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On the day King George V was crowned at Westminster Abbey in London, Billy Williams went down the pit in Aberowen, South Wales.

The twenty-second of June 1911 was Billy's thirteenth birthday. He was woken by his father. Da's technique for waking people was more effective than it was kind. He patted Billy's cheek, in a regular rhythm, firmly and insistently. Billy was in a deep sleep, and for a second he tried to ignore it, but the patting went on relentlessly. Momentarily he felt angry; but then he remembered that he had to get up, he even wanted to get up, and he opened his eyes and sat upright with a jerk.

'Four o'clock,' Da said, then he left the room, his boots banging on the wooden staircase as he went down.

Today Billy would begin his working life by becoming an apprentice collier, as most of the men in town had done at his age. He wished he felt more like a miner. But he was determined not to make a fool of himself. David Crampton had cried on his first day down the pit, and they still called him Dai Crybaby, even though he was twenty-five and the star of the town's rugby team.

It was midsummer, and a bright early light came through the small window. Billy looked at his grandfather, lying beside him. Gramper's eyes were open. He was always awake, whenever Billy got up; he said old people did not sleep much.

Billy got out of bed. He was wearing only his underdrawers. In cold weather he wore his shirt to bed, but Britain was enjoying a hot summer, and the nights were mild. He pulled the pot from under the bed and took off the lid.

There was no change in the size of his penis, which he called his peter. It was still the childish stub it had always been. He had hoped it might have started to grow on the night before his birthday, or perhaps that he might see just one black hair sprouting somewhere near it, but he was disappointed. His best friend, Tommy Griffiths, who had been

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born on the same day, was different: he had a cracked voice and a dark fuzz on his upper lip, and his peter was like a man's. It was humiliating.

As Billy was using the pot, he looked out of the window. All he could see was the slag heap, a slate-grey mountain of tailings, waste from the coal mine, mostly shale and sandstone. This was how the world appeared on the second day of Creation, Billy thought, before God said: 'Let the earth bring forth grass.' A gentle breeze wafted fine black dust off the slag on to the rows of houses.

Inside the room there was even less to look at. This was the back bedroom, a narrow space just big enough for the single bed, a chest of drawers, and Gramper's old trunk. On the wall was an embroidered sampler that read:

BELIEVE ON THE
LORD JESUS CHRIST
AND THOU SHALT
BE SAVED

There was no mirror.

One door led to the top of the stairs, the other to the front bedroom, which could be accessed only through this one. It was larger and had space for two beds. Da and Mam slept there, and Billy's sisters had too, years ago. The eldest, Ethel, had now left home, and the other three had died, one from measles, one from whooping cough, and one from diphtheria. There had been an older brother, too, who had shared Billy's bed before Gramper came. Wesley had been his name, and he had been killed underground by a runaway dram, one of the wheeled tubs that carried coal.

Billy pulled on his shirt. It was the one he had worn to school yesterday. Today was Thursday, and he changed his shirt only on Sunday. However, he did have a new pair of trousers, his first long ones, made of the thick water-repellent cotton called moleskin. They were the symbol of entry into the world of men, and he pulled them on proudly, enjoying the heavy masculine feel of the fabric. He put on a thick leather belt and the boots he had inherited from Wesley, then he went downstairs.

Most of the ground floor was taken up by the living room, fifteen feet square, with a table in the middle and a fireplace to one side, and a home-made rug on the stone floor. Da was sitting at the table reading an old copy of the *Daily Mail*, a pair of spectacles perched on the bridge

of his long, sharp nose. Mam was making tea. She put down the steaming kettle, kissed Billy's forehead, and said: 'How's my little man on his birthday?'

Billy did not reply. The 'little' was wounding, because he was little, and the 'man' was just as hurtful because he was not a man. He went into the scullery at the back of the house. He dipped a tin bowl into the water barrel, washed his face and hands, and poured the water away in the shallow stone sink. The scullery had a copper with a fire grate underneath, but it was used only on bath night, which was Saturday.

They had been promised running water soon, and some of the miners' houses already had it. It seemed a miracle to Billy that people could get a cup of cold clear water just by turning the tap, and not have to carry a bucket to the standpipe out in the street. But indoor water had not yet come to Wellington Row, where the Williamses lived.

He returned to the living room and sat at the table. Mam put a big cup of milky tea in front of him, already sugared. She cut two thick slices off a loaf of home-made bread and got a slab of dripping from the pantry under the stairs. Billy put his hands together, closed his eyes, and said: 'Thank you, Lord, for this food. Amen.' Then he drank some tea and spread dripping on his bread.

Da's pale blue eyes looked over the top of the paper. 'Put salt on your bread,' he said. 'You'll sweat underground.'

Billy's father was a miners' agent, employed by the South Wales Miners' Federation, which was the strongest trade union in Britain, as he said whenever he got the chance. He was known as Dai Union. A lot of men were called Dai, pronounced 'die', short for David, or Dafydd in Welsh. Billy had learned in school that David was popular in Wales because it was the name of the country's patron saint, like Patrick was in Ireland. All the Dais were distinguished one from another not by their surnames – almost everyone in town was Jones, Williams, Evans or Morgan – but by a nickname. Real names were rarely used when there was a humorous alternative. Billy was William Williams, so they called him Billy Twice. Women were sometimes given their husband's nickname, so that Mam was Mrs Dai Union.

