

TRANSITION

by

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IN the school playgrounds the girls and infants one side of the wall, the boys the other, there was swift movement and quick, shrill voices. Girls stepped to the turn of skipping ropes and tossed balls with fine judgment, infant pulled at infant; boys swerved and darted, bending bodies from the brushing, clutching fingers of the one who was 'on,' or who was 'it.'

A youngster of ten, in desperate effort to evade capture, slipped round a group of senior boys and clutched at the last to help him turn more sharply.

The senior, Jack Parker, clouted him as he dashed away, then spoke again to his two companions.

"Yes. I s'll be comin' down there this time on Monday."

"Wish I was leavin' to-day,, as well," Sam Lester said with faint envy.

"I'm goin' to the pit an' all, when I leave. My mam wants me to try for t'Co-op

"Co-op," Jack broke in. "My mam wanted me to try an' all. I'm bein' no counter-jumper."

"I don't want to go to t'pit," the third lad said. "I s'll try for t'Co-op."

"Ber," sneered Jack. "Look at 'em comin' 'ome from t'pit."

He pointed over the school wall, across two fine meadows where the chimney, headgear, and screens of the mine stood perched on a small hill, dead-black in the glowing afternoon sunshine.

Tiny figures moved down the steep pit bank on to Pit Lane, which led into the village.

"Comin' 'ome, an' not three o'clock yet. An' you'll be stuck in t'Co-op till seven."

"An' they never 'ave many 'ol'days, either," Sam Lester was beginning.

"They don't," Jack took up the cue.

"An' when they 'ave 'ol'days at t'pit they get dole for 'em. An' do Co-oppers ever see Derby County play at football? "

"They don't," Sam helped. "They at work all Sat'day afternoon. I'm not goin' to any shop. I'm goin' to t'pit when I leave at Christmas. Like Jack."

A whistle blew and Sam and the other boy turned at once and walked towards the lines forming at the school door. Jack stayed for a moment and watched the steam shoot from the exhaust and foam in the still air over the winding engine-house, watched the wheels in the headgear twinkle and slow to rest. Then he hurried to lines.

"Don't think because this is your last day at school, Parker, that you can slink into lines five minutes after the others. Stay at my desk when you get in."

He left the desk and went to his place with tingling hands; he sat and glared until the teacher looked at him, then he dropped his gaze.

" I'll make the devil look out when I've left," he muttered to his neighbour.

" I'll come down when 'e's takin' drill an' shout "

The master's eyes stayed on him and Jack was silent. He got out his library book and opened it the last half of Friday afternoon was always silent reading but he read nothing, sitting with empty eyes, thinking and sometimes thrilling.

When he reached home his tea was ready and he sat down at once, eager to get it over.

His mother sat at the table while he ate ; she would clear away the tea things and carry the pots into the kitchen immediately he had done, then straighten round and go shopping to Pirley.

Every Friday she did this, for it was every Friday that her husband and their two sons brought home wages from the pit. They were home now; the father was in the garden watching his pigeons peck up the corn he had scattered, Tom dozing and starting in the chair under the narrow side window, Harry snoring on the sofa.

They were still in their pit clothes. Mrs. Parker looked from Tom to Harry with faint disgust.

" Tom ! Harry ! "

Tom murmured in reply.

" Come on. Get washed. Lyin' about in your pit-muck till bed-time. House's never tidy."

" You won't forget to bring my pit trousers, will you mum ? " Jack said across the table.

" White moleskin. Don't bring me them cord'roy things. 'Ad I better go with you ? "

" I shouldn't go to t'pit, Jack, if I was you."

She had glanced at the other two, one drooping and jerking in the chair, the other sprawled in ugliness across the sofa.

" Stop at 'ome a bit an' find a job in a shop or somewhere."

" I'm not. I'm not. My dad got me on at t'pit an' I'm goin'. Don't start that again, mum. I want to go to t'pit."

She did not answer but began clearing the table.

" I s'll want a strap, as well."

" You've got two or three cricket belts."

" Oo. Them won't do. I want a leather strap. I'll go with you to Pirley."

They walked to Pirley and he would have her buy the moleskin trousers, the blue linsey shirt, the nailed boots, and leather strap, before she pursued her regular line of shopping.

