The boy I love, the same becomes a man

by festlich

Summary

Nigel Bumble and Jacob Frye are both boys in their own right. Through the years they grow, experiencing life, loss and love apart until one day, things change. They aren't boys any more and the world is a different place, they are different people but there is still something there between them that is the same.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

"The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right, Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear, Fond of his sweetheart, relishing well his steak, Unrequited love or a slight cutting him worse than sharp steel cuts" - Walt Whitman

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"Soon things will be different, son."

Nigel's father Harry said this from across the dining table as Nigel sat on one of their mismatched chairs reading his school book.

Harry Bumble had hands that were big and calloused and folded neatly in front of him and a drooping blonde moustache hiding his tired smile.

"Of course, Da." Nigel glanced up from his book and smiled back uncertainly.
Harry's voice is low with conspiracy and excitement when he speaks "We'll travel to a place where the pigs drink beer just as soon as any man does," he leaned forward and winked "there will be will be opportunities for all of us, even you my boy."

He continued, "Haven't you always wanted to learn a trade? You're a smart lad, your schoolmaster has said so."

He was clever too, all the neighbor boys would come to Nigel when they wanted to nick something and not get caught--though his father didn't know about that and Nigel wasn't about to tell him.

"I suppose so, Da, yes I would." His Father's eyes crinkled at the corners and he left Nigel with his book and racing thoughts.

His father's grand words had excited him but Nigel dreamed cautiously. His eyes always darting to the anemic wood stacks near their hearth or the patches in his mother's skirts, the empty larder. London wasn't a place for risks, not for folk like them.

Nigel's birthday came and went and he began to wonder how true his father's words had truly been.

Mary, his mother had only said when he asked her while she stitched two brightly colored fabric scraps together "Your father has many plans, my sweet. We'll just have to see how this works out, have faith."

And that was that, Nigel continued to read his books, and do odd jobs for the local shops. He continued to play football with the local boys and even help them out a time or two when they needed something they didn't quite have the pocket change for.

It had happened slowly, Mary had given up an old pot to a neighbor while Harry carried out old stools and shelves down the stairs to the street with Nigel's dubious help.

"Nothing wrong with a little downsizing!" Harry had laughed, and Nigel had laughed too because what else could he say? They had little, and now they had less.

Harry had announced their departure from the city around the dining table which now only had five chairs, their one sturdy wooden piece had disappeared from the house a few days back. His little sister Edith sat on their mother's lap, carefully eating her steamed carrots and asked where they were going.

Harry had only winked and said that they had best say good bye to their friends because they would be leaving London to head North in three days.

The day arrived in mid spring, though frost still lined the windows of their tiny apartment. Nigel rose with the rest of his family, the cold making his breath come out in puffs of hot air as he shuffled frozen footed into the living area.

His mother watched her pot over a small cooking fire, but the tiny blaze was not enough to heat the whole house. They huddled around the potbellied stove together over a sparse breakfast of boiled potatoes and chunks of hard bread, talking softly.

After their meal was sorted, the dishes washed and packed away, his mother told him to scrub up his hands and comb his hair. His father squeezed his shoulder and smiled at him under his thick moustache while his little brothers, Ben and Franky climbed on his back. Always eager to pester him they had demanded answers for where they were going and what they would be doing when they got there.
Edith had asked him to braid her hair, her light voice high with excitement and her cheeks flushed.

Their bags were by the door, everything they owned in three neat little canvas sacks and it made Nigel sad to see it. They had given away or tossed near everything else they owned, the beds and the stove were all that remained and those belonged to their landlord.

They wore most of their clothing in an attempt to keep out the late winter cold, without much success. “Less to carry, more hands to hold” his mother murmured, smoothing down his blonde hair. Nigel felt a surge of love for her as her dry fingers touched the skin of his forehead and he reached out impulsively to gather her up in a hug.

It hurt to leave, but she had said to have faith and he would have that and her and his family.

His father took their thick, iron key and locked their door for the last time, handing it over to their landlord with a small smile before they all walked out into the bitterly chill air.

Nigel and his family arrived at the station at six thirty sharp but the hallways and boarding areas were already thick with people preparing to catch the seven o'clock train.

The noise and volume of the place was startling and Nigel and his family gaped like the foreign tourists at the gates to Buckingham Palace.

