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WRONG TRACKS







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For Alex and Harrison

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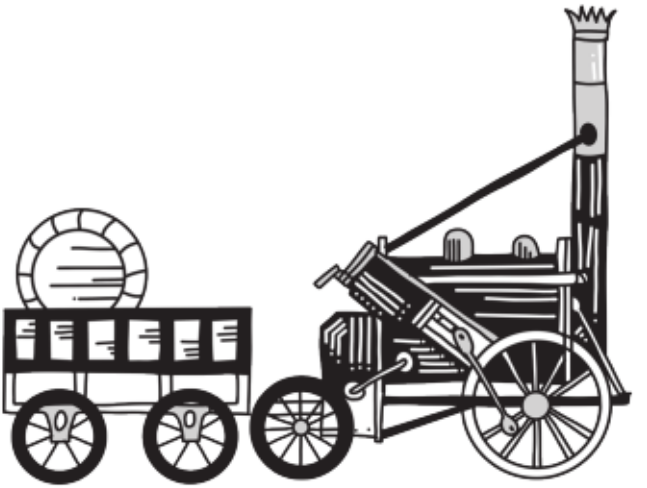
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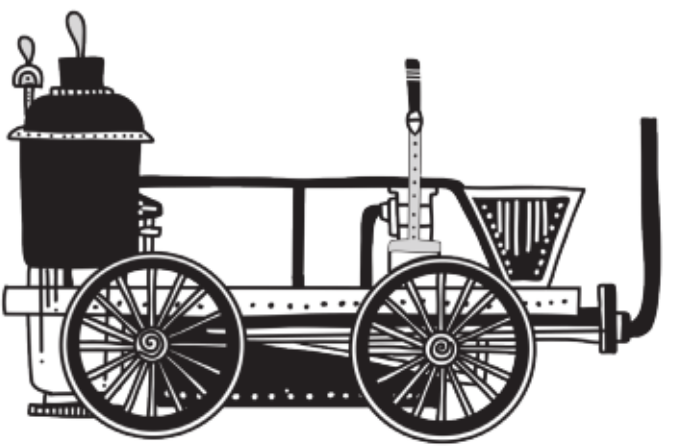
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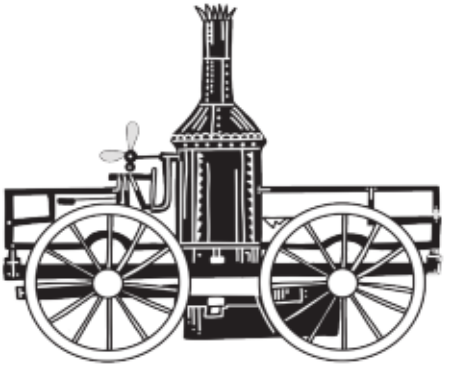
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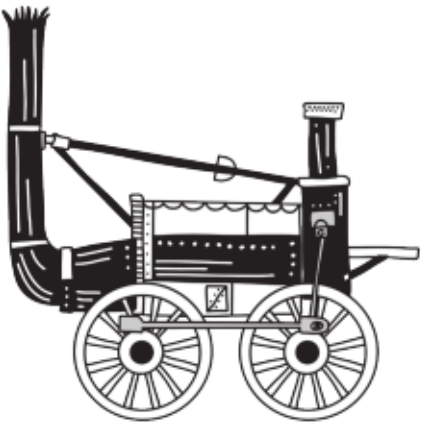
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TO ENGINEERS AND IRON FOUNDERS,

THE DIRECTORS of the LIVERPOOL and Manchester Rail Way hereby offer a Premium of £500 (over and above the cost price) for a LOCOMOTIVE ENGINE, which shall be a decided improvement on any hitherto constructed, subject to certain stipulations and conditions, a copy of which may be had at the Rail Way Office, or will be forwarded, as may be directed, on application for the same, if by letter, post paid.

HENRY BOOTH, Treasurer.

Rail Way Office, Liverpool, April 25, 1829.

