AI-Generated Graded Readers
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Publication webpage:
https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/a1/ai-generated_graded_readers.html

Publication date: April 29, 2026

About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

Content Note

This adaptation is based on a historical literary work. It may contain expressions, attitudes, or depictions that some readers may consider inappropriate or offensive by today's standards. Such elements have been retained or reflected where necessary in order to preserve the historical and literary character of the original work.

Source Text

Original work: The Railway Children
Author: E. Nesbit

Source: Project Gutenberg
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E. Nesbit, *The Railway Children* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1 — The Happy House and the Sudden Change

At first, the children were not railway children at all. They did not think much about trains. A train was only a way to go to London, to a show, to the zoo, or to some other happy place. They lived in a red brick house with Father and Mother. The house had bright glass in the front door, clean white paint, warm rooms, and many useful things. It was not a great house, but it was a comfortable house, and the children had always thought of it as home.

There were three children. Roberta was the eldest, but most people called her Bobbie. She was quick to feel things, and she often noticed what the others did not notice. Peter came next, and he wanted to be an engineer when he grew up. Phyllis was the youngest, and she always meant to do right, though her good ideas sometimes made trouble. They had pretty clothes, warm fires, many toys, and a dog called James. They also had a nursemaid, a nursery, and a mother who was almost always ready to help them.

Mother was not one of those dull mothers who were never at home when children wanted them. She played with them, read to them, and helped them with their lessons. When they were at school, she sometimes wrote stories for them. After tea, she read the stories aloud, and the children listened with great pleasure. She also made funny poems for birthdays and special days. A new kitten, a doll's house, or even getting better after being ill could become the subject of one of Mother's poems.

Father was almost perfect in the children's eyes. He was not cross, and he was not unfair. He liked games, and when he could not play, he always explained why in such a kind and funny way that the children forgave him at once. He could mend things, too. He had mended toys, dolls' furniture, and even animals from Noah's Ark. So the children trusted him deeply. They did not know how happy they were until that happy life began to change.

The change began soon after Peter's tenth birthday. He had many presents, but the best one was a little model engine. It was more wonderful than anything else he had ever owned. For three days he loved it with all his heart. Then, perhaps because Peter did not yet know enough about engines, or perhaps because Phyllis tried too hard to help, the little engine suddenly went off with a loud bang. James the dog was so frightened that he ran away and did not come back until much later. The small people from Noah's Ark were broken, and the engine itself was badly hurt.

Peter was very unhappy about the engine. The others said he cried, but Peter said his eyes were red because he had a cold. By the next day, the cold was real enough, and he had to stay in bed. Mother began to worry that he might be getting very ill. Then Peter sat up and said, "I do not want any more thin food. I want real food." Mother asked what he wanted, and Peter said, "A big pigeon pie." So Mother asked Cook to make one, and when Peter ate it, he began to feel better.

While the pie was being made, Mother wrote a funny poem about Peter and his broken engine. It told how deeply Peter loved the engine and how sad he was when it broke. It also joked that he was healing his sorrow with pigeon pie. Peter liked the poem, though he still cared more about the engine than about the poem. Father had been away in the country for several days, and Peter waited for him with great hope. Father could mend almost anything, and Peter believed that if anyone could save the engine, Father could.

Father came home, but Peter did not speak about the engine at once. Mother thought it would be kind to wait until Father had eaten dinner and rested. Peter agreed, though it was hard for him to be patient. At last Mother said, "Now, dear, if you are rested, we want to tell you about a terrible railway accident." Father smiled and said he was ready to hear it. Peter brought the broken engine and told the sad story. Then Father took the engine in his hands and looked at it very carefully.

The children held their breath while Father examined it. Peter asked in a low voice, "Is there any hope?" Father looked up and answered cheerfully, "Yes, a great deal of hope. But hope is not enough. It will need some careful mending and

a new small part." He said he would keep the job for Saturday afternoon, and all the children could help him. Peter was not sure that girls could help mend engines, but Father said, "Of course they can. Girls can be just as clever as boys."

Phyllis was not sure she wanted to be an engine driver, because she thought her face would always be dirty. Roberta said she would love to work with engines when she was grown up. Father laughed and said that if she still wanted it later, they would see what could be done. He began to say, "When I was a boy—" but just then there was a knock at the front door. Father stopped and looked annoyed. Ruth, the red-haired parlour-maid, came in and said that two gentlemen wanted to see him.

Father went to speak to the gentlemen in the library. Mother thought they were probably asking for money for some church matter, and she hoped Father would send them away quickly. But Father did not come back quickly. The children waited and listened. Mother tried to tell them a fairy story about a princess with green eyes, but it was hard to listen properly. They could hear voices from the library, and Father's voice sounded strange. It was louder and sharper than the voice he used for ordinary visitors.

After a while the library bell rang, and the children thought the visitors were going away. But Ruth came in instead, looking frightened and uneasy. She said that Father wanted Mother to come to the library. She also said that he looked very pale, as if he had heard terrible news. Mother told Ruth to stop speaking and sent her away. Then Mother went into the library. The children sat still and waited again, and the house felt very different from before.

There was more talking behind the library door. Then the bell rang again, and Ruth was sent to fetch a cab. The children heard footsteps in the hall and then on the front steps. A cab drove away into the night, and the front door closed. After that Mother came back into the room. Her face was almost white, and her eyes looked large and bright. Her mouth was tight, as if she were trying very hard not to cry.

"It is bedtime," Mother said. "Ruth will help you." Phyllis began to protest because Father had only just come home, and they had been allowed to stay up

late. Mother said, “Father has been called away on business. Go now, my darlings.” The children kissed her and went slowly toward the stairs. Roberta stayed a moment longer and held Mother tightly. She whispered, “It was not very bad news, was it? Nobody is dead, is there?”

Mother said, “Nobody is dead.” But she did not say that everything was all right. She said she could not tell Roberta anything that night, and she almost pushed her gently toward the door. So Roberta went upstairs with the others. Ruth brushed the girls’ hair and helped them undress, though Mother usually did that herself. Later, when the house was dark, Mother came into the children’s rooms and kissed them while they slept. Roberta woke, but she did not move or speak, because she heard in the dark that Mother had been crying.

Part 2 — Leaving the Old Life

The next morning, Mother was already gone when the children came down to breakfast. Ruth said she had gone to London, and then she left them alone with their food. The room felt empty without Mother, and the children were not used to beginning the day without her. Peter said there must be something very wrong, because Ruth had told him they would know soon enough. Bobbie did not like that he had asked Ruth questions, because Mother had not told them anything herself. Peter was angry and said he had asked because he cared about Mother.

The three children began to quarrel, but Bobbie soon stopped herself. She put down her spoon and said they must not be unkind to each other when something terrible might be happening. Peter still tried to answer sharply, but before he went to school, he hit Bobbie lightly on the back and told her to cheer up. That was Peter’s way of making peace. The children came home at dinner time, but Mother was not there. She was not there at tea time either, and the house seemed to wait with them.

It was almost seven o’clock when Mother came home. She looked so tired and ill that the children could not ask questions at once. She sat down in an armchair, and the children tried to help her in small ways. Phyllis took the pins out of her

hat. Bobbie took off her gloves, and Peter took off her walking shoes and brought her soft slippers. After Mother had drunk some tea, she said she had something to tell them.

Mother said the men had brought very bad news. Father would be away for some time, and she was very worried. She asked the children to help her and not to make things harder. They promised at once that they would try. Mother asked them not to quarrel when she was away, because she would have to be away often. Bobbie and Peter looked at each other, because they remembered the quarrel that morning.

Then Mother asked them for one more promise. She told them not to ask her questions about the trouble and not to ask anyone else either. Peter felt ashamed and moved his feet on the carpet. Then he suddenly confessed that he had asked Ruth. Mother asked what Ruth had said, and Peter told her. Mother said it was not necessary for them to know everything, because it was about business, and children did not understand business.

Bobbie asked if it had something to do with the government, because Father worked in a government office. Mother said yes, and then she told them it was bedtime. She also told them not to worry, because everything would come right in the end. Phyllis told Mother not to worry either, and said they would all be as good as gold. Mother kissed them, but she looked very tired. As they went upstairs, Peter said they would begin being good the next morning, and Bobbie asked why they could not begin at once.

The girls folded their clothes more neatly than usual, because that was the only way of being good they could think of. Phyllis remembered that Bobbie had once said nothing exciting ever happened, like in books. Now something had happened, but Bobbie did not want this kind of thing at all. She said she had never wanted things to happen if they made Mother unhappy. To her, everything now seemed perfectly horrible. And for several weeks, everything did continue to feel horrible.

Mother was out almost all the time. Meals were not cheerful, and the house was not cared for in the old way. One of the maids was sent away, and Aunt Emma came to stay for a while. Aunt Emma was older than Mother, and she was getting

ready to go abroad as a governess. She was always sewing ugly clothes, and the sound of the sewing machine seemed to go on all day and most of the night. She believed that children should stay in their proper place, and the children strongly believed that Aunt Emma's proper place was somewhere away from them.

The servants were more interesting than Aunt Emma, but they were also uncomfortable to be near. They never truly told the children what had happened to Father, but they often spoke as if they knew a great deal. One day Peter made a trap over the bathroom door, and it worked when Ruth passed through. Ruth was angry and hit him. She said he would come to a bad end if he did not change, and that he would go where his father had gone. Bobbie told Mother what Ruth had said, and the next day Ruth was sent away.

Then Mother came home one day and went to bed. She stayed there for two days, and the doctor came. The children moved quietly about the house and felt as if the world might be ending. At last Mother came down to breakfast. She was pale, and there were lines on her face that had not been there before. She smiled as well as she could and told them everything was settled. They were going to leave the house and live in the country, in a dear little white house that she hoped they would love.

Then came a week full of packing. This was not like packing clothes for a holiday. Chairs, tables, blankets, beds, carpets, pans, plates, and even fire irons had to be packed. The house looked like a place where furniture was stored. The children partly enjoyed it, because there was so much movement and change. Mother was very busy, but she still found time to talk to them and even to make a little poem for Phyllis when she hurt her hand with a screwdriver.

Bobbie noticed that they were taking many plain and useful things, but leaving some beautiful things behind. She asked Mother why they were not taking a fine cabinet. Mother said they could not take everything. Bobbie said it seemed as if they were taking all the ugly things. Mother answered that they were taking the useful things, because they had to play at being poor for a while. Bobbie understood only part of this, but she understood enough to feel cold inside.

When most of the furniture had gone, the house felt strange and hollow. The

girls slept with Mother and Aunt Emma in the spare rooms, and Peter slept on the drawing-room sofa. Peter said moving was great fun and that he wished they moved once a month. Mother laughed and said she certainly did not. Bobbie saw Mother's face as she turned away, and she never forgot it. She thought Mother was very brave to laugh when her face showed so much pain.

The next day more boxes were filled, and at last a cab came to take them to the station. Aunt Emma saw them off, though the children felt as if they were the ones seeing Aunt Emma off, and they were not sorry. They enjoyed looking out of the train window at first. But as it grew dark, they became colder and sleepier. At last Mother woke them gently and said they had arrived. They stood on a cold platform while their boxes were taken from the train, and they watched the red lights of the train disappear into the night.

This was the first train they saw on the railway that would later become so dear to them. But they did not know that yet. They only felt cold, tired, and sad, and they hoped the walk to the new house would not be long. There were no cabs, so they had to walk. The road was dark and muddy, and Phyllis fell into a puddle. A cart carried their boxes slowly ahead of them, and they followed the sound of its wheels in the dark.

At last they came near the house. It looked like a large dark shape, and Mother wondered why the woman she had hired had closed the shutters. The cart went around to the back, into a stone yard, and stopped at the back door. There was no light in any window, and nobody answered when they knocked. The cart man said the woman had probably gone home because the train was late. He found the key under the step, unlocked the door, and lit a candle.

By the weak candlelight, the children saw a large bare kitchen with a stone floor. Their old kitchen table stood in the middle, but the chairs, pots, pans, and dishes were all in wrong places. There was no fire, and the fireplace was cold and black. When the cart man left, a sudden sound came from inside the walls. Something rustled and ran quickly in the dark. The girls cried out, and the cart man said it was only the rats. Then he went away, the door shut, and the candle went out.

Part 3 — The First Morning at Three Chimneys

“What fun!” Mother said in the dark. Her voice was bright, though the children could hear that she was trying very hard to make it sound bright. She felt across the table for the matches, struck one, and lit the candle again. The small flame shook in the air and showed their pale faces. “The poor mice were more frightened than we were,” she said. “I do not believe they were rats at all.”

The children looked at one another in the weak light. The kitchen seemed larger and colder than before. Mother said that this was an adventure, and that they had often wanted something to happen. She had asked Mrs. Viney to put food ready for them, so perhaps supper was waiting in the dining room. Mother took up the candle, and they all went to look. The dining room opened from the kitchen, and it was darker, because its walls and ceiling were made of dark wood.

The room was full of furniture, but nothing was in the right place. Chairs stood in strange corners. Tables seemed to have lost their proper use. Boxes and dishes were scattered about, and dust lay everywhere. There was certainly a dining table, but there was no supper on it. Mother looked in the other rooms, and the children followed her from place to place. Everywhere they found furniture, but nowhere did they find food.

In the pantry there was only an old cake tin and a broken plate. Mother was angry with Mrs. Viney for a moment and said the woman had taken the money and bought them nothing. Phyllis asked sadly if they were to have no supper at all. Mother said they would have supper, but they would have to open one of the big boxes. The boxes had been put in the cellar, so Mother led the way back to the kitchen. Peter held the candle while she tried to open the nearest box.

The box was strongly nailed shut. Mother could not find the hammer, because it was probably inside another box. So she used a coal shovel and the kitchen poker. Peter wanted to do it himself, because he thought he could do it better. Bobbie wanted to help too, because she was afraid Mother would hurt her hands. Phyllis said Father would have opened it quickly, and then stopped, because

Bobbie gave her a warning look. They did not want to make Mother more unhappy by speaking of Father.

At last the first nail came up with a harsh sound. Then one piece of wood came loose, and then another. Soon the lid was open enough for Mother to look inside. The first useful things she found were candles. She told the girls to light as many as they liked and put them in saucers. Bobbie and Phyllis worked busily, though Phyllis burned her finger a little when the head of a match flew off. Bobbie said bravely that it was only a small burn, and Phyllis tried not to mind.

Soon the dining room was full of candlelight. Fourteen little flames stood about the room, and the dark wooden walls looked warmer and kinder. Bobbie brought coal and wood and made a fire, feeling very grown up as she did it. The girls pushed chairs against the walls and put loose things into one corner. They partly hid the untidy pile behind Father's old leather chair. When Mother came in carrying a tray, she smiled and said the room was beginning to look like a real room.

Mother found a tablecloth in a locked box, and soon they had supper. It was not an ordinary supper, but to tired children it seemed like a feast. There were biscuits, sardines, preserved ginger, raisins, candied peel, and marmalade. They drank ginger wine and water from tea cups, because they could not find the glasses. Bobbie suggested that they drink Aunt Emma's health, because Aunt Emma had packed these useful bits of food. They all did so, and for a little while they felt less unkind about Aunt Emma.

Aunt Emma had also made sure that the sheets were aired, and the beds had already been put together. So after supper, Mother made the beds ready. She told the children she was sure there were no rats, but she would leave her door open. If a mouse came, they only had to scream, and she would come and speak to it very firmly. The children laughed a little and went to bed. In the night, Bobbie woke and heard Mother still moving about in her room, long after everyone else was asleep.

The next morning Bobbie woke Phyllis by pulling her hair gently. Phyllis was still half asleep and did not understand at first. Bobbie whispered that they were

in the new house, and that there were no servants to help. She wanted them to get up quietly and make everything nice before Mother came down. Peter was already awake and would soon be dressed. The children washed under the pump in the yard, one pumping while another washed, and the cold water made them laugh and gasp.

