

Peter's Coal Mine

by **Edith Nesbit** *from The Railway Children*

The Railway Children is the story of of an English family with three children named Peter, Phyllis, and Roberta. The mother and children move to a house near a railway, or railroad track, after the father has been put in prison. In this passage, the children and their mother have just arrived at their new house very late in the day. No one is at the house to greet them. The house is dark; there are boxes everywhere; and there is no dinner ready. The mother and the children have just opened a box in the cellar that has food and candles.

“Hooray!” said Mother; “here are some candles—the very first thing! You girls go and light them. You’ll find some saucers and things. Just drop a little candle-grease in the saucer and stick the candle upright in it.”

“How many shall we light?”

“As many as ever you like,” said Mother, gaily. “The great thing is to be cheerful. Nobody can be cheerful in the dark except owls and dormice.”

So the girls lighted candles. The head of the first match flew off and stuck to Phyllis’s finger; but, as Roberta said, it was only a little burn, and she might have had to be a Roman martyr and be burned whole if she had happened to live in the days when those things were fashionable.

Then, when the dining-room was lighted by fourteen candles, Roberta fetched coal and wood and lighted a fire.

“It’s very cold for May,” she said, feeling what a grown-up thing it was to say.

The fire-light and the candle-light made the dining-room look very different, for now you could see that the dark walls were of wood, carved here and there into little wreaths and loops.

The girls hastily ‘tidied’ the room, which meant putting the chairs against the wall, and piling all the odds and ends into a corner and partly hiding them with the big leather arm-chair that Father used to sit in after dinner.

“Bravo!” cried Mother, coming in with a tray full of things. “This is something like! I’ll just get a tablecloth and then—”

The tablecloth was in a box with a proper lock that was opened with a key and not with a shovel, and when the cloth was spread on the table, a real feast was laid out on it.

Questions

1. What does *fetch* mean here: "Roberta fetched coal and wood and lighted a fire"?
2. What was the locked box opened with?
3. What does *hastily* mean here: "The girls hastily 'tidied' the room"?
4. In what month does this story take place?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. upright
2. dormice
3. martyr
4. fetched
5. bravo

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "stick the candle **upright** in it"

- a. upside down b. tightly or securely c. carefully; neatly d. straight up or vertical

2) "Nobody can be cheerful in the dark except owls and **dormice**"

- a. coal miners b. small rodents c. hawks or eagles d. moths

3) "she might have had to be a Roman **martyr** and be burned whole"

- a. chariot; cart b. one killed for their beliefs; saint c. emperor d. house; villa

4) "Roberta **fetches** coal and wood and lighted a fire"

- a. found; discovered b. stacked or piled c. carried; brought in d. purchased; bought

5) "'**Bravo!**' cried Mother, coming in with a tray full of things"

- a. well done; excellent b. help; hurry c. hello; hi d. oh no; oops