone up to sit with Mother in case she wanted anything, the other two were very busy with scissors and a white sheet, and a paint brush, and the pot of Brunswick black that Mrs. Viney used for grates and fenders. They did not manage to do what they wished, exactly, with the first sheet, so they took another out of the linen cupboard. It did not occur to them that they were spoiling good sheets which cost good money. They only knew that they were making a good--but what they were making comes later.

Bobbie's bed had been moved into Mother's room, and several times in

the night she got up to mend the fire, and to give her mother milk and soda-water. Mother talked to herself a good deal, but it did not seem to mean anything. And once she woke up suddenly and called out: "Mamma, mamma!" and Bobbie knew she was calling for Granny, and that she had forgotten that it was no use calling, because Granny was dead.

In the early morning Bobbie heard her name and jumped out of bed and ran to Mother's bedside.

"Oh--ah, yes--I think I was asleep," said Mother. "My poor little duck, how tired you'll be--I do hate to give you all this trouble."

"Trouble!" said Bobbie.

"Ah, don't cry, sweet," Mother said; "I shall be all right in a day or two."

And Bobbie said, "Yes," and tried to smile.

When you are used to ten hours of solid sleep, to get up three or four times in your sleep-time makes you feel as though you had been up all night. Bobbie felt quite stupid and her eyes were sore and stiff, but she tidied the room, and arranged everything neatly before the Doctor came.

This was at half-past eight.

"Everything going on all right, little Nurse?" he said at the front door. "Did you get the brandy?"

"I've got the brandy," said Bobbie, "in a little flat bottle."

"I didn't see the grapes or the beef tea, though," said he.

"No," said Bobbie, firmly, "but you will to-morrow. And there's some beef stewing in the oven for beef tea."

"Who told you to do that?" he asked.

"I noticed what Mother did when Phil had mumps."

"Right," said the Doctor. "Now you get your old woman to sit with your mother, and then you eat a good breakfast, and go straight to bed and sleep till dinner-time. We can't afford to have the head-nurse ill."

He was really quite a nice doctor.

When the 9.15 came out of the tunnel that morning the old gentleman in the first-class carriage put down his newspaper, and got ready to wave his hand to the three children on the fence. But this morning there were not three. There was only one. And that was Peter.

Peter was not on the railings either, as usual. He was standing in front of them in an attitude like that of a show-man showing off the animals in a menagerie, or of the kind clergyman when he points with a wand at the 'Scenes from Palestine,' when there is a magic-lantern and he is explaining it.

Peter was pointing, too. And what he was pointing at was a large white sheet nailed against the fence. On the sheet there were thick black letters more than a foot long.

Some of them had run a little, because of Phyllis having put the Brunswick black on too eagerly, but the words were quite easy to read.

And this what the old gentleman and several other people in the train read in the large black letters on the white sheet:--

LOOK OUT AT THE STATION.

A good many people did look out at the station and were disappointed, for they saw nothing unusual. The old gentleman looked out, too, and at first he too saw nothing more unusual than the gravelled platform and the sunshine and the wallflowers and forget-me-nots in the station borders. It was only just as the train was beginning to puff and pull itself together to start again that he saw Phyllis. She was quite out of breath with running.

"Oh," she said, "I thought I'd missed you. My bootlaces would keep coming down and I fell over them twice. Here, take it."

She thrust a warm, dampish letter into his hand as the train moved.

He leaned back in his corner and opened the letter. This is what he read:--

"Dear Mr. We do not know your name.

Mother is ill and the doctor says to give her the things at the end of the letter, but she says she can't afford it, and to get mutton for us and she will have the broth. We do not know anybody here but you, because Father is away and we do not know the address. Father will pay you, or if he has lost all his money, or anything, Peter will pay you when he is a man. We promise it on our honor. I.O.U. for all the things Mother wants.

"signed Peter.

"Will you give the parcel to the Station Master, because of us not knowing what train you come down by? Say it is for Peter that was sorry about the coals and he will know all right.

"Roberta.

"Phyllis.

"Peter."

Then came the list of things the Doctor had ordered.

The old gentleman read it through once, and his eyebrows went up. He read it twice and smiled a little. When he had read it thrice, he put it in his pocket and went on reading The Times.

At about six that evening there was a knock at the back door. The three

children rushed to open it, and there stood the friendly Porter, who had told them so many interesting things about railways. He dumped down a big hamper on the kitchen flags.

"Old gent," he said; "he asked me to fetch it up straight away."

"Thank you very much," said Peter, and then, as the Porter lingered, he added:--

"I'm most awfully sorry I haven't got twopence to give you like Father does, but--"

"You drop it if you please," said the Porter, indignantly. "I wasn't thinking about no tuppences. I only wanted to say I was sorry your Mamma wasn't so well, and to ask how she finds herself this evening--and I've fetched her along a bit of sweetbrier, very sweet to smell it is. Twopence indeed," said he, and produced a bunch of sweetbrier from his hat, "just like a conjurer," as Phyllis remarked afterwards.

"Thank you very much," said Peter, "and I beg your pardon about the twopence."

"No offence," said the Porter, untruly but politely, and went.

Then the children undid the hamper. First there was straw, and then there were fine shavings, and then came all the things they had asked for, and plenty of them, and then a good many things they had not asked for; among others peaches and port wine and two chickens, a cardboard box of big red roses with long stalks, and a tall thin green bottle of lavender water, and three smaller fatter bottles of eau-de-Cologne. There was a letter, too.

"Dear Roberta and Phyllis and Peter," it said; "here are the things you want. Your mother will want to know where they came from. Tell her they were sent by a friend who heard she was ill. When she is well again you must tell her all about it, of course. And if she says you ought not to have asked for the things, tell her that I say you were quite right, and that I hope she will forgive me for taking the liberty of allowing myself a very great pleasure."

The letter was signed G. P. something that the children couldn't read.

"I think we WERE right," said Phyllis.

"Right? Of course we were right," said Bobbie.

"All the same," said Peter, with his hands in his pockets, "I don't exactly look forward to telling Mother the whole truth about it."

"We're not to do it till she's well," said Bobbie, "and when she's well we shall be so happy we shan't mind a little fuss like that. Oh, just look at the roses! I must take them up to her."

"And the sweetbrier," said Phyllis, sniffing it loudly; "don't forget the sweetbrier."

"As if I should!" said Roberta. "Mother told me the other day there was a thick hedge of it at her mother's house when she was a little girl."

Chapter IV. The engine-burglar.

What was left of the second sheet and the Brunswick black came in very nicely to make a banner bearing the legend

SHE IS NEARLY WELL THANK YOU

and this was displayed to the Green Dragon about a fortnight after the arrival of the wonderful hamper. The old gentleman saw it, and waved a cheerful response from the train. And when this had been done the children saw that now was the time when they must tell Mother what they had done when she was ill. And it did not seem nearly so easy as they had thought it would be. But it had to be done. And it was done. Mother was extremely angry. She was seldom angry, and now she was angrier than they had ever known her. This was horrible. But it was much worse when she suddenly began to cry. Crying is catching, I believe, like measles and whooping-cough. At any rate, everyone at once found itself taking part in a crying-party.

Mother stopped first. She dried her eyes and then she said:--

"I'm sorry I was so angry, darlings, because I know you didn't understand."

"We didn't mean to be naughty, Mammy," sobbed Bobbie, and Peter and Phyllis sniffed.

"Now, listen," said Mother; "it's quite true that we're poor, but we have enough to live on. You mustn't go telling everyone about our affairs--it's not right. And you must never, never, never ask strangers to give you things. Now always remember that--won't you?"

