

Steam train stories



This text is taken from *The Railway Children*, which was first published in 1906. The author, E. Nesbit, wrote many other children's books, including *Five Children and It* and *The Phoenix and the Carpet*. In this text the main characters in the story meet the local station porter, who tells them all about life on the railway. Trains were then powered by steam (made using fire and water) and not by electricity or diesel as they are today.

When their father is suddenly taken away, Roberta, Peter and Phyllis go with their mother to live in a country cottage in Yorkshire – where they have all kinds of adventures.

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 began with “Why –” which many people in higher ranks of life often seem weary of.

He told them many things that they had not known before – as, 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 holt of one o’ them when the train is going and pull ’em apart,” said he, “she’d stop dead off with a jerk.”

“Who’s she?” said Phyllis.

“The train, of course,” said the Porter. After that the train was never again ‘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.”

“And if you used it properly?” said Roberta.

“It ’ud stop just the same, I suppose,” said he, “but it isn’t proper use unless you’re being murdered. There was an old lady once – someone kidded her on it was 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, ‘Oh, please, Mister, I’ll take a glass of stout and a Bath bun,’ she says. And the train was seven minutes behind time as it was.”

“What did the guard say to the old lady?”

“I dunno,” replied the Porter, “but I lay she didn’t forget it in a hurry, whatever it was.”