Gramper came down while Billy was eating his second slice. Despite the warm weather he wore a jacket and waistcoat. When he had washed his hands he sat opposite Billy. 'Don't look so nervous,' he said. 'I went down the pit when I was ten. And *my* father was carried to the pit on his father's back at the age of five, and worked from six in the morning

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until seven in the evening. He never saw daylight from October to March.'

'I'm not nervous,' Billy said. This was untrue. He was scared stiff.

However, Gramper was kindly, and he did not press the point. Billy liked Gramper. Mam treated Billy like a baby, and Da was stern and sarcastic, but Gramper was tolerant and talked to Billy as to an adult.

'Listen to this,' said Da. He never bought the *Mail*, a right-wing rag, but he sometimes brought home someone else's copy and read the paper aloud in a scornful voice, mocking the stupidity and dishonesty of the ruling class. "Lady Diana Manners has been criticized for wearing the same dress to two different balls. The younger daughter of the Duke of Rutland won 'best lady's costume' at the Savoy Ball for her off-the-shoulder boned bodice with full hooped skirt, receiving a prize of two hundred and fifty guineas." He lowered the paper and said: 'That's at least five years' wages for you, Billy boy.' He resumed: "'But she drew the frowns of the cognoscenti by wearing the same dress to Lord Winterton and F. E. Smith's party at Claridge's Hotel. One can have too much of a good thing, people said.'" He looked up from the paper. 'You'd better change that frock, Mam,' he said. 'You don't want to draw the frowns of the cognoscenti.'

Mam was not amused. She was wearing an old brown wool dress with patched elbows and stains under the armpits. 'If I had two hundred and fifty guineas, I'd look better than Lady Diana Muck,' she said, not without bitterness.

'It's true,' Gramper said. 'Cara was always the pretty one – just like her mother.' Mam's name was Cara. Gramper turned to Billy. 'Your grandmother was Italian. Her name was Maria Ferrone.' Billy knew this, but Gramper liked to retell familiar stories. 'That's where your mother gets her glossy black hair and lovely dark eyes – and your sister. Your gran was the most beautiful girl in Cardiff – and I got her!' Suddenly he looked sad. 'Those were the days,' he said quietly.

Da frowned with disapproval – such talk suggested the lusts of the flesh – but Mam was cheered by her father's compliments, and she smiled as she put his breakfast in front of him. 'Oh, aye,' she said. 'Me and my sisters were considered beauties. We'd show those dukes what a pretty girl is, if we had the money for silk and lace.'

Billy was surprised. He had never thought of his mother as beautiful or otherwise, though when she dressed for the chapel social on Saturday

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evening she did look striking, especially in a hat. He supposed she might once have been a pretty girl, but it was hard to imagine.

'Mind you,' said Gramper, 'your gran's family were clever, too. My brother-in-law was a miner, but he got out of the industry and opened a café in Tenby. Now there's a life for you – sea breezes, and nothing to do all day but make coffee and count your money.'

Da read another item. "As part of the preparations for the coronation, Buckingham Palace has produced a book of instructions two hundred and twelve pages long." He looked over the paper. 'Mention that down the pit today, Billy. The men will be relieved to know that nothing has been left to chance.'

Billy was not very interested in royalty. What he liked was the adventure stories the *Mail* often printed about tough rugby-playing public-school men catching sneaky German spies. According to the paper, such spies infested every town in Britain, although there did not seem to be any in Aberowen, disappointingly.

Billy stood up. 'Going down the street,' he announced. He left the house by the front door. 'Going down the street' was a family euphemism: it meant going to the toilets, which stood halfway down Wellington Row. A low brick hut with a corrugated iron roof was built over a deep hole in the earth. The hut was divided into two compartments, one for men and one for women. Each compartment had a double seat, so that people went to the toilet two by two. No one knew why the builders had chosen this arrangement, but everyone made the best of it. Men looked straight ahead and said nothing, but – as Billy could often hear – women chatted companionably. The smell was suffocating, even when you experienced it every day of your life. Billy always tried to breathe as little as possible while he was inside, and came out gasping for air. The hole was shovelled out periodically by a man called Dai Muck.

When Billy returned to the house he was delighted to see his sister Ethel sitting at the table. 'Happy birthday, Billy!' she cried. 'I had to come and give you a kiss before you go down the pit.'

Ethel was eighteen, and Billy had no trouble seeing *her* as beautiful. Her mahogany-coloured hair was irrepressibly curly, and her dark eyes twinkled with mischief. Perhaps Mam had looked like this once. Ethel wore the plain black dress and white cotton cap of a housemaid, an outfit that flattered her.

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Billy worshipped Ethel. As well as being pretty, she was funny and clever and brave, sometimes even standing up to Da. She told Billy about things no one else would explain, such as the monthly episode women called the Curse, and what was the crime of public indecency that had caused the Anglican vicar to leave town in such a hurry. She had been top of the class all the way through school, and her essay 'My Town or Village' had taken first prize in a contest run by the *South Wales Echo*. She had won a copy of *Cassell's Atlas of the World*.

