The Railway Children

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TO MY DEAR SON
PAUL BLAND
BEHIND WHOSE KNOWLEDGE OF RAILWAYS
MY IGNORANCE CONFIDENTLY SHELTERS

The Railway Children

Chapter 1

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 bathroom 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 wallpaper. 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 Edgecombe 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 dreamt 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 penknife, 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 unemotional 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 firewoman. 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 parlourmaid 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 from 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 teatime.

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 armchair. 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 bedtime, 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 bathroom door, and it had acted beautifully as Ruth passed through, that red-haired parlourmaid 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 turtle shell 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 shoelaces 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 slow 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 downhill. 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 lit it. By its thin little glimmer the children saw a large bare kitchen with a stone floor. There were no curtains, no hearthrug. 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.

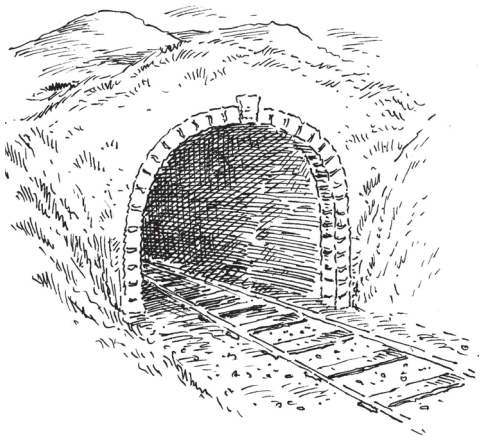
As the cart man turned to go out after he had brought in the boxes, there was a rustling, scampering sound that seemed to come from inside the walls of the house.

"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 2

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 relit the candle and everyone looked at each other by its winky, 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 a 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 long nails in them shining fiercely like iron teeth in the candlelight.

"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 lit 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 burnt whole if she had happened to live in the days when those things were fashionable.

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

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

The firelight and the candlelight 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 armchair 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 would 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 teacups, 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 woken 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 houseleeks and stonecrop and wallflowers, and even a clump of purple flag flowers at the far corner.

"This is far, far and away prettier than Edgecombe 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 lit 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 ashtray 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 burnt 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 and 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 today. I'll lie down for an hour, so as to be as fresh as a lark by suppertime."

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 tomorrow. Let's get to the railway."

The way to the railway was all downhill 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 so 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 one 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 organized 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 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 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 teatime 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 horsebeans – 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 horsebeans 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 long ago 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 had 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 dispatch. 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. "Tomorrow 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 on 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. & 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 agonized 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 Stavely 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 learnt 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 learnt 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 carrying 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 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.