Chapter 3 The Kind Gentleman

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After the adventure of Peter's coal mine—and the successive humbling confession which Roberta had as the eldest insisted upon—it seemed well to the children to keep away from the station, but they did not—they could not—keep away from the railway. They had lived all their lives in a street where cabs and omnibuses rumbled by at all hours and the carts of butchers and bakers and candlestick makers (I never saw a candlestick maker's cart, did you?) might pass by at any moment. Here in the deep silence of the sleeping country, the only things that went by were the trains. They seemed to be all that was left to link the children to the life that had once been theirs.

Straight down the hill in front of Three Chimneys, the daily passage of their six feet began to mark a path across the short, crisp turf. They began to know the hours when certain trains passed, and they gave names to them. The 9:15 up was called the *Green Dragon*. The 10:07 down was the *Worm of Wantley*. The midnight town express, whose shrieking rush they sometimes woke from their dreams to hear, was the *Fearsome Fly-by-night*. Peter got up once in chill starshine and, peeping at it through his curtains, named it on the spot.

It was by the *Green Dragon* that the venerable gentleman traveled. He was a very nice-looking elderly gentleman, and he looked as if he *were* nice too, which is not at all the same thing. He had a fresh-colored, clean-shaven face and white hair, and he wore rather odd-shaped collars and a top hat that wasn't exactly the same kind as other people's. Of course, the children didn't see all this at first. In fact, the first thing they noticed about the gentleman was his hand.

It was one morning as they sat on the fence waiting for

the *Green Dragon*, which was three and a quarter minutes late by the Waterbury watch that Peter had been given on his last birthday, that Phyllis had an idea.

"The *Green Dragon*'s going where Father is," said Phyllis. "If it were really a dragon, we could stop it and ask it to take our love to Father."

"Dragons wouldn't carry people's love," said Peter. "They'd be above it."

"They might if you tamed them thoroughly first," said Phyllis. "They would probably fetch and carry like pet spaniels and even feed out of your hand." She sighed. "I wonder why Father never writes to us."

"Mother says he's been too busy," said Roberta, "but he'll write soon, she says."

"I say," Phyllis suggested, "let's all wave to the *Green Dragon* as it goes by. If it's a very understanding dragon, it'll recognize what we mean at once and take our love to Father. And if it isn't, well, three waves aren't much. We shall never miss them."

So when the *Green Dragon* tore shrieking out of the mouth of its dark lair, which was the tunnel, all three children stood on the railing and waved their pocket handkerchiefs without stopping to think whether they were clean handkerchiefs or the reverse. And they were, as a matter of fact, very much the reverse.

And out of a first-class carriage, a hand waved back—a quite-clean hand. It held a newspaper. It was the nice gentleman's hand.

After this it became the custom for waves to be exchanged between the children and the 9:15. And the children, especially the girls, liked to think that perhaps the gentleman knew Father and would meet him "in business," wherever that shady retreat might be, and tell him how his three children stood on a rail far away in the green country

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and waved their love to him every morning, wet or fine.

For they were now able to go out in all sorts of weather such as they would never have been allowed to go out in when they lived in their villa house. This was Aunt Emma's doing, and the children felt more and more that they had not been quite as appreciative of this aunt as they ought to have been, especially once they found how useful were the long gaiters and waterproof coats that she had bought for them.

Mother, all this time, was very busy with her writing. She used to send off a good many long blue envelopes with stories in them, and large envelopes of different sizes and colors used to come back to her. Sometimes she would sigh when she opened them and say, "Another story come home to roost. Why, oh, why didn't they publish it?" And then the children would be very sorry. But other times she would wave the envelope in the air and say, "Hooray, hooray! Here's a sensible editor. He's taken my story, and this is the proof of it."

At first the children thought "the proof" meant the letter the sensible editor had written, but they presently got to know that the proof was the long slips of paper with the story printed on them.

Whenever an editor was sensible, there were buns for tea. One day Peter was going down to the village to get buns to celebrate the sensibleness of the editor of the *Children's Globe* when he met the Station Master.

Peter felt very uncomfortable, for he had now had time to think over the affair of the coal mine. He did not like to say, "Good morning," to the Station Master as you usually do to anyone you meet on a lonely road because he had a hot feeling, which spread even to his ears, that the Station Master might not care to speak to a person who had stolen coal. *Stolen* is a dreadful word, but Peter knew that it was the right one. So he looked down and said nothing.