She kissed Billy's cheek. 'I told Mrs Jevons, the housekeeper, that we were running out of boot polish and I'd better get some more from the town.' Ethel lived and worked at Tŷ Gwyn, the vast home of Earl Fitzherbert, a mile away up the mountain. She handed Billy something wrapped in a clean rag, 'I stole a piece of cake for you.'

'Oh, thanks, Eth!' said Billy. He loved cake.

Mam said: 'Shall I put it in your snap?'

'Aye, please.'

Mam got a tin box from the cupboard and put the cake inside. She cut two more slabs of bread, spread them with dripping, sprinkled salt on them, and put them in the tin. All the miners had a tin 'snap'. If they took food underground wrapped in a rag, the mice would eat it before the mid-morning break. Mam said: 'When you bring me home your wages, you can have a slice of boiled bacon in your snap.'

Billy's earnings would not be much at first but, all the same, they would make a difference to the family. He wondered how much Mam would allow him for pocket money, and whether he would ever be able to save enough for a bicycle, which he wanted more than anything else in the world.

Ethel sat at the table. Da said to her: 'How are things at the big house?'

'Nice and quiet,' she said. 'The earl and princess are in London for the coronation.' She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'They'll be getting up soon – they need to be at the abbey early. *She* won't like it – she's not used to early hours – but she can't be late for the King.' The earl's wife, Bea, was a Russian princess, and very grand.

Da said: 'They'll want to get seats near the front, so that they can see the show.'

'Oh, no, you can't sit anywhere you like,' Ethel said. 'They've had six thousand mahogany chairs made special, with the names of the guests on the back in gold writing.'

Gramper said: 'Well, there's a waste! What will they do with them after?'

'I don't know. Perhaps everyone will take them home as souvenirs.'

Da said dryly: 'Tell them to send a spare one to us. There's only five of us here, and already your mam's got to stand.'

When Da was being facetious there might be real anger underneath. Ethel leapt to her feet. 'Oh, sorry, Mam, I didn't think.'

'Stay where you are, I'm too busy to sit down,' said Mam.

The clock struck five. Da said: 'Best get there early, Billy boy. Start as you mean to go on.'

Billy got to his feet reluctantly and picked up his snap.

Ethel kissed him again, and Gramper shook his hand. Da gave him two six-inch nails, rusty and a bit bent. 'Put those in your trousers' pocket.'

'What for?' said Billy.

'You'll see,' Da said with a smile.

Mam handed Billy a quart bottle with a screw top, full of cold tea with milk and sugar. She said: 'Now, Billy, remember that Jesus is always with you, even down the pit.'

'Aye, Mam.'

He could see a tear in her eye, and he turned away quickly, because it made him feel weepy too. He took his cap from the peg. 'Bye, then,' he said, as if he was only going to school; and he stepped out of the front door.

The summer had been hot and sunny so far, but today was overcast, and it even looked as if it might rain. Tommy was leaning against the wall of the house, waiting. 'Aye, aye, Billy,' he said.

'Aye, aye, Tommy.'

They walked down the street side by side.

Aberowen had once been a small market town, serving hill farmers round about, Billy had learned in school. From the top of Wellington Row you could see the old commercial centre, with the open pens of the cattle market, the wool exchange building, and the Anglican church, all on one side of the Owen River, which was little more than a stream. Now a railway line cut through the town like a wound, terminating at the pithead. The miners' houses had spread up the slopes of the valley, hundreds of grey-stone homes with roofs of darker-grey Welsh slate. They were built in long serpentine rows that followed the contours of the mountainsides, the rows crossed by shorter streets that plunged headlong to the valley bottom.

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'Who do you think you'll be working with?' said Tommy.

Billy shrugged. New boys were assigned to one of the colliery manager's deputies. 'No way to know.'

'I hope they put me in the stables.' Tommy liked horses. About fifty ponies lived in the mine. They pulled the drams that the colliers filled, drawing them along railway tracks. 'What sort of work do you want to do?'

Billy hoped he would not be given a task too heavy for his childish physique, but he was not willing to admit that. 'Greasing drams,' he said.

'Why?'

'It seems easy.'

They passed the school where yesterday they had been pupils. It was a Victorian building with pointed windows like a church. It had been built by the Fitzherbert family, as the headmaster never tired of reminding the pupils. The earl still appointed the teachers and decided the curriculum. On the walls were paintings of heroic military victories, and the greatness of Britain was a constant theme. In the scripture lesson with which every day began, strict Anglican doctrines were taught, even though nearly all the children were from nonconformist families. There was a school-management committee, of which Da was a member, but it had no power except to advise. Da said the earl treated the school as his personal property.

In their final year, Billy and Tommy had been taught the principles of mining, while the girls had learned to sew and cook. Billy had been surprised to discover that the ground beneath him consisted of layers of different kinds of earth, like a stack of sandwiches. A coal seam – a phrase he had heard all his life without really understanding it – was one such layer. He had also been told that coal was made of dead leaves and other vegetable matter, accumulated over thousands of years and compressed by the weight of earth above it. Tommy, whose father was an atheist, said this proved that the Bible was not true; but Billy's Da said that was only one interpretation.

