

Jack Larkins' Van-Boy.

(By R. Stansby Williams; in 'Temperance Record'.)

That was his name and occupation. As for his appearance, he was a stout, active lad of about fourteen years of age, with fair hair, blue eyes, and round, fresh-colored face; just the sort of lad that would some day grow up to be a big, stalwart fellow, a thorough descendant of those old Saxons, who, as the history books tell us, drove the native Britons before them to seek refuge among 'the stormy hills of Wales.'

Jack's knowledge of his Saxon ancestors was confined to what he had picked up in his progress from the first to the sixth standard at Gordon-street School. It had been rather slow progress, for our friend Jack was not counted among the sharpest or quickest of the little lads who were gathered round Mr. Graham, the headmaster there. But, nevertheless, the master was very well satisfied.

Having passed the sixth standard and reached the seventh, Jack first of all put his name down for half-time, and then, after a few months as errand boy at a shop near his mother's house, managed to get taken on by a large firm of carriers, whose vans and wagons are known all over London.

He began with an odd job now and then, but was soon engaged as van-boy. His work was to help the men in charge of the van, and to look after the goods if they had to leave it for a time. Now this kind of life suited Jack remarkably well. There was plenty to do, hard work perhaps; work that required all his strength, but he didn't mind that. He was strong for his years, and rather enjoyed pulling and dragging heavy boxes and crates; it was to him what climbing trees is to the country boy, and hauling ropes is to the boy at sea. And it was as well that Jack liked his work, for it was by no means easy. He was out in all weathers, and though he managed to get enough to eat, his ways of getting it were sometimes not at all to his liking. Generally he had to eat his bread and cheese or bread and meat either in the van, jolting along a stony road, or while waiting in charge while the carman took his own meals.

The men, of course, were very different in their ways to him. The greater number of them were rough, but not unkindly fellows, fond of a lark, without troubling whether the 'lark' interfered with other people's comfort or not. One or two were positively cruel; but, on the other hand, one or two were kindly, well-behaved and steady men, with whom it was a pleasure to be working. So Jack had a succession of masters, but honestly did his best to please all, and as he had them only one at a time, he generally succeeded in doing so.

There was one, however, whom he could not satisfy, however much he tried, who was constantly finding fault and grumbling, whether Jack did his best or not. And so the lad got discouraged, and now and then gave up trying.

'Where's the use?' he said to his special chum, Tom Halliday. 'Jim's always at it, grumbling and growling.'

Tom picked up a straw and stuck it in the corner of his mouth, a sign he was thinking deeply. He took his time, as a rule, before giving an opinion.

'Well,' he said, at last, 'you ain't on with Jim every day—'

'I am three days out o' six,' retorted Jack, not much comforted as yet.

'Three days out o' six ain't all the week,' rejoined Tom. 'Look 'ere, Jack,' and he

turned to his friend, 'don't you be a duffer. You're a thinkin' o' givin' up, that's what you're drivin' at. Don't you be a duffer.'

'But I can't please Jim, nohow, do as I may,' said Jack.

'P'raps not,' Tom answered. 'Never you mind, you just hold on. Jim can't sack you. It's only Mr. Carson—the yard manager—as can do that. You just hold on.'

'But Jim's a regular brute. It's a cuff or a kick when he's put out about anything. He gave me a crack the other day as knocked me nearly to the other end of the van.'

Tom whistled. 'Well, I don't know as you're called on to stand that,' he said, picking up a fresh straw in place of the first one. 'Only if you make a bother it'll be the wuss for you in the end. It allus is. Put up with it a bit, old chap. Jim's sure to put his foot in it and get the sack before long. Put up with it a bit,' and, seeing no other way, Jack admitted that was the best he could do. So far as possible he tried to arrange so as to 'escape' being told off to work with Jim Gray. It was not much he could do that way, but now and again he contrived to keep clear of his 'enemy,' for he had begun to consider him as such, and to share the van of some more genial and steady carman employed by the firm.

But it very often happens that an event occurs through the very means we take to avoid it. We are so very anxious to escape a trouble that we go very far out of our way to do so, and thus meet with some greater difficulty than that which threatened us. Gray, as it happened, was one of the strongest of the large number of men employed by the firm, just as Jack Larkins was one of the strongest of the lads. So they were often paired off together by the yard manager, very much to Gray, the carman's, satisfaction, as he thus obtained in Larkins an active and steady assistant, on whom he could thoroughly depend, and in whose charge he could leave his van with safety. Gray, like most of us, could be pleasant enough if he chose; and his 'pleasant' moments were those in which he was desirous of being on good terms with Jack just for his own benefit.