PART ONE



Chapter One

A STRANGER

Tyldesley, Lancashire
August, 1829

"You're a liar, Edward Entwistle!"

"Admit it!"

"We won't let you get away now. Hold tight, lads!"

There are three of them, all sneering voices and snatching hands, and they are upon me. Desperation lends me strength. My shirt sleeve rips noisily as I tug free from the lads' grasp.

I suck air into my lungs and charge down the street. My feet burning as they pound on the hard cobbles towards my village.

Clumps of soil and stones thud against my back. I glance over my shoulder and nearly get a face full of horse manure!

The boys are catching up. They are older than me, bigger, I know I can't outrun them.

I desperately scan for somewhere to hide. The chapel, maybe? There'll be no one there now.

I launch myself around the corner.

Oof! I rub my sore chest and look up. The man is well-built and at least forty years old.

"Woah there, boy! What's the hurry?"

I quickly take in his crisp white shirt, knee high boots, tailcoat and overcoat. *A gentleman.*

"Sorry, sir!" I bend over, gasping for breath. I have to think quick. The boys will be upon me in just a moment. I straighten up. "I am in training for a . . . for a race."

"A race indeed!" The gentleman tips back his top hat so he can meet my eyes. "What a coincidence! I am in preparation for a race myself!" He gives a hearty laugh, eyes twinkling.

"*Really*, sir?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice. I glance round again, working out my next move.

"You do not believe me?" The gentleman raises an eyebrow.

"Of course I do."

The lads have gathered across the street. They watch me, all mean eyes and curled lips.

I stick out my tongue at them. I'm safe in the company of this gentleman.

"You have heard, perhaps, of The Trials?"

"Oh yes, everyone has," I fib, hoping to keep the man talking. "I've been thinking of entering myself, actually." I run on the spot to prove my point.

The man laughs again. "Excellent. How impressive. I thought my son, Robert, would be the youngest entrant, but you must be only eleven? Twelve?"

I scowl and stretch my body as much as I can. "Fourteen."

"Ah, my apologies. All the running must keep you lithe . . . Master . . ."

I can't help smiling. "Entwistle. Edward Entwistle."

The man thrusts out his hand. "I am Mr George Stephenson."

"'Ow do." His handshake is firm but warm.

Mr George pushes his thumb into his overcoat's top buttonhole.

"It is a pleasure to meet a young man who is as quick with his words as he is with his feet, young Edward. You're a canny bairn!"

I like this man. "Pardon me, sir, but you don't sound like you're from round here . . ."

Mr George puffs out his chest. "Well observed, Edward. I am from Northumberland originally."

"Is that why you sound funny?" I quickly slap my hand over my mouth.

But George Stephenson just laughs. "I could say the same about you, lad! I can't understand a word you Lancashire folk say, sometimes!"

I chuckle.

We walk down the street in silence until we reach the main crossroads. The boys have sloped away. My chest relaxes.

I point across the street to a row of terraces. "I'd best be goin' wom."

"And I must be going too." Mr Stephenson pulls out his pocket watch. "I have an important meeting to attend. But no doubt I will see you again at Rainhill!" He gives a wink."

"Oh yes, certainly!"

Rainhill! Where on earth is Rainhill?

***

I dash home, then run upstairs to the small front bedroom I share with my brother. I go to the window to check the street.

Mr Stephenson is walking away, there is no sign of the boys, thank goodness.

You don't get many gentlemen round here! I wish I'd asked him more about the race he and his son are entering.

There is a jug and bowl of water on the washstand. I have a quick strip wash then change into a fresh shirt. I gently bite my lip, gathering up the torn shirt, and head downstairs.

Ma and Pa are sitting in the front parlour. There is bread, cups and saucers, a milk jug and a brown teapot on a small table. My brother, William, is holding a dish in front of the range fire to warm the butter. My stomach rumbles in anticipation.

Gingerly, I hold out my damaged shirt.

"Oh Edward, what's happened now?" asks Ma.

"It wasn't my fault. I was trying to rescue a lady's cat and it scratched me," I fib.

