THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

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EDITH NESBIT

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INTRODUCTION

The book you are holding in your hand is a modern fairy tale. It is a story about childhood, gratitude, sin, forgiveness, and kindness, but it is also a book which begins with the sorrow of a separated family and ends in a picture of eucatastrophe. What's eucatastrophe? It's the final ingredient of a fairy story, according to Tolkien.

But first, a word about E. Nesbit's special kind of fairy tale. Edith Nesbit was a children's author who lived in England from 1858 to 1924. She is best known for her children's books, which in turn influenced other famous children's authors including C.S. Lewis, P.L. Travers, Diana Wynne-Jones, and J.K. Rowling. She is probably most beloved for her fairy stories, set in the real world with real flesh-and-blood children. *The Railway Children* does not have magic (sorry to disappoint you!), but it has all the ingredients that make up a great fairy tale.

When their father is arrested and charged with selling state secrets, Robert, Peter, and Phyllis have to leave London with their mother for a tiny house in the country. While most of life seems bleak and hopeless to the children, their one great joy is a train that passes near their house. They wave at it—and if you wave at a train, you never know what may happen. Adventures ensue, and Robert, Peter, and Phyllis soon are embarked on a quest to reunite their family.

Edith Nesbit was not an orthodox Christian by any stretch of the imagination, but she grew up in a culture that still bore witness to the truths of the Christian faith. So, in this book, she makes an explicit allusion to the doctrine of God's providence: "Don't you think it's rather nice to think that we're in a book that God's writing? If I were writing the book, I might make mistakes. But God knows how to make the story end just right—in the way that's best for us."

Tolkien coined the term "eucatastrophe" to be the opposite of a catastrophe. It is the point in any story, when everything is going as badly as possible and all hope seems lost, and then there is a sudden reversal or change in circumstances that brings unspeakable joy. A eucatastrophe is what makes a fairy story so joyful:

> This joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially "escapist," nor "fugitive."… It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the

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THE BEGINNING OF THINGS

THEY WERE NOT RAILWAY CHILDREN TO BEGIN with. I don't suppose they had ever thought about railways except as a means of getting to Maskelyne and Cook's, the Pantomime, Zoological Gardens, and Madame Tussaud's. They were just ordinary suburban children, and they lived with their Father and Mother in an ordinary red-brick-fronted villa, with coloured glass in the front door, a tiled passage that was called a hall, a bath-room with hot and cold water, electric bells, French windows, and a good deal of white paint, and 'every modern convenience', as the house-agents say.

There were three of them. Roberta was the eldest. Of course, Mothers never have favourites, but if their Mother *had* had a favourite, it might have been Roberta. Next came Peter, who wished to be an Engineer when he grew up; and the youngest was Phyllis, who meant extremely well.

Mother did not spend all her time in paying dull calls to dull ladies, and sitting dully at home waiting for dull ladies to pay calls to her. She was almost always there, ready to play with the children, and read to them, and help them to do their home-lessons. Besides this she used to write stories for them while they were at school, and read them aloud after tea, and she always made up funny pieces of poetry for their birthdays and for other great occasions, such as the christening of the new kittens, or the refurnishing of the doll's house, or the time when they were getting over the mumps.

These three lucky children always had everything they needed: pretty clothes, good fires, a lovely nursery with heaps of toys, and a Mother Goose wall-paper. They had a kind and merry nursemaid, and a dog who was called James, and who was their very own. They also had a Father who was just perfect—never cross, never unjust, and always ready for a game—at least, if at any time he was *not* ready, he always had an excellent reason for it, and explained the reason to the children so interestingly and funnily that they felt sure he couldn't help himself.

You will think that they ought to have been very happy. And so they were, but they did not know *how* happy till the pretty

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PETER'S COAL-MINE

"WHAT FUN!" SAID MOTHER, IN THE DARK, FEELing for the matches on the table. "How frightened the poor mice were—I don't believe they were rats at all."

She struck a match and relighted the candle and everyone looked at each other by its winky, blinky light.

"Well," she said, "you've often wanted something to happen and now it has. This is quite an adventure, isn't it? I told Mrs. Viney to get us some bread and butter, and meat and things, and to have supper ready. I suppose she's laid it in the dining-room. So let's go and see."