There were vendors hawking bags of salted peanuts and other sweet and savory smelling foods outside the station proper. There were families and richly dressed men and women walking the grounds with servants and children in tow and Nigel was awe struck. He'd lived in London all his life but he'd never seen such a mass of folk all in one place.

He took a deep breath and inhaled the sharp stink of coal smoke and too many bodies pressed together and then waded in with a hand on each of his brothers' backs.

It took nearly the full half hour spare they'd given themselves to wait in line with other poorer families to purchase their tickets and then they were hurrying towards their platform.

Mary held onto Edith's little hand, her other occupied with one of their bags as she listened to Edith chatter on about an extravagant dress they had seen. Harry carried their other two bags in each hand as he herded Nigel's brothers along, both of them shoving each other and laughing while Nigel brought up the rear.

As they walked, Nigel's eye caught on an illustrated ballot plastered to the wall.

There was an imagine of a stately looking man and beneath him in bold but plain lettering was 'International Workingmen's Association' and a call to meeting at St. Martins Hospital.

Nigel leaned forward, reading the finer print with rapt interest, it spoke of the professor George Odger, of Edward Spencer Beesly and even Karl Marx himself being in attendance. It spoke of reform and unions and Nigel felt excitement bubble up in his chest as he looked up to ask his father if he'd heard of this.

But his Father was gone? His family was gone. Gone? The churning sea of bodies were weaving around him and closing in.

He stood there dumbly with his hand braced on the wall next to the damn ballot before a sick sort of dread in his stomach lurched up into his throat and made him stagger into a run.
He pushed his way through the crowd, calling for his mother, his father, his brothers and sister. His voice grew frantic as he called for them over and over, getting only shoves and shouts of irritation in return. He heard the hissing lurch of a train preparing to depart and sobbed, eyes wide with fear as he turned towards the sound, so quickly his cap flew off his head.

The train was leaving and he was not aboard. He shouted again, waved his hands, begged the people to let him through, *let him through!*

He broke past the press of bodies just in time to see his mother being restrained by his father's arm from the back of the last train car.

Her hands were white knuckled on the fabric of his father's patched coat. Her ruddy, rounded face was scrunched up and he thought she might be crying.

She shouted something, "We'll come back for you!" or maybe, "You stupid boy!" as she struggled in Harry's arms, the train picking up speed. Harry's own face was twisted with pain and he shouted something too though it was drowned out by the pitched whistle of the departing train.

He'd never really know what either of them had said because then he was left standing alone on a train platform.

His family was disappearing down the tracks, their cries growing fainter and fainter until all that was left was the noise of the people moving around him and the shouts of a conductor calling out for the next departing train.

He stood there heaving for breath with his scrubbed hands braced on his knees, prickling tears stinging his eyes, as he gasped and tried very hard not to cry.

London wasn't a place to take risks, and if you did take them, you best be prepared for whatever consequences the ornery bitch had in mind for you.

Nigel remembers when he was seven and his mother being heavily pregnant. She and his Father had been glowing with excitement, their first child after Nigel- a little brother or sister for him to play with and to take care of and Nigel thought that nothing sounded better than that.

But then the baby had come, his mother had screamed and pushed and the small, pink little thing had arrived with barely a whimper. It had suckled weakly at his mother's breast and slept deep and long until one day it hadn't woken up at all.

Nigel remembers touching his little brothers' cool face, wrapped up in the cleanest linens his mother had been able to salvage. He remembers his mothers' piercing scream and his fathers choked sobs and remembers his own face had been scrunched up with pain and tears.

His heart had broken then, at the loss of one little baby who would have been his brother.

His heart was breaking now, and the city lurched on, indifferent and uncaring.

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Nigel stumbled around the station in a daze, eyes fixated on the ground. He wanted his cap, if only to hide his tear stained face and maybe warm his frigid ears but the damned thing was long gone and most likely trampled under a hundred feet.

He wandered the station like a ghost, spinning around to look at every mother's shout for her brood, every child's bright bubble of laughter.
He roamed the platforms until evening settled in cold and damp. As he watched the station empty out, conductors and ticket sellers and hawkers pouring back out into the smoky lamplit streets, something sharp crawled up into his throat. He couldn't go home now. There was no home left to go back to, no matter how desperately he wished it wasn't so.