The school was empty at this hour, its playground deserted. Billy felt proud that he had left school behind, although part of him wished he could go back there instead of down the pit.

As they approached the pithead, the streets began to fill with miners, each with his tin snap and bottle of tea. They all dressed the same, in old suits that they would take off, once they reached their workplace. Some mines were cold but Aberowen was a hot pit, and the men worked

in underwear and boots, or in the coarse linen shorts they called bannickers. Everyone wore a padded cap, all the time, because tunnel roofs were low and it was easy to bang your head.

Over the houses Billy could see the winding gear, a tower topped by two great wheels rotating in opposite directions, drawing the cables that raised and lowered the cage. Similar pithead structures loomed over most towns in the South Wales valleys, the way church spires dominated farming villages.

Other buildings were scattered around the pithead as if dropped by accident: the lamp room, the colliery office, the smithy, the stores. Railway lines snaked between the buildings. On the waste ground were broken drams, old cracked timbers, feed sacks, and piles of rusty disused machinery, all covered with a layer of coal dust. Da always said there would be fewer accidents if miners kept things tidy.

Billy and Tommy went to the colliery office. In the front room was Arthur 'Spotty' Llewellyn, a clerk not much older than they were. His white shirt had a dirty collar and cuffs. They were expected – their fathers had previously arranged for them to start work today. Spotty wrote their names in a ledger, then took them into the colliery manager's office. 'Young Tommy Griffiths and young Billy Williams, Mr Morgan,' he said.

Maldwyn Morgan was a tall man in a black suit. There was no coal dust on his cuffs. His pink cheeks were free of stubble, which meant he must shave every day. His engineering diploma hung in a frame on the wall, and his bowler hat – the other badge of his status – was displayed on the coat stand by the door.

To Billy's surprise, he was not alone. Next to him stood an even more formidable figure: Perceval Jones, chairman of Celtic Minerals, the company that owned and operated the Aberowen coal mine and several others. A small, aggressive man, he was called Napoleon by the miners. He wore morning dress, a black tailcoat and striped grey trousers, and he had not taken off his tall black top hat.

Jones looked at the boys with distaste. 'Griffiths,' he said. 'Your father's a revolutionary socialist.'

'Yes, Mr Jones,' said Tommy.

'And an atheist.'

'Yes, Mr Jones.'

He turned his gaze on Billy. 'And your father's an official of the South Wales Miners' Federation.'

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‘Yes, Mr Jones.’

‘I don’t like socialists. Atheists are doomed to eternal damnation. And trade unionists are the worst of the lot.’

He glared at them, but he had not asked a question, so Billy said nothing.

‘I don’t want troublemakers,’ Jones went on. ‘In the Rhondda valley they’ve been on strike for forty-three weeks because of people like your fathers stirring them up.’

Billy knew that the strike in the Rhondda had not been caused by troublemakers, but by the owners of the Ely Pit at Penygraig, who had locked out their miners. But he kept his mouth shut.

‘Are you troublemakers?’ Jones pointed a bony finger at Billy, making Billy shake. ‘Did your father tell you to stand up for your rights when you’re working for me?’

Billy tried to think, though it was difficult when Jones looked so threatening. Da had not said much this morning, but last night he had given some advice. ‘Please, sir, he told me: “Don’t cheek the bosses, that’s my job.”’

Behind him, Spotty Llewellyn sniggered.

Perceval Jones was not amused. ‘Insolent savage,’ he said. ‘But if I turn you away, I’ll have the whole of this valley on strike.’

Billy had not thought of that. Was he so important? No – but the miners might strike for the principle that the children of their officials must not suffer. He had been at work less than five minutes, and already the union was protecting him.

‘Get them out of here,’ said Jones.

Morgan nodded. ‘Take them outside, Llewellyn,’ he said to Spotty. ‘Rhys Price can look after them.’

Billy groaned inwardly. Rhys Price was one of the more unpopular deputy managers. He had set his cap at Ethel, a year ago, and she had turned him down flat. She had done the same to half the single men in Aberowen, but Price had taken it hard.

Spotty jerked his head. ‘Out,’ he said, and he followed them. ‘Wait outside for Mr Price.’

Billy and Tommy left the building and leaned on the wall by the door. ‘I’d like to punch Napoleon’s fat belly,’ said Tommy. ‘Talk about a capitalist bastard.’

‘Yeah,’ said Billy, though he had had no such thought.

Rhys Price showed up a minute later. Like all the deputies, he wore

a low round-crowned hat called a billycock, more expensive than a miner's cap but cheaper than a bowler. In the pockets of his waistcoat he had a notebook and a pencil, and he carried a yardstick. Price had dark stubble on his cheeks and a gap in his front teeth. Billy knew him to be clever but sly.

'Good morning, Mr Price,' Billy said.

Price looked suspicious. 'What business have you got saying good morning to me, Billy Twice?'

'Mr Morgan said we are to go down the pit with you.'