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It was the Station Master who said, "Good morning," as he passed by. And Peter answered, "Good morning," but then he thought, *Perhaps he doesn't know who I am by daylight, or he wouldn't be so polite*. And he did not like the feeling which thinking this gave him. Before he knew what he was going to do, he ran after the Station Master, who stopped when he heard Peter's hasty boots crunching the road. Coming up to him very breathless and with his ears now quite magenta colored, he said, "I don't want you to be polite to me if you don't know me when you see me."

"How's that?" said the Station Master.

"I thought perhaps you didn't know it was me that took the coals," Peter went on, "when you said, 'Good morning,' back there. But it was, and I'm sorry. That's that."

"Why," said the Station Master, "I wasn't thinking anything at all about the coals. Let bygones be bygones, I say. And where were you off to in such a hurry?"

"I'm going to buy buns for tea," said Peter.

"I thought you were all so poor!" said the Station Master.

"So we are," said Peter confidentially, "but we always have three pennyworth of halfpenny buns for tea whenever Mother sells a story or a poem or anything."

"Oh," said the Station Master, "so your mother writes stories, does she?"

"The beautifulest you ever read," said Peter.*

"You ought to be very proud to have such a clever mother."

"Yes," said Peter, "I am. But she used to play with us more before she had to be so clever."

"Well," said the Station Master, "I must be getting along. You give us a look in at the Station whenever you feel so inclined. And as to coals, it's a word that—well—we never need to mention it again, eh?"

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"Thank you," said Peter gratefully. "I'm very glad it's all straightened out between us."

And he went on across the canal bridge and into the village to get the buns, feeling more comfortable in his mind than he had felt since the hand of the Station Master had fastened on his collar that night among the coals.

Next day when they had sent the threefold wave of greeting to Father by the *Green Dragon* and the gentleman had waved back as usual, Peter proudly led the way to the station.

"But ought we?" said Roberta.

"After the coals, she means," Phyllis explained.

"I met the Station Master on the road yesterday," said Peter in an offhand way, pretending not to hear what Phyllis had said, "and he *expresspecially* invited us to go down anytime we liked."

"After stealing the coals?" repeated Phyllis. "Stop a minute. My bootlace is undone again."

"It is *always* undone again," said Peter, "and the Station Master was more of a gentleman than you'll ever be, Phyllis—heaping guilt on a chap's head like that."

Phyllis did up her bootlace and went on in silence, but her shoulders shook, and presently a big tear fell off her nose and splashed on the metal of the railway line. Roberta saw it.

"Why, what's the matter, darling?" she said, stopping short and putting her arm round the younger girl.

"He called me un-un-ungentlemanly," sobbed Phyllis. "I've not called him names, not even when he dunked my dearest Clorinda deep in the creek and got her all matted and spoiled."

Peter had indeed perpetrated this outrage a year or two before.

"Well, you began it today, you know," said Roberta

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honestly, "about the coals and all that. Don't you think you'd better both unsay everything since the wave and let honor be satisfied?"

"I will if Peter will," said Phyllis, sniffling.

"All right," said Peter, "honor is satisfied. Here, use my hankie, Phyllis, if you've lost yours as usual. I do wonder what you do with them."

"You borrowed my last one," said Phyllis, "to tie up the rabbit-hutch door with. But you're very ungrateful. It's quite right what it says in the poetry book about 'sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!' ** Miss Lowe explained it to me."

"All right," said Peter abashedly, "You're right, and I'm sorry." He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his toes. "Now can we go on?"

They reached the station and spent a joyous two hours with the Porter. He was a worthy man and seemed never tired of answering the questions that begin with *why*, which many people in higher ranks of life often grow weary of.

He told them many things that they had not known before—for instance, that the things that hook carriages together are called couplings and that the pipes like great serpents that hang over the couplings are meant to stop the train with.

"If you could get a hold of one o' them when the train is going and pull 'em apart," said he, "she'd stop dead in her tracks."

"Who's she?" said Phyllis.

"The train of course," said the Porter. After that the train was never again just "it"' to the children.

"And you know the thing in the carriages where it says on it, 'Five pounds' fine for improper use'? If you was to improperly use that, the train 'ud stop too."

"And if you used it properly?" said Roberta.

