

## **The Train Ticket**

**By Claire Falconer**

The night was dark and bitterly cold. Snowflakes gently drifted down from the velvet black sky. On the outskirts of a small village in the Yorkshire countryside, a light twinkled through the frosted windowpane of a little house. Fiona Lawrence, a young, ten-year-old girl, held her candle to the window and gazed out at the snowy landscape. Her face was streaked with tears and her eyes were red from crying. She had been sitting before the window the entire night, lost in painful memories. There was no fire on the hearth, and the room was frightfully cold. Fiona shivered as the wind picked up, rattling the window frame and causing the house to creak.

A mouse scurried across the floor. Its squeaks brought Fiona back to the present. She gingerly stood and moved to the fireplace to build a fire. The coal scuttle was empty, but there was a small stack of wood near the door. As Fiona knelt before the hearth, she was overcome with a sob of grief and loneliness.

Within the past two days, both of her parents had suddenly died. Her father had fallen ill with a high fever and passed away two nights ago. Her broken-hearted mother died shortly afterward of the same fever. The doctor had done all he could, but had been unable to help them.

As if this were not enough for the young girl to deal with, the last of her poverty-stricken parents' money had gone to pay the doctor's bill and the rent of the house, and she had no living relatives to provide for her. Now Fiona was left penniless and alone in the world.

The fire crackled. Fiona rose and hurried around the room, hastily packing her few possessions. She remembered how last night, the doctor, after expressing his condolences, had matter-of-factly explained that he would arrange for her to be sent away to the orphanage.

Having no desire whatsoever to live in an orphanage, Fiona decided she would run away to London. Her parents had been good friends with a warmhearted family who lived there, and Fiona was sure that the family would be willing to take her in.

Outside, the snow stopped falling. The first shafts of daylight stretched over the horizon. The ground was covered in a sparkling blanket of snow.

With the packing complete, Fiona turned to the mantelpiece over the hearth. There, bathed in the early morning light, a beautiful porcelain teapot sat on display. It was the prettiest item in the room, and had been her mother's prized possession. It was white, with an exquisite floral design in the center. Because she

had no money, Fiona decided to sell the teapot for money to buy a train ticket. Feeling rather guilty, she lifted it off the mantle and wrapped it in a scrap of cloth. She could hardly bear to part with it, but she must if she wanted to get to London before she was sent to the orphanage.

In another few minutes, Fiona was outside with her bundle of packages. The young, orphaned girl crunched through the snow, leaving behind a trail of footsteps that would never be retraced. How cold the air; how harsh the wind! The load of grief and suffering, matched with the weight of her packages, left Fiona doubled over. The sharp air bit at her bare face and hands. But the thought of her parents' friends in London, who would lovingly welcome her and grieve with her, warmed Fiona on the inside.

By the time she reached the village, her fingers, nose and feet were numb. She entered the pawn shop and was welcomed by the warmth of a blazing fire. Fiona carried her teapot to the counter. The storekeeper was stirred to sympathy at the sight of the forlorn child, and paid two shillings more than necessary for the teapot.

Fiona carefully tucked the shillings into her coat pocket. Then she set out once more to brave the weather in order to reach her destination: the train station.

She hurried down the cobblestone road, avoiding the ditches and ice patches to the best of her ability. As she passed down Main Street, a group of rowdy boys jostled up against her. She slipped and fell onto the road. Two shillings spilled out of her pocket. The boys pounced on the money.

Seeing the distressed young girl, a passing gentleman stopped. He took the money from the boys and quickly dispersed the group. Then he helped Fiona to her feet.

You have to be careful in the streets, he warned her with a good-natured smile. He held out the shillings, which Fiona took, expressing her thanks. She stuffed the money back into her pocket.

No trouble at all, the gentleman said, casting a hasty glance at her coat pocket. Where are you headed?

The train station, Fiona replied.

Well, isn't that a coincidence? So am I! the gentleman chuckled. Let's go together. He offered Fiona his arm. Though the station was just a minute away, Fiona agreed. She knew that there was no chance of the money being stolen if she walked with him.

When they reached the train platform, Fiona thanked the gentleman again.

It was my pleasure, he replied. As he withdrew his arm from hers, he immediately thrust his hand into his pocket. With another smile, he strode up the platform.

Fiona paused for a moment to catch her breath and brush off her coat, then she stepped up to the ticket booth.

I you please, sir, she addressed the man in the booth, I would like to buy a ticket for the four o'clock train to London.

The cost is on the sign. the ticket seller mumbled without looking up. He pointed to a little placard next to him.

Fiona reached into her pocket for the money but to her horror, it was not there! A surge of panic rose to her throat as she carefully turned her pocket inside out" it was empty. Frantically, she checked her other pockets and shook out the folds of her dress, refusing to believe what she already understood to be true.

It began to snow again. Fiona knew that it would be futile to search for the money on the streets. Whatever had happened, it was gone now.

Well? The annoyed ticket seller glowered down at the young girl. If you haven't got the money, then you'd better step out of line. You're wastin' my time!

Tears blurred Fiona's vision as she feebly backed away. A line of impatient customers had formed behind her. Their faces were as unsympathetic and cold as the biting wind.

Numb to the world around her, Fiona hardly noticed the passengers who pushed past her and boarded the waiting train. Thoughts of the treasured teapot which would never be regained and the family in London she would never meet whirled through her mind. She was truly a penniless orphan, and would now live like one in a cold, miserable orphanage.

The shriek of a whistle pierced the air, followed by the chugging of the train pulling out of the station. The wind howled as the train picked up speed. There was a puff of smoke, and the train vanished around the bend, leaving the orphaned girl alone on the snowy platform.