'Did he, now?' Price had a way of darting looks to the left and right, and sometimes behind, as if he expected trouble from an unknown quarter. 'We'll see about that.' He looked up at the winding wheel, as if seeking an explanation there. 'I haven't got time to deal with boys.' He went into the office.

'I hope he gets someone else to take us down,' Billy said. 'He hates my family because my sister wouldn't walk out with him.'

'Your sister thinks she's too good for the men of Aberowen,' said Tommy, obviously repeating something he had heard.

'She *is* too good for them,' Billy said stoutly.

Price came out. 'All right, this way,' he said, and headed off at a rapid walk.

The boys followed him into the lamp room. The lamp man handed Billy a shiny brass safety lamp, and he hooked it on to his belt as the men did.

He had learned about miners' lamps in school. Among the dangers of coal mining was methane, the inflammable gas that seeped out of coal seams. The men called it firedamp, and it was the cause of all underground explosions. Welsh pits were notoriously gassy. The lamp was ingeniously designed so that its flame would not ignite firedamp. In fact, the flame would change its shape, becoming longer, thereby giving a warning – for firedamp had no smell.

If the lamp went out, the miner could not relight it himself. Carrying matches was forbidden underground, and the lamp was locked to discourage the breaking of the rule. An extinguished lamp had to be taken to a lighting station, usually at the pit bottom near the shaft. This might be a walk of a mile or more, but it was worth it to avoid the risk of an underground explosion.

In school the boys had been told that the safety lamp was one of the ways in which mine owners showed their care and concern for their

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employees – ‘As if,’ Da said, ‘there was no benefit to the bosses in preventing explosions and stoppage of work and damage to tunnels.’

After picking up their lamps, the men stood in line for the cage. Cleverly placed alongside the queue was a noticeboard. Handwritten or crudely printed signs advertised cricket practice, a darts match, a lost penknife, a recital by the Aberowen Male Voice Choir, and a lecture on Karl Marx’s Theory of Historical Materialism at the Free Library. But deputies did not have to wait, and Price pushed his way to the front, with the boys tagging along.

Like most pits, Aberowen had two shafts, with fans placed to force air down one and up the other. The owners often gave the shafts whimsical names, and here they were Pyramus and Thisbe. This one, Pyramus, was the up shaft, and Billy could feel the draught of warm air coming from the pit.

Last year Billy and Tommy had decided they wanted to look down the shaft. On Easter Monday, when the men were not working, they had dodged the watchman and sneaked across the waste ground to the pithead, then climbed the guard fence. The shaft mouth was not completely enclosed by the cage housing, and they had lain on their bellies and looked over the rim. They had stared with dreadful fascination into that terrible hole, and Billy had felt his stomach turn. The blackness seemed infinite. He experienced a thrill that was half joy because he did not have to go down, half terror because one day he would. He had thrown a stone in, and they had listened as it bounced against the wooden cage-conductor and the brick lining of the shaft. It seemed a horrifically long time before they heard the faint, distant splash as it hit the pool of water at the bottom.

Now, a year later, he was about to follow the course of that stone.

He told himself not to be a coward. He had to behave like a man, even if he did not feel like one. The worst thing of all would be to disgrace himself. He was more afraid of that than of dying.

He could see the sliding grille that closed off the shaft. Beyond it was empty space, for the cage was on its way up. On the far side of the shaft he could see the winding engine that turned the great wheels high above. Jets of steam escaped from the mechanism. The cables slapped their guides with a whiplash sound. There was an odour of hot oil.

With a clash of iron, the empty cage appeared behind the gate. The banksman, in charge of the cage at the top end, slid the gate back. Rhys Price stepped into the empty cage and the two boys followed. Thirteen

miners got in behind them – the cage held sixteen in total. The banksman slammed the gate shut.

There was a pause. Billy felt vulnerable. The floor beneath his feet was solid, but he might, without much difficulty, have squeezed through the widely spaced bars of the sides. The cage was suspended from a steel rope, but even that was not completely safe: everyone knew that the winding cable at Tirpentwys had snapped one day in 1902, and the cage had plummeted to the pit bottom, killing eight men.

He nodded to the miner beside him. It was Harry ‘Suet’ Hewitt, a pudding-faced boy only three years older, though a foot taller. Billy remembered Harry in school: he had been stuck in Standard Three with the ten-year-olds, failing the exam every year, until he was old enough to start work.

A bell rang, signifying that the onsetter at the pit bottom had closed his gate. The banksman pulled a lever and a different bell rang. The steam engine hissed, then there was another bang.

The cage fell into empty space.

Billy knew that it went into free fall, then braked in time for a soft landing; but no theoretical foreknowledge could have prepared him for the sensation of dropping unhindered into the bowels of the earth. His feet left the floor. He screamed in terror. He could not help himself.

All the men laughed. They knew it was his first time and had been waiting for his reaction, he realized. Too late, he saw that they were all holding the bars of the cage to prevent themselves floating up. But the knowledge did nothing to calm his fear. He managed to stop screaming only by clamping his teeth together.

At last the brake engaged. The speed of the fall slowed, and Billy’s feet touched the floor. He grabbed a bar and tried to stop shaking. After a minute the fear was replaced by a sense of injury so strong that tears threatened. He looked into the laughing face of Suet and shouted over the noise: ‘Shut your great gob, Hewitt, you shitbrain.’

