

The Moment of Choice

A NOVEL OF THE BRITISH WAY

by

JACK LINDSAY

LONDON
THE BODLEY HEAD

THE MOMENT OF CHOICE

This is the third of the novels of postwar Britain in which Mr. Lindsay, as he says, has applied the method of the historical novel to the contemporary situation and its conflicts. The setting is principally the West Riding of Yorkshire, and the action takes place between April 1950 and April 1951, a year during which the Korean War began and the Sheffield Peace Congress was held. Both these events have their effect upon the people in the story, mill workers and mill-owners, trade union officials and many others. If Mr. Lindsay writes as an historian, a social chronicler, he writes also as a novelist, a man with a warm feeling for his fellow-men and women—above all for the working people, their aspirations and fears, their beliefs and disillusionments.

Like its predecessors, *Betrayed Spring* and *Rising Tide*, the tale bubbles and overflows with life. But it is a kind of life—life in the other half of the community—that novel readers do not often meet with, because very few of our middle-class novelists possess the first-hand knowledge and the sympathy which would enable them to write about it. For this reason, no less than for the sincerity and vigour with which the story is told, it deserves to be widely read.

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In memory to
ANN
the best person I have ever known

Note

This novel is set almost wholly in the West Riding of Yorkshire. The action takes place from April 1950 to April 1951.

It is the third of the novels I am writing on postwar Britain, in which I have attempted to use the method of the historical novel applied to the contemporary situation and its conflicts. This novel, like the others, is complete in itself, but some earlier events in the lives of various of its characters will be found in Betrayed Spring.

The story of the young couple who appear briefly on page 40 will be found in Rising Tide.

JACK LINDSAYS

One

As HE crossed the street, he raised his eyes and glanced at the first-storey windows of the Heather Café. The place had been one of his haunts in undergraduate days, but he hadn't been in it for at least four years. To his surprise, at the window on the left he saw a familiar face. He saw Jane Dacres, in profile, with a small foolish hat that broke into some sort of blue flower over her right ear; Jane whom he had taken several times to that café in the years that now seemed so distant.

He swerved to escape being run over by a lorry and skipped on to the pavement. The driver shouted a muffled insult and Kit stood flushed and irresolute, angry at himself and at the hurrying world, and caught in an impulse to go up and encounter Jane. Perhaps because that small hat didn't seem at all in character. In memory she appeared equally obtuse and intelligent, sentimental and sincere, clumsy and sensitive. He smiled at the thought of how easily she could have been his and how wittily brutal he had had to be in order to hedge her off; and yet he admitted to himself that there had perhaps been something in her which he had never quite grasped. Something which was now blossoming maybe in the absurd hat. He hesitated. Now he wasn't at all sure that the girl in the window was Jane. But, annoyed at his wavering intentions, he forced himself into the café.

As he came to the top of the stairs, he looked over at the window-table, convinced that he had made a mistake, that he had been bewildered by some chance impression. From where he stood he couldn't get a full view of the silly-hatted girl; and he was about to retreat after all when she half turned to catch the waitress's attention. Jane beyond a doubt.

As he neared the table, she turned away again and stared abstractedly out at the grey morning, at the clouds scudding over the chimney tops. He stood at a loss, sorry he had come, then remarked: 'Hullo, Jane, can I join you or are you too deep in meditation?'

For an instant she did not seem to recognise him. 'Why, it's Kit,' she said with undisguised pleasure. 'Do sit down. It's ages since I saw you.'

The waitress came belatedly along with Jane's bill. 'Here you are, Miss. Sorry to keep you.'

Kit took the slip of paper. 'A pot of tea for two. And some buttered toast.' His eyebrows inquired and his smile appealed. Jane shook her head, smiling back in approval at his good memory of her tastes.

'I was going; but I'll drink a cup with you for old time's sake, though my buttered-toast days are over.'

She was certainly very much improved, no longer so plump and earnest. Her manner was assured; her face had much more shape than he had remembered—perhaps that was the result of its thinning down. He recalled having heard of some illness of hers about eighteen months ago. Suddenly he was curious. But she didn't have much to say about herself; she preferred to prompt him with questions about the mill. 'Father was saying only last week how well you'd settled down to it.'

'Meaning that he had serious doubts when I started?' he asked. But she merely smiled, opened her snakeskin bag and took out a small silver cigarette-case. He pulled out his own case, but too late. However, he managed to get his lighter going before hers. 'Well,' he resumed, 'I had those serious doubts myself three years ago, but it's hard to remember them now. I really enjoy business.'