The dining-room opened out of the kitchen. It looked much darker than the kitchen when they went in with the one candle. Because the kitchen was whitewashed, but the dining-room was dark wood from floor to ceiling, and across the ceiling there were heavy black beams. There was a muddled maze of dusty furniture—the breakfast-room furniture from the old home where they had lived all their lives. It seemed a very long time ago, and a very long way off.

There was the table certainly, and there were chairs, but there was no supper.

"Let's look in the other rooms," said Mother; and they looked. And in each room was the same kind of blundering half-arrangement of furniture, and fire-irons and crockery, and all sorts of odd things on the floor, but there was nothing to eat; even in the pantry there were only a rusty cake-tin and a broken plate with whitening mixed in it.

"What a horrid old woman!" said Mother; "she's just walked off with the money and not got us anything to eat at all."

"Then shan't we have any supper at all?" asked Phyllis, dismayed, stepping back on to a soap-dish that cracked responsively.

"Oh, yes," said Mother, "only it'll mean unpacking one of those big cases that we put in the cellar. Phil, do mind where you're walking to, there's a dear. Peter, hold the light."

The cellar door opened out of the kitchen. There were five wooden steps leading down. It wasn't a proper cellar at all, the children thought, because its ceiling went up as high as the

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THE OLD GENTLEMAN

AFTER THE ADVENTURE OF PETER'S COAL-MINE, 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 occur 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 old 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 crisp, short 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 10.7 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 old gentleman travelled. He was a very nice-looking old gentleman, and he looked as if he were nice, too, which is not at all the same thing. He had a fresh-coloured, 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 old 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 Peter's Waterbury watch that he had had given him on his last birthday.

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

"Dragons don't carry people's love," said Peter; "they'd be above it."

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THE ENGINE-BURGLAR

WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE SECOND SHEET AND THE Brunswick black came in very nicely to make a banner bearing the legend

SHE IS NEARLY WELL THANK YOU

and this was displayed to the Green Dragon about a fortnight after the arrival of the wonderful hamper. The old gentleman saw it, and waved a cheerful response from the train. And when this had been done the children saw that now was the time when they must tell Mother what they had done when she was ill. And it did not seem nearly so easy as they had thought it would be. But it had to be done. And it was done. Mother

was extremely angry. She was seldom angry, and now she was angrier than they had ever known her. This was horrible. But it was much worse when she suddenly began to cry. Crying is catching, I believe, like measles and whooping-cough. At any rate, everyone at once found itself taking part in a crying-party.

Mother stopped first. She dried her eyes and then she said:—

"I'm sorry I was so angry, darlings, because I know you didn't understand."

"We didn't mean to be naughty, Mammy," sobbed Bobbie, and Peter and Phyllis sniffed.

"Now, listen," said Mother; "it's quite true that we're poor, but we have enough to live on. You mustn't go telling everyone about our affairs—it's not right. And you must never, never, never ask strangers to give you things. Now always remember that—won't you?"

They all hugged her and rubbed their damp cheeks against hers and promised that they would.

"And I'll write a letter to your old gentleman, and I shall tell him that I didn't approve—oh, of course I shall thank him, too, for his kindness. It's *you* I don't approve of, my darlings, not the old gentleman. He was as kind as ever he could be. And you can give the letter to the Station Master to give him—and we won't say any more about it."

Afterwards, when the children were alone, Bobbie said:—

"Isn't Mother splendid? You catch any other grown-up saying they were sorry they had been angry."

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PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES

IT WAS ONE DAY WHEN MOTHER HAD GONE TO Maidbridge. She had gone alone, but the children were to go to the station to meet her. And, loving the station as they did, it was only natural that they should be there a good hour before there was any chance of Mother's train arriving, even if the train were punctual, which was most unlikely. No doubt they would have been just as early, even if it had been a fine day, and all the delights of woods and fields and rocks and rivers had been open to them. But it happened to be a very wet day and, for July, very cold. There was a wild wind that drove flocks of dark purple clouds across the sky "like herds of dream-elephants," as Phyllis

said. And the rain stung sharply, so that the way to the station was finished at a run. Then the rain fell faster and harder, and beat slantwise against the windows of the booking office and of the chill place that had General Waiting Room on its door.

"It's like being in a besieged castle," Phyllis said; "look at the arrows of the foe striking against the battlements!"

"It's much more like a great garden-squirt," said Peter.

They decided to wait on the up side, for the down platform looked very wet indeed, and the rain was driving right into the little bleak shelter where down-passengers have to wait for their trains.