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"Well, it'd stop just the same, I suppose," said he, "but it isn't proper use unless you're in dire straits. There was an elderly lady once—someone kidded her on it being a refreshment-room bell, and she used it improper, not being in danger of her life (though hungry), and when the train stopped and the guard came along expecting to find someone weltering in their last moments, she says, 'There you are, mister. I'll take a glass of milk and a hot bun, if you please.' And the train was seven minutes behind her time as it was."

"What did the guard say to the lady?"

"I dunno," replied the Porter, "but I lay she didn't forget it in a hurry, whatever it was."

In such delightful conversation the time went by all too quickly.

The Station Master came out once or twice from that sacred inner temple behind the place where the hole is that they sell you tickets through, and he was most jolly with them all.

"Just as if the coal had never been discovered," Phyllis whispered to Roberta.

He gave them each an orange and promised to take them up into the signal box one of these days when he wasn't so busy. Several trains went through the station, and Peter noticed for the first time that engines have numbers on them like cabs.

"Yes," said the Porter, "I knew a young gent as used to take down the numbers of every single one he saw. A green notebook with silver corners he had, owing to his father being very well-to-do in wholesale stationery."

Peter felt that he could take down numbers too even if he was not the son of a wholesale stationer. As he did not happen to have a green leather notebook with silver corners, the Porter gave him a yellow envelope, and on it he noted

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and felt that this was the beginning of what would become a most interesting collection.

That night at tea he asked Mother if she had a green leather notebook with silver corners. She had not, but when she heard what he wanted it for, she gave him a little black one.

"It has a few pages torn out," said she, "but it will hold quite a lot of numbers; and when it's full, I'll give you another. I'm so glad you like the railway. Only, please, you children *mustn't* walk on the line."

"Not even if we face the way the train's coming?" asked Peter after a pause in which glances of despair were exchanged.

"No—really not," said Mother.

Then Phyllis asked, "Mother, didn't you ever walk on the railway lines when you were little?"

Mother was an honest and honorable mother, so she had to say, "Yes."

"Then . . . " said Phyllis.

"My darlings, you don't know how fond I am of you. What should I ever do if you got hurt?"

"Are you fonder of us than Granny was of you when you were little?" Phyllis asked, wide-eyed. Roberta made signs to her to stop, but Phyllis never did see signs, no matter how plain they might be.

Mother did not answer for a minute. She got up to put more water in the teapot.

"No one," she said at last, "ever loved anyone more than my mother loved me."

Then she was quiet again, and Roberta stared at Phyllis hard across the table because Roberta understood a little bit

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the thoughts that were making Mother so quiet—the thoughts of the time when Mother was a little girl and was all the world to *her* mother. It seems so easy and natural to run to Mother when one is in trouble. Roberta understood a little how people do not leave off running to their mothers when they are in trouble even when they are grown up, and she thought she knew a little what it must be to be so sad and have no mother to run to anymore.

So she nudged Phyllis to keep her from asking more questions, but Phyllis only said, "Why *do* you keep jabbing me with your elbow, Roberta?"

And then Mother laughed a little and sighed and said, "Very well then. Only let me be sure you do know which way the trains come—and don't walk on the line near the tunnel or near corners."

"Trains keep to the left like carriages," said Peter, "so if we keep to the right, we're bound to see them coming."

"Yes, that's true enough," said Mother, and I dare say you think that she ought not to have said it. But she remembered about when she was a little girl herself, and she did say it—and neither her own children nor you nor any other children in the world could ever understand exactly what it cost her to do it. Only some few of you, like Roberta, may understand a very little bit.

It was the very next day that Mother had to stay in bed because her head ached so. Her hands were burning hot, she would not eat anything, and her throat was very sore.

"If I was you, ma'am," said Mrs. Viney, "I should send for the doctor. There're a lot of catchy complaints going about just now. My sister's eldest—she took a chill, and it went to her insides, two years ago come Christmas, and she's never been the same gal since."

Mother wouldn't at first, but in the evening she felt so much worse that Peter was sent to the house in the village

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that had three laburnum trees by the gate and on the gate a brass plate with

W. W. Forrest, M.D.

on it. W. W. Forrest, M.D., came at once. He talked to Peter on the way back. And he seemed a most charming and sensible man, interested in railways and rabbits and really important things like that.

When he had seen Mother, he said it was influenza.

"Now, Lady Grave-airs," he said in the hall to Roberta, "I suppose you'll want to be head nurse."

