

the Berkshire Edge:

The Little Blue Engine and the Boy with the Lemon-Colored Hair

By [Jon Swan](#) Wednesday, Feb 15, 2017



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When the Little Blue Engine that thought it could finally reached the top of the mountain, it was out of breath. “Puff Puff,” said the Little Blue Engine. And it wheezed and sighed and waited a while to catch its breath.

The engineer took out his red bandana, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and said, “Whew! Little Blue Engine, that was quite a climb. And now I think we both deserve a rest. So I’ll step down and sit for a minute on that bench on the platform.” And because he and the Little Blue Engine were old friends, he added, “If that’s all right with you.”

The Little Blue Engine let out a puff of steam, and the engineer stepped down out of the cab, walked over to the bench on the platform, and sat down like a lump of dough that was not eager to rise.

No sooner had the engineer sat down and started to fan himself with his blue-and-white-striped cap than a grinning boy with a mop of hair that looked like a lemon-chiffon pie jumped up into the cab from the other side of the engine.

“Ya, ya,” said the boy with the lemon-colored hair. “Now it’s my turn, and we’ll see if this Little Blue Engine of yours is really out of breath or just playing sick, the way I do when I don’t feel like going to school.”

“You naughty boy!” said the engineer, getting to his feet and starting toward the Little Blue Engine, which had stopped puffing and looked frightened. “Get out of the cab right this minute or . . .”

But the boy with the lemon-colored hair only grinned a wide grin and pulled down a lever. And the minute he did so, the Little Blue Engine trembled and shook — and started to roll *backward*.

“You crazy boy!” the engineer shouted, running to catch up with the locomotive. “You released the brake!”

But the boy only grinned and shouted back, “Backward goes faster than forward. Look how fast I’m going already.”

And he laughed when the engineer’s cap flew off his head and he had to run to catch it. And by the time the engineer had picked up his cap, the Little Blue Engine and the ten box cars packed with food and clothing for the poor people on the other side of the mountain were sliding back down, faster and faster — much faster than the engineer could run!

When the boy saw the engineer running after the train, he stuck out his tongue and thumbed his nose at him. “Ya, ya, catch me if you can,” he shouted. Then he reached up to a lever above his head and pulled it. And the moment he pulled the lever, the Little Blue Engine let out a shriek that made the boy’s lemon-colored hair stand on end.

And now that he knew how to do it, the boy pulled the lever again and again — and he laughed when the cows in the meadow all turned to stare and then ran. And the sheep in the meadow lifted their heads from the grass they were chewing and stared — and ran. And the horses and ponies neighed and brayed and galloped away. Oh, what fun it was to make them all run!

The boy poked his head out of the window as far as he could to see if the train would soon be coming into a station. But he could see no station. All he could see was a railroad crossing. And the crossing arms were not down to keep people and cars and wagons from crossing the tracks, but raised up high. And, seeing the train coming toward them, men and women who had started to cross the tracks started running back now. And the boy, seeing them run, shouted out gaily: “Backward goes faster than forward! Backward goes faster than forward!”

And the men and women — and children, too — clenched their fists and shook them at the boy with the lemon-colored hair. But the sound of the iron wheels pounding against the iron tracks drowned out their shouts. So the boy only smiled, and he thought: “How funny people look when they’re angry.”

The train was now moving faster and faster and sparks were starting to fly up from under the big iron wheels. And the sight of the sparks made the boy with the lemon-colored hair grin. The sparks were like fireworks on the Fourth of July! When the train thundered past another railroad crossing, again the crossing arms were raised as if saluting a hero. And, leaning out of the window as far as he could stretch his neck, the boy saw that people who had started to cross the tracks were now running back. And to make them run faster, he pulled the lever that made the Little Blue Engine shriek. And the faster the people ran and the louder they screamed, the wider boy's grin grew. And, leaning far out of the window, as far as his neck could stretch, he shouted, "Backward goes faster than forward! Backward goes faster than forward!"

But after the train had thundered through two more crossings, with women pushing their baby carriages and men pushing wagons or pulling carts and horses rearing up and neighing loudly – all trying to get out of the way of the runaway train, the train began to slow down. It had reached the bottom of the mountain and the ground was as flat as a tabletop.

Now no sparks flew up from under the big iron wheels. The cows and the sheep in the meadows did not run, but stared and bent their heads and went right on chewing. And the horses did not run or rear up and neigh, but stared at the boy with their big brown eyes and then swished their tails and looked away.

And the train rolled slower and slower, and then slower yet – until it reached the little station with its water tank and ticket office and a little crowd of people on the platform – and the stationmaster, a tall man wearing a black uniform and braided black cap. And he was not smiling.

"Step down," said the stationmaster, who had a very deep voice, to the boy. "Step down from the cab," he said. And, seeing all the people there, the boy with the lemon-colored hair decided it would be wise to do as he was told. And he stepped down onto the platform, and searched the people's faces for a friendly eye.

"You reckless boy," the stationmaster said. "We have heard by telephone of all the people at the crossings you almost killed. And of how the boxcars full of food and clothing for the people on the far side of the mountain were almost destroyed. Not to mention the brave Little Blue Engine – you could have wrecked, too! So now, young man," said the stationmaster in his deep, gruff voice, "what do you have to say for yourself?"

And the boy with the lemon-colored hair thought and thought, and frowned, and scratched his head, and took a deep breath, and all he could come up with was, "Backward is faster than forward. Backward is faster than forward."

And the people standing on the platform looked at one another, and then at the stationmaster. And "The poor boy," one of the women said, quietly. "He must be mad." And the others all nodded, and the stationmaster nodded, and he sighed. And so did the Little Blue Engine, letting out a little jet of steam.

And from that day on, the boy was known as the Backward Lad and no mention was made of his hair.