He carried the parcels and waited outside grocery and provision shops, he followed his mother from stall to stall on the market, impatient of the jostling and noise.

When he complained that he was tired and wanted to go home, his mother was angry.

" I told you to wait till I'd finished shoppin', didn't I ? You must wait, now."

He brightened when they were walking back over the fields.

" Mum. Could I 'ave long trousers for Sunday, wi' my next suit ? "

" I'll see."

" I don't think I s'll go to t'chapel on Sunday mornin' again, mum," he said after a while, and his tone asked that she would agree.

" Oh. An' why not ? "

" Well. Not many go who goes to t'pit."

" Well, you'll go. So get that into your 'ead."

There was some disgust in her voice.

" I should think you want to lie in bed till dinner time every Sunday, then rake about t'fields for the rest o' the day. Well, you're not."

" Our Tom an' 'Arry does."

She was silent in face of that. Her teeth pressed together and she did not speak when he offered another remark. She changed the full basket from one hand to the other that the physical effort might steady her wild thoughts. He'd be the same as the others. If only his dad would make him have something different. Still the dad hadn't much go in him, just a collier; never known anything but the pit and the village. Well, Jack hadn't, so how could he be expected to want something he knew nothing about. She brightened and moved again to the boy.

" You must keep goin' to the chapel, Jack. Mester Poole's 'ead deputy at t'pit, an' if you go to Sunday School well, 'e's sure to look after you down t'pit. You go. I should."

He did not offer anything and she began again :

" An' I should go to night classes, if I was you. They don't get to be deputies an' under-managers wi'out studyin'. I should."

" I think I shall go to night school. They don't boss you about same as at day school. I should soon chuck it if they did."

" Now, don't be too big a man. You'll wish someday, perhaps, that you'd learnt more at school."

As soon as they reached home, Jack tore open the parcels and was soon clattering about the kitchen floor in the nailed boots, looking down at the white moleskin trousers imprisoning his legs. Until now he had been free in shorts and light boots; the thick cloth rubbing about his knees and the noise he made at every step brought a sheepish look to his face as he met the eyes of his parents; he felt strange and less certain of himself.

The pit was idle next day, Saturday, and Jack hurried out as soon as he had had his breakfast to find Joe Lynam.

Joe had worked at the pit for a year and had said he would take Jack the first morning. But Mrs. Lynam said her son had gone to an aunt in Pirley and would not be back before dinner.

Jack turned away in anger and disappointment, nor did he feel any more at ease when Sam Lester called and invited him to play in his back-garden.

He didn't want to play in schoolboy fashion, now; they ought to know that. Did Sam ever shout to Joe Lynam and ask him 'to play'?

Still there was nothing else to do until dinner.

"I've got some pit things ready for Monday," he told Sam at once.

"Moleskins, and boots wi' clinkers in. An' a thick leather strap. I wish it was Monday."

Neither boys got pleasure out of the morning's play; when Mrs. Lester called Sam in for dinner he went at once, usually she had to come out three or four times and get from him: 'I'm comin',' or 'Just another minute.'

But he was utterly sick of Jack's talking of the pit and left him eagerly. Jack was not unwilling to break away, either, for although he had enjoyed talking about Monday and the pit, there had been no response from Sam, who had tried all the time to slide the conversation to the games they agreed to play.

Immediately after dinner he went to his mother in the kitchen where she was washing up.

"Gi'e me threepence, mum," he pleaded in a whisper.

"Threepence! What do you want threepence for?" she cried.

"Shut up," he said quickly. "Dad'll 'ear you." His tone slowed again.

"I'm goin' to t'cricket match wi' Joe."

"It's only a penny to go in, isn't it, for you?"

"Well but Joe'll 'ave some to spend."

She wiped her hands and gave him three pennies from her purse, and he went at once along the street to Joe's house and waited there until the Lynam family had finished dinner.

"You're goin' to t'pit, are you, my duck?" Mrs. Lynam asked, and Jack nodded in smiling agreement.

"I thought your mam wanted to make sommat else of you. She said she'd enough wi' two lads at t'pit."

"She doesn't want me to go, but I'm goin'. My dad's got me a job, so I s'll 'ave to go, now."

