

Chapter VI. Saviours of the train.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They went now.

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

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

There was an uncomfortable silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We didn't mean to do it whatever it was.”

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

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

“I don't know nothing about Russia.”

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

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

“Do you mean to say you've not heard?”

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

“We didn't know you didn't know.”

“We thought Mother had told you.”

“We wanted to tell you only we thought it would be a stolen news.”

The three spoke all at once.

Perks said it was all very well, and still held up the paper. Then Phyllis suddenly snatched it away, and threw her arms round his neck.

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

“We are so sorry,” said the others.

And Perks at last consented to accept their apologies.

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

“Well, I must say,” said Perks; but he did not say it—whatever it was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A signal sounded.

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

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

Perks narrowed his eyes and then raised his eyebrows.

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

This was an awkward moment for Phyllis. To say “yes” would seem rude and greedy, and unkind to Perks. But she knew if she said “no,” she would not be pleased with herself afterwards. So—

“Yes,” she said, “it was.”

“Well done!” said the Porter; “speak the truth and shame the—”

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

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

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

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

The mouth of the tunnel was some way from Three Chimneys, so Mother let them take their lunch with them in a basket. And the basket would do to bring the cherries back in if they found any. She also lent them her silver watch so that they should not be late for tea. Peter's Waterbury had taken it into its head not to go since the day when Peter dropped it into the water-butt. And they started. When they got to the top of the cutting, they leaned over the fence and looked down to where the railway lines lay at the bottom of what, as Phyllis said, was exactly like a mountain gorge.

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

The sides of the cutting were of grey stone, very roughly hewn. Indeed, the top part of the cutting had been a little natural glen that had been cut deeper to bring it down to the level of the tunnel's mouth. Among the rocks, grass and

flowers grew, and seeds dropped by birds in the crannies of the stone had taken root and grown into bushes and trees that overhung the cutting. Near the tunnel was a flight of steps leading down to the line—just wooden bars roughly fixed into the earth—a very steep and narrow way, more like a ladder than a stair.

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

So they went along the fence towards the little swing gate that is at the top of these steps. And they were almost at the gate when Bobbie said:—

“Hush. Stop! What's that?”

“That” was a very odd noise indeed—a soft noise, but quite plainly to be heard through the sound of the wind in tree branches, and the hum and whir of the telegraph wires. It was a sort of rustling, whispering sound. As they listened it stopped, and then it began again.

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

“Look”—cried Peter, suddenly—“the tree over there!”

The tree he pointed at was one of those that have rough grey leaves and white flowers. The berries, when they come, are bright scarlet, but if you pick them, they disappoint you by turning black before you get them home. And, as Peter pointed, the tree was moving—not just the way trees ought to move when the wind blows through them, but all in one piece, as though it were a live creature and were walking down the side of the cutting.

“It's moving!” cried Bobbie. “Oh, look! and so are the others. It's like the woods in Macbeth.”

“It's magic,” said Phyllis, breathlessly. “I always knew this railway was enchanted.”

It really did seem a little like magic. For all the trees for about twenty yards of the opposite bank seemed to be slowly walking down towards the railway line, the tree with the grey leaves bringing up the rear like some old shepherd driving a flock of green sheep.

“What is it? Oh, what is it?” said Phyllis; “it's much too magic for me. I don't like it. Let's go home.”

But Bobbie and Peter clung fast to the rail and watched breathlessly. And Phyllis made no movement towards going home by herself.

The trees moved on and on. Some stones and loose earth fell down and rattled

on the railway metals far below.

“It's ALL coming down,” Peter tried to say, but he found there was hardly any voice to say it with. And, indeed, just as he spoke, the great rock, on the top of which the walking trees were, leaned slowly forward. The trees, ceasing to walk, stood still and shivered. Leaning with the rock, they seemed to hesitate a moment, and then rock and trees and grass and bushes, with a rushing sound, slipped right away from the face of the cutting and fell on the line with a blundering crash that could have been heard half a mile off. A cloud of dust rose up.

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

“Look what a great mound it's made!” said Bobbie.

“Yes,” said Peter, slowly. He was still leaning on the fence. “Yes,” he said again, still more slowly.

Then he stood upright.

“The 11.29 down hasn't gone by yet. We must let them know at the station, or there'll be a most frightful accident.”

“Let's run,” said Bobbie, and began.

But Peter cried, “Come back!” and looked at Mother's watch. He was very prompt and businesslike, and his face looked whiter than they had ever seen it.

“No time,” he said; “it's two miles away, and it's past eleven.”

“Couldn't we,” suggested Phyllis, breathlessly, “couldn't we climb up a telegraph post and do something to the wires?”

“We don't know how,” said Peter.

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

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

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

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

“We might wave, anyway.”

“They'd only think it was just US, as usual. We've waved so often before.

Anyway, let's get down."

They got down the steep stairs. Bobbie was pale and shivering. Peter's face looked thinner than usual. Phyllis was red-faced and damp with anxiety.