He wanted to burst through the door of their apartment and see his mother with a pot on the stove telling him to wipe off his shoes 'for goodness' sake!' And to see his father carefully sorting his stock of buttons on the imbalanced dining table. He wanted his snot nosed little brothers and sister and to eat boiled potatoes and hard crusts of bread.

But the apartment he'd grown up in was cold and locked up tight and he didn't really have a home now he supposed, as he settled down onto an empty bench and stared blankly ahead.

The thick wooden slats were cold even through his threadbare trousers and he tucked his frozen fingers up under his armpits and huddled deeper into the red scarf his mother had gifted him on his birthday.

And then he started to cry and cry until finally he fell asleep.

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He was prodded awake by a weary looking night guard in the wee hours of the morning and shooed out into the watery light of day. He squinted against it after the relative dark of the station and took a deep, fortifying breath of frigid February air.

His eyes still stung from tears and the shallow sleep he'd managed had only twisted up his neck, and turned his back into knots.

He sniffed, knotting his loose scarf tight around his neck and then he loped towards the street, eyes catching on the little market set up just outside the station proper where folk could purchase a snack for their journey.

He walked quickly with his head down, scanning the produce and colorful bundles of flowers before spotting a likely target.

A sleeping shop boy slouched in a chair in which he was meant to be minding his wares while another, older man unloaded crates from a nearby buggy. Nigel shuffled closer with his head down until he was close enough that he could dart a hand out and snatch up a shiny red apple from the drowsing barrow boy's stock.

The boy was still asleep in his chair, cap slanted over his eyes as he snored audibly and Nigel carefully plucked the hat off his face and deposited it on his own head. The boy's father, presumably, turned just in time to see Nigel take a satisfying bite of the fruit before he shouted in indignation, causing his son to startle awake and collapse from his seat.

Nigel bolted, one hand clutching his breakfast, the other planted firmly on his new cap and almost laughed as he disappeared down an alley, shouts and accusations flung at his heels.

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He stayed close to the station from then on, watching the tired groups of people stepping off returning trains for a familiar face until the final bell rang and the lamps flickered to life.

He would wait as long as he could, for that last person on the last train that was always distant and blank when they saw him standing on the platform, hat in hand. And then as they passed him, the
burgeoning hope he fostered each morning and held onto throughout the day would crumple beneath his exhaustion and utter loneliness.

Nigel spent those first few nights tucked up on one of the out of the way benches in the stations lesser used areas. He would wrap abandoned newspapers around his hands and over his body as best he could, trying to stave off the the damp chill.

But the nights were long and limb numbing cold and sometimes, as he felt his eyes drift shut he wondered if he'd even wake up. He slept lightly, always half listening for the night guard or any other errant soul who would think to pick his pockets. Not that he even had a ha'penny to his name, but he had a decent wool cap and shoes and those were just as valuable to some.

He couldn't stay here like this though and he knew it, he had been lucky but that wouldn't last forever.

Nigel usually ate his ill gotten lunch, when he could manage to procure it, on the grand steps leading up to the small market. He could still watch the passengers descending into the streets of Whitechapel but he got some air and sunlight as well.

He was taking small bites of a steaming hot pasty wrapped in wax paper when he saw a boy, his own age or maybe a bit younger wandering the crowds. He stood out like a sore thumb with his bright copper hair and his hat in hand, his pale freckled face streaked with soot.

Copper head's voice had not yet deepened past boyhood and was plaintive and innocent "Bit of change? Even a small bit, somefin' to fill my belly please miss-- You sir, bit of change?"

Nigel thought it might be a bit of an act as he took another bite of his pasty and watched the boy make his rounds. His eyes were shrewd and the hand not holding his cap out for change was loose at his side.

Nigel saw when the boy picked his mark and his own eyes widened in disbelief and then growing horror.

A smartly dressed man in well made suit with a golden pocket watch glinting on his protruding belly.

The gentleman didn't look spry or particularly attentive either but what the fox headed boy didn't see was the brute just behind him, lumbering like the devil.

Nigel would bet his pasty and his boots that that was the man's body guard.

Foxy's hand reached out as the gentleman's back was turned but before he even brushed the expensive fabric of the man's trousers the body guards' ham like fist closed around the boy's bony wrist.