A certain time for meals was allowed to the men, but they had to take it whenever their work would permit. Some of them went to the coffee house, most of them to the public-houses; of these latter was Jim Gray. Jack always noticed that Jim was a good deal worse tempered after his hasty dinner than he was during the morning, except now and again—say, two or three times a week—when he came to his work, as Jack put it, 'as cross as an old bear.' And on these days the boy had a very bad time indeed; a curse or a blow, sometimes both, being his usual lot if everything did not go exactly as Jim wanted it.

Once or twice Jack felt inclined to 'hit back again,' or, if not that, to give up his place at the end of the week; but he remembered his friend's advice and held on bravely, doing his work as well as he could and without complaint. And there was another reason why he should hold on. There was at home a little sister, of whom he was very fond, and while his mother got the living and managed for the two young boys, it had somehow come about, nobody quite knew how, that the greater part of Jack's earnings was specially for little Laura's benefit. To give up his post, therefore, would hurt Laura as well as himself, for it might be some weeks before he could get another, and little Laura would have to go short of many things that his money now provided for her. So Jack held on.

'It can't last for ever,' he said to himself

by way of encouragement, when he had a particularly bad day. It certainly could not, and it did not. One morning, the morning of a cold, wintry, frosty day, Jack was at his post as usual, looking out for a chance of getting, if possible, along with one of the better-tempered men. But all the boys were just as eager to get with their special favorites as Jack was. Mr. Carson was standing at the door of his office, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, his thin, sharp face looking redder than ever, and his keen eyes twinkling in the cold, icy air, as he told off the names, as, one by one, the men dropped in. Last of all came Jim Gray.

'At it again, Gray,' said the yard manager, in his sharpest tones, as the man slouched up to him.

'I war a bit late up last night,' Jim admitted, in a half grumbling, half excusing tone.

'Late up,' rejoined the manager, looking keenly at the other's flushed face, heavy eyes, rough hair and beard, and generally untidy aspect. 'I should think you weren't in bed at all. You look out, my man, or you'll have to look for work somewhere else than here. Get yourself a bit more tidy by to-morrow, for you're no credit to the firm.'

And Jim Gray certainly was not. His clothes were splashed and stained with mud, his hat damaged; there was a rent in his coat, and bits of straw showed themselves in his tangled hair. Looking round as he spoke, Mr. Carson's eye lighted upon Jack Larkins.

'Here, Larkins, you go with Gray. He wants some steady fellow with him.'

'Yes, sir,' said Jack, but in so dismal a tone that the other lads in hearing broke into a laugh, and even the severe yard manager could not repress a smile.

On his part, Jim looked cross and angry, but went off to his van without a word more, and Jack followed, though with a very bad grace.

He expected a bad day, and the result quite came up to his expectations. Once clear of the yard and away from Mr. Carson's watchful eye, Jim gave vent to his annoyance in a burst of evil language that startled even Jack, accustomed as the latter was to the rough speech and ways of the majority of the carmen. He ventured upon a slight remonstrance, but Jim turned upon him so fiercely that the lad, though by nature bold, drew back a moment into his own part of the van and was silent.

Apparently satisfied by this, Jim, having finished loading, clambered up, not too steadily, Jack thought, and, cracking his whip, drove off. For the first hour or so, all went on much as usual, save that Jim from time to time, took up a tin flask he had stowed under the tarpaulin that covered the goods in the van, and whenever he stopped to deliver a bale or a package he contrived, under cover of the tarpaulin, to put the flask to his mouth and take a drink. With each application, however, his ill-humor seemed to increase, and before long showed itself more violently than ever it had before.

Jack, who unluckily got in his way on one occasion, was rewarded by a blow that, unless he had warded it off with his arm, would have laid him senseless on the floor of the van. As it was he went staggering up against a bale of goods, fortunately soft cotton goods, and received no further damage than a bruise that made his arm black and blue for a week after.

Then the enraged carman, whose frequent applications to the flask were rapidly destroying what little self-command he pos-