***Left Foot Forward*** *by Jan Mark*

**Part 1**

Singlewell High School was small, but St George’ C of E Primary had been even smaller. Waiting for his first PE lesson, feeling dwarfish in the high green vaults of the Singlewell changing room, Shaun remembered St George’s and felt almost homesick.

In the doorway, Mr Durkin loomed. Mr Durkin taught PE and games, and nothing else. At St George’s Mrs Calloway had taken them for everything; maths and language, science, cookery, music, art- and football. There were so few of them that to get a team together they used to amalgamate with the boys from Church Whitton and even then Emily Stowe had to be goalie.

Emily was away with the girls now, mutinously playing netball. On the bus home, after the first day at Singlewell, Emily had confided to Shaun that she was going to ask Mr Durkin if she could go on with football, but Shaun, now eyeing Mr Durkin’s silhouette, doubted that she would get much encouragement. Mr Durkin reminded Shaun of something out of a horror movie; not the old-fashioned kind where a mad scientist, holed up in a derelict Bavarian schloss, created an uncontrollable monster, but the type that turned up on video featuring cybernetic mutants from the future, computerized and ruthless. Seen in that light, Mr Durkin was state of the art.

By the end of the lesson, Shaun realised that he had got it all wrong. Mr Durkin was large but mild. It was Mr Prior, his sidekick, half the size but twice as noisy, who supplied the sound and the fury. Ian Edwards, from Church Witton, remarked that Durkin and Prior were really an interrogation team, taking turns to soften you up and then rough you up. Ian did not care either way. He was sure of a place in any team going.

Mr Durkin stayed very much in the background while Mr Prior conducted the lesson with a series of barks and grunts. Mr Durkin was watchful; he was on the look-out.

Talent scout, Shaun though; he’s *noticing* people. Ian was noticed, and Tom Carter who had come to Singlewell with Shaun, from St George’s. Shaun was noticed too, but in a different way. This became apparent the following Monday when they had their first games lesson. Sides were chosen. Unlike St George’s there were enough of them in the first year for two teams. Shaun was not in either. Mr Prior growled something about acquiring ball skills and sent him, with three other rejects, to kick about on a disused pitch that sloped and had outcrops of rock in it.

‘We’re the ones with two left feet,’ said Edgar Crump cheerfully, and acquired rock skills, while the other three deployed their six left feet with mildewed ball that leaked air and, mysteriously, bubbles of moisture. Mr Durkin passed once in their direction, cried, ‘That’s right; keep it up, lads,’ and swerved away again. Shaun changing afterwards, foresaw that the rest of the term, the rest of the year, possibly the rest of his life was going to be spent like that. Edgar did not mind. He was prepared to wait until May, when his fast bowling would be revealed to the unsuspecting Prior and Durkin. The other two left footers planned to bring along computer games next time. As far as they were concerned, Monday football constituted an extended lunch hour.

Shaun consulted his timetable and discovered that Monday afternoon was scheduled to end as badly as it has begun. The next lesson was double maths. On his last day at St George’s Mrs Calloway had taken him aside and said, ‘Don’t worry about going to big school. You’ll get on fine- but you’ll have to work hard at your maths. Promise me you’ll do that.’

Shaun had promised. He meant to keep his word and for the first ten minutes of the lesson he paid careful attention, sitting upright with his arms folded upon his new file, with its single sheet of paper on which he had written the date and underlined it neatly. But gradually, like drizzle, a grey memory fell before his eyes; the steep and stony pitch, the flabby ball, the clumsy rejected boots of the eight left feet; new boots, in his case. It did not matter about the others. They didn’t care what they played, but he had been looking forward to the games lesson. He loved football. He hated maths. It was going to be a real effort to keep his promise to Mrs Calloway, but he loved football. It had never mattered that the combined team of St George’s and Church Whitton had not won a match in three seasons; he enjoyed playing.

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**Part 2**

The next games period found the eight left feet back on the pitch of stones. Alongside them, on the real pitch, the rest of the group played a real game, while beyond that rose occasional shrieks as Emily Stowe put the fear of God into the netball players.