Nigel sprung to his feet, hastily tucking the pasty into a pocket as he took the stairs two at a time.

He reached the struggling boy and the pocket of space the crowd had made around them at a run and didn't think about what he did next. He tucked his shoulder in against his body and slammed it into the brute's side, jostling him just enough for the skinny urchin to wriggle free.

The man rounded on him but before anyone could do anything Nigel felt himself nearly jerked off his feet, rough fingers pulling him away and into the sea of gawkers.

He ran, casting his eyes back behind him as the body guard tried to elbow his way after them but Nigel and his unlikely companion were already ducking around a corner and hopping over a rickety fence and collapsing on dew soaked grass.
They sat there breathing like the bellows and then a whistling, almost panicked laugh issued from one, then the other and then they were both guffawing and slapping their knees.

"Oh piss it, I made a right mess of that heist. Thanks a lot, mate. I'm Jeremy." Foxy or Jeremy stuck out his dirty hand and Nigel took it.

"Nigel Bumble, pleased I could help" he stuck his hand into his pocket and felt the greasy paper of his own lunch. He used the hand still clasped in Jeremy's to hoist the smaller boy to his feet.

Jeremy grinned, he was missing a tooth "that was going to be my breakfast, lunch and dinner. Ah well" he kicked at the dirt, dislodging a stone and sending it skittering away.

Nigel pursed his lips and decided that maybe he wasn't as hungry as he thought he was. His mother had always taught him to share when he could, and he figured that in this instance he could and happily.

He withdrew the wax paper and his still warm and mostly intact pasty. "Here Jeremy, have it. I wasn't all that hungry anyways and you look like a stiff breeze would knock you flat."

Jeremy stared at the offering before quickly snatching it, smiling sheepishly and then carefully peeling back the wax paper to take a full mouthed bite. He spoke with a mouth full of flaky pastry, meat and peas "Thanks a bunch Nigel, awful kind of ya'."

Nigel shrugged and they stood in comfortable silence as Jeremy quickly wolfed down his meal. He spoke again as he licked the grease from his dirty fingers "You got a place to stay around here Nigel? Haven't seen ya' before."

Nigel shrugged "Mostly I been staying at the station." He didn't mention his family and Jeremy didn't ask.

Jeremy nodded sympathetically "bit drafty there isn't it, stayed there a time or two m'self. Bobbies will kick you out though if you stay too long. I got a place, I mean sort of, I share it with a few other boys. It's not much but, it's a roof and it's got a stove that sometimes we have wood for. You're welcome to stay, iffin' ya' like."

Nigel grinned and nodded "Yeah Jeremy, thanks I'd like that a lot."

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Jeremy's house of wayward boys was a ramshackle derelict but it did indeed have a stove.

Nigel helped some of the smaller boys who couldn't be older than six or seven, gather dry branches and twigs from fallen trees.

They watched him with rapt fascination as he stoked the cast iron monstrosity to life, getting a steady even flame dancing in it's belly that lasted well into the night.

Nigel remembered his mother going through the same ritual of stoking their own ancient stove.

She would place two of the thickest pieces of wood down in a tight V shape, as Nigel did now, making sure the wood was good and dry. Then she would take pages of old newsprint, crumple them up and tuck them between the two slabs and set them to a match, slowly feeding in more wood until they had a cheery blaze.

He remembered her standing over the stove with her pot of whatever stew or soups they had the
meager ingredients for and he felt the now familiar pang of loss that made his eyes water.

If any of the children noticed, they didn't comment on Nigel's red eyes and instead brought him a pot and a selection of thin vegetables.

Nigel carefully trimmed off any rotted bits and did his best to chop them into pieces, asking one of the lads to fill the pot with fresh water.

It was a meager dinner but it was hot and that went a long way as night fell once more, heavy and cold.

The boys slept in piles of patch work blankets and pillows and the first night Nigel settled down with the rest of them he worried he wouldn't be able to sleep.

But it was warm and dry and he wasn't very much alone anymore. He slept nearly as soon as he closed his eyes.

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Nigel still spent his days in or around the station, sometimes with Jeremy, most times without.