They all hugged her and rubbed their damp cheeks against hers and promised that they would.

"And I'll write a letter to your old gentleman, and I shall tell him that I didn't approve--oh, of course I shall thank him, too, for his kindness. It's YOU I don't approve of, my darlings, not the old gentleman. He was as kind as ever he could be. And you can give the letter to the Station Master to give him--and we won't say any more about it."

Afterwards, when the children were alone, Bobbie said:--

"Isn't Mother splendid? You catch any other grown-up saying they were sorry they had been angry."

"Yes," said Peter, "she IS splendid; but it's rather awful when she's angry."

"She's like Avenging and Bright in the song," said Phyllis. "I should like to look at her if it wasn't so awful. She looks so beautiful when

she's really downright furious."

They took the letter down to the Station Master.

"I thought you said you hadn't got any friends except in London," said he.

"We've made him since," said Peter.

"But he doesn't live hereabouts?"

"No--we just know him on the railway."

Then the Station Master retired to that sacred inner temple behind the little window where the tickets are sold, and the children went down to the Porters' room and talked to the Porter. They learned several interesting things from him--among others that his name was Perks, that he was married and had three children, that the lamps in front of engines are called head-lights and the ones at the back tail-lights.

"And that just shows," whispered Phyllis, "that trains really ARE dragons in disguise, with proper heads and tails."

It was on this day that the children first noticed that all engines are not alike.

"Alike?" said the Porter, whose name was Perks, "lor, love you, no, Miss. No more alike nor what you an' me are. That little 'un without a tender as went by just now all on her own, that was a tank, that was--she's off to do some shunting t'other side o' Maidbridge. That's as it might be you, Miss. Then there's goods engines, great, strong things with three wheels each side--joined with rods to strengthen 'em--as it might be me. Then there's main-line engines as it might be this 'ere young gentleman when he grows up and wins all the races at 'is school--so he will. The main-line engine she's built for speed as well as power. That's one to the 9.15 up."

"The Green Dragon," said Phyllis.

"We calls her the Snail, Miss, among ourselves," said the Porter. "She's oftener be'ind'and nor any train on the line."

"But the engine's green," said Phyllis.

"Yes, Miss," said Perks, "so's a snail some seasons o' the year."

The children agreed as they went home to dinner that the Porter was most delightful company.

Next day was Roberta's birthday. In the afternoon she was politely but firmly requested to get out of the way and keep there till tea-time.

"You aren't to see what we're going to do till it's done; it's a glorious surprise," said Phyllis.

And Roberta went out into the garden all alone. She tried to be grateful, but she felt she would much rather have helped in whatever it

was than have to spend her birthday afternoon by herself, no matter how glorious the surprise might be.

Now that she was alone, she had time to think, and one of the things she thought of most was what mother had said in one of those feverish nights when her hands were so hot and her eyes so bright.

The words were: "Oh, what a doctor's bill there'll be for this!"

She walked round and round the garden among the rose-bushes that hadn't any roses yet, only buds, and the lilac bushes and syringas and American currants, and the more she thought of the doctor's bill, the less she liked the thought of it.

And presently she made up her mind. She went out through the side door of the garden and climbed up the steep field to where the road runs along by the canal. She walked along until she came to the bridge that crosses the canal and leads to the village, and here she waited. It was very pleasant in the sunshine to lean one's elbows on the warm stone of the bridge and look down at the blue water of the canal. Bobbie had never seen any other canal, except the Regent's Canal, and the water of that is not at all a pretty colour. And she had never seen any river at all except the Thames, which also would be all the better if its face was washed.

Perhaps the children would have loved the canal as much as the railway, but for two things. One was that they had found the railway FIRST--on that first, wonderful morning when the house and the country and the moors and rocks and great hills were all new to them. They had not found the canal till some days later. The other reason was that everyone on the railway had been kind to them--the Station Master, the Porter, and the old gentleman who waved. And the people on the canal were anything but kind.

The people on the canal were, of course, the bargees, who steered the slow barges up and down, or walked beside the old horses that trampled up the mud of the towing-path, and strained at the long tow-ropes.

Peter had once asked one of the bargees the time, and had been told to "get out of that," in a tone so fierce that he did not stop to say anything about his having just as much right on the towing-path as the man himself. Indeed, he did not even think of saying it till some time later.

Then another day when the children thought they would like to fish in the canal, a boy in a barge threw lumps of coal at them, and one of these hit Phyllis on the back of the neck. She was just stooping down to tie up her bootlace--and though the coal hardly hurt at all it made her not care very much about going on fishing.

On the bridge, however, Roberta felt quite safe, because she could look

down on the canal, and if any boy showed signs of meaning to throw coal, she could duck behind the parapet.

Presently there was a sound of wheels, which was just what she expected.

The wheels were the wheels of the Doctor's dogcart, and in the cart, of course, was the Doctor.

He pulled up, and called out:--

"Hullo, head nurse! Want a lift?"

"I wanted to see you," said Bobbie.

"Your mother's not worse, I hope?" said the Doctor.

"No--but--"

"Well, skip in, then, and we'll go for a drive."

Roberta climbed in and the brown horse was made to turn round--which it did not like at all, for it was looking forward to its tea--I mean its oats.

"This IS jolly," said Bobbie, as the dogcart flew along the road by the canal.

"We could throw a stone down any one of your three chimneys," said the Doctor, as they passed the house.

"Yes," said Bobbie, "but you'd have to be a jolly good shot."

"How do you know I'm not?" said the Doctor. "Now, then, what's the trouble?"

Bobbie fidgeted with the hook of the driving apron.

"Come, out with it," said the Doctor.

"It's rather hard, you see," said Bobbie, "to out with it; because of what Mother said."

"What DID Mother say?"

"She said I wasn't to go telling everyone that we're poor. But you aren't everyone, are you?"

"Not at all," said the Doctor, cheerfully. "Well?"

"Well, I know doctors are very extravagant--I mean expensive, and Mrs. Viney told me that her doctoring only cost her twopence a week because she belonged to a Club."

"Yes?"

"You see she told me what a good doctor you were, and I asked her how she could afford you, because she's much poorer than we are. I've been in her house and I know. And then she told me about the Club, and I thought I'd ask you--and--oh, I don't want Mother to be worried! Can't we be in the Club, too, the same as Mrs. Viney?"

The Doctor was silent. He was rather poor himself, and he had been pleased at getting a new family to attend. So I think his feelings at that minute were rather mixed.

"You aren't cross with me, are you?" said Bobbie, in a very small voice.

The Doctor roused himself.

"Cross? How could I be? You're a very sensible little woman. Now look here, don't you worry. I'll make it all right with your Mother, even if I have to make a special brand-new Club all for her. Look here, this is where the Aqueduct begins."

"What's an Aque--what's its name?" asked Bobbie.

"A water bridge," said the Doctor. "Look."

The road rose to a bridge over the canal. To the left was a steep rocky cliff with trees and shrubs growing in the cracks of the rock. And the canal here left off running along the top of the hill and started to run on a bridge of its own--a great bridge with tall arches that went right across the valley.

Bobbie drew a long breath.

"It IS grand, isn't it?" she said. "It's like pictures in the History of Rome."

"Right!" said the Doctor, "that's just exactly what it IS like.

The Romans were dead nuts on aqueducts. It's a splendid piece of engineering."

"I thought engineering was making engines."