The hour would be full of incident and of interest, for there would be two up trains and one down to look at before the one that should bring Mother back.

"Perhaps it'll have stopped raining by then," said Bobbie; "anyhow, I'm glad I brought Mother's waterproof and umbrella."

They went into the desert spot labelled General Waiting Room, and the time passed pleasantly enough in a game of advertisements. You know the game, of course? It is something like dumb Crambo. The players take it in turns to go out, and then come back and look as like some advertisement as they can, and the others have to guess what advertisement it is meant to be. Bobbie came in and sat down under Mother's umbrella and made a sharp face, and everyone knew she was the fox who sits under the umbrella in the advertisement. Phyllis tried to make a Magic Carpet of Mother's waterproof, but it would not stand out stiff and raft-like as a Magic Carpet should, and nobody

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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

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FOR VALOUR

I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND MY TELLING YOU A good deal about Roberta. The fact is I am growing very fond of her. The more I observe her the more I love her. And I notice all sorts of things about her that I like.

For instance, she was quite oddly anxious to make other people happy. And she could keep a secret, a tolerably rare accomplishment. Also she had the power of silent sympathy. That sounds rather dull, I know, but it's not so dull as it sounds. It just means that a person is able to know that you are unhappy, and to love you extra on that account, without bothering you by telling you all the time how sorry she is for you. That was

what Bobbie was like. She knew that Mother was unhappy—and that Mother had not told her the reason. So she just loved Mother more and never said a single word that could let Mother know how earnestly her little girl wondered what Mother was unhappy about. This needs practice. It is not so easy as you might think.

Whatever happened—and all sorts of nice, pleasant ordinary things happened—such as picnics, games, and buns for tea, Bobbie always had these thoughts at the back of her mind. "Mother's unhappy. Why? I don't know. She doesn't want me to know. I won't try to find out. But she *is* unhappy. Why? I don't know. She doesn't—" and so on, repeating and repeating like a tune that you don't know the stopping part of.

The Russian gentleman still took up a good deal of everybody's thoughts. All the editors and secretaries of Societies and Members of Parliament had answered Mother's letters as politely as they knew how; but none of them could tell where the wife and children of Mr. Szezcpansky would be likely to be. (Did I tell you that the Russian's very Russian name was that?)

Bobbie had another quality which you will hear differently described by different people. Some of them call it interfering in other people's business—and some call it "helping lame dogs over stiles," and some call it "loving-kindness." It just means trying to help people.

She racked her brains to think of some way of helping the Russian gentleman to find his wife and children. He had learned a few words of English now. He could say "Good morning,"

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THE AMATEUR FIREMEN

"THAT'S A LIKELY LITTLE BROOCH YOU'VE GOT on, Miss," said Perks the Porter; "I don't know as ever I see a thing more like a buttercup without it WAS a buttercup."

"Yes," said Bobbie, glad and flushed by this approval. "I always thought it was more like a buttercup almost than even a real one—and I *never* thought it would come to be mine, my very own—and then Mother gave it to me for my birthday."

"Oh, have you had a birthday?" said Perks; and he seemed quite surprised, as though a birthday were a thing only granted to a favoured few.

"Yes," said Bobbie; "when's your birthday, Mr. Perks?" The children were taking tea with Mr. Perks in the Porters' room among the lamps and the railway almanacs. They had brought their own cups and some jam turnovers. Mr. Perks made tea in a beer can, as usual, and everyone felt very happy and confidential.

"My birthday?" said Perks, tipping some more dark brown tea out of the can into Peter's cup. "I give up keeping of my birthday afore you was born."

"But you must have been born *sometime*, you know," said Phyllis, thoughtfully, "even if it was twenty years ago—or thirty or sixty or seventy."

"Not so long as that, Missie," Perks grinned as he answered. "If you really want to know, it was thirty-two years ago, come the fifteenth of this month."

"Then why don't you keep it?" asked Phyllis.

"I've got something else to keep besides birthdays," said Perks, briefly.

"Oh! What?" asked Phyllis, eagerly. "Not secrets?"

"No," said Perks, "the kids and the Missus."

It was this talk that set the children thinking, and, presently, talking. Perks was, on the whole, the dearest friend they had made. Not so grand as the Station Master, but more approachable—less powerful than the old gentleman, but more confidential.

"It seems horrid that nobody keeps his birthday," said Bobbie. "Couldn't *we* do something?"