Edgar had joined the computer freaks, so Shaun had sole possession of the ball, which was no longer round but lopsided, like the gibbous moon.

He dribbled it up and down the pitch, pirouetting round flints and tussocks and the strange scaly leaves that sprouted in clumps, alien vegetation from a distant planet. The Phantom figures of twenty-one players surrounded him, but he eluded them all, scoring goal after goal. Phantom goalies flung themselves at his headers in futile dives. Phantom teammates hooked him. Occasionally he glanced round to see if Mr Prior or Mr Durkin were looking his way. They never were.

On the way back to the changing room a row broke out. Mr Prior had been particularly noisy at close of play. ‘hark at him,’ muttered a gingery boy from 1g. ‘Anyone would think we were at Wembley. It’s only a game.’

A fiery glow seemed to envelop Mr Prior. ‘*Only a game*?’ I can’t be bothered with people who aren’t prepared to give on hundred percent and then some extra. Only a game? If that’s how you feel you can go and play hopscotch. I’m sure we can find someone to take your place.’

Shaun’s excitement punched him in the ribs. If they were looking for someone else to take the place of the gingery boy from 1g, there was only one other place where they could look. The same thought occurred to Mr Prior.   
‘So, watch it,’ he added lamely.

If only maths did not come next. If only the bad times did not have to happen on Monday afternoons, infecting everything that followed during the rest of the week. English was his best subject; art was fun; geography was easy. He had all three on Monday mornings, a wonderful start to the week. Kind words rang in his ears; complimentary red comments underlined his homework; a sketch of Edgar’s feet, which he had knocked off in twenty minutes, ascended miraculously to a place on the wall beside the sixth-former’s A level life study. By lunchtime he ought to have been buoyant, confident, set up for success, but his praise was hollow. Beneath the buoyancy lay a dark despondent pit. His self esteem leaked damply away. After lunch there was nothing to look forward to but that dismal hour on the pitch of stones, followed by a more dismal hour of maths.

Today was misty. The school, lying on a hillside above the estuary, was swept by coastal squalls, offshore winds and sea fog. The wet air thickened, white and heavy. The farther goal vanished in the pallid muck; the adjacent pitch was invisible, although Shaun could tell how the game was going by the surge of noise, ebbing and flowing tidally in the fog; stampeding feet, the thud of boot on ball, the duetting whistles of Prior and Durkin, now close at hand, now fading eerily. Mainly the sounds were at the upper end of the pitch and his heart went out to the lonely goalie on the winning side, marooned in his net at the lower end where he waited for the ball to emerge from the vapour.

After that, the first five minutes of the maths lesson were almost enjoyable. All the lights were on, the radiators were hot. Shaun snuggled down in his corner seat and thawed contentedly, but it could not last. Homework was being handed back. Little was said, but people were looking congratulations at each other as Miss Stevens prowled the classroom, doling out sheets of paper.   
‘Just proving she knows our names already, ‘said Ian in front, over his shoulder. ‘Show- off.’  
‘I knew yours on the first day,’ Miss Stevens said, slapping down his paper in front of him. ‘We always notice the loudmouths first. Well done, anyway.’

Ian grinned and turned to pick up his paper. Shaun saw the short hairs on the back of his neck bristle with pride- but now it was Shaun’s turn, the last paper of all, limp and forlorn. Shaun looked up at its underside and recognised one of his own dirty thumb prints between Miss Stevenson’s clean fingertips.

‘You don’t really seem to have got the hang of this,’ Miss Stevens said, laying the paper on his desk so that he could see all the red writing, none of it complimentary this time, that covered it. ‘I’ll have a word with you at the end of the lesson.’  
‘Have you always found maths difficult?’ Miss Stevens asked, at the end of the lesson.

Shaun nodded, although it was not strictly true. Year ago, it had seemed as easy as anything else, in the infants, when it was just something that he did, in those days before it sneakily detached itself from the rest of his education and became maths. But Miss Stevens had BSc. after his name and would not know about the infants.   
‘Yes, miss,’ he said.