"Of course," said she.

"Well then, I'll send down some medicine. Keep up a good fire. Have some strong beef tea made ready to give her as soon as the fever goes down. She can have grapes now and beef essence and soda water and milk, and you'd better get in a bottle of syrup. The best kind. Cheap syrups don't seem to do much."

She asked him to write it all down, and he did.

When Roberta showed Mother the list he had written, Mother laughed. It *was* a laugh, Roberta decided, though it was rather odd and feeble.

"Nonsense," said Mother, lying in bed with eyes as bright as beads. "I can't afford all that rubbish. Tell Mrs. Viney to boil two pounds of scrag end of mutton for your dinners tomorrow, and I can have some of the broth. Yes, I should like some more water now, love. And will you get a basin and sponge my hands?"

Roberta obeyed promptly. When she had done everything she could to make Mother less uncomfortable, she went down to the others. Her cheeks were very red, her lips set tight, and her eyes almost as bright as Mother's.

She told them what the Doctor had said and what Mother

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had said too.

"And now," said she when she had told all, "there's no one but us to do anything, and we've got to do it. I've got the shilling for the mutton."

"We can do without the mutton," said Peter. "Bread and butter will support life. People have lived on less on desert islands many a time."

"That's the spirit," said his older sister. So Mrs. Viney was sent to the village to get as much syrup and soda water and beef tea as she could buy for a shilling.

"But even if we never had anything more to eat at all," said Phyllis, "you couldn't get all those other things with our dinner money."

"No," said Roberta, frowning. "We must find out some other way. Now *think*, everybody, just as hard as ever you can."

They did think. And presently they talked. And later, when Roberta had gone up to sit with Mother in case she wanted anything, the other two were very busy with scissors and a white sheet, a paintbrush, and the pot of Brunswick black that Mrs. Viney used for grates and fenders. They did not manage to do what they wished, exactly, with the first sheet, so they took another out of the linen cupboard. It did not occur to them that they were spoiling good sheets which cost good money. They only knew that they were making a lovely—ah, but what they were making comes later.

Roberta's bed had been moved into Mother's room, and several times in the night, she got up to tend the fire and to give her mother milk and soda water. Mother talked to herself a good deal, but it did not seem to mean anything. And once she woke up suddenly and called out, "Mamma, Mamma!" and Roberta knew she was calling for Granny. She guessed Mother must have forgotten that it was no use calling because Granny had died long ago.

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In the early morning Roberta heard her name and jumped out of bed at once and ran to Mother's bedside.

"Oh—yes—I think I was asleep," said Mother. "My poor little duck, how tired you must be. I'm sorry to give you all this trouble."

"It's no trouble to me!" said Roberta as a tear slid down her cheek.

"Ah, don't cry, sweet," Mother said. "I shall be all right in a day or two."

And Roberta said, "Yes, of course you will," and tried to smile.

When you are used to ten hours of solid sleep, to get up three or four times makes you feel as though you had been up all night. Roberta felt quite dull, and her eyes were sore and stiff, but she tidied the room and arranged everything neatly before the doctor came. This was at half past eight.

"Everything going on all right, little nurse?" he said at the front door. "Did you get the syrup?"

"I got it," said Roberta, "though it's an awfully small bottle."

"I didn't see the grapes or the beef tea though," said he.

"No," said Roberta firmly, "but you will tomorrow. And there's some beef stewing in the oven for beef tea."

"Who told you to do that?" he asked.

"I noticed what Mother did when Phyllis had mumps."

"Just right," said the Doctor. "Now you get Mrs. Viney to sit with your mother, and then you eat a good breakfast and go straight to bed and sleep till dinnertime. We can't afford to have the head nurse ill."

He was really quite a nice doctor.

When the 9:15 came out of the tunnel that morning, the kind gentleman in the first-class carriage put down his newspaper and got ready to wave his hand to the three children on the fence. But this morning there were not three.

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There was only one, and that was Peter.

Peter was not on the railings either as usual. He was standing in front of them with an attitude like that of a showman showing off the animals in a menagerie or of the studious clergyman pointing with his stick at the "Scenes from Palestine" when there is a slide show and he is the one explaining it.

Peter was pointing too, and what he was pointing at was a large white sheet nailed against the fence. On the sheet there were thick black letters more than a foot long.