"Pit's as good as any other job," Mrs. Lynam sniffed.

"Them women who thinks their lads are better 'cos they work in a shop..."

She broke off when she found no one listening, her husband had left the table and gone into the garden, the elder son was deep in the sport page of the newspaper, and Joe and Jack were talking quickly. She left her chair and put the kettle on the gas ring to make herself a cup of tea. The two boys went out.

"Not time for t'match, yet," Joe said as they walked down the street and came to the small shop in the middle of the village.

"Say, Jack. 'Ave you ever smoked?"

"No. I 'aven't. No. Why?"

"I 'ave." He was silent a moment watching the other.

" I say. Fetch a packet from 'ere. They'll think it's for your dad." Jack looked startled, then laughed nervously.

" Go on," Joe urged.

Jack took the two pennies and waited until the shop was empty, then fetched the five cigarettes and furtively transferred the packet to Joe. Jack seemed immensely relieved to be rid of them.

" We'll go down Stoney Lane to t'park, eh ? " Joe said.

" We've plenty of time."

They walked over Pit Lane, then turned down the narrow Stoney Lane hemmed in by tall, thick hedges. Joe pulled out the cigarettes and offered one to the other boy.

" No. I'd better Not."

" Come on. Get 'old o' one an' light it. Everybody smokes who goes to t'pit. Come on."

Jack was glad when the park entrance came in sight and he could throw away the cigarette ; each time he had taken the thing from his mouth to expel the smoke he had drawn in, he had looked at it between his fingers and swallowed hard, shuddering inwardly at times.

Joe seemed to throw his away with as much relief, though he attempted a gesture for Jack's sake, which was by no means a success.

Inside the park gates, Jack put down a penny on the table at which two cricket club officials sat, and passed on. Joe did the same, but one of the men caught his arm.

" Come on, young Lynam, twopence more. You go to work."

Joe forked out two more pennies and came up to Jack mumbling in his throat, his mouth pushed out.

" I've never paid above a penny before. It's that sod Kelly. I'll bet their Bill's come on for nowt. Ber ! "

They walked on towards the playing pitch and sat down with a group of youths who sprawled about the grass on the top side of the wicket. One greeted Joe, who at once joined in the quick, vivid conversation. Most of the youths were gangers like Joe, and the talk rarely moved from that particular section of pit work. Jack listened but could get little sense from the chatter about 'osses, stints, lockers, doggers, couplers, drags he wouldn't ask Joe, though, it would all be plain to him when he had been at the pit a week.

The youths were smoking and Joe looked stealthily around, then fetched out his cigarettes. Jack looked about, too, when he saw Joe get on to his stomach and elbows and light up, and moved away to sit among some schoolboys.

His father was coming from the gate, he mustn't let him see him with that swearing, smoking pit gang to-day. It wouldn't matter next week.

He watched the play for a while, saw his brother Harry get fifteen runs and catch out one of the other side, then he went with two boys climbing the oak trees standing about the wide park. An ice-cream man came on to the field and they bought a cornet, then went into the long wood at the bottom of the park to play cowboys.

Sunday was an excruciatingly painful day. He went to Sunday School in the morning and afternoon much against his will; Joe Lynam had asked him to go a walk after dinner but Jack's mother had been at the gate when the invitation was put out and she had told Joe firmly that Jack wasn't going to rake about the fields on Sunday afternoons, he was going to Sunday School. Joe had gone off at once and Jack had walked into the house scowling and muttering in an ugly tone. But his mother went to chapel in the evening and the two boys did get an hour together in the fields, coming again into the village with pale faces and somewhat guilty looks. Jack went to the tap at once and had a long drink.

" Don't forget to call in t'mornin'," Jack said seriously to Joe when they parted.

A sudden dread seized him. What if he was too late the first morning, and then at the pit got a job all ready for him. They wouldn't have him if he put them in a mess like that.

" Be sure, Joe," he cried as the other merely nodded.

" Oh, I s'll call. 'Alf-past six."