"Ah, there are different sorts of engineering--making road and bridges and tunnels is one kind. And making fortifications is another. Well, we must be turning back. And, remember, you aren't to worry about doctor's bills or you'll be ill yourself, and then I'll send you in a bill as long as the aqueduct."

When Bobbie had parted from the Doctor at the top of the field that ran down from the road to Three Chimneys, she could not feel that she had done wrong. She knew that Mother would perhaps think differently. But Bobbie felt that for once she was the one who was right, and she scrambled down the rocky slope with a really happy feeling.

Phyllis and Peter met her at the back door. They were unnaturally clean and neat, and Phyllis had a red bow in her hair. There was only just time for Bobbie to make herself tidy and tie up her hair with a blue bow before a little bell rang.

"There!" said Phyllis, "that's to show the surprise is ready. Now you wait till the bell rings again and then you may come into the dining-room."

So Bobbie waited.

"Tinkle, tinkle," said the little bell, and Bobbie went into the dining-room, feeling rather shy. Directly she opened the door she found herself, as it seemed, in a new world of light and flowers and singing. Mother and Peter and Phyllis were standing in a row at the end of the table. The shutters were shut and there were twelve candles on the table, one for each of Roberta's years. The table was covered with a sort of pattern of flowers, and at Roberta's place was a thick wreath of forget-me-nots and several most interesting little packages. And Mother and Phyllis and Peter were singing--to the first part of the tune of St. Patrick's Day. Roberta knew that Mother had written the words on purpose for her birthday. It was a little way of Mother's on birthdays. It had begun on Bobbie's fourth birthday when Phyllis was a baby. Bobbie remembered learning the verses to say to Father 'for a surprise.' She wondered if Mother had remembered, too. The four-year-old verse had been:--

Daddy dear, I'm only four
And I'd rather not be more.
Four's the nicest age to be,
Two and two and one and three.
What I love is two and two,
Mother, Peter, Phil, and you.
What you love is one and three,
Mother, Peter, Phil, and me.
Give your little girl a kiss
Because she learned and told you this.

The song the others were singing now went like this:--

Our darling Roberta,
No sorrow shall hurt her
If we can prevent it
Her whole life long.
Her birthday's our fete day,
We'll make it our great day,
And give her our presents
And sing her our song.
May pleasures attend her
And may the Fates send her
The happiest journey
Along her life's way.
With skies bright above her
And dear ones to love her!
Dear Bob! Many happy
Returns of the day!

When they had finished singing they cried, "Three cheers for our Bobbie!" and gave them very loudly. Bobbie felt exactly as though she were going to cry--you know that odd feeling in the bridge of your nose and the pricking in your eyelids? But before she had time to begin they were all kissing and hugging her.

"Now," said Mother, "look at your presents."

They were very nice presents. There was a green and red needle-book that Phyllis had made herself in secret moments. There was a darling little silver brooch of Mother's shaped like a buttercup, which Bobbie had known and loved for years, but which she had never, never thought would come to be her very own. There was also a pair of blue glass vases from Mrs. Viney. Roberta had seen and admired them in the village shop. And there were three birthday cards with pretty pictures and wishes.

Mother fitted the forget-me-not crown on Bobbie's brown head.

"And now look at the table," she said.

There was a cake on the table covered with white sugar, with 'Dear Bobbie' on it in pink sweets, and there were buns and jam; but the nicest thing was that the big table was almost covered with flowers--wallflowers were laid all round the tea-tray--there was a ring of forget-me-nots round each plate. The cake had a wreath of white lilac round it, and in the middle was something that looked like a pattern all done with single blooms of lilac or wallflower or laburnum.

"It's a map--a map of the railway!" cried Peter. "Look--those lilac lines are the metals--and there's the station done in brown wallflowers. The laburnum is the train, and there are the signal-boxes, and the road up to here--and those fat red daisies are us three waving to the old gentleman--that's him, the pansy in the laburnum train."

"And there's 'Three Chimneys' done in the purple primroses," said Phyllis. "And that little tiny rose-bud is Mother looking out for us when we're late for tea. Peter invented it all, and we got all the flowers from the station. We thought you'd like it better."

"That's my present," said Peter, suddenly dumping down his adored steam-engine on the table in front of her. Its tender had been lined with fresh white paper, and was full of sweets.

"Oh, Peter!" cried Bobbie, quite overcome by this munificence, "not your own dear little engine that you're so fond of?"

"Oh, no," said Peter, very promptly, "not the engine. Only the sweets."

Bobbie couldn't help her face changing a little--not so much because she was disappointed at not getting the engine, as because she had thought it so very noble of Peter, and now she felt she had been silly to think it. Also she felt she must have seemed greedy to expect the engine as well as the sweets. So her face changed. Peter saw it. He hesitated a

minute; then his face changed, too, and he said: "I mean not ALL the engine. I'll let you go halves if you like."

"You're a brick," cried Bobbie; "it's a splendid present." She said no more aloud, but to herself she said:--

"That was awfully jolly decent of Peter because I know he didn't mean to. Well, the broken half shall be my half of the engine, and I'll get it mended and give it back to Peter for his birthday."--"Yes, Mother dear, I should like to cut the cake," she added, and tea began.

It was a delightful birthday. After tea Mother played games with them--any game they liked--and of course their first choice was blindman's-buff, in the course of which Bobbie's forget-me-not wreath twisted itself crookedly over one of her ears and stayed there. Then, when it was near bed-time and time to calm down, Mother had a lovely new story to read to them.

"You won't sit up late working, will you, Mother?" Bobbie asked as they said good night.

And Mother said no, she wouldn't--she would only just write to Father and then go to bed.

But when Bobbie crept down later to bring up her presents--for she felt she really could not be separated from them all night--Mother was not writing, but leaning her head on her arms and her arms on the table. I think it was rather good of Bobbie to slip quietly away, saying over and over, "She doesn't want me to know she's unhappy, and I won't know; I won't know." But it made a sad end to the birthday.

* * * * *

The very next morning Bobbie began to watch her opportunity to get Peter's engine mended secretly. And the opportunity came the very next afternoon.

Mother went by train to the nearest town to do shopping. When she went there, she always went to the Post-office. Perhaps to post her letters to Father, for she never gave them to the children or Mrs. Viney to post, and she never went to the village herself. Peter and Phyllis went with her. Bobbie wanted an excuse not to go, but try as she would she couldn't think of a good one. And just when she felt that all was lost, her frock caught on a big nail by the kitchen door and there was a great criss-cross tear all along the front of the skirt. I assure you this was really an accident. So the others pitied her and went without her, for there was no time for her to change, because they were rather late already and had to hurry to the station to catch the train.

When they had gone, Bobbie put on her everyday frock, and went down to the railway. She did not go into the station, but she went along the line to the end of the platform where the engine is when the down train

is alongside the platform--the place where there are a water tank and a long, limp, leather hose, like an elephant's trunk. She hid behind a bush on the other side of the railway. She had the toy engine done up in brown paper, and she waited patiently with it under her arm.

Then when the next train came in and stopped, Bobbie went across the metals of the up-line and stood beside the engine. She had never been so close to an engine before. It looked much larger and harder than she had expected, and it made her feel very small indeed, and, somehow, very soft--as if she could very, very easily be hurt rather badly.

"I know what silk-worms feel like now," said Bobbie to herself.

The engine-driver and fireman did not see her. They were leaning out on the other side, telling the Porter a tale about a dog and a leg of mutton.

"If you please," said Roberta--but the engine was blowing off steam and no one heard her.