Some of them had run a little because of Phyllis's having applied Brunswick black a bit too eagerly, but the words were quite easy to read.

And this is what the gentleman and several other people in the train read in the large black letters on the white sheet:

LOOK OUT AT THE STATION.

A good many people did look out at the station and were disappointed, for they saw nothing unusual. The gentleman looked out too, and at first he saw nothing more unusual than the gravelly platform, the sunshine, and the wallflowers and forget-me-nots in the station borders. It was only just as the train was beginning to puff and pull itself together to start again that he saw Phyllis. She was quite out of breath with running.

"Oh," she said, "I thought I'd missed you. My bootlaces *would* keep coming down, and I fell over them twice. Here, take it."

She thrust a warm, dampish letter into his hand and jumped back fast as the train began to move. The gentleman smiled a little, leaned back in his corner, and opened the letter. And this is what he read:

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Dear Mr. We-do-not-know-your-name,

Mother is ill, and the doctor says to give her the things at the end of the letter, but she says we can't aford it and to just get mutton for us and she will have the broth. We do not know anybody here but you because Father is away, and we do not know his address. Father will pay you, sir, someday. Or if he has lost all his money or anything, Peter will pay you when he is a man. We promise it on our honer. I.O.U. for all the things Mother needs. (This part was signed *"Peter";* then came a little more—)

Will you give the parsel to the Station Master because of us not knowing what train you come down by? Just say it is for the Peter that was sorry about the coals, and he will know us all right.

Sincerely,
Roberta, Peter, and Phyllis

The letter was followed by the list of things the Doctor had ordered. The gentleman read it through once, and his eyebrows went up. He read it through twice and smiled that little smile again. When he had read it thrice, he put it in his pocket and went on reading *The Times*.

At about six that evening, there was a knock at the back door. The three children rushed to open it, and there stood the friendly Porter, who had told them so many interesting things about railways. He dumped down a big hamper on the kitchen flagstones.

"The gent from the train," he said, "asked me to fetch it up straight away."

"Thank you very much," said Peter, and then as the Porter lingered, he added, "I'm most awfully sorry I haven't got twopence to give you like Father does, but—"

"Drop it, if you please," said the Porter indignantly. "I

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wasn't thinking about no twopences. I only wanted to say I was sorry your mama wasn't so well and to ask how she finds herself this evening—and I've fetched her along a bit of sweetbrier; very sweet to smell it is. Twopence indeed!" said he. And at once he produced a bunch of sweetbrier from his hat.

"Quite a trick that," Phyllis remarked afterwards.

"Thank you very much," said Peter, "and I beg your pardon about the twopence."

"No offence," said the Porter politely, and he left.

Then the children undid the hamper. First there was straw, and then there were fine shavings, and then came all the things they had asked for (and plenty of them), and then a good many things they had not asked for—among others there were peaches and plums and two chickens, a cardboard box of big red roses with long stalks, a tall green bottle of lavender water, and three smaller bottles of eau de Cologne. There was a letter too.

Dear Roberta and Peter and Phyllis, (it said)

Here are the things you want. Your mother will want to know where they came from. Tell her that they were sent by a friend who heard she was ill. When she is well again, you must tell her all about it of course. And if she says you ought not to have asked for the things, tell her that I say you were quite right and that I hope she will forgive me for taking the liberty of allowing myself a very great pleasure.

The letter was signed *G.K.,* followed by something that the children couldn't read.

"I think we *were* right," said Phyllis.

"Right? Of course we were right," said Roberta.

"All the same," said Peter with his hands in his pockets,

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"I don't exactly look forward to telling Mother the whole story."

"Well, we're not to fess up till she's well," said Roberta, "and when she's well, we shall be so happy we shan't mind a little fuss like that. Oh, just look at the roses! I must take them to her straight away."

"And the sweetbrier," said Phyllis, sniffing it loudly. "Don't forget the sweetbrier."

"As if I should!" said Roberta. "Why, Mother told me just the other day that there was a thick hedge of it at her mother's house when she was a little girl."

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* In proper English one would say, "the most beautiful," but "the beautifulest" sounds just like Peter, doesn't it? Little boys (and perhaps little girls as well) are sometimes blissfully unaware of the correct use of the superlative.

** This is a quote from Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

*** The children's spelling was retained in the letter. Can you find the three words that need fixing? The answer is in the final note at the end of the next chapter.