Outside, the morning was bright and fresh. Bobbie noticed the shining weeds between the stones and the moss on the low roof. There were plants growing there too, with wallflowers and other small green things. Phyllis said this place was much prettier than their old house, and she wanted to see the garden. But Bobbie said they must work first. They went inside, lit the fire, put the kettle on, and tried to set the breakfast table. They could not find the right dishes, so they used whatever seemed near enough.

When they thought there was nothing more to do, they went outside again. Peter wanted to find the garden, but the garden seemed to have disappeared. They went round and round the house. There was a yard behind it, and there were stables and other buildings. On the other sides, the house stood in a field, with short grass right up to it. Yet they were sure they had seen a garden wall in the dark the night before.

Then they looked down the hill and saw something far more interesting than a garden. Below them lay the railway line. They could see the black mouth of a tunnel, and farther away there was a bridge with tall arches across the valley. Peter said they should go down and look at the railway. Bobbie suggested sitting down for a moment first. They all sat on a large flat grey stone in the warm sun, and because they had risen so early, they soon fell asleep there together.

Mother found them at eight o'clock, sleeping in a happy little heap. Their good work in the kitchen had not gone quite as they had hoped. The fire had gone out, the water had boiled away, and the bottom of the kettle was burned. Also they had forgotten to wash the cups before setting the table. But Mother did not scold them much. She had found another little room that they had missed the night before, and in it Mrs. Viney had left bread, butter, cheese, cold beef, and apple pie.

Breakfast was wonderful, especially because there was pie. Peter said pie for

breakfast was splendid, and Mother explained that it was the supper they should have eaten the night before. There was also a note from Mrs. Viney, saying she had had to go home because someone in her family had broken his arm. After breakfast, the children helped Mother unpack. They carried clothes, dishes, and many other things from place to place until their legs ached. Late in the afternoon, Mother said they had done enough, and that she would lie down for an hour before supper.

As soon as Mother had gone to rest, the children looked at each other. They all had the same thought without needing to say much. They would go to the railway. On the way, they suddenly saw where the garden had been hiding. It was behind the stables, with a high wall around it. But Peter said the garden could wait until another day. The railway could not wait.

They ran down the hill over the short grass. Grey and yellow stones stood out from the ground, and there were bushes here and there. At the bottom was a wooden fence, and beyond it lay the shining railway lines. The children climbed up and sat on the fence. Then a deep sound came from the tunnel. A train rushed out with a cry and a roar, and it flew past them so close that they felt the hot air of it on their faces.

Bobbie drew a long breath and said it was like a great dragon rushing by. Phyllis thought the tunnel looked like a dragon’s cave. Peter did not care much about dragons at that moment. He was thinking of the train itself, its height, its noise, its power, and the wonderful nearness of it. He said he had never thought they would be so close to a real train. To him, it was better than any game, and the railway had already begun to take hold of his heart.

Part 4 — Peter’s Coal-Mine

After the train had rushed past, the children stayed on the fence for a while. They looked at the lines, the stones, the posts, and the dark tunnel. Bobbie wondered if that train was going to London, because London was where Father was. The thought made the railway feel different at once. It was not only exciting

now; it was also a possible road to Father.

Peter said they should go down to the station and ask where the train was going. So they climbed down from the fence and walked beside the railway. The wires above them made a soft singing sound in the air. When they had traveled by train before, the posts had seemed to fly past. Now, walking beside them, the children found that each post stood a long way from the next. The station seemed farther away than they expected, but they enjoyed every step.

They had never come to a station in this free way before. In the old days, they had only gone there with grown-ups, to catch a train or wait for one. Grown-ups did not seem to care much about stations. They only wanted to leave them as soon as possible. But to the children, everything was interesting. The signal box, the wires, the small sharp sounds from inside, and the rows of rails all seemed full of secrets.

They came to the platform by the sloping end, not through the booking office. This made the station feel even more like an adventure. They looked into the porters' room and saw lamps, notices, and a railway calendar on the wall. A porter was sitting there, half hidden behind a newspaper. There were many lines near the station, and some went only a short way into a yard and then stopped. Trucks stood there too, as if they were resting after hard work.

At one side of the yard was a great pile of coal. It was not like the coal at home, loose in a coal cellar. This coal was built up almost like a wall, with large square pieces outside. Near the top there was a white line painted across it. When the porter came out, Peter politely said good morning and asked what the white mark was for. The porter said it showed how much coal there was, so they would know if anyone took any.

The porter added, in a joking way, that Peter must not carry any away in his pockets. Peter laughed, and at that moment the words seemed only funny. He liked the porter at once, because the man spoke easily and did not treat them as if they were in the way. The children stayed as long as they could, looking, asking questions, and feeling that the station belonged to a wonderful world. Then they went home up the hill to Three Chimneys. They did not know that the porter's

joke would soon become important.

Life in the new place slowly became ordinary. The children still missed Father, but the pain did not stay sharp all the time. It was like a mark pressed into soft dough; at first it was deep, but little by little the surface rose again. They got used to not going to school. They got used to Mother being upstairs for many hours, writing stories and sending them away in long envelopes. They got used to the hills, the rocks, the canal, and most of all the railway.

Mother sometimes said they were very poor now. At first the children did not fully understand what that meant. There was still food on the table, and they still wore their old clothes. But then three cold wet days came in June. The rain fell straight down, and the house felt damp and cold. The children could not go outside, and they all began to shiver.

Bobbie went to Mother's door and asked if she might light a fire. Mother said no, because coal was too expensive. She tried to speak cheerfully and told them to run in the attic and get warm by playing. Bobbie said a fire would need only a little coal, but Mother answered that even a little was more than they could afford. Then she asked them kindly to go away, because she was very busy. Phyllis whispered that Mother was always busy now, and Peter said nothing, because he was thinking.

They went to the attic and played at robbers. Peter was the leader, Bobbie helped him, and Phyllis became the captured girl who had to be saved. The game was very exciting, and by tea time they were warm and red-faced again. But at tea, the feeling of poverty came back. Phyllis tried to put both butter and jam on her bread. Mother said gently that she must choose one or the other, because they could not afford both now.

After tea, Peter told his sisters that he had an idea. He would not say what it was. This made Bobbie and Phyllis cross, and they asked him again and again. At last he said he was going to do something alone because it might be wrong. He did not want to pull them into it. Bobbie told him not to do it if it was wrong, and then offered to do it herself, which was not very sensible but was very loyal.

Peter would only say that he was going on a lonely adventure. If Mother asked

where he was, they were to say he was playing at mines. After more questions, he added that they were coal mines. This was enough for the girls to guess more than he wished. Peter thought he had kept his plan secret, but his sisters understood a great deal. They knew he was thinking about coal, the cold house, and Mother's words about money.

Two evenings later, Peter called the girls to come with him and bring the old baby carriage. The children called it the Roman Chariot. They had found it over the coach house and made its wheels work smoothly again. Peter led them down the hill toward the station. Near the line, between some rocks, he showed them a heap of coal. He called it the first coal from Saint Peter's Mine and said they must carry it home at once.

They filled the old carriage with coal, but it was much too heavy to push up the hill. Even when Peter pulled and the girls pushed, it would not move properly. So they had to take some of the coal out and make three journeys. At last the coal was added to Mother's coal in the cellar. Peter went out alone again later and came back black and mysterious. He said his mine was good, and that tomorrow they would bring home more black diamonds.

For a while, everything seemed successful. Mrs. Viney even said to Mother that the coal was lasting very well. The children heard this and laughed quietly on the stairs. By then, they had almost forgotten that Peter had once wondered whether the mining might be wrong. But the railway people had not forgotten the white line on the coal heap. One night, the Station Master put on soft shoes and went quietly to wait in the yard.

He hid near the coal and watched. After a while, something small and dark moved on top of the heap. It scraped and rattled among the coal. The Station Master waited until the figure came down and lifted a bag. Then his hand came down firmly on Peter's collar. Peter stood there trembling, with a bag of coal in his hand, and the Station Master called him a young thief.

Peter said he was not a thief but a coal miner. The Station Master did not accept this. Then Bobbie and Phyllis came out from the dark, frightened and ashamed. They begged him not to take Peter to the police station. Bobbie said it was their

fault too, because they had helped carry the coal. Peter tried to deny it, but Bobbie would not let him carry the blame alone. The Station Master took them toward the station, but his voice became kinder when he saw who they were.

He asked why children from Three Chimneys had done such a thing. Peter explained about the wet day, the cold house, and Mother saying they were too poor to have a fire. He said he had thought taking coal from the middle of the heap might count as mining, not stealing. The Station Master listened, then told him clearly that taking what belonged to someone else was stealing, whatever name he gave it. But he also said he would forgive them this once. The children thanked him with all their hearts, and then they went home through the dark, with Peter safe between his sisters, though he was still cross with them for spying on him.

Part 5 — The Green Dragon and the Old Gentleman

After Peter's coal-mine, the children thought it would be wise to keep away from the station for a while. But they could not keep away from the railway itself. In London, many things had passed the house every day: cabs, carts, and people going here and there. At Three Chimneys, the country was much quieter. The trains were almost the only things that moved past them with noise, speed, and purpose. So the railway began to feel like a living road between their new life and the old life they had lost.

Every day the children went down the hill from Three Chimneys. Their feet began to make a little path in the short grass. Soon they learned the times of some of the trains. They gave the trains names, because that made them feel more like friends. The 9:15 train going up the line was called the Green Dragon. Another train had another strange name, and the night express became something wild and frightening in their thoughts. Peter once woke in the night, heard it rush by, and gave it a name at once.

The old gentleman travelled by the Green Dragon. At first, the children did not know anything about him. They only saw a hand from a first-class carriage. It was a clean hand, and it held a newspaper. One morning the children were waiting by

the fence when Phyllis said the Green Dragon was going where Father was. If it were a real dragon, she said, they might ask it to carry their love to him.

Peter said dragons did not carry love. Phyllis said they could if they were properly tamed, because they would fetch and carry like pet dogs. Then she wondered why Father never wrote to them. Bobbie said Mother had told them Father was very busy and would write soon. But Father still did not write, and this made the children think about him more when the train passed. So Phyllis suggested that they wave to the Green Dragon and send their love that way.

When the train came roaring out of the tunnel, all three children stood on the fence and waved their handkerchiefs. They did not stop to ask if the handkerchiefs were clean. They only waved with all their strength. Then, from one of the carriages, the clean hand waved back. The old gentleman had seen them. After that, waving to the Green Dragon became part of every morning.

The children liked to imagine that the old gentleman knew Father. Perhaps he would meet Father in London. Perhaps he would say, “Your children stand by the railway every morning and wave their love to you.” This thought made the waves feel important. The old gentleman became someone they trusted without knowing him. He was only a face, a hand, and a friendly wave, but he seemed to belong to them.

The children were now allowed to go out in weather that would once have kept them indoors. Aunt Emma’s long coats and strong gaiters, which they had laughed at before, became very useful. Mother was still busy with her writing. She sent stories away in long envelopes, and sometimes the stories came back. When that happened, she sighed and looked tired. But sometimes an editor accepted a story, and then Mother was happy. On those days, there were buns for tea.

One day Peter went to the village to buy buns because one of Mother’s stories had been accepted. On the road, he met the Station Master. Peter felt hot and uncomfortable at once. He remembered the coal. He was not sure the Station Master would want to speak kindly to a boy who had stolen railway coal. So Peter looked down and said nothing.

But the Station Master said good morning as if nothing bad had happened.

Peter answered, but then he felt worse. He wondered if the man had not known him in daylight. That thought made him feel dishonest, so he ran after the Station Master. When the man stopped, Peter said he did not want him to be polite if he did not know who Peter was. Then he said plainly, “I was the boy who took the coal. I am sorry.”

The Station Master said he had not been thinking about the coal at all. He said they should let old trouble stay in the past. Then he asked where Peter was going. Peter said he was buying buns because Mother had sold a story. The Station Master learned that Mother wrote stories, and Peter said they were the most beautiful stories anyone could read. He also said Mother used to play with them more before she had to be so clever. The Station Master was kind, and he told Peter to come to the station whenever he liked.

Peter felt much happier after that. The next day, after the children had waved to the Green Dragon and the old gentleman had waved back, Peter led his sisters toward the station. Bobbie was not sure they should go there after the coal trouble. Phyllis asked directly if Peter meant after the coal. Peter proudly said the Station Master had invited him. Phyllis kept speaking about the coal, and Peter answered sharply. Soon she began to cry, because he had called her ungentlemanly.

Bobbie stopped and put her arm around Phyllis. She tried to make peace between them. She said they should both take back the unkind words they had said since the morning wave. Peter agreed, though he was impatient. He gave Phyllis his handkerchief and told her to use it. Phyllis answered that Peter had used her last one to tie up a rabbit-hutch door. Still, the quarrel passed, and they went on together.

At the station, they spent two happy hours with the porter. He answered their questions and did not seem tired of them. He told them the hooks between railway carriages were called couplings. He showed them the pipes that helped stop a train. He also told them about the handle in the carriages that could stop the train if someone was in real danger. He told a funny story about an old lady who had used it because she thought it was a bell for food.

The children listened with great interest. After that, the train was no longer just

“it” to them. The porter spoke of a train as “she,” and the children liked that. The Station Master came out once or twice and was friendly too. He gave each of them an orange and said that one day he might take them to the signal box when he was not too busy. Phyllis whispered that he acted just as if coal had never been found in the world.

Several trains passed while they were there. Peter noticed for the first time that engines had numbers on them, like cabs. The porter told him about a boy who used to write down every engine number in a fine green notebook. Peter liked that idea very much. He did not have a green notebook, but the porter gave him a yellow envelope. Peter wrote down two engine numbers on it and felt that he had begun an important collection.

That evening, Peter asked Mother if she had a green notebook with silver corners. She did not, but when she heard why he wanted it, she gave him a small black notebook instead. She said some pages had been torn out, but it would still hold many numbers. Then she grew serious and asked the children not to walk on the railway line. Peter asked if they might walk there if they faced the direction of the trains, but Mother said she did not want them to do it.

Phyllis asked whether Mother had ever walked on railway lines when she was little. Mother was honest, so she had to say yes. Then Phyllis thought that settled the matter. But Mother said she loved them very much and could not bear the thought of their being hurt. Bobbie understood that Mother was thinking of her own mother, who was no longer alive. At last Mother said they might go near the line only if they were very careful, knew which way the trains came, and did not go near the tunnel or around corners. The children promised, and Peter felt that railway life had truly opened before them.

Part 6 — Mother Is Ill

Mother’s permission made the children feel rich. They were not rich in money, but they were rich in railway freedom. They could go near the line if they were careful, and this seemed like a great gift. Still, Mother’s words stayed in Bobbie’s

mind. Mother had spoken about her own mother, and Bobbie had understood a little of the sadness behind her voice.

The very next day, Mother had to stay in bed. Her head hurt badly, her hands were hot, and her throat was sore. Mrs. Viney said they should send for the doctor, because there were many illnesses going around. Mother did not want to send for him at first. But by evening she felt worse, and Peter was sent to the village house where Doctor Forrest lived.

Peter came back with the doctor, and he liked him at once. Doctor Forrest talked about railways and rabbits and other things that mattered to Peter. After he had seen Mother, he said she had influenza. Then he spoke to Bobbie in the hall, because Bobbie clearly wanted to be useful. He called her the head nurse and told her exactly what Mother needed.

The doctor said they must keep a good fire in Mother's room. He said Mother should have grapes, beef tea, beef essence, soda water, milk, and a little good brandy. Bobbie asked him to write the list down, and he did. When Bobbie showed the list to Mother, Mother gave a weak little laugh. She said they could not afford all those things, and that Mrs. Viney should buy cheap meat for the children's dinner, so Mother could have some broth from it.