Miss Stevens looked kind, sad but kind. ‘I suppose you’re one of the bus people.’

He could not see what that had to do with it, whizz-kid Ian was a bus person and it did not seem to do his maths any harm. What he could see, out in the fog, were the headlights of the bus itself, and he had about three minutes in which to catch it.   
‘yes, miss.’  
‘Well then, I can’t suggest that you stop after school for extra tuition- some people do that. But you do need help. Are you in the band- or gym club?’

‘No, miss.’ She certainly did know how to stray off the subject.   
‘Then you’d better come along to my room tomorrow lunchtime. We’ll see how that goes for a few weeks, shall we?’

She was doing him a favour, he knew that. He made a grateful noise and backed out of the room, racing for the cloak room and then the bus, where Emily Stowe was cock-a-hoop, running up and down the gangway and punching the air. She had been sent off, during netball. No one in history of the school, she thought, had ever had a red card in netball.

‘it wasn’t a foul, though,’ she explained, settling next to Shaun as the bus started. ‘I’d never do nothing like that. I just throw the ball too hard and no-one can’t catch it. They fall over.’

She tried to sound remorseful, but Shaun could envision the other netball players, felled like skittles by Emily’s demon delivery.   
‘I’ve got to do extra maths,’ Shaun said.   
‘What, for homework?’ Emily said. ‘I’ll help. I’ll do it for you.’ She had done a lot of it for him at St George’s, too. That had been part of the trouble.  
‘No, at school, Tuesday lunchtime,’ Shaun said and saw, with sinking spirits, how the awfulness of Monday was spilling over in Tuesday; how soon, like a creeping paralysis, it would take over Wednesday, and Thursday too, until it had ruined the whole week.

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**Part 3**

When, on the following Monday, Shaun looked at the classroom calendar before registration, he realised that there were only two weeks left before half term. He had heard somewhere that time passes more quickly as you get older. His life was skidding away from under him, and he knew why. At St George’s he had taken one day at a time because, except for birthdays and Christmas, or bad moments due to his own villainy, one day had been as good as another. But now he spent his time wishing that Monday was over, even as early as the previous Tuesday. Life had been reduced to a series of Mondays; he scarcely noticed what came in between.

It was a frosty day, clear and bright. From the pitch of stones, he could see the estuary glinting in the distance. Weak but well-intentioned sunlight glided the smokestacks on the cement works. It was too cold to stand about so the other left feet abandoned the computer games and joined Shaun with the bad-news ball; not the original one which had collapsed altogether and gone strangely stiff, but a replacement, equally limp and soggy. Shaun suspected that somewhere there was a factory turning out special partially- collapsed footballs for people like him.

Indoors again, after they had changed, Mr Durkin read out a list of names. Mr Prior stood by, casting a watchful eye over them.

‘All these boys,’ he said, ‘will report here for extra coaching on Wednesday lunchtimes.’ Shaun mentally reviewed the list. Ian Edwards and Tom Carter were on it, even the gingery boy from 1g. Edgar Crump was not, nor was Shaun, nor any of the other left feet. Those who *were* on it smiled at each other.

‘What’s them two so pleased with themselves about?’ asked Emily Stowe, later, on the bus, as Tom and Ian toasted each other in Seven-Up.   
‘They’ve been picked for extra football,’ Shaun said.   
‘I’m going to be let do hockey after half term,’ Emily said, ‘with the second years.’ She paused and thought. ‘Why’re they doing extra football?’  
‘Because they’re good at it,’ Shaun said. ‘For the team.’  
‘But that’s not why you get extra maths, is it?’ Emily said  
Shaun felt his gloom pierced by a needle of resentment.  
‘yes’ he said.  
‘Well that’s not fair is it?’ Emily said. ‘You get extra maths because you *can’t* do it, and they get extra football because they *can*.’  
Shaun’s needle became a bodkin, then a six-inch nail.   
‘If I was you,’ Emily advised, with an evil smile, ‘I’d ask old Durkin if you can have extra football too.’  
He knew that she was not really concerned on his behalf. He had once heard Mrs Calloway describe Emily Stowe as a stirrer. She was stirring now. She liked the idea of a fight.   
‘You ask him on Wednesday,’ she said. ‘I’ll come with you.’