'It's one way of getting a sense of power,' she said quietly; and he was jarred, uncertain whether she was being critical or simply throwing in a truism.

'The will to power,' he observed defensively. 'Nietzsche defines it as the will to more life.' Then he flushed slightly at the large phrase. 'You always had the knack of turning me into a pompous philosopher.'

'I don't think that was it,' she remarked; and again he found her words obscure. The conversation wasn't going at all the way he had meant it to go. Jane was much more self-contained than she'd been; the note of irony, if irony it was, was something new. Or had he merely missed it before, in his own obsessed obtuseness? Anyhow, there was a gently challenging note in her voice; nothing of the detached and even scornful note that might have gone with her words.

'Tell me what you've been doing?'

But the waitress came up, plumping a tray down and setting out the teapot and cups. Jane waited with a faint smile, her eyes

turned on the girl's movements; and he was able to study her more closely. Yes, she had become handsomer, better dressed: indeed quite elegant, minus her previous effect of a high-minded female ostentatiously above the things of the flesh with clothes that were expensive but never quite seemed to fit her, and with hair always on the edge of disarray. Her mild brown eyes had a warmer hint, under lashes that were surely much longer; and her lipstick had been carefully put on though she lacked lacquer on her finger-nails. She was slightly powdered and made up, no longer flaunting a mild blur of freckles, and she looked at ease in her grey coat and skirt. Her rounded face had firm contours in cheek and jaw, and her small nose was definitely less apologetic, holding its own above the long full mouth and the dimpled chin. Her hair was parted in the middle, not on the side as it had been. Most of all, her air of coolness seemed new to him.

He had to repeat his question, and she merely shrugged. 'Nothing much.'

'You were ill, weren't you?'

She finished pouring the tea out. 'So you did hear.'

'Only afterwards,' he said hastily, feeling that she was hurt at his failure to write any letters of inquiry or good wishes.

She calmly turned the conversation back to him. 'Father says you've given up what he calls the wild ideas you had about the mill.'

'I'm glad I'm so interesting a subject—'

She cut him short. 'You know how all the mill-owners talk about one another. He's not particularly interested in you.'

'I stand corrected,' he said stiffly, himself now the hurt one. And as she said nothing more, he went on; 'Yes, like everyone else I grow up. Unoriginal, but a fact. I find my place in the world, a small but definite place in a rather stupid but exciting world. I leave those wild ideas, etcetera, to the failures and misfits.'

'You sound bitter.' She patted his hand. 'Poor Kit.'

He flushed again, divided between anger and pleasure: furious that he had failed to impress and dominate her as he had once found so easy, and yet not altogether resenting the mild soft light of her half mocking, half kindly eyes. The chill of anger, however, was his stronger feeling, and he decided to rise with an excuse and go. But she went on: 'You shouldn't be bitter, you know. You've got a place in the world, stupid but exciting, while I feel more lost than ever. That's why I'm making fun of you.'

His resentment passed and he'd have taken her hand if she

hadn't withdrawn it. 'Jane, I'm ever so glad we met. We really must see more of one another. What are you doing with yourself nowadays?'

'Nothing much. I've spent the last two winters in Italy. Dad insisted on it and the doctor backed him up. Most of last year I was helping a friend in London.' She stubbed her cigarette and seemed unable to go on. 'What you'd call charity work,' she added weakly. 'Oh, I don't know.' She opened her case for another cigarette, changed her mind and snapped the case shut again.

She looked up under her soft long lashes and their eyes met. She flushed at last and her eyes glowed; and he felt for the first time that he was dominating her in the way that he had once enjoyed and feared. But now she was only in slight part that callow Jane; she was much more desirable and chastened; and he too was different, he told himself, no longer torn by wayward emotions and uncertainties. She sat with half-opened mouth, opening her silver case and closing it.

'On second thoughts,' she added, regaining her coolness, 'I don't think either of us has changed much.' She resolutely took another cigarette from the case, and leaned forward, almost defiantly, to have it lit. 'I must definitely go after this one.'