Bobbie did what Mother asked, but she did not feel satisfied. She washed Mother's hot hands with cool water and tried to make the room comfortable. Then she went downstairs to Peter and Phyllis. Her cheeks were red, and her eyes were bright with worry. She told them what the doctor had ordered and what Mother had said. Then she said there was nobody but them to do anything, so they must do it.

They had only the shilling meant for meat. Peter said they could do without meat, because people on islands had lived on less than bread and butter. Phyllis understood that even if they gave up dinner, one shilling would not buy all the things on the doctor's list. Bobbie told everyone to think as hard as they could. They sat together, serious and silent, trying to find a way. Then Peter and Phyllis began to work on a plan while Bobbie went back upstairs to sit with Mother.

Peter and Phyllis used scissors, a white sheet, a paint brush, and black paint

from the kitchen things. The first sheet did not work well, so they took another from the linen cupboard. They did not stop to think that good sheets cost money. They only thought about Mother lying upstairs with hot hands and a sore throat. They were making a message, and they believed the message might save her.

That night, Bobbie slept in Mother's room. She woke several times to put coal on the fire and give Mother milk with soda water. Mother sometimes talked in a confused way, as people do when they have fever. Once she cried out for her own mother. Bobbie knew then that Mother had forgotten for a moment that Granny was dead. It made Bobbie's heart ache, but she stayed quiet and gentle.

Early in the morning, Mother woke and spoke to Bobbie. She said she hated giving her so much trouble. Bobbie could hardly bear the word trouble, because helping Mother did not feel like trouble at all. Mother told her not to cry and said she would be better in a day or two. Bobbie tried to smile. She was very tired, but before the doctor came, she tidied the room and put everything in order.

Doctor Forrest came at half past eight. He asked Bobbie if she had bought the brandy. Bobbie said yes, though it was only in a small flat bottle. He noticed that there were no grapes or proper beef tea yet. Bobbie said firmly that there would be tomorrow, and that some beef was already cooking for broth. The doctor looked pleased and told her to eat breakfast and sleep, because they could not have the head nurse ill too.

That morning, when the 9:15 came out of the tunnel, the old gentleman looked out as usual. He expected to see three children waving from the fence. But this time there was only Peter. He was not sitting on the fence in the usual way. He stood in front of it and pointed to a large white sheet nailed there. On the sheet were big black letters, asking people to look out at the station.

Many people in the train did look out at the station, but most of them saw nothing special. The old gentleman looked too. At first, he saw only the platform, the flowers, and the bright morning. Then, just as the train was starting again, Phyllis ran up, quite out of breath. Her bootlaces had come undone more than once, and she had nearly missed him. She pushed a warm, damp letter into his hand before the train moved away.

The old gentleman opened the letter in his carriage. The children had written that Mother was ill, and that the doctor had ordered many things for her. Mother could not afford them, and Father was away, so they did not know whom else to ask. They promised that Father would pay, or if Father could not, Peter would pay when he was grown up. At the end of the letter, they copied the doctor's list.

The old gentleman read the letter once. Then he read it again and smiled a little. After the third reading, he put it carefully into his pocket and went back to his newspaper. The children, of course, did not know what he was thinking. All day they waited and hoped. They had done something bold, and perhaps wrong, but they had done it for Mother.

At about six o'clock that evening, someone knocked at the back door. The children ran to open it, and there stood the friendly porter from the station. He put a large hamper down on the kitchen floor and said the old gentleman had asked him to bring it at once. Peter thanked him, then awkwardly said he was sorry he had no money to give him. The porter was hurt, because he had not come for money. He had come to ask after Mother and to bring her some sweet-smelling flowers.

The children opened the hamper with shaking hands. First there was straw, then soft wood shavings, and then all the things they had asked for. There were also things they had not asked for: peaches, chickens, roses, lavender water, and bottles of eau-de-Cologne. There was a letter too. The old gentleman wrote that Mother should be told the gifts came from a friend who had heard she was ill, but that when she was well, the children must tell her the whole truth. Peter was not happy about that part, but Bobbie said they would wait until Mother was better, and for now they must take the roses and the sweetbrier upstairs to her.

Part 7 — The Letter, the Doctor, and Bobbie's Birthday

About two weeks passed after the wonderful hamper came. By then Mother was almost well again. The children used the rest of the white sheet and black paint to make another large message for the Green Dragon. This one said that

Mother was nearly well and thanked the old gentleman. They showed it when the 9:15 train passed, and the old gentleman saw it. He waved back cheerfully, and the children felt warm and happy for a moment.

But after that warm moment came a harder thing. They had promised to tell Mother everything when she was better. Now she was better, and there was no honest way out. The children found that telling the truth was much harder than they had expected. Still, they did it. Mother listened, and then she became more angry than they had ever seen her.

Mother was not often angry, so this was very frightening. But the worst moment came when she suddenly began to cry. Then the children cried too, because crying often spreads from one person to another. Bobbie cried because Mother was unhappy. Peter cried because he hated being in trouble. Phyllis cried because everyone else was crying, and also because she was truly sorry.

Mother stopped crying first. She dried her eyes and said she was sorry she had been so angry, because she knew they had not understood. Bobbie sobbed that they had not meant to be bad. Mother said she knew that. But she told them very clearly that, though they were poor, they still had enough to live on. They must not tell strangers about the family's private troubles, and they must never ask strangers to give them things.

The children promised. They hugged Mother and pressed their wet faces against her. Mother said she would write to the old gentleman herself. She would thank him for his kindness, but she would also say that she did not approve of what the children had done. She said it was the children she did not approve of, not him, because he had been as kind as anyone could be. Then she told them to take the letter to the Station Master, so he could pass it to the old gentleman.

Afterward, when the children were alone, Bobbie said Mother was wonderful. Not many grown-ups would say they were sorry after they had been angry. Peter agreed that Mother was wonderful, though he added that she was rather terrible when she was angry. Phyllis said Mother looked beautiful when she was truly angry, but too frightening to look at for long. Then the children took the letter down to the Station Master. He seemed surprised when he heard that the old

gentleman was their friend, but he took the letter.

While they were at the station, they went to talk with the porter. They learned that his name was Perks, and that he had a wife and three children. They also learned more railway words. The lamps at the front of an engine were called head-lights, and the lamps at the back were called tail-lights. Phyllis whispered that this proved trains really were dragons, because they had heads and tails. Perks also told them that engines were not all alike, and he explained the difference between small tank engines, goods engines, and fast main-line engines.

The children liked Perks more and more. He spoke in a friendly way, and he made railway knowledge sound like a secret world opening before them. Phyllis called the 9:15 the Green Dragon, but Perks said railway people called it the Snail because it was often late. Phyllis did not like this name as much, because the engine was green and strong in her mind. Still, she had to admit that snails could be green too. When the children went home, they all agreed that Perks was excellent company.

The next day was Bobbie's birthday. In the afternoon, Peter and Phyllis told her very firmly to go away and stay away until tea time. They said there would be a wonderful surprise. Bobbie tried to feel grateful, but she would rather have helped them than spend her birthday afternoon alone. She went into the garden by herself and walked among the bushes. There were buds on the roses, but not many open flowers yet.

Because she was alone, Bobbie had too much time to think. She remembered something Mother had said during one of her feverish nights. Mother had worried about the doctor's bill. The words came back to Bobbie again and again as she walked around the garden. The more she thought about the bill, the more troubled she felt. At last she made up her mind to speak to the doctor herself.

Bobbie went out through the garden side door and climbed up the field to the road by the canal. She walked to the bridge and waited there. The canal water below looked blue and peaceful in the sun. The railway was still the children's first love, but the canal had its own quiet beauty. Bobbie leaned on the warm stone and watched for the doctor's cart.

The children did not love the canal people as much as the railway people. The railway people had been kind: the Station Master, Perks, and the old gentleman. The people on the canal had not been kind. One barge boy had once thrown pieces of coal at them, and one piece had hit Phyllis on the neck. So Bobbie felt safer on the bridge than down by the towpath. From the bridge, she could hide if any canal boy seemed ready to throw anything.

Soon she heard wheels. It was Doctor Forrest in his dogcart. He stopped and called to her, asking if the head nurse wanted a ride. Bobbie said she wanted to see him. The doctor looked worried at first and asked if Mother was worse. Bobbie said no, and he invited her to climb in. The horse turned around rather unwillingly, because it had been going home to its food.

As they drove along, the doctor asked what the trouble was. Bobbie found it hard to begin. Mother had told her not to tell everyone that they were poor, and Bobbie did not want to disobey. But she decided that the doctor was not "everyone." She told him that doctors were expensive, and that Mrs. Viney belonged to a club that made doctoring cost very little each week. Then she asked if they could belong to such a club too, because she did not want Mother to be worried.

The doctor was silent for a little while. He was not a rich man himself, and the question was not easy for him. But he was kind. He told Bobbie not to worry, and he said he would make it right with Mother, even if he had to make a new club just for her. Then he showed Bobbie the aqueduct, a great water bridge that carried the canal across the valley. Bobbie admired it, and the doctor explained that engineering was not only making engines. It could also mean making roads, bridges, tunnels, and other great works.

When Bobbie left the doctor near the field above Three Chimneys, she felt lighter. She knew Mother might not think she had done right, but Bobbie felt she had acted from love. She ran down the slope toward the house and found Peter and Phyllis waiting for her at the back door. They were very clean and neat, and Phyllis had a red bow in her hair. Bobbie had just enough time to make herself tidy and tie a blue bow in her own hair before the little bell rang.

When the bell rang again, Bobbie went into the dining room. The room looked like a world of candles, flowers, and song. Mother, Peter, and Phyllis stood together and sang a birthday song Mother had made for her. There were twelve candles on the table, one for each year of Bobbie's life. There were flowers everywhere, and at Bobbie's place there was a crown of forget-me-nots and several little presents. Bobbie felt the sharp sweet feeling that comes just before tears.

The presents were lovely. Phyllis had made a needle-book. Mother gave Bobbie a small silver brooch shaped like a buttercup, which Bobbie had loved for years. Mrs. Viney sent two blue glass vases that Bobbie had admired in the village shop. Then Bobbie saw the table itself. Peter had made a flower map of the railway, with flowers for the rails, the station, the train, Three Chimneys, the children, the old gentleman, and Mother watching from home.

Peter's present was sweets placed in the tender of his dear broken engine. For a moment Bobbie thought he was giving her the engine too, and her face changed when she learned it was only the sweets. Peter saw her face and felt something inside him move. He said quickly that she could have half the engine if she liked. Bobbie understood that he had not meant to give so much at first, and this made the gift better, not worse. She decided silently that the broken half would be hers, and that she would try to get it mended for Peter.

The birthday tea was very happy. Mother played games with them afterward, and they chose blindman's-buff first. Later, when they were calm again, Mother read them a new story. At bedtime, Bobbie asked Mother not to sit up late working, and Mother said she would only write to Father and then go to bed. But later, when Bobbie crept downstairs to bring up her presents, she saw Mother sitting at the table with her head on her arms. Bobbie slipped away quietly, telling herself that if Mother did not want her to know she was unhappy, then she would not know.

Part 8 — The Engine-Burglar

The next day, Bobbie thought often about Peter's broken engine. He had

offered her half of it on her birthday, and she had understood what that meant. It was not really half an engine that she wanted. She wanted Peter to have his dear engine whole again. Father was not there to mend it now, and this made the broken toy seem sadder than before.

Bobbie began to think of the real railway engines. The men who drove them must know a great deal about engines. Perhaps one of them would know how to mend Peter's little one, or at least know someone who could. The idea grew stronger in her mind each day. At last she wrapped the toy engine in brown paper and waited for a chance to take it secretly to the station.

The chance came when Mother had to go out, and Peter and Phyllis went with her. Bobbie did not want to go, but she could not think of a good excuse. Then, just when she needed one most, her dress caught on a large nail near the kitchen door. A long tear opened across the front. This really was an accident, but it served her purpose very well. The others were sorry for her and went without her, because there was no time for her to change.

When they had gone, Bobbie put on her everyday dress and took the brown paper parcel under her arm. She did not go into the station building. Instead, she went along the line to the end of the platform, where engines stopped beside the water tank. There was a long leather hose there, hanging like an elephant's trunk. Bobbie hid behind a bush on the other side of the railway and waited.

When the next train came in, Bobbie watched it with a beating heart. The engine stopped near the water tank, breathing steam and making small angry sounds. Bobbie crossed the line carefully and stood close beside it. She had never been so near a real engine before. It looked huge, black, hard, and strong. She suddenly felt very small and soft, as if the engine could hurt her without even noticing.

The engine driver and the fireman did not see her. They were leaning out on the other side and talking to the porter. Bobbie tried to speak. "Please," she said, but the engine let out steam at the same moment, and no one heard her. She tried again, a little louder, calling the driver "Mr. Engineer." But the engine was louder than Bobbie, and her small voice disappeared in the noise.

She thought the only way was to climb up and touch one of the men on the arm. The step was high, but she managed to put one knee on it. Then she climbed into the cab. As she did so, she slipped and fell on her hands and knees among the coal. At that very moment, the driver started the train. When Bobbie stood up again, the train was moving.

It was not moving very fast at first, but it was already too fast for her to jump down safely. Fear rushed through her. What if this train did not stop for miles and miles? What if it went all the way to some far place? She had no money to return home. Worse still, she had no right to be there at all. In her frightened mind, she told herself that she was an engine-burglar.

For a few moments, Bobbie could not speak. The two men had their backs to her and were busy with the engine. At last she reached out and caught the sleeve nearest to her. The man turned suddenly, and for a moment he and Bobbie looked at each other in complete surprise. Then he spoke, and Bobbie burst into tears. The other man also turned round, and both men looked at the small girl who had appeared among their coal.

They were surprised, but they were not cruel. One of them said she was a naughty little girl. The other said she was a daring little thing. They made her sit down on an iron seat in the cab and told her to stop crying and explain herself. Bobbie tried to obey. One thought helped her. Peter would have given almost anything to be where she was, riding on a real engine.

She wiped her eyes and told them what had happened. She said she had called from beside the line, but they had not heard her. She had climbed up only to touch one of them gently, and then she had fallen into the coal. She said she was very sorry if she had frightened them. The men listened. They were still astonished, but they began to understand that Bobbie had not meant harm.

Then Bobbie explained the real reason for her coming. She showed them Peter's broken toy engine. She said her brother loved it very much, but it had been damaged, and Father was away and could not mend it. She asked whether they knew anyone who could repair it. The men looked at the small engine with interest. They knew engines, of course, though this one was tiny beside their great black

one.

The driver was called Bill, and the fireman was called Jim. They spoke together about the toy and about who might mend it. Jim said that his second cousin's wife's brother could solder things, and that he would make sure the job was done properly. Bobbie began to feel that she had not fallen among enemies after all. She had fallen among railway friends. The fear went out of her, and her eyes began to shine.

The men let her stay in the cab until the train reached Stacklepoole Junction. During the ride, Bobbie learned more about engines than she had ever dreamed there was to know. She saw handles, gauges, coal, fire, steam, and water, all working together in a hot, noisy world. Bill showed her how he used a shining steel handle to control the steam. Jim explained things in simple words, and Bobbie listened with all her mind.

At Stacklepoole Junction, Bill and Jim handed Bobbie over to a guard on a train going back. The guard was their friend, so Bobbie was safe. On the way home, she learned about the guard's van too. She saw how the communication cord worked, and why a bell rang when it was pulled. She also learned why the van smelled of fish. Boxes of fish had been carried there, and water had drained from them into the floor.

Bobbie reached home in time for tea. Her head felt full, as if all the new things she had learned were trying to burst out at once. When Peter and Phyllis asked where she had been, she only said she had been to the station. She did not tell them the story yet. She wanted to wait until the right day, when she could show them the result of her adventure.

That day came when she led them mysteriously to the station at the time of the 3:19 train. There she introduced them proudly to Bill and Jim. The toy engine had been mended beautifully. Jim's second cousin's wife's brother had done his work well, and Peter's engine looked almost new again. Peter held it as if it were alive, and for once he had very little to say.