"If you please, Mr. Engineer," she spoke a little louder, but the Engine happened to speak at the same moment, and of course Roberta's soft little voice hadn't a chance.

It seemed to her that the only way would be to climb on to the engine and pull at their coats. The step was high, but she got her knee on it, and clambered into the cab; she stumbled and fell on hands and knees on the base of the great heap of coals that led up to the square opening in the tender. The engine was not above the weaknesses of its fellows; it was making a great deal more noise than there was the slightest need for. And just as Roberta fell on the coals, the engine-driver, who had turned without seeing her, started the engine, and when Bobbie had picked herself up, the train was moving--not fast, but much too fast for her to get off.

All sorts of dreadful thoughts came to her all together in one horrible flash. There were such things as express trains that went on, she supposed, for hundreds of miles without stopping. Suppose this should be one of them? How would she get home again? She had no money to pay for the return journey.

"And I've no business here. I'm an engine-burglar--that's what I am," she thought. "I shouldn't wonder if they could lock me up for this." And the train was going faster and faster.

There was something in her throat that made it impossible for her to speak. She tried twice. The men had their backs to her. They were doing something to things that looked like taps.

Suddenly she put out her hand and caught hold of the nearest sleeve. The man turned with a start, and he and Roberta stood for a minute looking at each other in silence. Then the silence was broken by them both.

The man said, "Here's a bloomin' go!" and Roberta burst into tears.

The other man said he was blooming well blest--or something like it--but though naturally surprised they were not exactly unkind.

"You're a naughty little gell, that's what you are," said the fireman, and the engine-driver said:--

"Daring little piece, I call her," but they made her sit down on an iron seat in the cab and told her to stop crying and tell them what she meant by it.

She did stop, as soon as she could. One thing that helped her was the thought that Peter would give almost his ears to be in her place--on a real engine--really going. The children had often wondered whether any engine-driver could be found noble enough to take them for a ride on an engine--and now there she was. She dried her eyes and sniffed earnestly.

"Now, then," said the fireman, "out with it. What do you mean by it, eh?"

"Oh, please," sniffed Bobbie.

"Try again," said the engine-driver, encouragingly.

Bobbie tried again.

"Please, Mr. Engineer," she said, "I did call out to you from the line, but you didn't hear me--and I just climbed up to touch you on the arm--quite gently I meant to do it--and then I fell into the coals--and I am so sorry if I frightened you. Oh, don't be cross--oh, please don't!" She sniffed again.

"We ain't so much CROSS," said the fireman, "as interested like. It ain't every day a little gell tumbles into our coal bunker outer the sky, is it, Bill? What did you DO it for--eh?"

"That's the point," agreed the engine-driver; "what did you do it FOR?"

Bobbie found that she had not quite stopped crying. The engine-driver patted her on the back and said: "Here, cheer up, Mate. It ain't so bad as all that 'ere, I'll be bound."

"I wanted," said Bobbie, much cheered to find herself addressed as 'Mate'--"I only wanted to ask you if you'd be so kind as to mend this." She picked up the brown-paper parcel from among the coals and undid the string with hot, red fingers that trembled.

Her feet and legs felt the scorch of the engine fire, but her shoulders felt the wild chill rush of the air. The engine lurched and shook and rattled, and as they shot under a bridge the engine seemed to shout in her ears.

The fireman shovelled on coals.

Bobbie unrolled the brown paper and disclosed the toy engine.

"I thought," she said wistfully, "that perhaps you'd mend this for me--because you're an engineer, you know."

The engine-driver said he was blowed if he wasn't blest.

"I'm blest if I ain't blowed," remarked the fireman.

But the engine-driver took the little engine and looked at it--and the fireman ceased for an instant to shovel coal, and looked, too.

"It's like your precious cheek," said the engine-driver--"whatever made you think we'd be bothered tinkering penny toys?"

"I didn't mean it for precious cheek," said Bobbie; "only everybody that has anything to do with railways is so kind and good, I didn't think you'd mind. You don't really--do you?" she added, for she had seen a not unkindly wink pass between the two.

"My trade's driving of an engine, not mending her, especially such a hout-size in engines as this 'ere," said Bill. "An' 'ow are we a-goin' to get you back to your sorrowing friends and relations, and all be forgiven and forgotten?"

"If you'll put me down next time you stop," said Bobbie, firmly, though her heart beat fiercely against her arm as she clasped her hands, "and lend me the money for a third-class ticket, I'll pay you back--honour bright. I'm not a confidence trick like in the newspapers--really, I'm not."

"You're a little lady, every inch," said Bill, relenting suddenly and completely. "We'll see you gets home safe. An' about this engine--Jim--ain't you got ne'er a pal as can use a soldering iron? Seems to me that's about all the little bounder wants doing to it."

"That's what Father said," Bobbie explained eagerly. "What's that for?"

She pointed to a little brass wheel that he had turned as he spoke.

"That's the injector."

"In--what?"

"Injector to fill up the boiler."

"Oh," said Bobbie, mentally registering the fact to tell the others; "that IS interesting."

"This 'ere's the automatic brake," Bill went on, flattered by her enthusiasm. "You just move this 'ere little handle--do it with one finger, you can--and the train jolly soon stops. That's what they call the Power of Science in the newspapers."

He showed her two little dials, like clock faces, and told her how one showed how much steam was going, and the other showed if the brake was working properly.

By the time she had seen him shut off steam with a big shining steel

handle, Bobbie knew more about the inside working of an engine than she had ever thought there was to know, and Jim had promised that his second cousin's wife's brother should solder the toy engine, or Jim would know the reason why. Besides all the knowledge she had gained Bobbie felt that she and Bill and Jim were now friends for life, and that they had wholly and forever forgiven her for stumbling uninvited among the sacred coals of their tender.

At Stacklepoole Junction she parted from them with warm expressions of mutual regard. They handed her over to the guard of a returning train--a friend of theirs--and she had the joy of knowing what guards do in their secret fastnesses, and understood how, when you pull the communication cord in railway carriages, a wheel goes round under the guard's nose and a loud bell rings in his ears. She asked the guard why his van smelt so fishy, and learned that he had to carry a lot of fish every day, and that the wetness in the hollows of the corrugated floor had all drained out of boxes full of plaice and cod and mackerel and soles and smelts.

Bobbie got home in time for tea, and she felt as though her mind would burst with all that had been put into it since she parted from the others. How she blessed the nail that had torn her frock!

"Where have you been?" asked the others.

"To the station, of course," said Roberta. But she would not tell a word of her adventures till the day appointed, when she mysteriously led them to the station at the hour of the 3.19's transit, and proudly introduced them to her friends, Bill and Jim. Jim's second cousin's wife's brother had not been unworthy of the sacred trust reposed in him. The toy engine was, literally, as good as new.

"Good-bye--oh, good-bye," said Bobbie, just before the engine screamed ITS good-bye. "I shall always, always love you--and Jim's second cousin's wife's brother as well!"

And as the three children went home up the hill, Peter hugging the engine, now quite its own self again, Bobbie told, with joyous leaps of the heart, the story of how she had been an Engine-burglar.

Chapter V. Prisoners and captives.

It was one day when Mother had gone to Maidbridge. She had gone alone, but the children were to go to the station to meet her. And, loving the station as they did, it was only natural that they should be there a good hour before there was any chance of Mother's train arriving, even if the train were punctual, which was most unlikely. No doubt they would have been just as early, even if it had been a fine day, and all the delights of woods and fields and rocks and rivers had been open to them. But it happened to be a very wet day and, for July, very cold. There was a wild wind that drove flocks of dark purple clouds across the sky "like

herds of dream-elephants," as Phyllis said. And the rain stung sharply, so that the way to the station was finished at a run. Then the rain fell faster and harder, and beat slantwise against the windows of the booking office and of the chill place that had General Waiting Room on its door.