He stood with his back to the wall, arms crossed over his lean chest as he watched the herds of people ebb and flow across the platform until he spotted a rather peculiar sight on the other side of the station tracks.

A smaller passenger train sat in departure with a surprising number of men and women in red coats crawling around her engine and cars. It was a little worse for wear, the windows streaked with mud and rain and the paint was faded around the welded seams, but it was still a magnificent machine.

Some of the red coats were hanging off railings on the sides of the train, others were hopping couplers between cars, hauling boxes or crates or other bundles. It was a strange sight to be sure and although it and it's crew were attracting attention, no one approached them. In fact, people seemed to actively avoiding the train, darting away from the rough looking brutes who sneered at anyone who ventured too closely, their thick arms loose at their sides.

Nigel watched from a cautious distance until a bald-pated man, dressed in a smartly fit black waistcoat and shirt sleeves, parted the sea of red tartan and thrust himself up onto the roof of the train.

A gaggle of red coats followed him, clambering up onto the roof and reaching for their sides or into their pockets and retrieving what could only be pistols, dangerous contraptions of metal that glinted in the lamp light. Though there was little chance any of them had seen him or cared, Nigel ducked quickly behind a sign board and pressed his back to it.

He swallowed thickly and carefully tilted his head so he could peak past the board and watch. The train was pulling away from the station and the man in the black waistcoat was waving his armed hand in the air, shouting orders as he stalked across the roof towards the engine.

Even though Nigel was watching the whole scene intently with wide eyed excitement, he nearly missed it.

A man was running full tilt after the departing train; The man in question wore a tatty dark frock coat that flared behind him as he leapt from the station tiles and latched onto the back railing of the caboose. He clambered up the side of it, his feet slotting neatly into whatever divots they could find and then he was on the roof as though he were one of the monkeys at the London zoo.
The man ran forwards and then whatever happened next, Nigel couldn't know as the train pulled completely away from the station and it's walls.

He slumped down onto his arse and reached for his hat, plucking it off his head and holding it nervously to his chest and wondered what on earth he'd just witnessed.

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Several hours later, the train returned with little fanfare and the man in the black waistcoat was nowhere to be seen nor was a single red coat.

Nigel had not expected to see it back so soon or even at all. He watched it with a tentative excitement as it pulled to a full stop, stepping closer to the edge of the tracks, unable to look away.

Men and women in green coats exited the train or stuck their heads out of windows, bowler hats sat on their heads at jaunty angles and smiles on all their faces.

The new contrast perplexed Nigel but then a door swung open on one of the cars and the man with the frock coat stepped out followed by a woman of his equal height.

Their backs were quickly turned as they addressed a large woman in a lace shawl who spoke in a thick Scottish brogue as she stood at the open doorway. The pair in black spoke with her excitedly, though Nigel couldn't make out the words over the hiss of engines and the chatter of the crowds. She waved a hand out like she was the Queen herself and they inclined their heads, turning back around towards Nigel.

They were swallowed up by the loitering green coats and he noticed a back or two with red still stretched across it. Those red coats quickly shed their tweeds and shrugged on matching green reefer just as the man in black raised his fist and shouted with a clarity that carried across the tracks and straight to Nigel, "The Rooks!"

The rallying cry picked up among their followers- what else could they be? Until their crowd was in unison, even the demure woman at the man's side and the lady on the train were chanting "The Rooks! The Rooks! The Rooks!"

Nigel whispered on a reverent exhale, eyes so wide they hurt "The Rooks..."

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He met Evie Frye first, when the stout woman in the lace shawl grabbed two fist fulls of his tatty coat and hoisted him near off his feet and into the dimly lit stage coach. Evie Frye had been close behind the other woman, chestnut wisps of hair escaping from her braid and coiling around her heart shaped face.

After that day at the station Nigel had taken it into mind and into heart that he needed to join this motley band of green hued warriors. He had watched them from a distance every time they pulled into Whitechapel station to resupply. They were always so lively, and never sad or alone. There was always a swarm of them, whole clumps of laughing green coats that played games climbing off the train to swagger in gangs of two or three down the stairs and out onto the streets.