Bobbie said goodbye to Bill and Jim with all her heart. Just then the real engine gave its loud cry, as if it too were saying goodbye. On the way home, Peter carried

the mended engine carefully in his arms. Bobbie walked beside him, feeling happier than she had felt for many days. Then, with great joy, she told Peter and Phyllis the whole story of how she had become an engine-burglar.

Part 9 — The Russian Stranger

One day, Mother went to Maidbridge by herself. The children were to go to the station later and meet her train. Of course, because they loved the station, they arrived much too early. Even if Mother's train had been on time, they would still have had a long wait. But the day was wet and cold, though it was July. The wind drove dark clouds across the sky, and the rain beat hard against the station windows.

The children were glad to get inside the waiting room. Phyllis said it was like being inside a castle while enemies shot arrows at the walls. Peter said it was more like being hit by a very large garden water-squirter. They decided to wait on the up side, because the other platform was much wetter. They had Mother's waterproof coat and umbrella with them, so they felt they were well prepared. There were also trains to watch before Mother's train came, and that made the waiting easier.

To pass the time, they played a game with advertisements. One child went out, came back, and tried to look like a picture from an advertisement, while the others guessed what it was. Bobbie sat under Mother's umbrella and made a sharp fox-like face, and the others guessed quickly. Phyllis tried to make Mother's waterproof into a magic carpet, but no one understood. Peter covered his face with coal dust and tried to look like an ink advertisement, which the girls thought was going too far.

Just then, the signal sounded for a train. The children ran out to see it. The engine driver and fireman were their friends now, and they greeted the children from the engine. Jim asked about the toy engine, and Bobbie gave him some sticky toffee that she had made herself. The driver was pleased and even said he would think about taking Peter on an engine one day. Then he called to them to stand

back, and the train moved away.

The children watched the train until its back lights disappeared around the curve. Then they turned to go back to the waiting room. They expected to see only one or two people leaving the platform. Instead, they saw a dark crowd gathered near the station door. Everyone was talking at once, and everyone was trying to look over someone else's shoulder. Peter's eyes shone, because he loved anything that looked like an event.

They ran to the crowd, but at first they could see only wet coats and backs and elbows. Someone said the man was not quite right in the head. Someone else said it might be a police matter. Another person thought the man should be taken to a hospital. Then the Station Master spoke in his firm railway voice and told people to move along. But the crowd did not move, because the thing in the middle was too interesting.

Then the children heard a voice speaking in a language they did not know. It was not English, and it was not like ordinary foreign talk they had heard before. Peter had learned some French and a little Latin, and he was sure it was not either of those. He pushed forward and said, "That is not French." The crowd moved a little, and then Peter saw the man at the centre. He had long hair, wild eyes, worn clothes, and shaking hands.

The man looked frightened and lost. His clothes were strange, and his face looked as if he had suffered for a long time. Someone told Peter to try French if he knew so much. Peter bravely began with the little French he knew. At once, the man sprang forward and caught Peter's hands. He poured out many words, and though Peter did not understand them, he knew the sound. He turned proudly to the crowd and said, "That is French."

But knowing that it was French did not mean Peter could understand it. Bobbie and Phyllis came close to him, and all three children wished they had learned French better at school. The Station Master wanted to take the man into his room. The stranger pulled away and trembled as if he thought someone was going to lock him up. Bobbie saw his eyes and understood his fear. She said gently that he thought he was being trapped.

Bobbie asked to try speaking to him. In that important moment, she remembered some French words she had not known she remembered. Her French was not good, but her voice was kind. She told him, as well as she could, that he should wait, that her mother spoke French, and that they would be good to him. Perhaps he did not understand every word. But he understood Bobbie's hand in his hand and the way she softly touched his sleeve.

She led him toward the Station Master's room. Peter and Phyllis followed, and the Station Master shut the door on the crowd. Inside, the stranger still looked frightened, but Bobbie stayed near him. The Station Master said the man had no ticket and did not seem to know where he wanted to go. He wondered if he should send for the police. All the children cried out at once and begged him not to do that.

Bobbie suddenly stood in front of the stranger, because she had seen that he was crying. She had a handkerchief in her pocket, and by good luck it was almost clean. She passed it to him quietly, so the others would not notice his tears. Phyllis told the Station Master that Mother spoke beautiful French and would soon arrive. Peter said he was sure the man had not done anything bad enough for prison. The Station Master agreed to wait until Mother came.

Then Peter had an idea. He had some foreign stamps in an envelope. He showed the man an Italian stamp, then a Norwegian stamp, and then a Spanish one. The stranger shook his head each time. Then he took the envelope himself and searched through the stamps with a shaking hand. At last he held out a Russian stamp. Peter cried out that the man was Russian, and everyone felt that at last they knew one small piece of the truth.

Mother's train was signalled. Bobbie stayed with the stranger while Peter, Phyllis, and the Station Master went to meet Mother. When they came back with her, Bobbie was still holding the man's hand. The stranger stood up and bowed very politely. Mother spoke to him in French. At first he answered slowly, but then he spoke more and more. The children watched Mother's face and saw pity, anger, and sorrow pass over it.

The Station Master could not keep quiet and asked what it all meant. Mother

said the man was Russian, had lost his ticket, and was very ill. She asked to take him home with her, because he was completely worn out. The Station Master was not sure this was wise, but Mother smiled and said the man was a great writer in his own country. She had read some of his books. Then she spoke to the Russian again, and his face filled with surprise and thanks.

The Russian offered Mother his arm in a very formal way. Mother took it, but anyone could see that she was really helping him, not the other way round. She told the girls to run home and light a fire in the sitting room. She told Peter to fetch the doctor, though Bobbie went instead. Soon the Russian gentleman was sitting in Father's old armchair at Three Chimneys, with his feet near a bright fire and a cup of hot tea in his hands. For the first time since they had seen him at the station, he looked not safe exactly, but less lost.

Part 10 — Prisoners and Captives

Doctor Forrest looked carefully at the Russian gentleman. The man sat in Father's old chair, holding the cup of tea in both hands. His fingers still shook, and every few minutes a hard cough bent his body forward. The doctor said he was worn out in mind and body. The cough was bad, but it could be cured with rest, warmth, and care. He said the Russian must go to bed at once, and there must be a fire in his room through the night.

Mother said she would make a fire in her own room, because it was the only bedroom with a fireplace. She spoke as if this were quite simple, but Bobbie saw that Mother was tired too. Mother went upstairs and began to make the room ready. Soon the doctor helped the Russian gentleman up the stairs. He moved slowly, like a person who had forgotten what safety felt like.

In Mother's room there was a large black trunk. The children had seen it before, but they had never seen it open. Now Mother unlocked it and took out men's clothes. She put them near the fire to warm and air them. Bobbie came in with more wood and saw a name on a nightshirt. It was Father's name. Then she looked again at the trunk and saw that all the things inside seemed to be Father's clothes.

Bobbie's heart began to beat hard. Father had gone away, but he had not taken these clothes. Why had he not taken them? Had something happened so suddenly that he could not pack? Had Mother hidden something even worse than Bobbie had imagined? Bobbie did not ask at once. She went out quietly, and behind her she heard Mother lock the trunk again.

When Mother came out of the room, Bobbie ran to her and held her tightly. She whispered, "Mother, Daddy is not dead, is he?" The words came out before she could stop them. Mother started and held Bobbie close. She said, "No, darling. No. What made you think such a terrible thing?" Bobbie could not explain without saying she had seen the trunk, so she only said she did not know.

Mother told her that Father had been quite well when she last heard from him. She said he would come back to them one day. Bobbie wanted very much to believe this. She tried to push away the picture of the open trunk and the clothes by the fire. She also remembered her own rule: if Mother did not want her to know something, then Bobbie would not show that she knew it. So she kissed Mother and tried to be quiet.

Later, when the Russian gentleman was comfortable for the night, Mother came to the girls' room. She was going to sleep there, because her own room had been given to the guest. Phyllis was to sleep on a mattress on the floor, and she thought this was a great adventure. But when Mother came in, both girls sat up at once. They wanted the story of the Russian gentleman.

Peter came too, wrapped in his quilt and looking like a white bird with a long tail. He said they had waited very patiently. He had even bitten his tongue to keep himself awake, and now it hurt. Mother smiled a little, but her face was pale. She said she could not tell them a long story that night, because she was very tired. But the children begged, and at last she sat down and began.

Mother said the Russian gentleman was a writer. In his own country, he had written beautiful books. One of his books was about poor people and how they might be helped. It said that rich and powerful people should not treat poor people cruelly. It was full of kindness, not hate. But in Russia, at that time, people could be punished for saying such things.

Peter found this hard to believe. He said people were sent to prison only when they had done wrong. Mother answered that in England, people were sent to prison when judges thought they had done wrong. But in Russia, things had been different. The Russian gentleman had written a good and brave book, and for that he had been sent to prison. He had been shut up for three years in a dark, damp place with almost no light.

Mother's voice changed when she said this. It became lower and less steady. Bobbie felt Mother's body move a little beside her, and she knew Mother was trying not to cry. Peter said it sounded like something from a history book. Mother said it was true. After those years in prison, the Russian gentleman had been sent far away to Siberia.

Mother explained that he had been chained with other prisoners. Some of them had done terrible crimes, but he had not. Still, he had to walk with them for days and weeks. Men with whips followed them. If the prisoners became weak and fell, they were beaten. Some were left to die on the road. Mother stopped for a moment, because the story was almost too hard to tell.

At last, the Russian gentleman reached the mines. He was told he must stay there for life. The children were silent now. Even Phyllis, who often asked questions without thinking, did not speak. Bobbie thought of the man's frightened eyes at the station and the way his hand had trembled in hers. She understood now that he had not only been lost at the station. He had been lost for years in fear and pain.

Peter asked how he had escaped. Mother said that when war came, some Russian prisoners were allowed to become soldiers. The Russian gentleman joined them, but he left the army as soon as he could. Peter said leaving in wartime sounded cowardly. Mother asked whether he owed anything to a country that had treated him so cruelly. Then she said he owed more to his wife and children, because he did not know what had happened to them.

Bobbie cried out softly, because she had not known the Russian gentleman had a wife and children. Mother said he had thought about them all the years he was in prison and in Siberia. He did not know whether they were safe. They might

even have been sent to prison too. Later, friends had sent him a message saying his wife and children had escaped to England. So when he was free, he came to England to find them.

Peter asked if he knew their address. Mother said no. He knew only that they were in England. He was trying to reach London, but he thought he had to change trains at their station. Then he found that he had lost his ticket and his purse. That was why he had seemed so helpless and afraid. He was ill, alone, and unable to explain himself.

Phyllis asked whether he would find his wife and children. Mother said she hoped so with all her heart. Her voice shook again, and this time even Phyllis noticed. She said Mother sounded very sorry for him. Mother did not answer at once. She sat quietly in the dim room, perhaps thinking about the Russian gentleman, perhaps thinking about Father, and perhaps thinking about many sad things the children still did not know.

Then Mother said that when the children said their prayers, they might ask God to be kind to all people in prison and all people held far from home. Bobbie repeated the words slowly, so she would remember them. Mother said yes, that was right. They should remember all prisoners and all captives. The children lay down again, but Bobbie did not sleep for a long time. She kept thinking of the Russian gentleman, of Father's locked trunk, and of Mother's trembling voice.

Part 11 — Saving the Train

The Russian gentleman was better the next day, and better still the day after that. On the third day, he was able to come into the garden. Mother put a basket chair for him in the sun, and he sat there wearing some of Father's clothes. They were much too large for him, but Mother had turned up the sleeves and trousers, so they did well enough. His face looked kinder now that fear and tiredness had gone from it. Whenever he saw the children, he smiled.

The children wanted very much to show him that they cared about him. They could smile at him, and they did smile, but smiling all the time soon began to feel

silly. So they brought him flowers instead. They picked clover, roses, and Canterbury bells, and put them near his chair. Soon the ground around him looked like a small, fading garden. Mother sat near him too, correcting proofs and writing letters to people who might help find his wife and children.

Mother did not write to the people she had known before they came to Three Chimneys. She wrote to people who might be useful: editors, members of Parliament, and people in helpful societies. The children did not fully understand this, but Bobbie noticed it. Mother seemed willing to ask strangers for the Russian gentleman, though she would not ask old friends for herself. That made Bobbie think again about pride, kindness, and trouble. But she said nothing, because there were still many things Mother did not want explained.

Then Phyllis had an idea. She called Peter and Bobbie into the yard, between the pump and the water butt. She reminded them that Perks had promised her the first strawberries from his own garden. Surely, she said, some of them must be ripe by now. The children had not gone to the station for three days, because the Russian gentleman had been so interesting. Now they decided to go down and see Perks.

They expected Perks to be pleased to see them. Instead, he received them very coldly. He sat in the porters' room and read his newspaper as if they were almost not there. Bobbie sighed and said she believed he was cross. Perks said he was not cross, but he said it in a way that showed very clearly that he was. He said it was nothing to him if people had secrets.

The children looked at one another in surprise. They searched their minds and could not think of any secret they had kept from Perks. Bobbie said they had no secrets from him. Perks held up his newspaper and wished them a very good afternoon. Phyllis was almost in despair and begged him to tell them what they had done. Peter said even people who did crimes were told what they were being punished for.

At last the truth came out. Mother had been to the station and told the Station Master the story of the Russian prisoner. The children had thought the Station Master would surely tell Perks. But he had not. Perks had felt hurt because the

children had not come to tell him themselves. He thought they came quickly enough when they wanted railway knowledge, but not when there was a great story to share.

The children were very sorry. They explained that they had thought he already knew. Phyllis could bear the coldness no longer. She pulled the newspaper away and put her arms around Perks's neck. She said they should kiss and be friends. Perks tried to keep his pride for a little longer, but he could not stay angry. Soon they were all sitting outside on the warm grass, and the children told him the whole story of the Russian gentleman.

Perks listened with great interest. He did not like to call himself curious, but he was certainly interested. He talked in his own way about countries, politics, and how people always stood up for their own side. The children did not agree with everything he said, but they were glad that peace had returned. Then the signal sounded, and Perks said the next train was coming. After it had passed, he would take them to see if the strawberries were ripe.

Phyllis asked if she might give the strawberries to the Russian gentleman if there were any. Perks looked at her closely. He understood then that the strawberries were the reason they had come. Phyllis told the truth, though it was not easy. Perks was pleased with her honesty and said so. He crossed the line in front of the coming train in a way that made the girls afraid and made Peter secretly admire him very much.

The strawberries were ripe, and the Russian gentleman was delighted with them. After that, the children tried to think of another treat for him. The next morning, they remembered the wild cherry trees near the tunnel. They had seen the blossom in spring, and now there might be cherries. Mother let them take their lunch in a basket and also lent them her silver watch, so they would not be late for tea. Peter's own watch had stopped since he had dropped it into the water butt.

They walked to the top of the cutting near the tunnel. The railway lines lay far below them, between steep sides of grey stone. Bushes and small trees grew from cracks in the rock. Near the tunnel was a steep wooden stair, more like a ladder than a real stair. Peter thought they could climb down and reach the cherries from

there. They were almost at the little gate when Bobbie suddenly stopped and told them to listen.

There was a strange soft sound. It was not the wind, and it was not the telegraph wires. It was a whispering, rustling sound, and then it grew louder. Peter pointed to a tree on the far side of the cutting. The tree was moving, not like a tree in the wind, but as if it were walking. Then the other trees began to move too. For a moment, it looked like magic.

But it was not magic. Stones and earth began to fall onto the railway line below. Then a great part of the cutting slipped down. Trees, grass, stones, and earth all fell together with a heavy crash. A cloud of dust rose into the air. The children stared down at the great pile lying across the rails. Then Peter looked at Mother's watch and turned very white.