Suet’s face changed in an instant and he looked furious, but the other men laughed all the more. Billy would have to say sorry to Jesus for swearing, but he felt a bit less of a fool.

He looked at Tommy, who was white-faced. Had Tommy screamed? Billy was afraid to ask in case the answer was no.

The cage stopped, the gate was thrown back, and Billy and Tommy walked shakily out into the mine.

It was gloomy. The miners’ lamps gave less light than the paraffin

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lights on the walls at home. The pit was as dark as a night with no moon. Perhaps they did not need to see well to hew coal, Billy thought. He splashed through a puddle, and looking down he saw water and mud everywhere, gleaming with the faint reflections of lamp flames. There was a strange taste in his mouth: the air was thick with coal dust. Was it possible that men breathed this all day? That must be why miners coughed and spat constantly.

Four men were waiting to enter the cage and go up to the surface. Each carried a leather case, and Billy realized they were the firemen. Every morning, before the miners started, the firemen tested for gas. If the concentration of methane was unacceptably high they would order the men not to work until the ventilation fans cleared the gas.

In the immediate neighbourhood Billy could see a row of stalls for ponies and an open door leading to a brightly lit room with a desk, presumably an office for deputies. The men dispersed, walking away along four tunnels that radiated from the pit bottom. Tunnels were called headings, and they led to the districts where the coal was won.

Price took them to a shed and undid a padlock. The place was a tool store. He selected two shovels, gave them to the boys, and locked up again.

They went to the stables. A man wearing only shorts and boots was shovelling soiled straw out of a stall, pitching it into a coal dram. Sweat ran down his muscular back. Price said to him: 'Do you want a boy to help you?'

The man turned around, and Billy recognized Dai Ponies, an elder of the Bethesda Chapel. Dai gave no sign of recognizing Billy. 'I don't want the little one,' he said.

'Right,' said Price. 'The other is Tommy Griffiths. He's yours.'

Tommy looked pleased. He had got his wish. Even though he would only be mucking out stalls, he was working in the stables.

Price said: 'Come on, Billy Twice', and he walked into one of the headings.

Billy shouldered his shovel and followed. He felt more anxious now that Tommy was no longer with him. He wished he had been set to mucking out stalls alongside his friend. 'What will I be doing, Mr Price?' he said.

'You can guess, can't you?' said Price. 'Why do you think I gave you a fucking shovel?'

Billy was shocked by the casual use of the forbidden word. He could not guess what he would be doing, but he asked no more questions.

The tunnel was round, its roof reinforced by curved steel supports. A two-inch pipe ran along its crown, presumably carrying water. Every night the headings were sprinkled in an attempt to reduce the dust. It was not merely a danger to men's lungs – if that were all, Celtic Minerals probably would not care – but it also constituted a fire hazard. However, the sprinkler system was inadequate. Da had argued that a pipe of six inches diameter was needed, but Perceval Jones had refused to spend the money.

After about a quarter of a mile they turned into a cross-tunnel that sloped upwards. This was an older, smaller passage, with timber props rather than steel rings. Price had to duck his head where the roof sagged. At intervals of about thirty yards they passed the entrances to workplaces where the miners were already hewing the coal.

Billy heard a rumbling sound, and Price said: 'Into the manhole.'

'What?' Billy looked at the ground. A manhole was a feature of town pavements, and he could see nothing on the floor but the railway tracks that carried the drams. He looked up to see a pony trotting towards him, coming fast down the slope, drawing a train of drams.

'In the manhole!' Price shouted.

Still Billy did not understand what was required of him, but he could see that the tunnel was hardly wider than the drams, and he would be crushed. Then Price seemed to step into the wall and disappear.

Billy dropped his shovel, turned, and ran back the way he had come. He tried to get ahead of the pony, but it was moving surprisingly fast. Then he saw a niche cut into the wall, the full height of the tunnel, and he realized that he had seen such niches, without registering them, every twenty-five yards or so. This must be what Price meant by a manhole. He threw himself in, and the train rumbled past.

When it had gone he stepped out, breathing hard.

Price pretended to be angry, but he was smiling. 'You'll have to be more alert than that,' he said. 'Otherwise you'll get killed down here – like your brother.'

Most men enjoyed exposing and mocking the ignorance of boys, Billy found. He was determined to be different when he grew up.

He picked up his shovel. It was undamaged. 'Lucky for you,' Price commented. 'If the dram had broken it, you would have had to pay for a new one.'

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They went on, and soon entered an exhausted district where the workplaces were deserted. There was less water underfoot, and the ground was covered with a thick layer of coal dust. They took several turnings and Billy lost his sense of direction.

They came to a place where the tunnel was blocked by a dirty old dram. 'This area has to be cleaned up,' Price said. It was the first time he had bothered to explain anything, and Billy had a feeling he was lying. 'Your job is to shovel the muck into the dram.'

Billy looked around. The dust was a foot thick to the limit of the light cast by his lamp, and he guessed it went a lot farther. He could shovel for a week without making much impression. And what was the point? The district was worked out. But he asked no questions. This was probably some kind of test.