"It must have had claws like a dragon," says Pa.

"Or a lion," adds William.

I shoot my brother a dark look. "You didn't see it. It were fierce."

"You should be a writer, the number of stories you tell, Edward Entwistle," says Ma, while looking for her sewing basket.

"It's true!"

"Course it is," mocks William, spreading the softened butter on to the end of the bread with a knife. "Just like that story you told last week about seeing a ghost in our yard . . ."

"Only it turned out to be my nightshirt on the washing line!" ribs Pa.

"And what about that story you told the other week about how you found that gold coin . . ." adds William. "Only that magpie flew down and got to it first."

"It did!"

"In your imagination," mutters William, "Like all your stories!" He pulls me aside and lowers his voice, so Ma and Pa can't hear. "What really happened?"

I shrug. "I got in a spot of bother with some lads from the other village, that's all."

"I've warned you, those tales you keep telling will land you in hot water." William pulls himself up even taller, as he often does when emphasising his two-year advantage over me in age. "Well at least they didn't bust your nose this time."

I shudder and touch it. The room begins to spin as I remember how the sticky blood ran down my face. *Blood.* Even the word makes me feel woozy. I clutch the mantlepiece. It's too hot in here.

There is a knock on the door.

"Now, who could that be?" wonders Ma, putting aside her needle and thread.

"It'll be the lady come to thank Edward for saving her cat," teases Pa, taking the bread knife to the loaf.

Ma whips off her apron and dusts down her skirt before opening the front door.

William and I peer round to see.

It's the gentleman from earlier! He takes off his top hat and introduces himself.

Cold fear plunges into the pit of my stomach. Am I in trouble again? I slink back into the parlour and tuck myself in between the fire and Pa's armchair, trying to make myself as small as possible.

William mouths. "What does he want?"

I glue my lips together.

Ma is so flustered she simply invites our unexpected visitor in. George Stephenson seems to fill the room as he glances around at our rather plain furnishings. He indicates the range's coal fire with a flick of his head. "Do you mind if I warm my hands?" He claps them together. "It is rather a cold day."

"Be my guest," says Pa, sitting rather straighter in his chair. "Mother, have we a drop left in the 'pot?"

Ma is still a bit dazed, but she gives her head a little shake as though waking herself, then picks up the brown teapot. "A cup of tea, Mr Stephenson?"

"Aye, that would be most kind, Mrs Entwistle." He takes off his overcoat and passes it, with his hat, to William. I can see confusion spread over Ma's face as she wonders how he knows her name.

"Some bread and butter?"

"I have already eaten, thank you."

I wish they would stop with all the niceties and ask him why he has called on us.

"You're not from round these parts," comments Pa.

"No, Mr Entwistle. I have travelled down from the town of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. My son runs an engineering works there."

Pa nods.

"How nice," says Ma, as she pours the tea.

"I am here for a meeting with the owners of the new Bolton to Leigh Rail Way," Mr Stephenson continues.

The rail way! My ears prick – The rail way! I have been fascinated by all the talk and newspaper articles about the new rail ways – special iron roads used to transport coal and passengers to the big towns – and the steel horses, or steam locomotives, which

pull the wagons. I am burning with questions I want to ask about this exciting new technology, but Ma will give me a clip around the ear if I speak out of place.

Ma gestures for our guest to sit as she holds out a teacup and saucer.

Mr Stephenson accepts the tea but remains standing. He is a man who seems more comfortable on his feet, addressing his audience. "Your cottage reminds me a little of my own childhood home in Wylam." His gaze falls on two shelves of books in the corner of the front room. "You enjoy reading, I see."

"Very much so," agrees Pa. "Knowledge is key to a man's progress in life. My two boys both went to school."

"I am glad to hear that. I was not fortunate to have a formal education myself, but I have ensured my son Robert received the best schooling possible," he says proudly. "And that brings me to the reason for my calling here today." He sips his tea. "I met briefly with your son earlier." He nods at me. "Edward told me that he was considering entering The Trials."