"It's like being in a besieged castle," Phyllis said; "look at the arrows of the foe striking against the battlements!"

"It's much more like a great garden-squirt," said Peter.

They decided to wait on the up side, for the down platform looked very wet indeed, and the rain was driving right into the little bleak shelter where down-passengers have to wait for their trains.

The hour would be full of incident and of interest, for there would be two up trains and one down to look at before the one that should bring Mother back.

"Perhaps it'll have stopped raining by then," said Bobbie; "anyhow, I'm glad I brought Mother's waterproof and umbrella."

They went into the desert spot labelled General Waiting Room, and the time passed pleasantly enough in a game of advertisements. You know the game, of course? It is something like dumb Crambo. The players take it in turns to go out, and then come back and look as like some advertisement as they can, and the others have to guess what advertisement it is meant to be. Bobbie came in and sat down under Mother's umbrella and made a sharp face, and everyone knew she was the fox who sits under the umbrella in the advertisement. Phyllis tried to make a Magic Carpet of Mother's waterproof, but it would not stand out stiff and raft-like as a Magic Carpet should, and nobody could guess it. Everyone thought Peter was carrying things a little too far when he blacked his face all over with coal-dust and struck a spidery attitude and said he was the blot that advertises somebody's Blue Black Writing Fluid.

It was Phyllis's turn again, and she was trying to look like the Sphinx that advertises What's-his-name's Personally Conducted Tours up the Nile when the sharp ting of the signal announced the up train. The children rushed out to see it pass. On its engine were the particular driver and fireman who were now numbered among the children's dearest friends. Courtesies passed between them. Jim asked after the toy engine, and Bobbie pressed on his acceptance a moist, greasy package of toffee that she had made herself.

Charmed by this attention, the engine-driver consented to consider her request that some day he would take Peter for a ride on the engine.

"Stand back, Mates," cried the engine-driver, suddenly, "and horf she goes."

And sure enough, off the train went. The children watched the

tail-lights of the train till it disappeared round the curve of the line, and then turned to go back to the dusty freedom of the General Waiting Room and the joys of the advertisement game.

They expected to see just one or two people, the end of the procession of passengers who had given up their tickets and gone away. Instead, the platform round the door of the station had a dark blot round it, and the dark blot was a crowd of people.

"Oh!" cried Peter, with a thrill of joyous excitement, "something's happened! Come on!"

They ran down the platform. When they got to the crowd, they could, of course, see nothing but the damp backs and elbows of the people on the crowd's outside. Everybody was talking at once. It was evident that something had happened.

"It's my belief he's nothing worse than a natural," said a farmerish-looking person. Peter saw his red, clean-shaven face as he spoke.

"If you ask me, I should say it was a Police Court case," said a young man with a black bag.

"Not it; the Infirmary more like--"

Then the voice of the Station Master was heard, firm and official:--

"Now, then--move along there. I'll attend to this, if YOU please."

But the crowd did not move. And then came a voice that thrilled the children through and through. For it spoke in a foreign language. And, what is more, it was a language that they had never heard. They had heard French spoken and German. Aunt Emma knew German, and used to sing a song about bedeuten and zeiten and bin and sin. Nor was it Latin. Peter had been in Latin for four terms.

It was some comfort, anyhow, to find that none of the crowd understood the foreign language any better than the children did.

"What's that he's saying?" asked the farmer, heavily.

"Sounds like French to me," said the Station Master, who had once been to Boulogne for the day.

"It isn't French!" cried Peter.

"What is it, then?" asked more than one voice. The crowd fell back a little to see who had spoken, and Peter pressed forward, so that when the crowd closed up again he was in the front rank.

"I don't know what it is," said Peter, "but it isn't French. I know that." Then he saw what it was that the crowd had for its centre. It was a man--the man, Peter did not doubt, who had spoken in that strange tongue. A man with long hair and wild eyes, with shabby clothes of a cut

Peter had not seen before--a man whose hands and lips trembled, and who spoke again as his eyes fell on Peter.

"No, it's not French," said Peter.

"Try him with French if you know so much about it," said the farmer-man.

"Parlay voo Frongsay?" began Peter, boldly, and the next moment the crowd recoiled again, for the man with the wild eyes had left leaning against the wall, and had sprung forward and caught Peter's hands, and begun to pour forth a flood of words which, though he could not understand a word of them, Peter knew the sound of.

"There!" said he, and turned, his hands still clasped in the hands of the strange shabby figure, to throw a glance of triumph at the crowd; "there; THAT'S French."

"What does he say?"

"I don't know." Peter was obliged to own it.

"Here," said the Station Master again; "you move on if you please. I'LL deal with this case."

A few of the more timid or less inquisitive travellers moved slowly and reluctantly away. And Phyllis and Bobbie got near to Peter. All three had been TAUGHT French at school. How deeply they now wished that they had LEARNED it! Peter shook his head at the stranger, but he also shook his hands as warmly and looked at him as kindly as he could. A person in the crowd, after some hesitation, said suddenly, "No comprenny!" and then, blushing deeply, backed out of the press and went away.

"Take him into your room," whispered Bobbie to the Station Master.

"Mother can talk French. She'll be here by the next train from Maidbridge."

The Station Master took the arm of the stranger, suddenly but not unkindly. But the man wrenched his arm away, and cowered back coughing and trembling and trying to push the Station Master away.

"Oh, don't!" said Bobbie; "don't you see how frightened he is? He thinks you're going to shut him up. I know he does--look at his eyes!"

"They're like a fox's eyes when the beast's in a trap," said the farmer.

"Oh, let me try!" Bobbie went on; "I do really know one or two French words if I could only think of them."

Sometimes, in moments of great need, we can do wonderful things--things that in ordinary life we could hardly even dream of doing. Bobbie had never been anywhere near the top of her French class, but she must have learned something without knowing it, for now, looking at those wild, hunted eyes, she actually remembered and, what is more, spoke, some French words. She said:--

"Vous attendre. Ma mere parlez Francais. Nous--what's the French for 'being kind'?"

Nobody knew.

"Bong is 'good,'" said Phyllis.

"Nous etre bong pour vous."

I do not know whether the man understood her words, but he understood the touch of the hand she thrust into his, and the kindness of the other hand that stroked his shabby sleeve.

She pulled him gently towards the inmost sanctuary of the Station Master. The other children followed, and the Station Master shut the door in the face of the crowd, which stood a little while in the booking office talking and looking at the fast closed yellow door, and then by ones and twos went its way, grumbling.

Inside the Station Master's room Bobbie still held the stranger's hand and stroked his sleeve.

"Here's a go," said the Station Master; "no ticket--doesn't even know where he wants to go. I'm not sure now but what I ought to send for the police."

"Oh, DON'T!" all the children pleaded at once. And suddenly Bobbie got between the others and the stranger, for she had seen that he was crying.

By a most unusual piece of good fortune she had a handkerchief in her pocket. By a still more uncommon accident the handkerchief was moderately clean. Standing in front of the stranger, she got out the handkerchief and passed it to him so that the others did not see.

"Wait till Mother comes," Phyllis was saying; "she does speak French beautifully. You'd just love to hear her."

"I'm sure he hasn't done anything like you're sent to prison for," said Peter.