The 11:29 train had not passed yet. If it came round the corner and hit that pile, there would be a terrible accident. Bobbie said they must run to the station, but Peter said there was no time. The station was too far away. Phyllis suggested doing something to the telegraph wires, but they did not know how. Then Peter said that if only they had something red, they could go round the curve and wave it at the train.

At that moment Phyllis remembered the red flannel petticoats they were wearing under their dresses. Bobbie cried out that they must take them off. The girls did so as quickly as they could, and then they ran down the steep steps with the red cloth under their arms. They went past the fallen earth and stones and reached the place where the line was straight. Peter tore the petticoats into pieces, though Phyllis was sorry for them. Bobbie said it did not matter, because people might be killed.

They made six red flags from the torn cloth and young tree branches. Two flags were fixed between the rails, and each child held one or two more. Then they waited. The minutes seemed terribly long. Bobbie's hands grew cold, and her body shook. She began to think the train would never see their little flags. Then, far away, they heard the sound of the rails and saw a white puff of steam.

The train came very fast. Peter shouted to stand firm and wave as hard as they

could. One of the flags fixed on the line fell, and Bobbie ran forward to catch it up. Peter called to her to get off the line, but she could not move back yet. She waved both flags over the rails and cried, “Stop, stop, stop!” The engine seemed huge and black as it rushed toward her. Then, at last, it slowed, shook, and stopped not far from where Bobbie stood.

The driver and fireman jumped down, and Peter and Phyllis ran to tell them about the fallen mound around the curve. But Bobbie still stood with the flags in her hands. She waved more weakly, and then she fell across the line. The driver carried her into a first-class carriage and laid her on the cushions. She had fainted. The train ran back to the station with the children inside, and before they arrived, Bobbie opened her eyes and began to cry.

Everyone at the station was full of excitement. The Station Master, Perks, the guards, the driver, the fireman, and the passengers all praised the children. They spoke of brave action, quick thinking, and the lives that had been saved. Phyllis enjoyed being a heroine, and Peter enjoyed it too, though his ears grew red. But Bobbie wanted only to go home. As they walked away, everyone cheered them, and Phyllis cried that the cheer was for them. Bobbie said nothing. She was thinking of the terrible pile on the line and of the trusting train that had rushed toward it.

Part 12 — For Valour

After the train was saved, Bobbie did not forget the danger as quickly as Peter and Phyllis did. At night, she sometimes woke suddenly and saw the fallen earth again in her mind. She saw the engine rushing toward it, trusting that the line was clear. Then she remembered the red flags and the train stopping, and a warm feeling came into her heart. Fear and gladness were mixed together, and she did not know how to speak about them.

Bobbie was still thinking often about Mother too. She knew that Mother was unhappy, though Mother had not told her why. Bobbie did not ask questions, because she understood that Mother wanted silence. Instead, she tried to love

Mother more quietly and more carefully. This was not easy. It is hard to know that someone is sad and not ask why, but Bobbie tried.

The Russian gentleman also filled much of their thoughts. Mother had written many letters to people who might help him find his wife and children. Answers came back, but none of them brought the news they wanted. The Russian gentleman had learned a few English words now. He could say “Good morning,” “Good night,” “Please,” “Thank you,” and “Very good.” When the children brought him flowers, he smiled and said “Pretty,” and this made them love him more.

One morning, a letter came addressed to Peter, Bobbie, and Phyllis. They were very excited, because children do not often receive important letters. The letter was from the railway company. It said that the company wished to give them a small presentation because they had acted quickly and bravely and had saved the train from a terrible accident. The ceremony would be held at the station at three o’clock on the thirtieth, if that was convenient for them.

The children ran to Mother with the letter. Mother read it and looked proud of them, which was almost better than the letter itself. But she said that if the presentation was money, they must say thank you but not take it. Then she said their best white dresses must be washed, because they had to look neat for such an occasion. Bobbie said she and Phyllis could wash the dresses if Mother would iron them. Mother agreed, and the washing began.

Washing the dresses felt like part of the ceremony. The girls washed the light muslin very carefully in the back kitchen, while Peter stood by and made remarks. Phyllis wanted to rub and scrub, but Bobbie said delicate cloth must be shaken and squeezed gently. Outside the window, the roses moved in the soft air. Bobbie said it was a good drying day, and she felt grown up when she said it.

While the dresses dried, the children wondered what the presentation would be. Peter thought perhaps medals would be given, like medals for soldiers. Bobbie wondered if it was right to enjoy being rewarded for doing something that had simply needed to be done. Peter said brave soldiers did not ask for medals, but they were still glad to receive them. Phyllis thought of strange gifts, and the talk

soon became half serious and half funny. Still, under all the jokes, the children were very proud.

They had to answer the railway company's letter. Mother had gone back to her work, so they tried to write the answer themselves. It took several pieces of Phyllis's pink paper before they were satisfied. They wrote that they had not wanted a reward, but they were glad the company was pleased, and that the time and place would be convenient. Each child copied the letter and signed a name. Then they waited for the great day.

When the day came, they went to the station in their clean clothes. The station looked quite changed. The waiting room had a carpet, flowers, green branches, and many people inside. There were railway men, ladies in smart dresses, gentlemen in high hats, and some passengers from the train they had saved. Best of all, the old gentleman was there. He shook hands with them kindly, and the children felt both pleased and shy.

A railway gentleman with spectacles made a speech. It was a long speech, and the children did not understand every word. But they understood that he was praising their quick thought, their courage, and their good sense. The more he praised them, the hotter their faces became. Phyllis liked being a heroine, but even she grew red. Peter stared at the floor, and Bobbie wished speeches could be shorter.

Then the old gentleman stood up and spoke too. After that, he called each child by name. He gave Peter, Bobbie, and Phyllis each a beautiful gold watch and chain. Inside each watch were words saying that the railway directors gave it in thanks for brave and quick action that had prevented an accident. Each watch had a blue leather case. The children could hardly believe that such wonderful things now belonged to them.

Peter was pushed forward to make a speech of thanks. The Station Master whispered that he should begin with "Ladies and gentlemen." Peter began so, but then his voice became rather rough and nervous. He said it was very kind of everyone, and that they would keep the watches all their lives. He also said they had not really deserved them, because they had only done what had to be done.

Then he thanked everyone again, and the people clapped warmly.

As soon as they politely could, the children escaped from the station and ran up the hill to Three Chimneys. They carried their watches in their hands and looked at them again and again. It was one of those days that people remember for the rest of their lives. Yet Bobbie had another thought in her mind. She had wanted to speak to the old gentleman about the Russian gentleman, but there had been too many people. It had felt too public, almost like speaking aloud in church.

After thinking for a while, Bobbie wrote to the old gentleman. She called him her dearest old gentleman and asked if he could get out of the train and go on by the next one. She wrote that she did not want him to give them anything, because Mother did not approve of that. She only wanted to talk to him about a prisoner and captive. She gave the letter to the Station Master, and he promised to pass it on.

The next day, Bobbie asked Peter and Phyllis to come with her to the station at the right time. She explained her plan, and they agreed. They washed their faces, brushed their hair, and tried to look as tidy as possible. Unfortunately, Phyllis spilled lemonade on the front of her dress, and dust from the coal yard soon stuck to the sticky marks. Peter said she looked like a dirty little street child, so they decided she should stand partly behind the others.

When the old gentleman stepped down from the train, the children suddenly became shy. Their ears grew hot, their hands felt damp, and even Bobbie found it hard to speak. But the old gentleman greeted them kindly and took them into the waiting room. He asked what they wanted. Bobbie began slowly, then told him the whole story of the Russian writer, his book about poor people, his prison, Siberia, and his lost wife and children.

Bobbie said they wanted to find the Russian gentleman’s family more than anything else in the world. She said the old gentleman must be very clever because he was connected with the railway company. If he could help, they would rather have that than any present. They would even give up their watches if selling them would help find the wife and children. Peter and Phyllis agreed, though not quite as strongly as Bobbie.

The old gentleman asked the Russian gentleman's name, but he said it wrongly. Bobbie wrote it down for him in his fine green notebook and explained how to say it. When he read the name, his face changed. He knew the man's book. He said it was a fine and noble book and that many people in Europe had read it. Then he said Mother must be a very good woman to have taken such a man into her house.

Phyllis was surprised that anyone needed to say Mother was good. Bobbie, feeling shy but wanting to be polite, told the old gentleman that he was good too. He laughed and said he was very glad they had come to him. He knew many Russians in London, and he believed every Russian would know the writer's name. He said he would try to find out something soon. Bobbie felt hope rise in her, quiet but strong, like a small light in a dark room.

Part 13 — The Russian Family Found

Not ten days passed after Bobbie spoke to the old gentleman in the waiting room. One afternoon, the three children were sitting on the largest rock in the field below Three Chimneys. They were watching the 5:15 train leave the station and move along the valley. They saw a few people come out of the station and walk toward the village. Then they saw one person leave the road and open the gate that led across the fields to Three Chimneys.

Peter jumped down from the rock at once. Phyllis said they should go and see who it was, and Bobbie was already looking hard. The person came nearer across the field, and soon they knew him. It was the old gentleman himself. His brass buttons shone in the afternoon light, and his white waistcoat looked very bright against the green grass. The children shouted hello and waved their hands, and the old gentleman waved his hat back at them.

They ran to meet him. When they reached him, they had almost no breath left for polite words. The old gentleman did not wait long before telling them why he had come. He had good news. He had found the Russian gentleman's wife and child, and he had wanted very much to tell him himself. But when he saw Bobbie's

face, he understood that she wanted to carry the news more than anyone.

"You run on and tell him," he said kindly. "Peter and Phyllis can show me the way." Bobbie did not need to be told twice. She ran across the field as fast as she could, through the gate and toward the garden. Her heart beat hard, and the wonderful news seemed to run with her. She almost forgot that she was out of breath, because she was thinking of the Russian gentleman's face when he heard.

Mother and the Russian gentleman were sitting quietly in the garden. Mother had her work near her, and the Russian gentleman was resting in the chair. Bobbie came to them, breathless and bright-eyed. At first she could hardly speak, but then the words came out. The old gentleman had found his wife and child. Mother's face changed at once, and she spoke quickly to the Russian gentleman in French.

The Russian gentleman sprang up with a cry. It was not a cry of pain or fear. It was a cry of love, hope, and long waiting suddenly ended. Bobbie had never heard such a sound before, and it made her heart leap and tremble. The Russian gentleman took Mother's hand and kissed it gently, with deep respect. Then he sank back into his chair, covered his face with his hands, and sobbed.

Bobbie slipped away quietly. She had wanted to bring the news, but now she felt that the moment belonged to him and to Mother. It was too deep and private for a child to watch. She went out of the garden and stood alone for a little while. She was glad, but the gladness almost hurt her. She thought of the wife and child who had been lost and were now found, and then, though she tried not to, she thought of Father.

Soon the old gentleman arrived with Peter and Phyllis. There was much talking, much French, and many happy questions. Peter was sent quickly to the village for buns and cakes. The girls began to get tea ready in the garden. They put the cups and plates on the table and tried to make everything look as pretty as possible. Even Phyllis was careful, because the day felt important.

Tea in the garden was a very happy meal. The old gentleman was merry and kind, and he seemed able to speak French and English almost at the same time. Mother spoke French too, and the children admired her for it. The Russian gentleman listened, answered, smiled, and sometimes looked as if he could not

believe that the good news was real. Every now and then he pressed his hands together, as if he were holding joy inside them.

The old gentleman had brought gifts for the children too. He asked Mother if he might give his little friends some sweets, and Mother said yes at once. The word he used for them was new to the children, but when he opened his bag, they understood perfectly. There were three beautiful boxes, pink and green, tied with green ribbon. Inside were layers of chocolates more wonderful than any they had seen since the old London days.

The children thanked him with shining faces. They were happy about the chocolates, but they were happier still because the old gentleman had found the Russian family. The sweet boxes seemed part of the happy ending of that trouble. Mother made much of the old gentleman and thanked him again and again. The children loved seeing her speak to him warmly, because she had so few visitors now, and so few chances to look bright in that old way.

The Russian gentleman's few things were packed. There was not much to pack, and that made the children feel sad. He had come to them almost with nothing, tired, ill, and lost. Now he was leaving with hope before him. They all went with him to the station, and the walk down the hill felt different from other walks. The railway, which had first brought him to them in trouble, would now take him toward his wife and child.

At the station, the Russian gentleman said goodbye with deep feeling. Mother spoke to him in French, and he answered with tears in his eyes. The children shook his hand, and Phyllis looked as if she wanted to hug him but was not sure whether it would be proper. Then the train came, and he got in. They watched him through the window until the train began to move, and they waved until he was out of sight.

After the train had gone, Mother turned to the old gentleman. She said she did not know how to thank him for everything. She said it had been a real pleasure to see him. Then her voice changed a little. She said they lived very quietly, and she was sorry that she could not ask him to come and see them again. The children thought this was very hard. When they had made such a friend, they wanted him

to come often.

The old gentleman did not look offended. He only bowed in his kind, old-fashioned way and said he had been very fortunate to be welcomed once at her house. Mother said she knew she must seem unkind and ungrateful. He answered that she could never seem anything but kind and gracious. The children did not fully understand why Mother was refusing future visits. Bobbie understood more than the others, but even she did not understand all of it.

As they turned to go up the hill, Bobbie saw Mother's face. It looked very tired. Bobbie went close to her and said, "Lean on me, Mother." Peter at once said it was his place to give Mother his arm, because he was the head man of the family while Father was away. Mother smiled faintly and took one arm from Bobbie and one from Peter. For a little while they walked like that, slowly and quietly, up from the station.

Phyllis skipped beside them. She was thinking about the Russian gentleman and his family. She said it was lovely to imagine him meeting his long-lost wife and child. Then she wondered how much the child must have grown since he last saw it. Mother said yes, but her voice was low. Phyllis went on happily and said she wondered whether Father would think she had grown when he came back.

Mother's hands tightened suddenly on Bobbie's and Peter's arms. Peter thought she was only very tired, and he said so kindly. Bobbie understood more. She knew that Phyllis's innocent words had touched Mother's hidden pain. Bobbie could not stop Phyllis by explaining, so she did the only thing she could think of. She called to Phyllis and challenged her to race to the gate.

Bobbie hated doing it, because she did not feel like running. But she wanted to pull Phyllis away from more talk about Father. Phyllis ran at once, laughing, and Bobbie ran after her. Mother only thought Bobbie was tired of walking slowly. She did not know that Bobbie was trying to protect her. Even mothers, who love their children more than anyone else can, do not always understand everything their children do.

Part 14 — The Amateur Firemen

One afternoon, the children were having tea with Perks in the porters' room. They had brought their own cups and some jam turnovers, and Perks made tea in his usual strong way. Bobbie was wearing the little buttercup brooch Mother had given her for her birthday. Perks noticed it and said it looked almost more like a buttercup than a real buttercup. Bobbie was pleased, because she loved the brooch very much. When Perks learned that she had just had a birthday, he looked surprised, as if birthdays were rare things given only to lucky people.

Bobbie asked when his birthday was. Perks said he had stopped keeping birthdays long before the children were born. Phyllis said he must have been born sometime, even if it was twenty, thirty, sixty, or seventy years ago. Perks laughed and said it was not as long ago as that. His birthday was on the fifteenth of that month, and he would be thirty-two. When Phyllis asked why he did not keep it, Perks answered that he had other things to keep: his wife and children.

This made the children think. Perks was one of their dearest friends now. He was not as grand as the Station Master, and he was not as powerful as the old gentleman. But he was easier to talk to than either of them. Bobbie said it seemed wrong that nobody kept his birthday. Peter suggested that they go up to the canal bridge and talk about what they might do.