Shaun thought that this last was the least attractive proposition he had heard in a long while. But the one before it had certain possibilities.   
‘I’ll ask him myself,’ he said.  
‘I’ll watch,’ said Emily.

**Part 4**

Tuesday’s extra maths tuition was not a success. Shaun's mind was on other things. On Wednesday, with Emily at a constant but safe distance, he went along to the changing room, carrying his kit.

Mr Durkin never changed, nor Mr prior. They seem to live in their tracksuits, appearing in them for games and PE, at registration and assembly, Mr Prior's small and purple, Mr Durkin's large and black. Sean approached the large black tracksuit.   
‘Sir?’  
Now, what do you want?’ Mr Durkin asked. ‘This is extra coaching time.’  
‘Yes,’ Shaun said. ‘I know. I want to do extra coaching.’  
‘No, no,’ said Mr Durkin, good-humouredly, as if explaining to an idiot something very obvious, such as how buttonholes work. ‘This is for the boys who will be in the team,’  
‘Yes. I want to be in the team,’ Shaun said.

He could see Mr Durkin's problem. If Sean went on like this Mr Durkin would be forced to say, out loud that Sean had two left feet and might just as well be applying to join the England squad. Out of the corner of his eye he could also see, through the frosted glass panel of the door , Emily Stowe, eavesdropping, longing to rush in and speak up for him. He had to speak up for himself before Emily burst through the door ( not bothering to open it but leaving an Emily shaped hole in the glass, like desperate Dan ) and gazed unblushingly at Ian Edwards and Tom Carter with no trousers on.

‘look Sir, said Sean, I have to do extra maths with Miss Stevens so I can get good at it. I want to get good at football. I want to do extra football like the others.’

Mr Prior, at this point, might have exploded and seriously damaged Sean in the blast, but Mr Durkin, fatally, gave himself time to think.   
‘I’m never going to get good if I don’t practise, am I, sir?’ Shaun said.   
‘No one is stopping you from practising,’ Mr Durkin said.   
‘I can’t practise on my own,’ Shaun persisted, not on that horrible old pitch with that horrible old ball. Not with people who don’t care anyway. I want to play properly. I don’t see why I shouldn’t do it at all just because I don’t do it well. I mean-‘  
he pressed home his advantage ‘- I mean, I couldn’t go to a Miss Stevens and say I wasn’t going to do that extra maths ‘cause I’m no good anyway, could I sir?’

‘That’s a bit different,’ Mr Durkin said. ‘Maths is important. After all, football’s only-‘

He stopped. He did not say it. Just in time he saw the trap, and it was his own mouth. Then he looked around and saw Mr Prior. Shaun fancied that he detected a light sweat breaking out on Mr Durkin’s forehead.   
‘What’s this lad up to?’ Mr Prior asked. ‘Giving trouble?’  
‘Not at all,’ said Mr Durkin. ‘He’s just come along to watch the coaching. I think,’ said Mr Durkin, and Shaun could see him thinking, ‘that shows real enthusiasm, don’t you?’  
‘Yes!’ cried Mr Prior, with no enthusiasm at all.

He wheeled and bolted back to the players. ‘Come on boys. Outside in five seconds flat!’

‘Enthusiasm…important attitude…essential to team spirit…’

Mr Durkin was chuntering. ‘Remind me at the start of the lesson next Monday. I’ll see that you get a game- time we tried out some of the others…oh.’ He hesitated. ‘I suppose there’s no chance that the rest think as you do?’

Shaun smiled kindly.

‘What, Edgar and that? Oh no sir, just me…I think,’ he added, and the satisfaction of seeing Mr Durkin cringe at the prospect of Edgar and the other left feet taking steps to improve their game.