"Looks like without visible means to me," said the Station Master.

"Well, I don't mind giving him the benefit of the doubt till your Mamma comes. I SHOULD like to know what nation's got the credit of HIM, that I should."

Then Peter had an idea. He pulled an envelope out of his pocket, and showed that it was half full of foreign stamps.

"Look here," he said, "let's show him these--"

Bobbie looked and saw that the stranger had dried his eyes with her handkerchief. So she said: "All right."

They showed him an Italian stamp, and pointed from him to it and back again, and made signs of question with their eyebrows. He shook his

head. Then they showed him a Norwegian stamp--the common blue kind it was--and again he signed No. Then they showed him a Spanish one, and at that he took the envelope from Peter's hand and searched among the stamps with a hand that trembled. The hand that he reached out at last, with a gesture as of one answering a question, contained a RUSSIAN stamp.

"He's Russian," cried Peter, "or else he's like 'the man who was'--in Kipling, you know."

The train from Maidbridge was signalled.

"I'll stay with him till you bring Mother in," said Bobbie.

"You're not afraid, Missie?"

"Oh, no," said Bobbie, looking at the stranger, as she might have looked at a strange dog of doubtful temper. "You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

She smiled at him, and he smiled back, a queer crooked smile. And then he coughed again. And the heavy rattling swish of the incoming train swept past, and the Station Master and Peter and Phyllis went out to meet it. Bobbie was still holding the stranger's hand when they came back with Mother.

The Russian rose and bowed very ceremoniously.

Then Mother spoke in French, and he replied, haltingly at first, but presently in longer and longer sentences.

The children, watching his face and Mother's, knew that he was telling her things that made her angry and pitying, and sorry and indignant all at once.

"Well, Mum, what's it all about?" The Station Master could not restrain his curiosity any longer.

"Oh," said Mother, "it's all right. He's a Russian, and he's lost his ticket. And I'm afraid he's very ill. If you don't mind, I'll take him home with me now. He's really quite worn out. I'll run down and tell you all about him to-morrow."

"I hope you won't find you're taking home a frozen viper," said the Station Master, doubtfully.

"Oh, no," Mother said brightly, and she smiled; "I'm quite sure I'm not. Why, he's a great man in his own country, writes books--beautiful books--I've read some of them; but I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

She spoke again in French to the Russian, and everyone could see the surprise and pleasure and gratitude in his eyes. He got up and politely bowed to the Station Master, and offered his arm most ceremoniously to Mother. She took it, but anybody could have seen that she was helping him along, and not he her.

"You girls run home and light a fire in the sitting-room," Mother said, "and Peter had better go for the Doctor."

But it was Bobbie who went for the Doctor.

"I hate to tell you," she said breathlessly when she came upon him in his shirt sleeves, weeding his pansy-bed, "but Mother's got a very shabby Russian, and I'm sure he'll have to belong to your Club. I'm certain he hasn't got any money. We found him at the station."

"Found him! Was he lost, then?" asked the Doctor, reaching for his coat.

"Yes," said Bobbie, unexpectedly, "that's just what he was. He's been telling Mother the sad, sweet story of his life in French; and she said would you be kind enough to come directly if you were at home. He has a dreadful cough, and he's been crying."

The Doctor smiled.

"Oh, don't," said Bobbie; "please don't. You wouldn't if you'd seen him. I never saw a man cry before. You don't know what it's like."

Dr. Forrest wished then that he hadn't smiled.

When Bobbie and the Doctor got to Three Chimneys, the Russian was sitting in the arm-chair that had been Father's, stretching his feet to the blaze of a bright wood fire, and sipping the tea Mother had made him.

"The man seems worn out, mind and body," was what the Doctor said; "the cough's bad, but there's nothing that can't be cured. He ought to go straight to bed, though--and let him have a fire at night."

"I'll make one in my room; it's the only one with a fireplace," said Mother. She did, and presently the Doctor helped the stranger to bed.

There was a big black trunk in Mother's room that none of the children had ever seen unlocked. Now, when she had lighted the fire, she unlocked it and took some clothes out--men's clothes--and set them to air by the newly lighted fire. Bobbie, coming in with more wood for the fire, saw the mark on the night-shirt, and looked over to the open trunk. All the things she could see were men's clothes. And the name marked on the shirt was Father's name. Then Father hadn't taken his clothes with him. And that night-shirt was one of Father's new ones. Bobbie remembered its being made, just before Peter's birthday. Why hadn't Father taken his clothes? Bobbie slipped from the room. As she went she heard the key turned in the lock of the trunk. Her heart was beating horribly. WHY hadn't Father taken his clothes? When Mother came out of the room, Bobbie flung tightly clasping arms round her waist, and whispered:--

"Mother--Daddy isn't--isn't DEAD, is he?"

"My darling, no! What made you think of anything so horrible?"

"I--I don't know," said Bobbie, angry with herself, but still clinging

to that resolution of hers, not to see anything that Mother didn't mean her to see.

Mother gave her a hurried hug. "Daddy was quite, QUITE well when I heard from him last," she said, "and he'll come back to us some day. Don't fancy such horrible things, darling!"

Later on, when the Russian stranger had been made comfortable for the night, Mother came into the girls' room. She was to sleep there in Phyllis's bed, and Phyllis was to have a mattress on the floor, a most amusing adventure for Phyllis. Directly Mother came in, two white figures started up, and two eager voices called:--

"Now, Mother, tell us all about the Russian gentleman."

A white shape hopped into the room. It was Peter, dragging his quilt behind him like the tail of a white peacock.

"We have been patient," he said, "and I had to bite my tongue not to go to sleep, and I just nearly went to sleep and I bit too hard, and it hurts ever so. DO tell us. Make a nice long story of it."

"I can't make a long story of it to-night," said Mother; "I'm very tired."

Bobbie knew by her voice that Mother had been crying, but the others didn't know.

"Well, make it as long as you can," said Phil, and Bobbie got her arms round Mother's waist and snuggled close to her.

"Well, it's a story long enough to make a whole book of. He's a writer; he's written beautiful books. In Russia at the time of the Czar one dared not say anything about the rich people doing wrong, or about the things that ought to be done to make poor people better and happier. If one did one was sent to prison."

"But they CAN'T," said Peter; "people only go to prison when they've done wrong."

"Or when the Judges THINK they've done wrong," said Mother. "Yes, that's so in England. But in Russia it was different. And he wrote a beautiful book about poor people and how to help them. I've read it. There's nothing in it but goodness and kindness. And they sent him to prison for it. He was three years in a horrible dungeon, with hardly any light, and all damp and dreadful. In prison all alone for three years."

Mother's voice trembled a little and stopped suddenly.

"But, Mother," said Peter, "that can't be true NOW. It sounds like something out of a history book--the Inquisition, or something."

"It WAS true," said Mother; "it's all horribly true. Well, then they took him out and sent him to Siberia, a convict chained to other convicts--wicked men who'd done all sorts of crimes--a long chain of

them, and they walked, and walked, and walked, for days and weeks, till he thought they'd never stop walking. And overseers went behind them with whips--yes, whips--to beat them if they got tired. And some of them went lame, and some fell down, and when they couldn't get up and go on, they beat them, and then left them to die. Oh, it's all too terrible! And at last he got to the mines, and he was condemned to stay there for life--for life, just for writing a good, noble, splendid book."

"How did he get away?"

"When the war came, some of the Russian prisoners were allowed to volunteer as soldiers. And he volunteered. But he deserted at the first chance he got and--"

"But that's very cowardly, isn't it"--said Peter--"to desert? Especially when it's war."