I squirm.

"Did he?" says Pa, widening his eyes.

"The Trials are a race," I explain, ignoring him.

Ma, Pa and William look confused.

"But not for runners," adds George Stephenson, his eyes twinkling again.

Now *I* feel confused.

"They are for steam locomotives! And I know I have only just met your son, but I think he might just be the person I need – to win!"



Chapter Two

A DECISION

"Locomotives!" Ma's face turns as pale as the tablecloth. "Oh dear! Aren't they dangerous?"

My heart thuds with excitement. *I'm not afraid of a little danger!*

"I promise you, my locomotives are very safe," George Stephenson continues, waving a hand dismissively. "There have been lots of lies written about rail ways – that the locomotives' fumes will poison birds, that they will terrify cows and horses and ruin crops. That sparks from them will set fields alight and blaze through the countryside . . . All nonsense."

"But there have been boiler explosions . . ." Pa prompts.

"Explosions!" Ma gasps.

I nibble the end of my thumb. A little danger is one thing, but boilers that blow up is quite another!

George Stephenson looks serious for a moment. "There are safety valves to stop that from happening. As long as a fireman is well trained and does not tamper, he can drive the engine without fear for himself or others."

I let out a long breath.

"This talk of accidents and danger are put about by those who oppose development and progress," Mr George reassures us. "Rich landowners with a vested interest in the canals. They know my rail ways will be faster and cheaper for the transportation of coal. There is much money to be lost and they will stop at nothing to protect their investment. Why, they even had their men shoot at my surveyors as they walked the proposed line of the new Liverpool & Manchester Rail Way!"

"Shot at," whispers William.

I elbow my brother to make him stay quiet. There's no way Ma and Pa will let me have anything to do with locomotives!

"But all is settled now," continues Mr George. "The Government has passed a bill and the Liverpool & Manchester line is almost complete. There is only one important matter still to be decided. At first, the owners of the rail way favoured the use of a series of stationary engines using heavy rope winches to pull the coal and passenger wagons along. But, of course, I have argued for the use of steam-powered locomotive engines which move with the wagons.

"To test if locomotives are superior, the owners of the Liverpool & Manchester have organised a contest. The Trials are an opportunity for the finest engineers to showcase their latest locomotive designs – the owner of the best engine will win £500."

"£500!" I gasp.

Ma shoots me a look, but I can see she is equally impressed.

"But the real prize is a contract to supply locomotive engines on the Liverpool & Manchester Rail Way and I am determined to win!" finishes Mr George.

"And you want our Edward to help with this contest?" asks Ma.

"I do. I am in need of someone quick-witted and fast on their feet."

"Well, our Edward is certainly that, Mr Stephenson," says Pa.

I grin.

"And someone who is honest, who will always speak the truth."

William snorts.

"We have brought up both our boys to be good Christian children." Ma gives my brother a hard stare. "Though Edward does have rather a vivid imagination."

"Another asset! Imagination is the path to invention – and with it we find solutions to problems."

I blush again.

"Don't you have to be strong to work in a manufactory," mumbles William.

"Muscles aren't necessary for the role I have in mind – in fact, I would go so far as to say, Edward is a perfect fit for the job!"

William sulks, and I realise that he's probably jealous that Mr George has chosen me for this job.

Pa has lots of questions for Mr George. How much will I be paid? Where will I live? Ma wants to be sure I'll be safe and well looked after. I cross my fingers and hope they will agree to my going.

Mr George answers them all, then turns to me. "So, what do you say, Edward? Would you like to come and work for me and my son?"

It all sounds so exciting! I look from face to face. William. Ma. Pa. Mr George. All waiting for my answer.

Can I really leave home – leave my family?

Ma dabs at her eyes with her apron. But there is something else there, besides the tears – a look of pride.

"Yes. Yes, I would."

***

A week later, I stick my head out of the stagecoach window and gape at the width of the Tyne River and the gas-lit streets, breathing in the salty, coalsmoke-filled air.

