

Chapter XIV. The End.

Life at the Three Chimneys was never quite the same again after the old gentleman came to see his grandson. Although they now knew his name, the children never spoke of him by it—at any rate, when they were by themselves. To them he was always the old gentleman, and I think he had better be the old gentleman to us, too. It wouldn't make him seem any more real to you, would it, if I were to tell you that his name was Snooks or Jenkins (which it wasn't)?—and, after all, I must be allowed to keep one secret. It's the only one; I have told you everything else, except what I am going to tell you in this chapter, which is the last. At least, of course, I haven't told you EVERYTHING. If I were to do that, the book would never come to an end, and that would be a pity, wouldn't it?

Well, as I was saying, life at Three Chimneys was never quite the same again. The cook and the housemaid were very nice (I don't mind telling you their names—they were Clara and Ethelwyn), but they told Mother they did not seem to want Mrs. Viney, and that she was an old muddler. So Mrs. Viney came only two days a week to do washing and ironing. Then Clara and Ethelwyn said they could do the work all right if they weren't interfered with, and that meant that the children no longer got the tea and cleared it away and washed up the tea-things and dusted the rooms.

This would have left quite a blank in their lives, although they had often pretended to themselves and to each other that they hated housework. But now that Mother had no writing and no housework to do, she had time for lessons. And lessons the children had to do. However nice the person who is teaching you may be, lessons are lessons all the world over, and at their best are worse fun than peeling potatoes or lighting a fire.

On the other hand, if Mother now had time for lessons, she also had time for play, and to make up little rhymes for the children as she used to do. She had not had much time for rhymes since she came to Three Chimneys.

There was one very odd thing about these lessons. Whatever the children were doing, they always wanted to be doing something else. When Peter was doing his Latin, he thought it would be nice to be learning History like Bobbie. Bobbie

would have preferred Arithmetic, which was what Phyllis happened to be doing, and Phyllis of course thought Latin much the most interesting kind of lesson. And so on.

So, one day, when they sat down to lessons, each of them found a little rhyme at its place. I put the rhymes in to show you that their Mother really did understand a little how children feel about things, and also the kind of words they use, which is the case with very few grown-up people. I suppose most grown-ups have very bad memories, and have forgotten how they felt when they were little. Of course, the verses are supposed to be spoken by the children.

PETER

I once thought Caesar easy pap—
How very soft I must have been!
When they start Caesar with a chap
He little know what that will mean.
Oh, verbs are silly stupid things.
I'd rather learn the dates of kings!

BOBBIE

The worst of all my lesson things
Is learning who succeeded who
In all the rows of queens and kings,
With dates to everything they do:
With dates enough to make you sick;—
I wish it was Arithmetic!

PHYLLIS

Such pounds and pounds of apples fill
My slate—what is the price you'd spend?
You scratch the figures out until
You cry upon the dividend.
I'd break the slate and scream for joy
If I did Latin like a boy!

This kind of thing, of course, made lessons much jollier. It is something to know that the person who is teaching you sees that it is not all plain sailing for you, and does not think that it is just your stupidity that makes you not know your lessons till you've learned them!

Then as Jim's leg got better it was very pleasant to go up and sit with him and hear tales about his school life and the other boys. There was one boy, named Parr, of whom Jim seemed to have formed the lowest possible opinion, and another boy named Wigsby Minor, for whose views Jim had a great respect. Also there were three brothers named Paley, and the youngest was called Paley Terts, and was much given to fighting.

Peter drank in all this with deep joy, and Mother seemed to have listened with some interest, for one day she gave Jim a sheet of paper on which she had written a rhyme about Parr, bringing in Paley and Wigsby by name in a most

wonderful way, as well as all the reasons Jim had for not liking Parr, and Wigsby's wise opinion on the matter. Jim was immensely pleased. He had never had a rhyme written expressly for him before. He read it till he knew it by heart and then he sent it to Wigsby, who liked it almost as much as Jim did. Perhaps you may like it, too.

THE NEW BOY

His name is Parr: he says that he
Is given bread and milk for tea.
He says his father killed a bear.
He says his mother cuts his hair.

He wears goloshes when it's wet.
I've heard his people call him "Pet"!
He has no proper sense of shame;
He told the chaps his Christian name.

He cannot wicket-keep at all,
He's frightened of a cricket ball.
He reads indoors for hours and hours.
He knows the names of beastly flowers.

He says his French just like Mossoo—
A beastly stuck-up thing to do—
He won't keep *cave*, shirks his turn
And says he came to school to learn!