That afternoon at the mill, as the girl came in with a cup of tea, Bannister, the general manager, slid in behind her. 'Mr. Swinton didn't feel very well after lunch,' he remarked with that slight obsequious twang in his voice. A lean man with hairbrush moustache, who clearly thought himself a hundred per cent. Britisher looking like someone in the advertisements of Savile Row fashions: he tried to give an effect of breezy open-air living, even of the Empire's wide open spaces. But he could not offset a weedy narrow-chested appearance, a sallow touch of dyspepsia. He had never fired a gun even in a fair gallery, and a mediocre game of golf was the nearest he got to the sports world. The domineering note which merged with his faint cringe—considered by him a balance of self-respect and a fine deference to the Swintons—was gained, not by ordering about the lesser breeds without the law, but by keeping Mrs. Bannister in her place, a strident but obedient wife and a passable bridge player. Kit still didn't like him much; but the keen distaste he had felt when first entering the mill had yielded to an amiable tolerance under pressure of the man's continual toadying. He told himself that he wasn't taken in, but he weakened. There was something flattering

in the vague but unmistakable way in which during the last year Bannister had been shifting his allegiance from old Mr. Swinton to his son.

Kit lied. 'I expected father to go home.'

'I wish he'd get better medical attention than old Greeves can give him.'

Bannister didn't sit down, but walked over to the window and cleared his throat. His comment was exactly in line with all his recent tactics: it showed a loyal concern for the old master, but clearly told the young one that his day was coming and that when it came he could rely on Bannister's prescient devotion.

'It's no use,' said Kit, sipping the tea. 'He keeps Greeves because he can control him. No nonsense about old Greeves, he says. That means that Greeves agrees with everything he says.' He stopped, aware that he'd let his tongue run away with him, the very thing Bannister wanted. By talking like that he was accepting Bannister's semi-conspiratorial attitude; and yet he found it hard to stay as reserved and dignified as he meant. When he let go with a few touches of careless caustic wit, he felt assured and on top of the world; and Bannister's appreciative silence, his almost imperceptible bend of self-deprecating pleasure at being taken into Kit's confidence, had a lubricating effect on Kit's tongue—even though he told himself all the while that he wasn't taken in. Bannister was a shrewd business man, no denying it, more than worth his salary. There was no harm in humouring him and letting him think his tricks unnoted.

Bannister turned and nodded as if admiring Kit's insight into the foibles of mankind. 'Still . . .' he murmured.

'Dad still believes there's a magic potion or pill that any doctor worth his salt ought to be able to produce after looking at your tongue.'

'There's sometimes a good deal of sense in what are called old-fashioned notions,' commented Bannister, turning back and laying his cheek against the window glass as if to observe something going on outside.

'Sometimes,' Kit agreed. Again he couldn't help being pleased at the remark which subtly placed Mr. Swinton in an outmoded world and united the two younger men in a superior contemplation of old-fashioned prejudices.

Bannister lifted his thin, jutting chin: there were deep lines on either side of his mouth. He went over towards the door. 'Kellett's have banked. I heard it only an hour ago, though we've been expecting it.'

Kit nodded knowingly, but felt somehow upset. Yorkshire turns of phrase always sounded odd in Bannister's clipped accent. Then as the door closed, Kit felt a double meaning in those last words. They continued Bannister's previous line of hints: Kellett too is one of the has-beens, he's sold up. But they also held a hint of menace: You see what happens to firms with old-fashioned notions, outdated masters who refuse to retire or die off. We've got to watch our step, the Swinton step. I, the accomplished Bannister, can always find a new job, maybe a better one; but the Swintons, if they bank, are done for, wiped from the map of Yorkshire.

No, I don't like him, Kit thought. As always, his distaste of Bannister increased as soon as he was left alone. He felt disturbed enough to rise and pace the room with his hands in his pockets. Then, as he turned back to his desk, he saw the half-empty teacup, lifted it to drink, and relaxed with a half smile, remembering Jane. How the girl had changed—and yet she was still very much Jane. It would be interesting to find how she reacted if he began asking her out; testing—why not?—how far he could go on reinvoking that old confusion of hers. It wouldn't be so easy; but that would only make it more interesting.

Miss Smellie, after her little tap of a knock, entered with a dozen letters. 'I've put the reply from Manchester on top.' In his re-found confidence he rewarded her with a tolerant grin. She was again suffering from indigestion and had heavily dusted her nose with too white powder; probably she'd done it just before coming in—a white smudge lay across her breastbone where it showed above her puce blouse.

'Always efficient, Miss Smellie,' he remarked briskly, and she lowered her pale eyes.