Mr George thumps the roof of the carriage and the driver brings us to a halt with a "Woah!" to the horses.

"Well, here we are."

Thank goodness! I rub my back, bruised from being jolted about. Travel by stagecoach was exciting at first, especially on the newer roads, but the novelty quickly wore off when we switched to older, rutted and water-logged lanes.

The trip north was slow, with us stopping every fifteen miles or thereabouts so the driver and guard could change horses. Still, at least the stagecoach inns were warm, with a chance for a drink before setting off again.

I pick up my bag and step down after Mr George. I glance back at the yellow and black carriage. I hope journeys by steam locomotive are not just faster but more comfortable!

Butterflies flutter in my stomach as we stroll up to my new lodgings. I've never stayed with strangers before. The house looks rather grey and cold as I approach the front door. I take a deep breath and rap the knocker.

The curtains twitch and I glimpse a woman about Ma's age with curly hair.

The woman quickly opens the front door. "I'm Mrs Dibnah."

She gives a big smile. "And you must be Edward. Come in. Come in."

Mrs Dibnah seems friendly enough. Relief rushes through me.

The hall smells of cooking, something meaty, awakening my appetite.

Mr George passes Mrs Dibnah some money. My keep I guess.

"You're in the front room, pet." She points up the stairs.

"I'll see you at the manufactory at eight sharp." Mr George tips his top hat in farewell.

"Yes, sir."

***

A whole room to myself! I drop my bag on the floor and fling myself on to the bed. I might miss my family, but I won't miss my brother's stinky feet under my nose!

There is some other furniture too. There's a chair and a small wooden table by the window.

Ma's words echo in my head. "Don't be leaving your things strewn all over the place. I won't be there to pick up after you."

I put away all my clothes, then lay out my writing equipment. I dip my pen into the ink and start to write. The journey was rather uneventful, so I decide to add a bit of drama . . .

Dear Ma, Pa and William,
What a journey I have had! Our stagecoach almost toppled over several times due to the rough roads! But I am now safely in Newcastle – the town is huge with a castle ruin. There are lots of new buildings being constructed. The river here—

I'm interrupted by two loud knocks on the door.

To my surprise, it's not my landlady but a girl about my age holding a bowl of broth. "For your supper."

"Thank you." I reach out, the bowl warming my chilled fingers.

But she doesn't let go. She stares at me with bright blue eyes, as though assessing me and finding me wanting. "Mam says to bring it to the kitchen when you're done."

I nod, giving the bowl a subtle tug.

The girl keeps her grip. "I didn't know Mr George was hiring children." She wrinkles her freckled nose. "Know a lot about engines, do you?"

I blink hard, but then I relax. A girl will have even less of a clue than I do about locomotives! "Oh yes, that's why Mr George hired me. He wants my advice on his newest engine," I fib.

She jerks her chin. "And which one would that be?"

"I can't say." I tap the side of my nose. "My work is highly confidential."

The girl scoffs. "But you can tell me about the other engines you've worked on . . ."

I scramble for a name – something Mr George mentioned on our long journey north. I know steam locomotive engines and their individual carriages have names just like stagecoaches – but my mind is a blank.

She is still waiting.

"Erm . . ."

"I suppose *that* work was highly confidential too."

"Exactly."

"Huh!" She releases the bowl, the hot liquid slops on to my hand. "Ow!"

The girl turns and trots away, still shaking her head.

I scowl at her back.

The broth steam wisps up my nostrils, the smell making me forget my grumpiness.

I carry my supper over to the table and put it down next to my writing materials. I move the letter aside. I don't have much to tell my family yet, any road. I'll start afresh after I've been to the manufactory.

The broth is watery with slivers of green and orange floating in it. I dip in my spoon, blow, then take a sip. It's not a patch on Ma's but at least it should be filling.

I wonder what the girl's name is. She has the same curly hair as her ma. Unruly and dark. And those eyes – like she can see right through me.

She can tell I don't know a thing about engines. I take another slurp of soup. *Well, I'll soon fix that!*