'I'll come back in a bit and see how you're getting on,' Price said, and he retraced his steps, leaving Billy alone.

Billy had not expected this. He had assumed he would be working with older men and learning from them. But he could only do what he was told.

He unhooked the lamp from his belt and looked around for somewhere to put it. There was nothing he could use as a shelf. He put the lamp on the floor, but it was almost useless there. Then he remembered the nails Da had given him. So this was what they were for. He took one from his pocket. Using the blade of his shovel, he hammered it into a timber prop, then hung up his lamp. That was better.

The dram was chest-high to a man, but shoulder-height to Billy, and when he started work he found that half the dust slipped off his shovel before he could get it over the lip. He developed an action that turned the blade to prevent this happening. In a few minutes he was bathed in sweat, and he understood what the second nail was for. He hammered it into another timber and hung up his shirt and trousers.

After a while he felt that someone was watching him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dim figure standing as still as a statue. 'Oh, God!' he shrieked, and he turned round to face it.

It was Price. 'I forgot to check your lamp,' he said. He took Billy's lamp off the nail and did something to it. 'Not so good,' he said. 'I'll leave you mine.' He hung up the other lamp and disappeared.

He was a creepy character, but at least he seemed to have Billy's safety in mind.

Billy resumed work. Before long his arms and legs began to ache.

He was used to shovelling, he told himself: Da kept a pig in the waste ground behind the house, and it was Billy's job to muck out the sty once a week. But that took about a quarter of an hour. Could he possibly keep this up all day?

Under the dust was a floor of rock and clay. After a while he had cleared an area four feet square, the width of the tunnel. The muck hardly covered the bottom of the dram, but he felt exhausted.

He tried to pull the dram forward so that he would not have to walk so far with his shovelful, but its wheels seemed to have locked with disuse.

He had no watch, and it was difficult to know how much time had passed. He began to work more slowly, conserving his strength.

Then his light went out.

The flame flickered first, and he looked anxiously at the lamp hanging on the nail, but he knew that the flame would lengthen if there was firedamp. This was not what he was seeing, so he felt reassured. Then the flame went out altogether.

He had never known darkness like this. He saw nothing, not even patches of grey, not even different shades of black. He lifted his shovel to face level and held it an inch from his nose, but he could not see it. This was what it must be like to be blind.

He stood still. What was he to do? He was supposed to take the lamp to the lighting station, but he could not have found his way back through the tunnels even if he had been able to see. In this blackness he might blunder about for hours. He had no idea how many miles the disused workings extended, and he did not want the men to have to send a search party for him.

He would just have to wait for Price. The deputy had said he would come back 'in a bit'. That could mean a few minutes, or an hour or more. And Billy suspected it would be later rather than sooner. Price had surely intended this. A safety lamp could not blow out and, anyway, there was little wind here. Price had taken Billy's lamp and substituted one that was low on oil.

He felt a surge of self-pity, and tears came to his eyes. What had he done to deserve this? Then he pulled himself together. It was another test, like the cage. He would show them he was tough enough.

He should carry on working, even in the dark, he decided. Moving for the first time since the light went out, he put his shovel to the ground and ran it forward, trying to pick up dust. When he lifted it he thought,

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by its weight, that there was a load on the blade. He turned and walked two paces then hefted it, trying to throw the muck into the dram, but he misjudged the height. The shovel clanged against the side of the dram and felt suddenly lighter as its load fell to the ground.

He would adjust. He tried again, lifting the shovel higher. When he had unloaded the blade he let it fall, and felt the wooden shaft bang against the lip of the dram. That was better.

As the work took him farther from the dram he continued to miss occasionally, until he began to count his paces aloud. He got into a rhythm, and although his muscles hurt he was able to carry on.

As the work became automatic, his mind was free to wander, which was not so good. He wondered how far the tunnel extended ahead of him and for how long it had been disused. He thought of the earth above his head, extending for half a mile, and the weight being held up by these old timber props. He recalled his brother, Wesley, and the other men who had died in this mine. But their spirits were not here, of course. Wesley was with Jesus. The others might be, too. If not, they were in a different place.

He began to feel frightened, and decided it was a mistake to think about spirits. He was hungry. Was it time for his snap? He had no idea, but he thought he might as well eat it. He made his way to the place where he had hung his clothes, fumbled on the ground below and found his flask and tin.

Sitting with his back against the wall he took a long drink of cold, sweet tea. As he was eating his bread-and-dripping he heard a faint noise. He hoped it might be the creaking of Rhys Price's boots, but that was wishful thinking. He knew that squeak: it was rats.

He was not afraid. There were plenty of rats in the ditches that ran along every street in Aberowen. But they seemed bolder in the dark, and a moment later one ran over his bare legs. Transferring his food to his left hand, he picked up his shovel and lashed out. It did not even scare them, and he felt the tiny claws on his skin again. This time one tried to run up his arm. Obviously they could smell the food. The squeaking increased, and he wondered how many there were.

He stood up and crammed the last of his bread into his mouth. He drank some more tea, then ate his cake. It was delicious, full of dried fruit and almonds; but a rat ran up his leg, and he was forced to gobble the cake.