Peter had a new fishing line, which the postman had given him. Bobbie first thought Peter had traded roses for it, and she was angry because the roses had been for the postman's sick sweetheart. But Phyllis quickly explained that they had given the roses freely, and the postman had given the line afterward because he was grateful. Bobbie said she was sorry. Peter accepted the apology in a grand manner. Then they all went to the canal bridge, meaning to talk about Perks's birthday and perhaps do a little fishing.

The evening was beautiful. The sun was going down over the hills, and the canal lay smooth and quiet below the bridge. Bobbie would have been happy simply to stand and look at it, but Peter liked beauty better when he had something to do at the same time. The fishing line was not quite long enough from the bridge, so he wanted to go down to the towpath. The girls remembered the canal boys

who had once thrown coal at them, but Peter said there were no boys there now. If there were, he said, he would fight them.

The girls did not remind him that he had not fought the coal-throwing boys last time. They climbed down the bank with him and began to fish. For half an hour, nothing happened. The water looked as if no fish had ever lived in it. Then a rough voice shouted at them to get out of the way. An old white horse was coming along the towpath, pulling a barge behind it.

The children quickly climbed up the bank. They thought they could go down again after the barge passed. But the barge stopped under the bridge and was tied up there. The bargeman was red-faced and heavy-looking, and he spoke roughly. Peter answered him too boldly from halfway up the bank and said they had as much right there as anyone. The man climbed down from the barge and came up the bank much faster than the children expected.

Before Peter could escape, the bargeman caught him by the leg, pulled him down, and took him by the ear. He said the children had no right to fish there. Peter said, with real courage, that he had not caught any fish. The bargeman said that was not Peter's fault and twisted his ear a little. Bobbie could not bear to see Peter held like that. She rushed down the bank so fast that she almost fell into the canal, but the bargeman caught her and set her on her feet.

Bobbie spoke to him politely. She said they were sorry if the canal was his and that they would not fish there again. She promised that they had not caught any fish and even held out her empty hands to prove it. Phyllis turned out her pocket too. The bargeman became a little less angry and told them to go away and not do it again. Then he called to his wife for his coat and went off toward the village inn.

The barge woman came out of the cabin with a baby in her arms. She threw the coat to her husband, and he called that she could find him at the Rose and Crown after the baby was asleep. When he had gone, Peter insisted on going back to the bridge. His ear was sore, and his feelings were even sorer. He said the canal might belong to the bargeman, though he did not believe it, but the bridge belonged to everyone. Bobbie and Phyllis did not want to stay, but they would not leave Peter alone.

The barge woman soon came up to them. She told them not to mind her Bill too much, because his bark was worse than his bite. Some rough boys from farther down the canal had made him angry before, and he had thought the children were the same sort. She said they might fish if they liked, because Bill would not be back for two hours. Bobbie thanked her and asked about the baby. The woman's face grew bright when she said the baby was asleep in the cabin and was the finest baby anyone could see.

Peter asked if she was not afraid to leave the baby alone. The woman said no one would hurt such a little thing, and that Spot the dog was there too. Then she went away. Phyllis asked if they should go home, but Peter said he was going to fish. Bobbie reminded him they had come to talk about Perks's birthday, but Peter said that could wait. So they went down again to the towpath, and Peter fished, though he caught nothing at all.

It grew almost dark, and the girls became tired. Bobbie said it was past bedtime. Then Phyllis suddenly pointed at the barge. Smoke was coming from the cabin door. Peter said calmly that it was on fire and that it served the bargeman right. But Phyllis thought of the dog, and Bobbie screamed, "The baby!" In a moment, all three children were running toward the barge.

The end of the barge had drifted close to the bank. Bobbie reached it first, Peter came next, and then Peter slipped and fell into the canal up to his neck. Phyllis caught his hair, which hurt him but helped him get out. Peter climbed onto the barge, wet through, and Phyllis followed him. Bobbie tried to go into the cabin, but Peter pushed her back. He said he must go because he was already wet.

Peter pulled his wet handkerchief from his pocket and tied it over his mouth. He went down the cabin steps into the thick smoke. Bobbie tried to follow, but Peter pushed her back again, more roughly than before. He called out that there was hardly any fire, though he did not really know if that was true. He only wanted to keep Bobbie from rushing in after him. Then the baby cried, and that sound showed Peter where to go.

Peter felt through the smoke until he found something small, warm, and alive. He picked it up and backed out of the cabin, nearly falling over Bobbie. The dog

tried to bark and snapped gently at Bobbie's hand, as if it knew she was a stranger but also knew she meant well. Peter came onto the deck with the baby in his arms. Bobbie told him to give her the baby because he was so wet. Then she told him to run to the Rose and Crown and bring help.

Peter said he could not run in his wet clothes, because they were heavy. So Bobbie handed the baby carefully to Phyllis on the bank and ran herself. She ran over the bridge and up the long road as fast as she could. At the Rose and Crown, many barge people were sitting round the fire, and Bill was telling a story about his own troubles. Bobbie burst in, breathless, and cried that she wanted Bill the bargeman. Then she saw the barge woman and told her the cabin was on fire.

The woman cried out for her baby, Reginald Horace. Bobbie quickly told her that the baby and dog were safe, but that the barge was burning. The woman ran faster than anyone expected. Bill came too, more slowly at first, but soon with great energy. By the canal, Phyllis had almost got the baby to sleep, and she felt rather hurt when the mother snatched him up. Bill jumped onto the barge, filled pails with water, and Peter helped him put the fire out.

It turned out that the fire had been Bill's own fault. He had knocked ashes from his pipe, and one red piece had fallen where it should not. To his credit, he did not blame his wife. He knew the fault was his. Later, when the children at last came home to Three Chimneys, Mother was terribly anxious. They were wet, dirty, excited, and all talking at once, but when Mother understood the story, she said they had done right.

The next day, Bill took them on the canal as a thank-you. They brought food in a basket and went through many locks. The old white horse pulled the barge, the water shone in the sun, and Bill was as friendly as anyone could be. The children came home tired, dirty, and happy. They told Mother about the locks, the baby, the dog, and the new canal friends. Then Phyllis suddenly remembered that they had gone to the bridge to talk about Perks's birthday and had not talked about it at all. Bobbie said Peter had saved Reginald Horace's life, and that was enough for one evening.

Part 15 — Planning Perks's Birthday

The next morning, Mother looked brighter than usual at breakfast. She poured the milk and served the porridge with a happy face. Then she told the children that she had sold another story. This meant there would be buns for tea. The children could go to the village and buy them as soon as they were baked.

Peter, Bobbie, and Phyllis looked at one another. They had been waiting for a chance like this. Bobbie asked if Mother would mind if they did not have the buns that day. Could they have them on the fifteenth instead? Mother asked why, and Bobbie explained that the fifteenth was Perks's birthday. He would be thirty-two, but he did not keep his birthday now, because he had a wife and children to keep.

Mother understood. Peter said Perks had been very kind to them, and they wanted to make a nice birthday for him. Mother asked what they would have done if she had not sold a story before the fifteenth. Peter said they meant to ask her to let them have the buns first and then go without buns later. Mother smiled and corrected his long word. Then she said it would be nice to put his name on the buns with pink sugar.

Peter said "Perks" was not a pretty name to write on buns. Phyllis said his other name was Albert, because she had asked him once. Mother suggested putting "A. P." on each bun. That sounded much better. The children were delighted. Still, buns alone did not seem enough for such a friend as Perks. They wanted a real birthday, not only a plate of sweet buns with letters on top.

Later they held a serious meeting in the hay-loft. The old broken machine stood there, and there were holes in the floor where hay could be dropped into the stable racks below. Bobbie said there were always flowers. Peter said Perks had flowers of his own. Bobbie answered that flowers were still nice when they were given with love. They could use flowers to make the birthday pretty, but they needed something more important too.

Phyllis said they should all be quiet and think. So they sat still. They were so quiet that a brown rat came out, thinking the loft was empty. Then Bobbie sneezed, and the rat ran away in great surprise. Peter suddenly jumped up and said he had

an idea. Perks was kind to many people, so many people in the village might like to help make his birthday.

Bobbie was not sure this was right. Mother had told them not to ask people for things. Peter said Mother meant they must not ask for themselves. This was different, because they were asking for Perks. Bobbie thought they should ask Mother first, but Peter said Mother was busy and should not be troubled about every little thing. So they went down to the village and began their work.

Asking people for things was not easy. The old woman at the post office said she did not see why Perks should have a birthday more than anyone else. Bobbie said she would like everyone to have one, but they happened to know when Perks's birthday was. The old woman said her own birthday was tomorrow, and no one would take any notice of that. Then she sent them away.

Other people were kinder. Some gave things at once, and some promised things for later. Some were rather cross and made the children feel small. It is hard to ask for things, even when they are not for yourself. By the time the children went home, they were tired, but they were also pleased. For a first day, they had done quite well.

Peter wrote everything in the small notebook where he kept engine numbers. They had been given a tobacco pipe from the sweet shop, half a pound of tea from the grocer, a faded woollen scarf from the draper, and a stuffed squirrel from the doctor. Other people had promised more. The butcher promised meat, a woman at the old turnpike cottage promised six fresh eggs, the cobbler promised honeycomb and bootlaces, and the blacksmith promised an iron shovel. It was a strange collection, but it looked grand in Peter's list.

Very early the next morning, Bobbie woke Phyllis. The girls had made a plan, but they had not told Peter, because they thought he might laugh. They cut a large bunch of roses and put them in a basket. They added the needle-book Phyllis had made for Bobbie's birthday and a pretty blue necktie that belonged to Phyllis. Then they wrote a note saying the things were for Mrs. Ransome, with their love, because it was her birthday.

They carried the basket to the post office. They put it on the counter and ran

away before Mrs. Ransome could come into the shop. When they got home, Peter had been helping Mother with breakfast and had already told her the Perks plan. Mother said there was no harm in it if they did it in the right way. But she warned them that Perks might be offended if he thought it was charity. Poor people, she said, were often very proud.

Phyllis said it was not because Perks was poor. It was because they loved him. Mother said she would find some clothes that Phyllis had outgrown, if the children were sure they could give them without hurting Perks's feelings. She wanted to do something for him too, because he had been good to them. Bobbie was writing something while Mother spoke, but she said it was nothing particular. Still, her face showed that she was thinking hard.

On the morning of the fifteenth, everyone was busy and happy. The buns were bought, and Mother showed them how to write A. P. on each one with pink sugar. She mixed white of egg and sugar, added a little red colour, and put the mixture into a paper cone. Then she used it like a pen. The letters looked beautiful on the buns, and the buns were put into a cool oven so the pink sugar would set.

Then the children went to the village to collect the promised things. On the way, Mrs. Ransome called them from the post office door. She had liked the roses, the needle-book, and the tie very much. She gave back the basket, but now it was full of fat red gooseberries. She said Perks's children might like them. Phyllis was so glad that she put her arms around the old woman's waist.

Mrs. Ransome had another gift too. There was an old baby carriage behind the house. It had once belonged to her own family, but the little baby who used it had died long ago. Mrs. Ransome said Mrs. Perks might find it useful with her youngest child. She was not sure Mrs. Perks would take it from her directly, but perhaps she would take it through the children. The children were deeply moved, though they did not know exactly what to say.

At last all the gifts were packed into the baby carriage. There were buns, flowers, gooseberries, honey, eggs, meat, clothes, the shovel, the scarf, the pipe, the stuffed squirrel, and many other things. At half past three, Peter, Bobbie, and Phyllis pushed the full carriage down to the little yellow house where Perks lived.

The house was very clean, and wild flowers stood in a jug on the window ledge. A half-washed child looked out and said his mother was changing her clothes.

Mrs. Perks came down a few minutes later. Her hair was brushed smooth, and her face shone with soap and water. She said she had been cleaning specially because Perks had happened to mention that it was his birthday. Peter told her they had brought presents for him. As the gifts were unpacked, Mrs. Perks looked more and more amazed. When everything was out, she sat down suddenly and began to cry.

The children were frightened and begged her not to cry. Peter asked if she did not like the presents. Mrs. Perks stopped crying as suddenly as she had begun and said she liked them more than she could say. Then she began to praise the children so warmly that their ears grew hot. Bobbie quickly asked for a plate for the buns, because she could not bear any more thanks. Soon the table was laid, the roses were in jars, and the birthday tea looked beautiful.

Then they heard Perks at the little gate. Bobbie whispered that they should hide in the back kitchen and let Mrs. Perks explain everything first. It was a good plan, but there was hardly time to do it. The children pushed the Perks children into the wash-house and followed them. The door did not close, so they could hear Perks come in. His voice sounded pleased at first when he saw the birthday tea, but then he noticed the baby carriage and the many bundles.

Part 16 — The Pride of Perks

Perks’s voice changed when he saw the baby carriage and the many bundles. At first, he had sounded pleased with the birthday tea and the tobacco from Mrs. Perks. But when he understood that many other things had been brought, his pride rose up at once. The children stood crowded together in the wash-house and heard every word, though they did not want to listen. Bobbie suddenly remembered something terrible: she had forgotten to put the labels on the gifts. Now Perks would think all the presents came from them, as if they were trying to act rich and important.

Perks said he would not accept charity. Mrs. Perks tried to stop him, but he became more angry, not less. He said they had lived for years without asking anyone for help, and he was not going to begin now. Then Mrs. Perks told him that the children were in the wash-house and could hear him. Perks said they might as well hear him properly, and he opened the wash-house door as far as he could. The children came out slowly, with the Perks children pressed behind them.

Perks asked what they meant by bringing all these things. Phyllis began to cry at once. She said she had thought he would be pleased, and now she would never try to be kind to anyone again. Peter said they had not meant any harm. But Perks answered that what people meant was not the whole matter. What they did also mattered, and what they had done looked like charity to him.

Bobbie tried to be braver than Phyllis. She told Perks that they always had presents on birthdays. Perks said that was different, because those presents came from their own family. Bobbie explained that, in their old home, servants and friends had given birthday presents too. Mrs. Viney had once given her blue glass vases, and nobody had thought it was charity. But Perks said this was not the same. There were too many things, too many bundles, and too much of everything.

Peter then said the gifts were not all from them. They had come from many people in the village. Perks asked who had told the village people to give anything. Phyllis, still crying, said that they had. This made things worse. Perks sat down heavily and looked at them with dark, hurt eyes. He said they had gone round the village telling people that his family could not manage. Now, he said, they had made him look poor and helpless before all the neighbours.

Bobbie felt as if the room had become smaller and darker. She had wanted to make Perks happy, and now everything had gone wrong. Perks said they could take the whole collection back where it came from. He said he did not wish to be friends with them any longer if this was the kind of friendship they brought. Then he turned his chair around and sat with his back to them. The legs of the chair made a hard sound on the brick floor.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Mrs. Perks was crying quietly, and the children stood still, full of shame. Then Bobbie said, “This is terrible.” Perks answered

without turning around that it certainly was. Bobbie said they would go if he wanted, and he need not be friends with them anymore. Phyllis cried that they would always be friends with him, even if he was unkind to them. Peter told her sharply to be quiet, because he saw that Bobbie was trying to explain.

Bobbie asked Perks to look at the labels they had written. He said he did not want labels unless they were proper railway luggage labels. But Phyllis reminded him that he had once been wrong about the Russian secret, and that perhaps he might be wrong again. Perks did not like this, but he listened. Bobbie searched in her pocket and pulled out the folded slips of paper. Her hands shook so much that she could hardly open them.

Bobbie began with Mother's label. Mother had sent some small clothes for Mrs. Perks's children. She had said she hoped Perks would not think it was charity, because she only wanted to do a little thing for him. She could not do much, because she was poor herself, but she wanted to help because he had been so kind to the children. Perks's back became a little less stiff. He said Mother was a real lady, and that they would keep the little clothes.

Then Bobbie read about the baby carriage, the gooseberries, and the sweets from Mrs. Ransome. Mrs. Ransome had said the carriage had belonged to her own dead grandchild, and she wanted a living baby to use it again. Mrs. Perks spoke up firmly and said she would not send that carriage back. Perks did not answer sharply this time. Then Bobbie read about the shovel from the blacksmith. He had made it himself and had said he respected Perks as a man who knew his work.