He won't play football, says it hurts;
He wouldn't fight with Paley Terts;
He couldn't whistle if he tried,
And when we laughed at him he cried!

Now Wigsby Minor says that Parr
Is only like all new boys are.
I know when *I* first came to school
I wasn't such a jolly fool!

Jim could never understand how Mother could have been clever enough to do it. To the others it seemed nice, but natural. You see they had always been used to having a mother who could write verses just like the way people talk, even to the shocking expression at the end of the rhyme, which was Jim's very own.

Jim taught Peter to play chess and draughts and dominoes, and altogether it was a nice quiet time.

Only Jim's leg got better and better, and a general feeling began to spring up among Bobbie, Peter, and Phyllis that something ought to be done to amuse him; not just games, but something really handsome. But it was extraordinarily difficult to think of anything.

"It's no good," said Peter, when all of them had thought and thought till their heads felt quite heavy and swollen; "if we can't think of anything to amuse him, we just can't, and there's an end of it. Perhaps something will just happen of its own accord that he'll like."

“Things DO happen by themselves sometimes, without your making them,” said Phyllis, rather as though, usually, everything that happened in the world was her doing.

“I wish something would happen,” said Bobbie, dreamily, “something wonderful.”

And something wonderful did happen exactly four days after she had said this. I wish I could say it was three days after, because in fairy tales it is always three days after that things happen. But this is not a fairy story, and besides, it really was four and not three, and I am nothing if not strictly truthful.

They seemed to be hardly Railway children at all in those days, and as the days went on each had an uneasy feeling about this which Phyllis expressed one day.

“I wonder if the Railway misses us,” she said, plaintively. “We never go to see it now.”

“It seems ungrateful,” said Bobbie; “we loved it so when we hadn't anyone else to play with.”

“Perks is always coming up to ask after Jim,” said Peter, “and the signalman's little boy is better. He told me so.”

“I didn't mean the people,” explained Phyllis; “I meant the dear Railway itself.”

“The thing I don't like,” said Bobbie, on this fourth day, which was a Tuesday, “is our having stopped waving to the 9.15 and sending our love to Father by it.”

“Let's begin again,” said Phyllis. And they did.

Somehow the change of everything that was made by having servants in the house and Mother not doing any writing, made the time seem extremely long since that strange morning at the beginning of things, when they had got up so early and burnt the bottom out of the kettle and had apple pie for breakfast and first seen the Railway.

It was September now, and the turf on the slope to the Railway was dry and crisp. Little long grass spikes stood up like bits of gold wire, frail blue harebells trembled on their tough, slender stalks, Gipsy roses opened wide and flat their lilac-coloured discs, and the golden stars of St. John's Wort shone at the edges of the pool that lay halfway to the Railway. Bobbie gathered a generous handful of the flowers and thought how pretty they would look lying on the green-and-pink blanket of silk-waste that now covered Jim's poor broken leg.

“Hurry up,” said Peter, “or we shall miss the 9.15!”

“I can't hurry more than I am doing,” said Phyllis. “Oh, bother it! My bootlace has come undone AGAIN!”

“When you're married,” said Peter, “your bootlace will come undone going up the church aisle, and your man that you're going to get married to will tumble over it and smash his nose in on the ornamented pavement; and then you'll say you won't marry him, and you'll have to be an old maid.”

“I shan't,” said Phyllis. “I'd much rather marry a man with his nose smashed in than not marry anybody.”

“It would be horrid to marry a man with a smashed nose, all the same,” went on Bobbie. “He wouldn't be able to smell the flowers at the wedding. Wouldn't that be awful!”

“Bother the flowers at the wedding!” cried Peter. “Look! the signal's down. We must run!”

They ran. And once more they waved their handkerchiefs, without at all minding whether the handkerchiefs were clean or not, to the 9.15.

“Take our love to Father!” cried Bobbie. And the others, too, shouted:—

“Take our love to Father!”

The old gentleman waved from his first-class carriage window. Quite violently he waved. And there was nothing odd in that, for he always had waved. But what was really remarkable was that from every window handkerchiefs fluttered, newspapers signalled, hands waved wildly. The train swept by with a rustle and roar, the little pebbles jumped and danced under it as it passed, and the children were left looking at each other.

“Well!” said Peter.

“WELL!” said Bobbie.

“WELL!” said Phyllis.

“Whatever on earth does that mean?” asked Peter, but he did not expect any answer.

“I don't know,” said Bobbie. “Perhaps the old gentleman told the people at his station to look out for us and wave. He knew we should like it!”