As he came downstairs at home, he glanced at the grandfather clock, which for him was always the memorial of Grandfather Ezra's time; and there seemed a note of approval in its clear unobtrusive tick-tock. The lines of the clock case were strong without heaviness; there was something well balanced about the whole thing that gave him a sense of satisfaction. He paused for a moment to look at the painting of Daniel under the clock face: a white-robed Daniel leaning on his staff while the tawny-red lions recoiled with stiff manes from the odour of holiness. The work of a local artist, crude and yet expressive in its design. Nobody else in the household, he felt, appreciated Ezra's clock but himself; and he had come to believe that Daniel was a portrait of

Ezra in person, a godly old scoundrel holding his own in the den of bankers, tax officials, and dyers who tried to blame their own faulty work on the weavers. He felt a special bond with Ezra, his well-made clock, his tenacious ghost. Ezra built the new works, he thought, and I'm going to expand them.

But, as usual, he felt slightly daunted as he paused at the door of the dining-room. Somehow, despite the way he had mastered the run of things at the mill and fitted into his father's scheme of the universe, he never felt wholly at ease in his presence—especially during the first moments. Something prevented him from relaxing: a hint of their old conflicts, an inability to forget that John, killed in the war, had been his father's favourite, the destined heir to the mill. Nowadays, when he felt assured in his grip on the mill's work, the emotion had lessened; but it was still there. And yet now it had sprung sharply back, perhaps because of the afternoon conversation when he'd indulged Bannister's approaches more than ever before. For the first time he had spoken of his father's ways and ideas with something like contempt; and he felt sorry. Sorry and afraid. Afraid, not so much of his father, but of Bannister taking advantage of some false step made by him, Kit, and getting on top of things. Probably the wily fellow was conveying to Mr. Swinton by hints and half statements that Kit was impatient to gain full control of the mill.

He went into the dining-room. To his relief Mr. Swinton wasn't there yet. But he caught the red eye of the Highland cattle of the Victorian Academy painting reflected in the sideboard mirror. How often had he met that glance of restrained ferocity till he felt a sort of kinship with the bulls penned on the heathery crags and then closed in the glass cavern over the mahogany sideboard. The red eye had as much appeal as threat in it. Then, as he went farther into the room, he saw himself in the mirror, with a darkish long face, somewhat bumpy about the brow, with dark waving hair and large but firm mouth: as usual he both liked his face, feeling that it had a strong handsome quality, and was disturbed by something asymmetrical about it in the same way as untidily set ornaments on a mantelpiece disturbed his fingers. He remarked with empty affability, 'Hello, Mother,' and passed on to his chair, ignoring his sister Margaret and in turn ignored by Diana, the fat one of the family, aged 12, who was reading a girl's paper on her lap, taking no notice of her mother's complaints and ready to thrust the paper away under herself at the first noise of her father.

'Would you go up, please, Margaret dear, and make sure your father heard?' Mrs. Swinton begged, uncertain of the wisdom of her own request.

'He heard all right,' said Margaret, lost in her own thoughts. She looked quite attractive, Kit admitted, in her deep blue suit and white blouse, her hair tied back in a mixture of negligence and elegance. Her calm grey-blue eyes regarded him a moment without interest; she wrinkled her finely cut nose and tilted her head a little back.

'Everything will get cold,' Mrs. Swinton was moaning, 'and you know how he hates cold things.'

None of the family looked at her. Then Aggie, the servant girl with missing front teeth, who kept her false teeth locked in a three and sixpenny jewel box, entered the room, breathing hard. Monthly she handed in her notice, and had been with the family twelve years; as almost four weeks had passed without threats of departure, Mrs. Swinton was feeling very jumpy and expecting the worst every moment. She alone of the household expected Aggie to act on her threats, no matter how often nothing came of them; and Aggie knew it. Now she slumped the tureen down hastily and stood back wriggling and trying to scratch herself between the shoulder-blades. 'Of course he had to wait till my hands was full of soup,' she muttered darkly. 'It's that dog of Miss Di's, he's thick with fleas.'

'He's not,' cried Di sharply, without lifting her eyes from the thriller entitled *The Corpse Bride*, which she was reading inside the covers of a schoolbook, to stop her mother from asking questions.

'I can't make out why you're so interested in geography,' said Mrs. Swinton weakly, trying to wrest the book away. Di merely pressed it more firmly down on her lap.

'Go away, it's mine. Read your own books.'

Mrs. Swinton turned on Aggie in a last effort to preserve some semblance of authority. 'I didn't tell you to bring the soup in yet.'

'Goblin's got no fleas,' repeated Di. 'You brought 'em in yourself.'

'Oh, what a thing to say,' sobbed Aggie, throwing her apron over her face and backing out.

'You mustn't say such things,' said Mrs. Swinton. 'You know how easily her feelings get hurt.'

Aggie put her head round the door. 'Either Miss Di's dog goes or I go. That's fairration. I won't stay in a house full of fleas.'