"Do you think he owed anything to a country that had done THAT to him? If he did, he owed more to his wife and children. He didn't know what had become of them."

"Oh," cried Bobbie, "he had THEM to think about and be miserable about TOO, then, all the time he was in prison?"

"Yes, he had them to think about and be miserable about all the time he was in prison. For anything he knew they might have been sent to prison, too. They did those things in Russia. But while he was in the mines some friends managed to get a message to him that his wife and children had escaped and come to England. So when he deserted he came here to look for them."

"Had he got their address?" said practical Peter.

"No; just England. He was going to London, and he thought he had to change at our station, and then he found he'd lost his ticket and his purse."

"Oh, DO you think he'll find them?--I mean his wife and children, not the ticket and things."

"I hope so. Oh, I hope and pray that he'll find his wife and children again."

Even Phyllis now perceived that mother's voice was very unsteady.

"Why, Mother," she said, "how very sorry you seem to be for him!"

Mother didn't answer for a minute. Then she just said, "Yes," and then she seemed to be thinking. The children were quiet.

Presently she said, "Dears, when you say your prayers, I think you might ask God to show His pity upon all prisoners and captives."

"To show His pity," Bobbie repeated slowly, "upon all prisoners and captives. Is that right, Mother?"

"Yes," said Mother, "upon all prisoners and captives. All prisoners and captives."

Chapter VI. Saviours of the train.

The Russian gentleman was better the next day, and the day after that better still, and on the third day he was well enough to come into the garden. A basket chair was put for him and he sat there, dressed in clothes of Father's which were too big for him. But when Mother had hemmed up the ends of the sleeves and the trousers, the clothes did well enough. His was a kind face now that it was no longer tired and frightened, and he smiled at the children whenever he saw them. They wished very much that he could speak English. Mother wrote several letters to people she thought might know whereabouts in England a Russian gentleman's wife and family might possibly be; not to the people she used to know before she came to live at Three Chimneys--she never wrote to any of them--but strange people--Members of Parliament and Editors of papers, and Secretaries of Societies.

And she did not do much of her story-writing, only corrected proofs as she sat in the sun near the Russian, and talked to him every now and then.

The children wanted very much to show how kindly they felt to this man who had been sent to prison and to Siberia just for writing a beautiful book about poor people. They could smile at him, of course; they could and they did. But if you smile too constantly, the smile is apt to get fixed like the smile of the hyaena. And then it no longer looks friendly, but simply silly. So they tried other ways, and brought him flowers till the place where he sat was surrounded by little fading bunches of clover and roses and Canterbury bells.

And then Phyllis had an idea. She beckoned mysteriously to the others and drew them into the back yard, and there, in a concealed spot, between the pump and the water-butt, she said:--

"You remember Perks promising me the very first strawberries out of his own garden?" Perks, you will recollect, was the Porter. "Well, I should think they're ripe now. Let's go down and see."

Mother had been down as she had promised to tell the Station Master the story of the Russian Prisoner. But even the charms of the railway had been unable to tear the children away from the neighbourhood of the interesting stranger. So they had not been to the station for three days.

They went now.

And, to their surprise and distress, were very coldly received by Perks.

"'Ighly honoured, I'm sure," he said when they peeped in at the door of the Porters' room. And he went on reading his newspaper.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Oh, dear," said Bobbie, with a sigh, "I do believe you're CROSS."

"What, me? Not me!" said Perks loftily; "it ain't nothing to me."

"What AIN'T nothing to you?" said Peter, too anxious and alarmed to change the form of words.

"Nothing ain't nothing. What 'appens either 'ere or elsewhere," said Perks; "if you likes to 'ave your secrets, 'ave 'em and welcome. That's what I say."

The secret-chamber of each heart was rapidly examined during the pause that followed. Three heads were shaken.

"We haven't got any secrets from YOU," said Bobbie at last.

"Maybe you 'ave, and maybe you 'aven't," said Perks; "it ain't nothing to me. And I wish you all a very good afternoon." He held up the paper between him and them and went on reading.

"Oh, DON'T!" said Phyllis, in despair; "this is truly dreadful! Whatever it is, do tell us."

"We didn't mean to do it whatever it was."

No answer. The paper was refolded and Perks began on another column.

"Look here," said Peter, suddenly, "it's not fair. Even people who do crimes aren't punished without being told what it's for--as once they were in Russia."

"I don't know nothing about Russia."

"Oh, yes, you do, when Mother came down on purpose to tell you and Mr. Gills all about OUR Russian."

"Can't you fancy it?" said Perks, indignantly; "don't you see 'im a-asking of me to step into 'is room and take a chair and listen to what 'er Ladyship 'as to say?"

"Do you mean to say you've not heard?"

"Not so much as a breath. I did go so far as to put a question. And he shuts me up like a rat-trap. 'Affairs of State, Perks,' says he. But I did think one o' you would 'a' nipped down to tell me--you're here sharp enough when you want to get anything out of old Perks"--Phyllis flushed purple as she thought of the strawberries--"information about locomotives or signals or the likes," said Perks.

"We didn't know you didn't know."

"We thought Mother had told you."

"Wewantedtotellyouonlywethou ghtitwouldbestalenews."

The three spoke all at once.

Perks said it was all very well, and still held up the paper. Then

Phyllis suddenly snatched it away, and threw her arms round his neck.

"Oh, let's kiss and be friends," she said; "we'll say we're sorry first, if you like, but we didn't really know that you didn't know."

"We are so sorry," said the others.

And Perks at last consented to accept their apologies.

Then they got him to come out and sit in the sun on the green Railway Bank, where the grass was quite hot to touch, and there, sometimes speaking one at a time, and sometimes all together, they told the Porter the story of the Russian Prisoner.

"Well, I must say," said Perks; but he did not say it--whatever it was.

"Yes, it is pretty awful, isn't it?" said Peter, "and I don't wonder you were curious about who the Russian was."

"I wasn't curious, not so much as interested," said the Porter.

"Well, I do think Mr. Gills might have told you about it. It was horrid of him."

"I don't keep no down on 'im for that, Missie," said the Porter; "cos why? I see 'is reasons. 'E wouldn't want to give away 'is own side with a tale like that 'ere. It ain't human nature. A man's got to stand up for his own side whatever they does. That's what it means by Party Politics. I should 'a' done the same myself if that long-'aired chap 'ad 'a' been a Jap."

"But the Japs didn't do cruel, wicked things like that," said Bobbie.

"P'r'aps not," said Perks, cautiously; "still you can't be sure with foreigners. My own belief is they're all tarred with the same brush."

"Then why were you on the side of the Japs?" Peter asked.

"Well, you see, you must take one side or the other. Same as with Liberals and Conservatives. The great thing is to take your side and then stick to it, whatever happens."

A signal sounded.

"There's the 3.14 up," said Perks. "You lie low till she's through, and then we'll go up along to my place, and see if there's any of them strawberries ripe what I told you about."

"If there are any ripe, and you DO give them to me," said Phyllis, "you won't mind if I give them to the poor Russian, will you?"

Perks narrowed his eyes and then raised his eyebrows.

"So it was them strawberries you come down for this afternoon, eh?" said he.

This was an awkward moment for Phyllis. To say "yes" would seem rude and greedy, and unkind to Perks. But she knew if she said "no," she would

not be pleased with herself afterwards. So--

"Yes," she said, "it was."

"Well done!" said the Porter; "speak the truth and shame the--"

"But we'd have come down the very next day if we'd known you hadn't heard the story," Phyllis added hastily.