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They seemed to know the food was gone for the squeaking gradually died down and then stopped altogether.

Eating gave Billy renewed energy for a while, and he went back to work, but he had a burning ache in his back. He kept going more slowly, stopping for frequent rests.

To cheer himself up, he told himself it might be later than he thought. Perhaps it was noon already. Someone would come to fetch him at the end of the shift. The lamp man checked the numbers, so they always knew if a man had not come back up. But Price had taken Billy's lamp and substituted a different one. Could he be planning to leave Billy down here overnight?

It would never work. Da would raise the roof. The bosses were afraid of Da – Perceval Jones had more or less admitted it. Sooner or later, someone was sure to look for Billy.

But when he got hungry again he felt sure many hours must have passed. He started to get scared, and this time he could not shake it off. It was the darkness that unnerved him. He could have borne the waiting if he had been able to see. In the complete blackness he felt he was losing his mind. He had no sense of direction, and every time he walked back from the dram he wondered if he was about to crash into the tunnel side. Earlier he had worried about crying like a child. Now he had to stop himself screaming.

Then he recalled what Mam had said to him: 'Jesus is always with you, even down the pit.' At the time he had thought she was just telling him to behave well. But she had been wiser than that. Of course Jesus was with him. Jesus was everywhere. The darkness did not matter, nor the passage of time. Billy had someone taking care of him.

To remind himself of that, he sang a hymn. He disliked his voice, which was still a treble, but there was no one to hear him, so he sang as loud as he could. When he had sung all the verses, and the scary feeling began to return, he imagined Jesus standing just the other side of the dram, watching, with a look of grave compassion on his bearded face.

Billy sang another hymn. He shovelled and paced in time to the music. Most of the hymns went with a swing. Every now and then he suffered again the fear that he might have been forgotten, the shift might have ended and he might be alone down here; then he would just remember the robed figure standing with him in the dark.

He knew plenty of hymns. He had been going to the Bethesda

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Chapel three times every Sunday since he was old enough to sit quietly. Hymn books were expensive, and not all the congregation could read, so everyone learned the words.

When he had sung twelve hymns, he reckoned an hour had passed. Surely it must be the end of the shift? But he sang another twelve. After that it was hard to keep track. He sang his favourites twice. He worked more and more slowly.

He was singing 'Up from the Grave He Arose' at the top of his voice when he saw a light. The work had become so automatic that he did not stop, but picked up another shovelful and carried it to the dram, still singing, while the light grew stronger. When the hymn came to an end he leaned on his shovel. Rhys Price stood watching him, lamp at his belt, with a strange look on his shadowed face.

Billy would not let himself feel relief. He was not going to show Price how he felt. He put on his shirt and trousers, then took the unlit lamp from the nail and hung it on his belt.

Price said: 'What happened to your lamp?'

'You know what happened,' Billy said, and his voice sounded strangely grown-up.

Price turned away and walked back along the tunnel.

Billy hesitated. He looked the opposite way. Just the other side of the dram he glimpsed a bearded face and a pale robe, but the figure disappeared like a thought. 'Thank you,' Billy said to the empty tunnel.

As he followed Price, his legs ached so badly that he felt he might fall down, but he hardly cared if he did. He could see again, and the shift was over. Soon he would be home and he could lie down.

They reached the pit bottom and got into the cage with a crowd of black-faced miners. Tommy Griffiths was not among them, but Suet Hewitt was. As they waited for the signal from above, Billy noticed they were looking at him with sly grins.

Hewitt said: 'How did you get on, then, on your first day, Billy Twice?'

'Fine, thank you,' Billy said.

Hewitt's expression was malicious: no doubt he was remembering that Billy had called him shitbrain. He said: 'No problems?'

Billy hesitated. Obviously they knew something. He wanted them to know that he had not succumbed to fear. 'My lamp went out,' he said, and he just about managed to keep his voice steady. He looked at Price, but decided it would be more manly not to accuse him. 'It was a bit

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difficult shovelling in the dark all day,' he finished. That was too understated – they might think his ordeal had been nothing much – but it was better than admitting to fear.

An older man spoke. It was John Jones the Shop, so called because his wife ran a little general store in their parlour. 'All day?' he said.

Billy said: 'Aye.'

John Jones looked at Price and said: 'You bastard, it's only supposed to be for an hour.'

Billy's suspicion was confirmed. They all knew what had happened, and it sounded as if they did something similar to all new boys. But Price had made it worse than usual.

Suet Hewitt was grinning. 'Weren't you scared, Billy boy, on your own in the dark?'

He thought about his answer. They were all looking at him, waiting to hear what he would say. Their sly smiles had gone, and they seemed a bit ashamed. He decided to tell the truth. 'I was scared, yes, but I wasn't on my own.'

Hewitt was baffled. 'Not on your own?'

'No, of course not,' Billy said. 'Jesus was with me.'

Hewitt laughed loudly, but no one else did. His guffaw resounded in the silence and stopped suddenly.

The hush lasted several seconds. Then there was a clang of metal and a jerk, and the cage lifted. Harry turned away.

After that, they called him Billy-with-Jesus.