Now, curiously enough, this was just what had happened. The old gentleman, who was very well known and respected at his particular station, had got there early that morning, and he had waited at the door where the young man stands holding the interesting machine that clips the tickets, and he had said something to every single passenger who passed through that door. And after nodding to what the old gentleman had said—and the nods expressed every shade of

surprise, interest, doubt, cheerful pleasure, and grumpy agreement—each passenger had gone on to the platform and read one certain part of his newspaper. And when the passengers got into the train, they had told the other passengers who were already there what the old gentleman had said, and then the other passengers had also looked at their newspapers and seemed very astonished and, mostly, pleased. Then, when the train passed the fence where the three children were, newspapers and hands and handkerchiefs were waved madly, till all that side of the train was fluttery with white like the pictures of the King's Coronation in the biograph at Maskelyne and Cook's. To the children it almost seemed as though the train itself was alive, and was at last responding to the love that they had given it so freely and so long.

“It is most extraordinarily rum!” said Peter.

“Most stronery!” echoed Phyllis.

But Bobbie said, “Don't you think the old gentleman's waves seemed more significating than usual?”

“No,” said the others.

“I do,” said Bobbie. “I thought he was trying to explain something to us with his newspaper.”

“Explain what?” asked Peter, not unnaturally.

“I don't know,” Bobbie answered, “but I do feel most awfully funny. I feel just exactly as if something was going to happen.”

“What is going to happen,” said Peter, “is that Phyllis's stocking is going to come down.”

This was but too true. The suspender had given way in the agitation of the waves to the 9.15. Bobbie's handkerchief served as first aid to the injured, and they all went home.

Lessons were more than usually difficult to Bobbie that day. Indeed, she disgraced herself so deeply over a quite simple sum about the division of 48 pounds of meat and 36 pounds of bread among 144 hungry children that Mother looked at her anxiously.

“Don't you feel quite well, dear?” she asked.

“I don't know,” was Bobbie's unexpected answer. “I don't know how I feel. It isn't that I'm lazy. Mother, will you let me off lessons to-day? I feel as if I wanted to be quite alone by myself.”

“Yes, of course I'll let you off,” said Mother; “but—”

Bobbie dropped her slate. It cracked just across the little green mark that is so

useful for drawing patterns round, and it was never the same slate again. Without waiting to pick it up she bolted. Mother caught her in the hall feeling blindly among the waterproofs and umbrellas for her garden hat.

“What is it, my sweetheart?” said Mother. “You don't feel ill, do you?”

“I DON'T know,” Bobbie answered, a little breathlessly, “but I want to be by myself and see if my head really IS all silly and my inside all squirmy-twisty.”

“Hadn't you better lie down?” Mother said, stroking her hair back from her forehead.

“I'd be more alive in the garden, I think,” said Bobbie.

But she could not stay in the garden. The hollyhocks and the asters and the late roses all seemed to be waiting for something to happen. It was one of those still, shiny autumn days, when everything does seem to be waiting.

Bobbie could not wait.

“I'll go down to the station,” she said, “and talk to Perks and ask about the signalman's little boy.”

So she went down. On the way she passed the old lady from the Post-office, who gave her a kiss and a hug, but, rather to Bobbie's surprise, no words except:

—
“God bless you, love—” and, after a pause, “run along—do.”

The draper's boy, who had sometimes been a little less than civil and a little more than contemptuous, now touched his cap, and uttered the remarkable words:—

“Morning, Miss, I'm sure—”

The blacksmith, coming along with an open newspaper in his hand, was even more strange in his manner. He grinned broadly, though, as a rule, he was a man not given to smiles, and waved the newspaper long before he came up to her. And as he passed her, he said, in answer to her “Good morning”:—

“Good morning to you, Missie, and many of them! I wish you joy, that I do!”

“Oh!” said Bobbie to herself, and her heart quickened its beats, “something IS going to happen! I know it is—everyone is so odd, like people are in dreams.”

The Station Master wrung her hand warmly. In fact he worked it up and down like a pump-handle. But he gave her no reason for this unusually enthusiastic greeting. He only said:—

“The 11.54's a bit late, Miss—the extra luggage this holiday time,” and went away very quickly into that inner Temple of his into which even Bobbie dared

not follow him.

Perks was not to be seen, and Bobbie shared the solitude of the platform with the Station Cat. This tortoiseshell lady, usually of a retiring disposition, came to-day to rub herself against the brown stockings of Bobbie with arched back, waving tail, and reverberating purrs.

“Dear me!” said Bobbie, stooping to stroke her, “how very kind everybody is to-day—even you, Pussy!”