Jack sat on the sofa from nine till half-past watching his mother put up the food for tomorrow's shift two slices of bread with bacon between, two of jam and an apple pasty went into each snap-bag. Then she brought in the pit-clothes from the kitchen where they had been drying and put them in heaps on the rug about the hearth. She left Jack's on the chair by the dresser, they were clean and new-smelling; after to-morrow they would be another heap on the hearth.

When he had seen his mother wash out his water drum and put it with the others on the sink near the tap, he went to bed. He was a long time dropping off to sleep, and twice during the night he wakened suddenly and lay listening with eyes held wide open.

His mother's voice brought him from a deep sleep and out of bed in quick bewilderment, and fear swept to his eyes when he ran down-stairs and saw that his father was about to leave for work and his brothers had finished breakfast.

" Am I late ? "

" No," his mother said firmly. " Get your clothes on, it's only quarter-past."

" Now, be'ave thisen," his father said as he slid the tape of his snap-bag over his arm and turned to the door.

" Don't let gaffer 'ave to come to me wi' any tale about thee actin' monny, an' playin' t'fool. Look after t'job tha'rt sent to, an' tha'll be all right. Mornin', mother."

He went and the two other sons followed him. Jack drank the tea his mother had poured out and began the boiled egg but turned from it before he had half eaten it.

"I Can't eat any more, mum,"

" Come on. Get it eaten. Tha'll be no good at work wi' nowt in thee belly. Come on."

" Gimme another cup o' tea, then."

" Ner, Jack ! " Joe was at the door.

Jack jumped from his chair and pulled on his coat, took up his water drum and snap-bag.

" Be a good lad, Jack. Be careful, an' do as tha'rt told."

" A' right. Mornin'." He was at the door, away from her completely. She moved to the small side window and watched the two pass out of sight down the street ; Joe was bending to look at the strap Jack had pulled up his coat to show, then Jack bent to see how Joe's fastened. They clattered down the street in the still morning, turned over Pit Lane and climbed the steep bank to the pit head.

Bells jangled, the cage crashed up and rested on the props, men filed on and it crashed down again. The ropes whirred and whipped about the shaft, steam roared through the exhaust over the engine-house. Jack appeared less certain of himself now, the noise and throng of men bewildered him slightly and he kept very close to Joe.

" 'Ave you to see t'gaffer before you go down, or what ? " Joe asked when they were passing the under-manager's office.

" No. I signed on when I was 'ere last week." He motioned towards the office window.

" 'Ee said I 'ad to see Mester Poole when I got down."

" Oh. That's a' right, then. Come on." They walked to the lamp-shed.

" Four, six, one," Joe called and a lamp was poked through a small window.

" Eh ! " A face peered through.

" 'Ee wants a lamp. First mornin'."

They crossed to the timekeeper's office and Jack said his name and received a motty with a number on. Jack had hung the lamp on his strap as he had seen Joe do, but as they walked along to the pit-head it banged against his knees and he had to take it off again and carry it in his hand. With nine others he filed on to the cage, the bell rang and he clutched the hand-rail suddenly as he felt himself jerk up, stop, then begin to fall. Steadily down from sunlight to a grey daylight, faster now into lamp light. Jack's stomach seemed to rise sickeningly, he clenched his teeth. The empty cage sighed towards him, rattled in passing, sighed away. He looked up suddenly, startled, grasped Joe who stood by him.

" 'S all right, Jack. We're not goin' up again," Joe whispered.

" Seems like it, though, doesn't it ? "

Mr. Poole was with the other deputies in a room cut out of the rock and he came to the door when Jack asked for him.

" Oh. It's young Parker, is it ? Tha can go an' learn to 'ang on at bottom o' double-road jig. Young Cooper'll show thee. Go in t'stables, 'e'll be theer."

Jack was turning away with "Right, Mester Poole."

"Eh." The boy turned again.

" I 'ope tha won't be too big to come to Sunday School, now."

" No," Jack said, and went into the pit bottom again where Joe was waiting.

" 'E says I've got to go wi' Cooper an' learn to 'ang on at bottom of oo, where did 'e say ? I've forgot."

" Cooper's at bottom at t'double-road jig '

" That's it. Double-road jig. Mester Poole said Cooper'd be in t'stables."