"Oh, how hot I am!" she said; "and I thought it was going to be cold; I wish we hadn't put on our—" she stopped short, and then ended in quite a different tone—"our flannel petticoats."

Bobbie turned at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, yes," she cried; "THEY'RE red! Let's take them off."

They did, and with the petticoats rolled up under their arms, ran along the railway, skirting the newly fallen mound of stones and rock and earth, and bent, crushed, twisted trees. They ran at their best pace. Peter led, but the girls were not far behind. They reached the corner that hid the mound from the straight line of railway that ran half a mile without curve or corner.

"Now," said Peter, taking hold of the largest flannel petticoat.

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

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

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

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

"There!" said Peter, tearing in his turn. He divided each petticoat into three pieces. "Now, we've got six flags." He looked at the watch again. "And we've got seven minutes. We must have flagstuffs."

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

"We must cut holes in the flags, and run the sticks through the holes," said Peter. And the holes were cut. The knife was sharp enough to cut flannel with. Two of the flags were set up in heaps of loose stones between the sleepers of the down line. Then Phyllis and Roberta took each a flag, and stood ready to wave it as soon as the train came in sight.

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

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

interrupted—

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

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

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

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

It seemed to her that they had been standing there for hours and hours, holding those silly little red flannel flags that no one would ever notice. The train wouldn't care. It would go rushing by them and tear round the corner and go crashing into that awful mound. And everyone would be killed. Her hands grew very cold and trembled so that she could hardly hold the flag. And then came the distant rumble and hum of the metals, and a puff of white steam showed far away along the stretch of line.

“Stand firm,” said Peter, “and wave like mad! When it gets to that big furze bush step back, but go on waving! Don't stand ON the line, Bobbie!”

The train came rattling along very, very fast.

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

The two little flags on the line swayed as the nearing train shook and loosened the heaps of loose stones that held them up. One of them slowly leaned over and fell on the line. Bobbie jumped forward and caught it up, and waved it; her hands did not tremble now.

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

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

“It's no good,” Bobbie said again.

“Stand back!” cried Peter, suddenly, and he dragged Phyllis back by the arm.

But Bobbie cried, “Not yet, not yet!” and waved her two flags right over the line. The front of the engine looked black and enormous. Its voice was loud and harsh.

“Oh, stop, stop, stop!” cried Bobbie. No one heard her. At least Peter and Phyllis didn't, for the oncoming rush of the train covered the sound of her voice with a mountain of sound. But afterwards she used to wonder whether the engine itself had not heard her. It seemed almost as though it had—for it slackened

swiftly, slackened and stopped, not twenty yards from the place where Bobbie's two flags waved over the line. She saw the great black engine stop dead, but somehow she could not stop waving the flags. And when the driver and the fireman had got off the engine and Peter and Phyllis had gone to meet them and pour out their excited tale of the awful mound just round the corner, Bobbie still waved the flags but more and more feebly and jerkily.

When the others turned towards her she was lying across the line with her hands flung forward and still gripping the sticks of the little red flannel flags.

The engine-driver picked her up, carried her to the train, and laid her on the cushions of a first-class carriage.

“Gone right off in a faint,” he said, “poor little woman. And no wonder. I'll just 'ave a look at this 'ere mound of yours, and then we'll run you back to the station and get her seen to.”

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

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

“DON'T!” said Peter, sharply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

So they went. And as they went Station Master and Porter and guards and

driver and fireman and passengers sent up a cheer.

“Oh, listen,” cried Phyllis; “that's for US!”

“Yes,” said Peter. “I say, I am glad I thought about something red, and waving it.”

“How lucky we DID put on our red flannel petticoats!” said Phyllis.

Bobbie said nothing. She was thinking of the horrible mound, and the trustful train rushing towards it.

“And it was US that saved them,” said Peter.

“How dreadful if they had all been killed!” said Phyllis; “wouldn't it, Bobbie?”

“We never got any cherries, after all,” said Bobbie.

The others thought her rather heartless.

The Railway Children Chapter 6 Questions

1. What does Mother do to try to find the Russian man's wife and children?
2. What do the children do to try to show the Russian man that they like him without being able to talk to him?
3. Why was Perks upset with the children?
4. When the children are explaining to Perks that they did not know that he hadn't already heard the story of the Russian man one of them says that they wanted to tell him but they thought it would be stale news. This sentence in the chapter is written without any finger spaces, why do you think that is?
5. Why does Phyllis tell the truth about only going to see Perks to get some strawberries even though she knows the truth could upset him?
6. What had the children gone to the railway for when they see the trees falling onto the line?
7. Do you think the trees falling onto the line was really magic or was it just the children's imaginations?
8. What do the children use to wave to the train to warn them of the trees on the line?
9. What kind of word is 'red-faced'?
10. What is a flagstaff?
11. What is a sapling?
12. What does Bobbie end up doing to stop the train?
13. What happens to Bobbie after the train is stopped?
14. What does it mean if someone is a heroine?
15. What do all the children feel when they are celebrated at the station?
16. What does ingenuity mean?