Perks did not appear until the 11.54 was signalled, and then he, like everybody else that morning, had a newspaper in his hand.

“Hullo!” he said, “ere you are. Well, if THIS is the train, it'll be smart work! Well, God bless you, my dear! I see it in the paper, and I don't think I was ever so glad of anything in all my born days!” He looked at Bobbie a moment, then said, “One I must have, Miss, and no offence, I know, on a day like this 'ere!” and with that he kissed her, first on one cheek and then on the other.

“You ain't offended, are you?” he asked anxiously. “I ain't took too great a liberty? On a day like this, you know—”

“No, no,” said Bobbie, “of course it's not a liberty, dear Mr. Perks; we love you quite as much as if you were an uncle of ours—but—on a day like WHAT?”

“Like this 'ere!” said Perks. “Don't I tell you I see it in the paper?”

“Saw WHAT in the paper?” asked Bobbie, but already the 11.54 was steaming into the station and the Station Master was looking at all the places where Perks was not and ought to have been.

Bobbie was left standing alone, the Station Cat watching her from under the bench with friendly golden eyes.

Of course you know already exactly what was going to happen. Bobbie was not so clever. She had the vague, confused, expectant feeling that comes to one's heart in dreams. What her heart expected I can't tell—perhaps the very thing that you and I know was going to happen—but her mind expected nothing; it was almost blank, and felt nothing but tiredness and stupidity and an empty feeling, like your body has when you have been a long walk and it is very far indeed past your proper dinner-time.

Only three people got out of the 11.54. The first was a countryman with two basketry boxes full of live chickens who stuck their russet heads out anxiously through the wicker bars; the second was Miss Peckitt, the grocer's wife's cousin, with a tin box and three brown-paper parcels; and the third—

“Oh! my Daddy, my Daddy!” That scream went like a knife into the heart of

everyone in the train, and people put their heads out of the windows to see a tall pale man with lips set in a thin close line, and a little girl clinging to him with arms and legs, while his arms went tightly round her.

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“I knew something wonderful was going to happen,” said Bobbie, as they went up the road, “but I didn't think it was going to be this. Oh, my Daddy, my Daddy!”

“Then didn't Mother get my letter?” Father asked.

“There weren't any letters this morning. Oh! Daddy! it IS really you, isn't it?”

The clasp of a hand she had not forgotten assured her that it was. “You must go in by yourself, Bobbie, and tell Mother quite quietly that it's all right. They've caught the man who did it. Everyone knows now that it wasn't your Daddy.”

“I always knew it wasn't,” said Bobbie. “Me and Mother and our old gentleman.”

“Yes,” he said, “it's all his doing. Mother wrote and told me you had found out. And she told me what you'd been to her. My own little girl!” They stopped a minute then.

And now I see them crossing the field. Bobbie goes into the house, trying to keep her eyes from speaking before her lips have found the right words to “tell Mother quite quietly” that the sorrow and the struggle and the parting are over and done, and that Father has come home.

I see Father walking in the garden, waiting—waiting. He is looking at the flowers, and each flower is a miracle to eyes that all these months of Spring and Summer have seen only flagstones and gravel and a little grudging grass. But his eyes keep turning towards the house. And presently he leaves the garden and goes to stand outside the nearest door. It is the back door, and across the yard the swallows are circling. They are getting ready to fly away from cold winds and keen frost to the land where it is always summer. They are the same swallows that the children built the little clay nests for.

Now the house door opens. Bobbie's voice calls:—

“Come in, Daddy; come in!”

He goes in and the door is shut. I think we will not open the door or follow him. I think that just now we are not wanted there. I think it will be best for us to go quickly and quietly away. At the end of the field, among the thin gold spikes of grass and the harebells and Gipsy roses and St. John's Wort, we may just take one last look, over our shoulders, at the white house where neither we nor anyone else is wanted now.

The Railway Children Chapter 14 Questions

1. Why does the author choose not to reveal the old gentleman's name?
2. What changed about life at Three Chimneys after the old gentleman's visit?
3. Why do you think mother writes all the children rhymes about their lessons?
4. Why do the children make a special trip to the railway to wave to the 9:15?
5. What was out of the ordinary when the children waved to the train?
6. Why can't Bobbie finish her lessons?
7. In what way was everyone acting strangely, or so Bobbie thinks, as she walks to the railway station?
8. Why do you think Father sends Bobbie in first to tell Mother he's there?
9. What do you think some of the overall themes of the book have been? Think about what the author has been trying to really say with this story, or what you have learned from reading it.
10. Do you think the story is more about any of the siblings in particular or are they all as important as each other?