They crossed to an opening in the wall and passed between rows of ' standings ' where gangers were putting bridles on their horses. Jack kept his mouth closed and put his handkerchief to his nose, but he could not keep from his mouth, throat, stomach, the hot, thick stench of manure. They came to a group of youths at the top of the stables. Joe was peering about all the way up.

" W'eer's Cooper." A small youth pushed forward.

" Oh, Fred. Jack Parker 'ere's got to learn thy job. Poole says."

' 'Ooray ! " cried Cooper. " I s'll go gangin' to-morrer. Come on, Parker, let's go. Tha can learn t'job in a day."

Jack followed him from the stables and they walked down the mile-long rope-road to a wide junction where three roads diverged. They went to the right, along a double- road stint.

' That long 'ill we came down," Cooper said, " was t'incline.

Where them roads met was main turn-out.

This's double-road stint ; ganger goes back'ards an' forrards ower 'ere bringin' empties an' takin' loaden'ns from us to that big turn-out."

They came soon to where the road and the two sets of rails rose steeply at an angle of about forty- five degrees.

" We're 'ere. Take thee jacket off an' put it in this seat-hole."

Jack looked about him. Nine full trams were on the right track, the left was empty; six-foot props, each with a bar resting on it, lined the walls. To one of the props a wire was fastened and it reached into the darkness of the jig, running through staples sticking from each prop. Cooper had sat down, his chin rested on his hands and he was yawning. Jack leaned against a loaded tram, listening and looking down the stint where a faint rumbling sounded.

A steady point of light grew brighter as the rumble increased and broke gradually into the plodding of hooves and the clicking of wheels over rail-joints. The ganger began singing, sang all the while he turned his horse from the front of the three empty trams he had brought and hung it on the first of the loaded ones. He clicked his horse to start when he had coupled three together, then leapt on the front of the first and rode away singing.

" This's w'eer we start, now," Fred Cooper said.

" Come on." Jack followed him to the three empties.

" Bring one, I'll take two." They pushed them to the foot of the incline.

" Couple three on, like this." He picked up two couplers from the floor and fastened the three trams together.

" Then 'ang this rope on, like this." The end of a rope lay in the track where the first empty stood and Fred cattered it to the tug-hole.

" Put t'drag on." He hung a long piece of iron to the back of the last empty.

" That's to throw 'em off road if they run back if rope breaks or a coupler."

He went to the front of the trams again.

" Ner. Just ring t'bell." He took hold of the wire running through staples and swung on it, swung almost to the floor. A bell chinked away in the darkness. There was a dry sound of the rope tightening, then the empties moved, were pulled upwards, were lost in the darkness, A niighty roaring sounded, the darkness was thick with noise; Fred had turned away without interest, Jack stood clenching his hands, afraid, swallowing hard. But soon there was a definite line of sound, the heavy running of wheels over metals, now the clicking over joints, then into the little world of light his lamp made, three loaded trams ran, the long smooth pieces of coal gleaming brilliantly black. Fred came to them at once.

" Take rope off these an' throw it ower on to t' empty road ready to 'ang on to next empties ganger brings." He threw over the rope as he spoke.

" Then uncouple these loaded 'ns an' push 'em down out o' t'road of next three landin'. See. Come on, push these down." They banged the three into the other six and the line of nine ran down to where the ganger turned his horse.

" Another ganger's comin'," Jack said.

" Well, thee 'ave a try, this time." The ganger came and left three empties.

" Gome on. Ner, push 'em up. One at a time if tha can't manage any more. Couple 'em together. Put drag on. Ner the rope. Be sure that's on right. Let me 'ave a look. Good. Ner ring t'bell. Go on, swing on it, it'll not break. That's it."

The bell chinked faintly, there were sounds at the top of the jig, then the empties began to move. The darkness roared, then came the smooth running sound, the clicking over joints, the slow gliding of the black brilliance into the room of light.

" Take rope off an' throw it ower. Uncouple 'em an' push 'em into t'others. Bang 'em. That's it. Why, tha can do t'job a'ready."

Jack was eager, now, and flushed with sense of achievement, he waited impatiently for the gangers, he hurried about, strained at the empties and the loaded trams. Fred Cooper sat all the time in the seat-hole, encouraging, praising, making certain Jack had coupled the empties, put the drag on, made secure the rope.