"I believe you, Missie," said Perks, and sprang across the line six feet in front of the advancing train.

The girls hated to see him do this, but Peter liked it. It was so exciting.

The Russian gentleman was so delighted with the strawberries that the three racked their brains to find some other surprise for him. But all the racking did not bring out any idea more novel than wild cherries. And this idea occurred to them next morning. They had seen the blossom on the trees in the spring, and they knew where to look for wild cherries now that cherry time was here. The trees grew all up and along the rocky face of the cliff out of which the mouth of the tunnel opened. There were all sorts of trees there, birches and beeches and baby oaks and hazels, and among them the cherry blossom had shone like snow and silver.

The mouth of the tunnel was some way from Three Chimneys, so Mother let them take their lunch with them in a basket. And the basket would do to bring the cherries back in if they found any. She also lent them her silver watch so that they should not be late for tea. Peter's Waterbury had taken it into its head not to go since the day when Peter dropped it into the water-butt. And they started. 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.

"If it wasn't for the railway at the bottom, it would be as though the foot of man had never been there, wouldn't it?"

The sides of the cutting were of grey stone, very roughly hewn. Indeed, the top part of the cutting had been a little natural glen that had been cut deeper to bring it down to the level of the tunnel's mouth. Among the rocks, grass and flowers grew, and seeds dropped by birds in the crannies of the stone had taken root and grown into bushes and trees that overhung the cutting. Near the tunnel was a flight of steps leading down to the line--just wooden bars roughly fixed into the earth--a very steep and narrow way, more like a ladder than a stair.

"We'd better get down," said Peter; "I'm sure the cherries would be quite easy to get at from the side of the steps. You remember it was there we picked the cherry blossoms that we put on the rabbit's grave."

So they went along the fence towards the little swing gate that is at

the top of these steps. 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.

And this time it did not stop, but it grew louder and more rustling and rumbling.

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

The tree he pointed at was one of those that have rough grey leaves and white flowers. The berries, when they come, are bright scarlet, but if you pick them, they disappoint you by turning black before you get them home. And, 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 like the woods in Macbeth."

"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. And Phyllis made no movement towards going home by herself.

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. The trees, ceasing to walk, stood still and shivered. Leaning with the rock, they seemed to hesitate a moment, 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.

"Oh," said Peter, in awestruck tones, "isn't it exactly like when coals come in?--if there wasn't any roof to the cellar and you could see

down."

"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.

"They do it in war," said Phyllis; "I know I've heard of it."

"They only CUT them, silly," said Peter, "and that doesn't do any good. And we couldn't cut them even if we got up, and we couldn't get up. If we had anything red, we could get down on the line and wave it."

"But the train wouldn't see us till it got round the corner, and then it could see the mound just as well as us," said Phyllis; "better, because it's much bigger than us."

"If we only had something red," Peter repeated, "we could go round the corner and wave to the train."

"We might wave, anyway."

"They'd only think it was just US, as usual. We've waved so often before. Anyway, let's get down."

They got down the steep stairs. Bobbie was pale and shivering. Peter's face looked thinner than usual. 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, skirting the newly fallen mound of stones and rock and earth, and bent, crushed, twisted trees. They ran at their best pace. Peter led, but the girls were not far behind. 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.

"You're not"--Phyllis faltered--"you're not going to TEAR them?"

"Shut up," said Peter, with brief sternness.

"Oh, yes," said Bobbie, "tear them into little bits if you like. Don't you see, Phil, if we can't stop the train, there'll be a real live accident, with people KILLED. Oh, horrible! Here, Peter, you'll never tear it through the band!"

She took the red flannel petticoat from him and tore it off an inch from the band. Then she tore the other in the same way.

"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 knives given to boys are, for some odd reason, seldom of the kind of steel that keeps sharp. The young saplings had to be broken off. Two came up by the roots. The leaves were stripped from them.

"We must cut holes in the flags, and run the sticks through the holes," said Peter. And the holes were cut. The knife was sharp enough to cut flannel with. 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.

"I shall have the other two myself," said Peter, "because it was my idea to wave something red."

"They're our petticoats, though," Phyllis was beginning, but Bobbie interrupted--

"Oh, what does it matter who waves what, if we can only save the train?"

Perhaps Peter had not rightly calculated the number of minutes it would take the 11.29 to get from the station to the place where they were, or perhaps the train was late. Anyway, it seemed a very long time that they waited.

Phyllis grew impatient. "I expect the watch is wrong, and the train's gone by," said she.

Peter relaxed the heroic attitude he had chosen to show off his two flags. And Bobbie began to feel sick with suspense.

It seemed to her that they had been standing there for hours and hours, holding those silly little red flannel flags that no one would ever notice. The train wouldn't care. It would go rushing by them and tear round the corner and go crashing into that awful mound. And everyone

would be killed. Her hands grew very cold and trembled so that she could hardly hold the flag. 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.

"They don't see us! They won't see us! It's all no good!" cried Bobbie.

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.

It seemed that the train came on as fast as ever. It was very near now.

"Keep off the line, you silly cuckoo!" said Peter, fiercely.

"It's no good," Bobbie said again.

"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. At least Peter and Phyllis didn't, for the oncoming rush of the train covered the sound of her voice with a mountain of sound. 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. She saw the great black engine stop dead, but somehow she could not stop waving the flags. And when the driver and the fireman had got off the engine and Peter and Phyllis had gone to meet them and pour out their excited tale of the awful mound just round the corner, Bobbie still waved the flags but more and more feebly and jerkily.

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. I'll just 'ave a look at this 'ere mound of yours, and then we'll run you back to the station and get her seen to."

It was horrible to see Bobbie lying so white and quiet, with her lips

blue, and parted.

"I believe that's what people look like when they're dead," whispered Phyllis.

"DON'T!" said Peter, sharply.

They sat by Bobbie on the blue cushions, and the train ran back. Before it reached their station Bobbie had sighed and opened her eyes, and rolled herself over and begun to cry. This cheered the others wonderfully. They had seen her cry before, but they had never seen her faint, nor anyone else, for the matter of that. They had not known what to do when she was fainting, but now she was only crying they could thump her on the back and tell her not to, just as they always did. And presently, when she stopped crying, they were able to laugh at her for being such a coward as to faint.

When the station was reached, the three were the heroes of an agitated meeting on the platform.

The praises they got for their "prompt action," their "common sense," their "ingenuity," were enough to have turned anybody's head. Phyllis enjoyed herself thoroughly. She had never been a real heroine before, and the feeling was delicious. Peter's ears got very red. Yet he, too, enjoyed himself. Only Bobbie wished they all wouldn't. She wanted to get away.

"You'll hear from the Company about this, I expect," said the Station Master.

Bobbie wished she might never hear of it again. She pulled at Peter's jacket.

"Oh, come away, come away! I want to go home," she said.

So they went. And as they went Station Master and Porter and guards and driver and fireman and passengers sent up a cheer.

"Oh, listen," cried Phyllis; "that's for US!"

"Yes," said Peter. "I say, I am glad I thought about something red, and waving it."

"How lucky we DID put on our red flannel petticoats!" said Phyllis.

Bobbie said nothing. She was thinking of the horrible mound, and the trustful train rushing towards it.

"And it was US that saved them," said Peter.

"How dreadful if they had all been killed!" said Phyllis; "wouldn't it, Bobbie?"

"We never got any cherries, after all," said Bobbie.

The others thought her rather heartless.

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.

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