Bobbie read more labels. The honey and the bootlaces had come from people who said Perks paid his way and helped others. The woman from the turnpike cottage remembered how he had once helped her in the garden. The butcher had spoken well of him too. Nobody had said anything about charity. Everyone had said something kind, and many people had seemed glad to have the chance to give him something.

Last of all, Bobbie told him about the gold pound from the old gentleman. The old gentleman had said that Perks was a man who knew his work. Bobbie could not go on much longer. She said she had thought Perks would be glad to know

how much people liked and respected him. Then her voice broke. She said goodbye and hoped he might forgive them one day.

Bobbie turned to go, but Perks stopped her. He still had his back to them, but his voice was different now. He said he took back every word that had hurt them. Then he told Mrs. Perks to put the kettle on. Peter said they would take the things away if Perks was unhappy about them. But Perks turned around at last, and his face looked very strange, as if he were trying not to show too much feeling.

Perks said he was not unhappy about the gifts. In fact, he did not think he had ever been better pleased. The presents were fine, but the best thing was knowing that the neighbours respected him. Mrs. Perks said everything was worth having, and that he had made a great fuss over nothing. Perks answered that a man had to respect himself, or nobody else would respect him. Bobbie said everyone already respected him, because they had all said so.

After that, the birthday became happy again. Perks asked the children to stay for tea, and they did. The buns with A. P. on them were eaten, the honey was opened, and everyone drank tea. Later Peter stood up and proposed Perks's health, which made Perks look proud and shy at the same time. Then Perks proposed a toast of his own. He wished that friendship would always stay fresh and green, which was much more poetic than the children had expected from him.

That birthday made many people happy. Perks and his family were happy because of the gifts and the good feeling behind them. The children were happy because their plan had worked in the end, though not as easily as they had hoped. Mrs. Ransome was happy whenever she saw the Perks baby in the old carriage. Mrs. Perks went round later to thank the people who had given things, and after each visit she felt she had more friends than before. Perks himself decided that it was not only what people did that mattered, but what they meant by it.

Part 17 — Bobbie Learns the Secret

When the children first came to Three Chimneys, they talked about Father very often. They asked where he was, what he was doing, and when he would come

home. Mother answered as well as she could, but she never answered in a way that made them feel satisfied. As the weeks passed, they spoke of Father less and less. Bobbie had felt almost from the beginning that talk of Father hurt Mother. Little by little, Peter and Phyllis felt this too, though they could not have explained it clearly.

One day, Mother was working very hard in the big bare room they called her workshop. The room had very little furniture, only a table, a chair, and a rug. But there were always flowers on the windowsills and on the mantelpiece, because the children saw to that. Through the three long windows, Mother could see the fields, the far hills, and the changing sky. Bobbie carried tea upstairs to her and said, “Here is your tea, Mother. Please drink it while it is hot.”

Mother put down her pen among the pages on the table. Her writing covered them almost as neatly as print. She pushed her hands into her hair as if her head hurt. Bobbie asked gently whether it did hurt. Mother said yes and no, not much. Then she asked a question that surprised Bobbie. “Do you think Peter and Phyllis are forgetting Father?”

Bobbie answered quickly that they were not. Mother said none of the children spoke of him now. Bobbie stood awkwardly and did not know what to say. At last she said they often talked about Father when they were by themselves. Mother asked why they did not speak of him to her. Bobbie went to the window and looked out, because the answer was hard to give.

Mother called her back and put an arm around her. She told Bobbie to try to say the truth. Bobbie moved uneasily, then said she had thought Mother was so unhappy because Father was away that speaking of him made it worse. So she had stopped. She had not told Peter and Phyllis to stop, but she thought they must have felt the same thing. Mother listened with her head against Bobbie’s shoulder.

Then Mother told Bobbie something, though not the whole secret. She said that besides being parted from Father, she and Father had had a terrible sorrow. At first, it had hurt very much to hear the children talk about him as if everything were still the same. But it would hurt far more if the children forgot him. Bobbie asked in a very small voice whether the trouble would last forever. Mother said

no. The worst would be over when Father came home.

Bobbie said she wished she could comfort Mother. Mother held her and said she did comfort her. She had noticed how the children tried not to quarrel so much. She had noticed the flowers, the cleaned shoes, and the beds made before she could do them herself. Bobbie had not been sure Mother noticed these little things, and it warmed her to hear it. Mother gave her one last hug and said she must go on with her work. She also told Bobbie not to say anything to the others.

That evening, instead of reading a story, Mother told them stories about Father as a boy. She spoke of games and adventures from the time when she and Father had lived near each other in the country. She told funny things about Father and her brothers when they were all children. The children laughed and listened eagerly. It felt strange and sweet to speak of Father openly again.

At bedtime, Phyllis asked about Uncle Edward, who had died before he grew up. Mother said they would have loved him, because he had been brave, full of adventure, and always in trouble, yet everyone liked him. Then she spoke of Uncle Reggie, who was far away in Ceylon, and of Father, who was away too. She said they would all like to think that the children had enjoyed talking about the old days. Peter asked whether they would see Uncle Reggie and Father again. Mother said yes, and then kissed them good night.

Bobbie hugged Mother more tightly than usual that night. Later, when she thought about everything, she tried not to wonder what the terrible trouble was. Father was not dead, because Mother had said he was not. He was not ill, because then Mother would surely have gone to him. Being poor was not the whole trouble either. Bobbie felt that the real trouble lay deeper than money, close to the heart.

Bobbie told herself she must not try to guess the secret. She was glad that Mother had noticed how they were trying not to quarrel, and she wanted to keep that up. But that very afternoon, she and Peter had a bad quarrel. Long before, Mother had given each child a small piece of garden. Phyllis had planted flowers, Peter had planted vegetables, and Bobbie had planted rose bushes.

Phyllis’s flowers had done fairly well, though she was afraid to weed them in case she pulled up the wrong things. Peter’s vegetables had not done well, because

he often used the earth for forts, canals, and battles with toy soldiers. Bobbie's rose bushes had died, though she had hoped for a long time that they were still alive. Perks came to see the garden and told her plainly that they were dead. He promised to bring her good young plants from his own garden if she cleared the ground.

Bobbie began to move the dead rose bushes to the rubbish heap. At the same time, Peter decided to flatten his forts and make a model of the railway, with the tunnel, cutting, bridges, canal, and everything else. When Bobbie came back from carrying the last thorny rose branches, Peter had taken the rake. Bobbie said she had been using it. Peter said he was using it now. That was how the quarrel began.

They argued more and more sharply. Peter said Bobbie was always disagreeable about nothing. Bobbie said she had had the rake first. Peter tried to make Phyllis take his side, but Phyllis wisely said she did not want to be mixed up in their quarrels. Of course, that mixed her up in it at once. At last Peter said he wished he had a brother instead of two little sisters. Bobbie answered, as she always did, that she could not imagine why little boys had ever been invented.

As soon as Bobbie said it, she looked up and saw the windows of Mother's workshop shining in the evening sun. She remembered Mother's praise: "You do not quarrel as much as you used to." The memory struck her hard. She wanted to say, "Let us stop. Mother hates quarrels." But Peter looked so cross and insulting that she could not make herself say it. Instead, she cried, "Take the horrible rake, then," and suddenly let go.

Peter had been pulling hard on the other end. When Bobbie let go, he fell backward. The teeth of the rake caught between his feet. For half a moment he lay still, and Bobbie was frightened. Then he sat up, cried out once, turned pale, and lay back again, making a thin, terrible cry. Mother put her head out of the window, and in less than a minute she was in the garden beside him.

Mother asked what had happened. Phyllis explained that Peter and Bobbie had both been pulling the rake, and Bobbie had let go. Bobbie was still angry and afraid at the same time. She said Peter could not be badly hurt if he made such a noise, because he was not a coward. Then Peter said his foot was broken off, and

sat up. A moment later he turned white and fainted. Mother put her arm around him and told Bobbie to sit down and take his head on her lap.

Mother took off Peter's boot, and blood fell onto the ground. When the stocking came off, they saw three red wounds where the teeth of the rake had gone into his foot and ankle. Mother sent Phyllis for water, and Phyllis ran so fast that she spilled most of it and had to fetch more. Then Mother and Bobbie carried Peter into the dining room and laid him on the wooden settle. Phyllis ran for the doctor.

Bobbie made tea and put the kettle on, because that was all she could do. Her mind filled with dark fears. What if Peter died? What if he could never walk properly again? What if he had to use crutches forever? She stood by the back door and said aloud that she wished she had never been born. Just then Perks arrived with a basket of young plants for her garden.

Perks tried to comfort her. He said Peter would be all right and told a strange story about a man who had been hurt by a hay fork and had still recovered. The story was not very comforting, but Perks meant well. He said he would plant the flowers for Bobbie and wait to hear what the doctor said. Doctor Forrest came, cleaned and bandaged Peter's foot, and said Peter must not put it on the ground for at least a week. When Bobbie whispered anxiously, the doctor told her Peter would be running about again in two weeks.

When Mother and Phyllis were out of the room, Bobbie and Peter were left alone. Bobbie said she was terribly sorry. Peter said it was all right, but in his rough way. Bobbie said it was her fault, because they had quarrelled. Peter told her not to talk nonsense. He said the quarrel had nothing to do with it. He might have hurt his foot in some other way, with a hoe or fireworks or anything.

Bobbie still cried and said she had known it was wrong to quarrel. Peter told her to stop, or she would become a Sunday-school prig. Bobbie said it was hard not to be one when she was really trying to be good. Peter said he was glad it was he who had been hurt, because if Bobbie had been hurt, she would have lain on the sofa looking like a suffering angel. Bobbie denied this, and Peter denied her denial. Mother came in and thought they were quarrelling again, but Peter said they were only not agreeing.

After Mother went out, Peter spoke more kindly. He said Bobbie had called him not a coward even when she was angry, and that had been decent of her. He only wanted her not to become too pleased with her own goodness. Bobbie understood. They made peace and shook hands. Peter said he was tired, and for many days after that he stayed on the settle, unable to go out. From the window, he could see the smoke of trains in the valley, but not the trains themselves.

Many people came to ask after Peter. Mrs. Perks came, the Station Master came, and several village people came too. Still, the days passed slowly. Peter had read their own books many times, and he was bored. Phyllis went to ask Doctor Forrest for books, though Peter feared the doctor would have only books about illness. Bobbie remembered that Perks had old magazines left by passengers in trains. She ran down to the station to ask him.

Perks was cleaning lamps when Bobbie arrived. He asked kindly how Peter was. Bobbie said Peter was better but very bored, and asked for magazines. Perks said he had sent the best ones to another boy who had been ill, but he still had many illustrated papers. He made a parcel of them for Bobbie, wrapping them in an old newspaper and tying them with string. Bobbie thanked him warmly and started home with the heavy parcel.

At the level crossing, Bobbie had to wait while a train passed. She rested the parcel on the gate and looked idly at the print on the old newspaper. Suddenly she bent over it and held the parcel more tightly. The words seemed to rise from the paper like something from a bad dream. Part of the column was torn away, but she could read enough. She carried the parcel home without remembering how she had done it.

Bobbie went quietly to her room and locked the door. Then she untied the parcel and read the printed column again. Her hands and feet felt icy cold, but her face burned. The heading said that a trial had ended, and that the verdict and sentence had been given. The name of the man on trial was Father’s name. The verdict was guilty, and the sentence was five years in prison.

Bobbie sat on the edge of her bed and drew a long, shaking breath. “So now I know,” she said. She crushed the paper in her hands and whispered to Father,

though he could not hear her. She said it was not true, and she would never believe it. Father had never done it. Then Phyllis knocked loudly on the door and called that tea was ready and that a boy had brought Peter a guinea pig. Bobbie hid the paper and had to go downstairs.

Part 18 — Bobbie and Mother

Bobbie knew the secret now. A piece of old newspaper, wrapped round a parcel, had told her what Mother had tried so hard to hide. But she still had to go down to tea as if nothing had happened. She tried to do this bravely. It was not easy, because her eyes were swollen, her face was pale, and red marks from tears were still on her cheeks.

When Bobbie came into the room, everyone looked up. Mother saw her face and jumped up from the tea tray at once. “My darling, what is the matter?” she cried. Bobbie said her head hurt a little, and that was true. But with her eyes she tried to send Mother a clear message: “Not here. Not in front of Peter and Phyllis.”

Tea was very uncomfortable. Peter knew that something bad had happened, and this made him unusually quiet. He kept asking for more bread and butter, because he could not think of anything else to say. Phyllis tried to comfort Bobbie by stroking her hand under the table. But she knocked over her cup as she did it, and the spilled milk gave Bobbie a little help, because everyone had to move and clean it up.

At last tea ended. Mother took the tray to the kitchen, and Bobbie followed her. As soon as Mother put the things down, Bobbie caught her hand. Mother asked again what the matter was. Bobbie could only say, “Come upstairs. Please come where nobody can hear us.” Mother looked at her carefully, and then they went up together.

In Bobbie’s room, Bobbie locked the door. She had planned many grand words while she was sitting at tea. She had thought she might say, “I know everything,” or “The secret is not hidden now.” But when she was alone with Mother, all those words disappeared. She stood still, unable to speak, and then suddenly ran to

Mother and put her arms round her.

Bobbie began to cry again. She could say only, “Oh, Mother, oh, Mother,” again and again. Mother held her close and waited. She did not push Bobbie to speak. She only held her, and that made Bobbie cry harder for a moment, because Mother’s kindness made the secret feel even heavier.

At last Bobbie pulled away and went to the bed. She lifted the mattress and took out the old newspaper she had hidden there. Her hand shook as she gave it to Mother. She pointed to Father’s name on the page. Mother looked once, very quickly, and understood everything.

“Oh, Bobbie,” Mother cried. “You do not believe it, do you? You do not believe Father did it?” Bobbie almost shouted, “No!” Mother drew a deep breath. “That is all right,” she said. “It is not true. They have shut him up in prison, but he has done nothing wrong. He is good and true, and he belongs to us. We must remember that, and we must be proud of him, and we must wait.”

Bobbie clung to Mother again. This time the only word she could say was “Father.” She said it again and again, as if saying it could bring him nearer. After a while she asked why Mother had not told her. Mother did not answer at once. Instead she asked, “Are you going to tell Peter and Phyllis?” Bobbie said no, and then she understood Mother’s reason without needing more words.

Mother said, “So now you understand. We two must help each other to be brave.” Bobbie wanted to understand everything, so she asked Mother to tell her the whole story. Mother held her close and told her. She told how the men had come that night, when Father was looking at Peter’s engine. They had come to arrest him. They said he had sold secret government information to the Russians, and that he was a spy and a traitor.

Bobbie could hardly bear to hear those words said about Father. Mother went on quietly, though her voice was not steady. There had been a trial. Letters had been found in Father’s desk at the office, and those letters had made the jury think he was guilty. Bobbie asked how the letters had got there. Mother said someone must have put them there, and that the person who put them there was the real guilty person.

Bobbie thought about this. She said perhaps the guilty man had hidden the papers in Father's desk because he was afraid of being caught. Mother said there had been a man under Father at the office. That man had been jealous of Father, and after Father was taken away, he got Father's place. Father had never fully trusted him. Mother had tried to make people listen, but no one would listen.

Bobbie asked if they could explain all this to lawyers or to someone powerful. Mother answered bitterly that she had tried everything. Then her voice grew softer. She said there was nothing more they could do except be brave, be patient, and pray. Bobbie looked at Mother and suddenly saw how thin she had become. She said Mother was the bravest person in the world, as well as the dearest.