Whenever he tried to follow one of the siblings, because that was what they were, he always ended up frustrated, kicking stones onto the rails and muttering under his breath as he watched the one twin or the other disappear into the shadows around the station, or vanish with the gouts of steam put out by the train's chugging engine. The Frye twins, that's what the Rooks called them. And they seemed
to delight in shaking him off their trail like it was a sport. It never failed, the minute he thought he
was going to figure out where they were off to, he quickly lost their trail as soon as they left the
station. If he was being honest, it was more like he lost them before they'd even gotten out of the
station.

But today he had followed their conductor, as she must be, for she commanded the train and it's crew
and even the elusive twins with utter surety whenever they were aboard.

Evie Frye had been close behind the other woman, Agnes, and her expression was severe and cold.
He felt a definite tendril of fear coil up in his belly as she'd demanded he speak from his sprawl on
the floor at their feet.

He gaped, opening and closing his mouth, trying to get out even a portion of the speech he'd
prepared in his head to try and convince them to let him join them.

He eventually stuttered out, pathetic and quivering, "I want to join your gang!"

Her face defrosted by inches until something almost soft was in its place. She gave him a crooked
half smile and he couldn't help smiling back.

She gestured her head toward Agnes who squinted at him as though he were a particularly large
mouse and grumbled that if he didn't mind getting dirty, she'd have work enough for him.

He pushed himself to his feet, staggering a little on his weak knees, relieved to the stars and back.
Maybe now things would get better, safer; maybe now he wouldn't have to be alone all the time.

The first real hope he'd felt since that frosty morning in February settled inside of him like a cup of
hot tea.

"Really? Terrific! You won't regret it, miss!"

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Nigel spent his first fortnight aboard the train, which he learned was nicknamed Bertha, hanging
about the caboose when Anges had no need of him to sweep the stoops or wipe the windows.

There was a somber man there who rarely spoke and who smoked Player's in between organizing
crates and selling effects to any Rook who wandered down the cars. He would sometimes offer one
of his cigarettes to Nigel, who had accepted only once before he handed it back to the chuckling man
over heaving coughs.

Over the weeks he slowly made his way up the train cars, balking over the rattling couplings until
Agnes stuck her head out from her desk.

"Get it over with and 'jump, ye daft kit!" She hollered.

Agnes' desk and domain were surprisingly masculine in decor though he later learned that it was also
the stomping grounds of the Frye brother, Jacob. He had only seen snatches of the man as he darted
in and out of the train as it slowly made it's circuit of London. Jacob was only around long enough to
duck his head into the boxy safe or to quickly scan the wall scattered with photos and hastily
scrawled notes before he was gone yet again.

Nigel had only spotted Jacob sleeping once as he was making his way towards the lounge car. Jacob
was set up with his feet resting on the arm of the black leather settee, his cap drawn down over his
eyes and his arms crossed over his chest.
Nigel stopped near Agnes' empty desk, his hand reaching out for the chair to steady himself. Jacob made him nervous and Nigel never truly knew why, it wasn't as if Jacob were cruel. He was something that Nigel had never seen before. He was wild, like the street side criers who rallied people around them with whispers of revolution. He was charismatic, Rooks flocking to him whenever he sat down at the small bar for a pint, laughing and telling jokes and commanding every attention in the room.

He was their leader, perhaps more so than his sister was.

Nigel took a cautious step forward, his stomach suddenly roiling with his nerves. He didn't want to wake Jacob up but at the same time he desperately hoped he did, maybe Jacob would talk to Nigel, maybe he'd ask his name.

Jacob was older than he was, by about four years though he seemed leagues apart.

Jacob's hair was dark and sleek under his hat and he already had the makings of a full beard while Nigel's face remained mostly smooth with only a hint of pale stubble.

Jacob's well worn but well made jacket was tailored to his broad shoulders, his thick arms. Once Nigel had even caught the delicate inked lines of what may have been a wing just under his shirt collar as the man was shrugging his coat on.

That had made his throat go dry and he did his best not to think about it too much.

Nigel now stood across from Jacob, not quite facing him but his head was turned in the sleeping man's direction, taking in his form. Nigel could just see the hint of a scar through the dark hair on Jacob's visible cheek and the shilling strung around his throat was caught between his neck and shoulder.

Nigel swallowed thickly, opening his mouth to probably say something foolish, but before he could speak a word or close it as he ought to, Jacob's muffled voice came from under his cap, "Can I help you?"

