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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Railway Children: Peter's coal-mine (2/14)

“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 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 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 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 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.