" Say, kid," a ganger said to him, " doesn't young Cooper 'elp thee? Come on out o' that seat'ole," he shouted, " an' let 'im 'ave a minute."

Cooper came out and the ganger went.

" Don't 'ave owt to do wi' 'im," Fred said, with a leer.

" 'E'll sneak to t'gaffer. Oh. I must tell thee. When tha sees a light comin' up stint or down t'jig an' tha'rt not jiggin', clean this place up. If there's nowt to clean up, tha can scrape thy shovel about floor. Don't let gaffer or t'deputy catch thee doin' nowt. 'Ere's ganger again. Come on." They worked on, at eleven sat in the seat-hole and ate the food they had brought, then began again. Jack slowed down, his efforts at pushing the trams were noisy and big, he visited his water drum more often, asked the time frequently.

" Last gang, 'e says," Fred told him as a ganger left.

" Come on, let's jig these, an' go." He marked the boy's effort.

" Tired ? " he asked, and Jack nodded as he pushed.

" Let's get these off, then, an' we'll look sharp into t'turn-out an' get a pull up big incline."

The three loaded trams slowed to rest and immediately Fred pulled five times at the bell-wire.

" That'll tell 'em it's last jig. Come on."

They hurried along the stint into the wide turn-out where four gangers were ungearing their horses. " Get 'old o' one o' 'osses' tails," Fred said as the horses began moving towards the incline. He himself grasped one and motioned Jack to another. The ganger of the horse moved his hand a little as Jack reached out to hang on with his hand. The horse pulled willingly, towards the stables, towards food and rest. Jack hung back wearily, merely picking up his feet and putting one forward as the horse pulled. In the pit bottom when he let go as the horse turned into the stables, he almost fell down, so weak his legs seemed. But he strengthened when he saw Joe Lynam waiting for him on the pit-top, and walked briskly to the lamp-shed and the time-office.

'Ow 'as tha gone on ? " Joe asked. " Like it ? "

" I do. S'll do it mysen to-morrer. I've done it most of to-day. That Cooper sat in t'seat-'ole nearly all time."

" Tha shouldn't 'ave let 'im."

They walked over Pit Lane and up Main Street; children shouted and played, happy that they had a whole month's holiday before them. Some of the older boys called to Jack and he moved his head to one side in recognition; to girls who laughingly pointed out to others his black face and long trousers he showed an ugly, threatening countenance and they ran from him a little distance and called louder than ever.

'E's a man now 'e works at t'pit. Where's your knees ? "

"I'll sock that Nellie Bates when I catch 'er."

They walked slowly up the street, their nailed boots slurring on the smooth pavement.

" Wat time are tha comin' out ? "

" Oh," Joe said brightly, " I s'll be out by four. 'Ave I to ca' for thee ? "

"Yes. I'll be ready."

Joe crossed to his home, Jack continued more slowly now. His mother stood at the gate and went in with him.

" Well, 'ow 'as tha gone on ? Ready for some dinner ? "

" Mm," he affirmed with closed lips. He pulled off his coat and dropped it on the kitchen floor, then went into the middle room where the table was laid.

" Not very 'ungry, though." He sat heavily in a chair and leaned an elbow on the table.

" Now get thee washed an' changed," she bade him immediately he had done eating.

" Come on, tha'll feel a lot better washed."

" I'll sit on t'sofa a minute an' look at t'paper."

His brothers came in and chaffed him a bit, then they turned to the food. The mother watched Jack nodding over the paper.

' Ner Jack. Get washed. Is Joe comin' for thee ? "

" In a minute," he said irritably.

The father came in, saw the boy fast asleep.

" 'E's bottled, is 'e ? " He laughed, but the mother made an impatient sound.

At four o'clock Joe Lynam came on to the yard and called,

" Is Jack ready ? " and Mrs. Parker went to the door.

" 'E's asleep, Joe. Not washed or changed. I'll tell 'im you've been."

She came back into the room with tense lips.

" 'E'll be t'same as t'rest. Lozzin' about in 'is pit-muck till bedtime." She glanced at the boy, saw the pain of weariness in his features, and her mouth softened.

" I wish wi' all my 'eart 'e'd been a gel."