Mother said they must not talk of it all the time. They had to bear it and go on living. She asked Bobbie to try to be cheerful and to help keep Peter and Phyllis happy. It would make life easier for Mother if Bobbie could still enjoy things a little. Bobbie washed her face, and they went down again. Peter and Phyllis were very gentle with her, because Peter had told Phyllis not to ask questions, though Phyllis badly wanted to ask many.

For the next few days, Bobbie carried the secret inside her. It made everything look different. The railway was still dear to her, but now it seemed more clearly like a road to Father. Mother's tired face, her writing, her quiet voice, and her thin hands all had new meaning. Bobbie did not tell Peter or Phyllis. She had promised Mother, and she kept the promise.

A week later, Bobbie found a chance to be alone. Once more, she wrote a letter to the old gentleman. She told him that the story in the newspaper was not true. Father had never done such a thing. Mother believed someone had put the letters in Father's desk, and Bobbie begged the old gentleman to help find out who had really done it. She reminded him that he had found the Russian gentleman's wife and child, and she said she would pray for him all her life if he would only try.

Bobbie cut the report about Father's trial from the newspaper and put it into the envelope with her letter. Then she went out by the back way, so Peter and Phyllis would not see her and offer to come too. She walked round by the road to the station. There she gave the letter to the Station Master and asked him to pass

it to the old gentleman on the next morning's train. Then she went home again, feeling frightened, hopeful, and very lonely all at once.

Part 19 — The Hound in the Red Jersey

After Bobbie sent her letter to the old gentleman, she had to wait. Waiting was hard, because there was nothing more she could do. She still went about with Peter and Phyllis, and she still tried to act as if life were ordinary. But inside, she was always listening for news that did not come. Every time the Green Dragon passed, she wondered whether the old gentleman had read her letter and whether he believed Father was innocent.

A few days later, the children went down to the railway cutting where men were still working after the landslip. The place was full of interest. Men with picks broke the fallen earth. Other men pushed barrows along planks. The children watched so closely that they almost forgot everything else. Then a voice behind them said, "Please let me pass," and a tall schoolboy ran by with a bag of torn paper under his arm.

The boy was playing hare and hounds. He was the hare, and he had to run first and leave a trail of paper for the hounds to follow. He ran down the line and disappeared into the mouth of the tunnel. The workmen looked after him, and one of them said he should not have gone that way. But another man said boys would be boys, and soon the hare was out of sight. The children watched the little white pieces of paper lying along the line.

Then the hounds came. There were many of them, all schoolboys, running in groups down the steep steps into the cutting. The children counted them as they passed. The boys saw the white paper and followed it into the tunnel. The last boy wore a bright red jersey. For a moment, the red showed clearly at the tunnel mouth, and then the darkness seemed to swallow him.

Peter wanted to see the boys come out at the other end. The foreman said it might take them a long time, because the tunnel was dark and turned more than once. Peter said they could go over the hill and arrive first. So the children climbed

up from the cutting and began to cross the top of the tunnel. It was hard work. They climbed over rocks, pushed through bushes, and ran when the grass was smooth enough.

At the top of the hill, they stopped to breathe. Bobbie looked across the valley and thought it was beautiful. Peter looked too, but he was more interested in getting on. Phyllis said she did not care much for views, especially when she was tired. After a short rest, they went down the other side. They reached the place near the far end of the tunnel and waited for the hounds to come out.

One by one, the boys came out of the tunnel, hot, dusty, and pleased with themselves. The children counted them carefully. But when the last group had passed and the tunnel was quiet again, Peter said the number was wrong. One boy had not come out. Bobbie thought at once of the boy in the red jersey, the last one who had gone in. Phyllis said perhaps he had come out without their seeing him, but none of them really believed that.

The children were frightened, but they knew they had to look. They went into the tunnel with a small candle. The darkness closed round them, and the air felt cold and wet. Then they heard a train coming. There was nowhere to run back in time, so they pressed themselves close against the wall of the tunnel and waited.

The train came with a great roar. Light flashed from the carriage windows. Hot air and smoke rushed past them, and the noise beat against the tunnel walls. Bobbie and Phyllis held each other tightly. Peter caught Bobbie’s arm and said later that he had done it only in case she was frightened. When the last red lights grew small and the noise went away, the silence felt deeper than before.

Peter lit the candle again, though his hand shook. Phyllis whispered that if the red-jerseyed boy had been in the way of the train, something terrible might have happened. Peter said they had to go and see. Phyllis wanted to send someone from the station instead, but Bobbie asked if she would rather wait alone in the tunnel. That settled it. They all went on.

The candle gave only a weak light. Peter walked first and held it up, while melted wax ran over his fingers. After they had gone some way, he suddenly stopped and called out. Then he went faster. The girls hurried after him. There, by

the wall of the tunnel, they saw the boy in the red jersey. His back was against the wall, his arms hung down, and his eyes were shut.

Phyllis closed her eyes and asked if the red was blood. Peter said sharply that the only red was the jersey. He thought the boy had fainted. They did not know what to do, but they began with what they could remember. Peter rubbed the boy's hands. Phyllis poured a little warm milk on his forehead. Bobbie burned feathers from Phyllis's shuttlecock under his nose, because Phyllis had remembered that people sometimes did this for fainting.

The boy did not wake at once. The children spoke to him again and again, begging him to open his eyes. At last he sighed and said weakly that they should stop it. Phyllis cried because he was alive. Peter made him drink some milk, though some of it spilled before the boy understood what was happening. Bobbie spoke gently and told him it would help him. After a few moments, he became clearer in his mind.

The boy remembered what had happened. A wire had caught his foot and thrown him down. When he tried to stand, he could not. He thought his leg was broken. The children tried to help him move, but the pain was too great, and he almost fainted again. Bobbie said someone must go for help. Peter and Phyllis would go, and Bobbie would stay with the injured boy.

The boy's name was Jim. Bobbie made him as comfortable as she could. She wetted his handkerchief with milk and put it on his forehead. Jim said she was a good nurse, and Bobbie said she had sometimes helped Mother when Mother was ill. Then she put out the candle to save it, because they might need it later. The darkness became thick and heavy. Jim asked if she was afraid, and Bobbie said she was not very afraid. Then he asked her to hold his hand, and the dark became easier for both of them.

Peter and Phyllis walked through the long tunnel toward the light at the far end. Phyllis caught her dress on a wire, tripped over her bootlace, and hurt her hands, but she kept going. At last they reached daylight and went to the signal box to ask for help. The signalman was tired and cross because his little child was ill and he had had almost no sleep. He could not leave the box, but he told them to

go to Brigden's farm.

Then he did something that made Peter very angry. He offered them money if they would not tell anyone that he had been asleep in the signal box. Peter knocked the money from his hand and said he would never take it. Phyllis, though she was angry too, forgave the man because she thought tiredness had made him act badly. Then she and Peter ran across the fields to the farm and brought men with a hurdle and horse blankets.

When the men reached the place in the tunnel, Bobbie and Jim were both asleep. The pain had worn Jim out, and the waiting had worn Bobbie out. The men lifted Jim carefully onto the hurdle. Someone asked where he lived, and Jim said his father was in Northumberland and that he himself was at school in Maidbridge. The farm men thought the doctor must see him before he went anywhere.

Bobbie said they should take him to Three Chimneys. She was sure Mother would want them to. Someone asked if Mother would like a strange boy with a broken leg being brought home. Bobbie answered that Mother had taken the poor Russian gentleman home, so she would surely help Jim too. Jim asked quietly if Bobbie was certain. Bobbie said she was certain, and Peter agreed. So the men lifted Jim carefully and carried him toward Three Chimneys.

Bobbie ran ahead to tell Mother. Mother was writing upstairs, and Bobbie burst in, hatless and red from running. She said they had found a hound in a red jersey in the tunnel, and that he had broken his leg and was being brought home. Mother thought at first that Bobbie meant a dog and said they should take it to a vet. Bobbie explained that he was not a dog but a boy. Mother sighed, but she also smiled. When Jim was carried in, white-faced and suffering, she said she was glad they had brought him, and Jim looked at her kind eyes and felt a little braver.

Part 20 — Jim's Grandfather and Father's Return

That evening, after Jim had been brought safely to Three Chimneys, Mother went to her writing room. She sat at the table with two candles burning in front of her. Their flames looked warm against the blue-grey light outside the window.

Peter came to the door and asked if he might come in. Mother said yes, though she was still thinking about the letters she had to write. She had already sent telegrams to Jim's school and to his grandfather, but she wanted to write proper letters too.

Peter did not want her to write to Jim's grandfather. He asked if they might keep Jim quietly until his leg was better and tell his family later. Mother laughed and said that would certainly surprise them. Peter tried to explain. The girls were all right, he said, but he would like another boy in the house sometimes. He missed boys' games, boys' talk, and the feeling that he was not the only male person at Three Chimneys.

Mother understood. She said perhaps Peter might go to school next year, and Peter admitted that he did miss other boys. But he still wanted Jim to stay. Mother said Jim might be able to stay for a while, but they were not rich. Jim would need proper care and perhaps a nurse. Peter asked whether Mother could nurse him, because she was so good at nursing. Mother smiled at the compliment, but she said she could not nurse Jim and also do all her writing.

Peter then said perhaps Jim's grandfather could pay for the nurse. He believed grandfathers in books were always very rich. Mother said this grandfather was not in a book, so they must not expect too much. Then Peter said it would be wonderful if they all were in a book and Mother were writing it. She could make Jim's leg better at once, bring Father home soon, and arrange everything happily. Mother asked, in a quiet voice, whether Peter missed Father very much.

Peter said he missed him terribly. Then he tried to explain something deeper. It was not only that Father was Father. Since Father had gone away, Peter felt that there was no other man in the house except himself. That was why he wanted Jim to stay so much. Mother suddenly put her arms around Peter and held him tightly without speaking. Then she said that perhaps life was like a book God was writing. If she wrote it, she might make mistakes, but God knew how to make the story end in the best way.

The next morning, while the children were cleaning brass candlesticks, there was a knock at the door. Mother went to answer it. The children heard a voice and

footsteps going upstairs. They did not know the footsteps, but they were sure they had heard the voice before. They waited in the kitchen, dirty from the brass cleaning, wondering who the visitor could be. At last Mother called down and said Jim's grandfather had come and wanted to see them.

The children washed their hands and faces in great haste. Their faces became clean enough, though their clothes still showed signs of work. Then they went upstairs, feeling curious and excited. When they entered Jim's room, they stopped in complete surprise. Jim's grandfather was the old gentleman from the Green Dragon. The kind hand that had waved from the train, the man who had helped Mother, the Russian gentleman, and now Jim—all were joined in one person.

The old gentleman greeted them warmly. Jim lay in bed, pleased and proud, because his new friends and his grandfather were together. The children were too surprised at first to speak properly. Peter stared, Phyllis opened her mouth and shut it again, and Bobbie felt as if a secret door had opened in the story of their lives. Then they all began to talk at once, because surprise can be silent for only a short time.

The old gentleman had already spoken with Mother. He knew that Jim must not be moved yet. He made a plan that solved the difficulty. Mother would stop writing for a little while and become the head nurse of Three Chimneys Hospital. Jim would be the only patient. The old gentleman would pay for a cook and a housemaid to help in the house. This meant that Mother could care for Jim without carrying every burden alone.

The children were glad, though Phyllis was afraid for a moment that Mother might have to go away to a real hospital. The old gentleman explained that the hospital was right there, at Three Chimneys. Mother would stay with them. Peter was delighted, because this meant Jim would stay. The old gentleman also said he hoped Jim would be the hospital's only patient, which made everyone laugh a little. For the first time in many days, the house felt lighter.

The old gentleman spoke kindly to Mother. He said the children should take good care of her, because she was one woman in a million. Bobbie whispered that she was. Then the old gentleman took Mother's hands and blessed her in his own

warm way. After that, he asked Bobbie to walk with him to the gate. Bobbie's heart began to beat quickly, because she remembered the letter she had sent him about Father.

At the gate, the old gentleman told her he had received her letter. Then he said something that made the whole world change for Bobbie. The letter had not been needed in the way she thought, because he had already had doubts about Father's case when he read of it in the newspapers. Since learning who the children were, he had been trying to discover more. He had not finished his work yet, but he had hope. Then he said he was certain Father had not done the thing he was accused of.

Bobbie could hardly speak. Hope rose inside her like a warm light. The old gentleman told her not to tell Mother yet. It would be cruel to give Mother hope before it was sure. Bobbie promised to keep the secret a little longer. From that day, she carried a new light inside herself. She still had to wait, but waiting was different now. Someone powerful believed Father was innocent and was trying to help him.

Life at Three Chimneys changed after that visit. A cook and a housemaid came, and Mrs. Viney came only on washing days. Mother spent much time with Jim, but now she was not worn down by all the housework. Jim's leg slowly improved. He liked Mother very much, and Mother liked him. When he had pain at night, he sometimes called out for his own mother. This made Mother care for him even more tenderly.

Jim became a real friend to the children. Mother wrote a funny poem for him about a new boy at school, and Jim was delighted with it. He read it again and again until he knew it by heart. He sent it to a school friend, who liked it too. Jim also taught Peter games such as chess, draughts, and dominoes. Because of Jim, Three Chimneys had many quiet happy hours.

Still, the children began to feel that they had almost forgotten the railway. Perks came up to ask after Jim, and the signalman's little boy was better, so their railway friends were not forgotten. But they themselves had not gone down to the station as they used to do. Phyllis wondered if the railway missed them. Bobbie

said it seemed ungrateful not to visit it, because they had loved it so much when they first came to the country.

One day Bobbie went down to the station alone. Peter and Phyllis had other things to do, and Jim could not walk far yet. At the station, she met Perks. He had something to tell her, but he was excited and difficult to understand. He said he had seen something in the newspaper. Bobbie asked what he had seen, but just then the 11:54 train was coming in, and Perks had to hurry back to his work.

Bobbie stood alone on the platform. The station cat looked at her from under a bench with bright golden eyes. Bobbie felt strange, tired, and expectant, though she did not know what she expected. Only three people got out of the train. First came a countryman with baskets full of live chickens. Then came a woman from the village with parcels. Then the third person stepped down.

It was Father. He was tall and pale, and his face looked thin and tired. For a second Bobbie could not move. Then she cried out, “Daddy! My Daddy!” and ran to him. She threw herself into his arms, and he held her tightly. People looked out of the carriage windows, but Bobbie did not care who saw them. The long waiting, the secret, the fear, and the hope all came together in that one cry.

Father and Bobbie walked home together. Bobbie kept touching his hand because she needed to know he was real. Father asked if Mother had received his letter. Bobbie said there had been no letter that morning. Then Father told her she must go into the house first and tell Mother very quietly that everything was all right. The real guilty man had been caught. Everyone now knew that Father had not done the wrong thing.

Bobbie said she had always known he had not done it. Mother had known too, and so had the old gentleman. Father said it was all the old gentleman’s doing. Mother had written to Father that Bobbie knew the secret and had been brave with her. Father called her his own little girl, and for a moment they stopped in the road. There were too many feelings for quick walking.

When they reached Three Chimneys, Bobbie went in first. She tried to keep her face quiet, but joy was almost too strong for her. Father waited in the garden. The flowers looked wonderful to him, because for so many months he had seen

only stone, gravel, and a little poor grass. He looked at the flowers, but again and again his eyes turned toward the house. At last he went to stand near the back door, while swallows flew across the yard.

Inside the house, Bobbie told Mother. She tried to say it gently, as Father had asked, but no gentle words could make such news small. The sorrow was over. The struggle was over. Father had come home. Mother went to him. The door closed behind them, and the children were not told what Father and Mother said to each other. Some happy things are too deep and too private for anyone else to hear.

Later, Peter and Phyllis learned the news, and Three Chimneys became a house of joy. Jim was still there, and the railway was still there, and the old gentleman was still their friend. But now Father was home, and the heart of the family had returned. The children had become railway children through trouble, fear, mistakes, and kindness. The railway had brought them danger, friends, work, hope, and at last Father himself.