Then she hastily withdrew. Mr. Swinton's footstep had been heard on the stairs and she had no intention of hazarding her

place in the house by annoying the master. He entered with head thrust forward and heavy bent brows; he sagged a little as he walked—the sign that he was feeling ill. He said nothing and looked at no one; and to his wife's surprise and worry he made no complaints about the pea soup, which was both tepid and slightly burnt. Di, so broad that she more than filled her chair, had failed to push her booklet underneath herself. It slipped and fell to the carpeted floor, beside Kit, who amused himself by drawing it closer with his foot, to Di's annoyed dismay.

Mr. Swinton grunted as he finished the soup and wiped his mouth with the napkin. At last he gave Kit a glance, a keen penetrating glance which Kit could not read, and then turned to his wife. 'What's next? Lamb? I'll take a little, and nothing else.' After that he relapsed into a heavy silence.

None of the others spoke, except Mrs. Swinton, who now and then made a disregarded remark. 'Di, don't slummock so. Don't put your spoon in sideways, you're spilling things on that nice green dress of yours. Kit, would you like some more bread?' Di sulked at being addressed so disrespectfully and put her spoon down. She concentrated on trying to rescue her booklet, but Kit had his foot firmly planted on it. 'Di, do sit up, you're sprawling right under the table.' Di sat sullen under the injustices of the world, occasionally darting a fierce look at Kit. She had green in her grey-blue eyes, like her mother, and when she was angry the green glinted sharply with a wilful strength that showed oddly in her round puddeny face with its small moist red mouth. In one of her tempers she had thrown a fork at Margaret and wounded her in the shoulder. Now, on pretence of picking up her napkin, she bent down, pinched Kit viciously in the calf and tried to wrench the booklet away. But all she gained was half a page and another reprimand, 'Look, you're red in the face. Do sit still, you'll ruin your digestion and it's most unladylike as well.'

After the lamb Mr. Swinton rose abruptly. At the door, without turning round, he said; 'Come up to my room when you've finished, Kit.' Then he went out.

His tone, though rough, had not been at all angry. Obviously he merely wanted to hear what had happened at the mill in the afternoon; but Kit had to suppress a qualm of fear and revulsion. However, he was diverted from his thoughts by Di making a dive at his foot and tearing the booklet away. She dusted the pages furiously. 'I won't be able to read the last page now,' she complained. 'It's all crumpled and dirty. You're a pig, Kit. Now I won't know how it ends.'

'But why are you so interested in geography?' asked Mrs. Swinton.

'It's trash. Serves you right,' said Kit.

Aggie came in to clear things, asserting herself with a sniff once more with the master gone.

'There's a bottle of aspirins on the shelf by the stove,' said Mrs. Swinton in a panic: she had two panaceas, aspirins for adults and castor oil for infants.

Margaret stared past Kit at the Highland cattle behind him, refusing to be implicated in the irrationalities of family life.

He did not go up at once after the meal. Mrs. Swinton made a vague and vain effort to find out if he had seen his sister Joyce recently; then went out to pacify Aggie in the kitchen. Joyce, after a quarrel with her father at which no one else had been present, had left the house; she now lived alone in a small flat with an allowance which she denounced as villainously insufficient.

In the drawing-room Margaret settled sternly down with a book while Di, aided by her wire-haired terrier Goblin, fiddled at the radio. Goblin, an unpleasant nervy animal with a sharp piercing bark, disliked everyone but his mistress and was disliked in return.

'You look as if you're going out,' said Kit to Margaret, meaning an amiable reference to her smart appearance.

'Do I?' She looked up blankly and yawned slightly. 'I am.'

After finishing a cigarette, Kit went up. His father was seated in his leather armchair, with his head thrown back and his hands gripping the arms. Everything was in its neat order: the work-table with its papers sorted and its pens in their racks by the old-fashioned penwiper, the small cut-glass carafe with glass upended over it, the books on the woollen and worsted trades well dusted on their shelves, the enlarged photo of Ezra looking like a handsome satanical goat beside the inherited print of John Martin's *Last Judgment* (which seemed tacitly accepted as a necessary adjunct of the Swinton mill system). Kit remembered dimly how Ezra in his last failing years had loved the engraving and had spent hours staring at it, with his chin supported by his two shrunken hands over a knobbly stick. From some of his mutterings Kit had been sure that he identified his enemies and competitors among the figures of the damned, and had found a place in the blasts of light for the Swinton line.

He paused a moment and asked: 'How are you feeling?'