Nigel sucked in a breath so quickly he choked on it and nearly busted his ear drums trying to contain his barking cough.

"No, nothing, sorry- _ ," he said in between small coughs.

Before Jacob could say another word, Nigel dashed out of the car, cheeks hotter than a coal stove in winter.

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The folk who came and went within the train were strange and unique, and he talked to each of them if they had the time.

Henry Green was kind and usually in Miss Evie's car, as he'd begun to think of it. It was filled with photographs, vases and ladies' things, and lots and lots of books. Henry asked after Nigel whenever he saw him and Nigel liked him just fine.

Sometimes they would have discussions, Henry's eyes would widen in pleasant surprise when Nigel spoke about the workingmen's association, about the reform that was needed and the children, like Jeremy, who fell through the cracks.

The next time they spoke, Henry had a small stack of books that he said "Would be good for a
young man such as yourself to read, as well as a few other topics."

Nigel looked at the unfamiliar cover and saw the name Angela Burdett-Coutts, it appeared to be philanthropic in nature.

He looked at Henry dubiously, but the man only smiled and pushed the books towards him, which he took without hesitation.

Agnes still eyed him sharply whenever she saw him, and if she suspected he might be idle she would demand he, "Go and make 'issel' useful," though she always let a private, indulgent little smile show through whenever she thought Nigel couldn't see.

There were others, faces he didn't know, young and old who hopped aboard and rode for a few hours or days. Evie was kind but distant, her attention always elsewhere in a book, on a map, or with Green.

And then there was Jacob.

During one particularly warm evening as Nigel helped the shop keep straighten out boxes of medicines, Jacob had jumped aboard the still moving train, scaring the daylights out of Nigel.

Hanging onto the handrail with one hand and clutching his hat with the other Jacob had grinned wildly and said, "Wonderful day for a train ride, isn't it?"

Hoisting himself in, he pat Nigel's shoulder as though they were good friends.

Nigel had nodded dumbly, clutching his own ratty wool cap as Jacob maneuvered past him and through the train, hopping the junctions like he were stepping over a puddle and disappearing around a corner.

Nigel swallowed thickly and followed, leaving the crates in what he hoped was relatively good order.

Jacob was standing in front of his wall of pictures with one of his half gloved hands scrubbing at his chin.

Nigel sidled up to him and asked cautiously, "Um, Boss, What is all this? Been meaning to ask."

Jacob barked out a laugh and dropped his hand from his chin, instead reaching out to squeeze Nigel's shoulder.

"Boss? That has a nice ring to it, I suppose, but please just call me Jacob. This, my friend, is a plan. This is how I'm going to liberate London." He gestured at the red strings and papers grandly with his opposite hand.

Nigel stared at Jacob uncertainly, who was an inch or two shorter than he was and wasn't that a revelation.

Jacob's eyes were brown and twinkling with mischief, and he had a scar neatly parting his right eyebrow. And like his sister he had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, which was handsomely shaped.

Nigel swallowed again and spoke, "How do you figure that, B-- Jacob. London's been the same way since as long as I can remember." The London he knew did not seem tractable in the slightest, and Jacob was only one man.
Jacob's smile was all teeth and good cheer, "Well not for much longer-- what's your name? I don't think I ever got it."

Nigel jostled under Jacob's hand and the moving train, staring at Jacob's face, his eyes which looked as though they had flecks of green in them in the light.

"It's Nigel, uh," he paused, tongue-tied and hot-faced, “Bumble. Nigel Bumble,” he said softly, looking away from Jacob's steady gaze.

"Well Nigel, it won't be this way for much longer that I can guarantee you." Jacob released Nigel's shoulder with a final pat.

Nigel watched Jacob's swaggering step as he walked towards the lounge car, and then looked back at the chaotic board of crossed off faces and ballots and string.

It didn't make much sense to him, these people and Jacob and his sister and the whole lot of it.

But when he saw the way Jacob commanded the Rooks, the way more and more of them flocked to him with each passing day he could almost believe what Jacob said.

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End Notes

A huge thank you to Llanval & Littleblue-eyedbird for story & grammatical help! Here's the first chapter, it was a few days in the works but I desperately wanted to write this. I hope that you all enjoy it, please feel free to comment, I would adore it :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!