

Chapter Eight

THE CARPET-BEATERS

JIM KNEW THAT he would have to make his break before old Marion did her rounds for the night. He had no idea how he was going to do it. At suppertime he stuffed his cheese in his pocket, and Tip passed his own share along to him.

At the end of the meal Mr Sissons stood up on his dais. All the shuffling and whispering stopped. He moved his body slowly round, which was his way of fixing his eyes on everyone, freezing them like statues.

"I'm looking for some big boys," he said. "To help the carpet-beaters." He waited in the silence, but nobody moved.

"Just as I would expect. A rush to help, when there is sickness in the wards." A cold sigh seemed to ripple through the room. Mr Sissons laughed into it in his dry, hissing way. "It might be cholera, my dears. That's what I hear. I've two thousand mouths to feed here, and someone has to earn the money,

cholera or not. Somebody has to buy the medicines. Somebody has to pay for the burials." He moved his body round in its slow, watchful circle again. "Plenty of big strong boys here, eating every crumb I give them, and never a word of thanks." He stepped down from his dais and walked along the rows, cuffing boys on the backs of their heads as he passed them. "I want you all up in the women's wards straight after supper, and you don't come down again till all the carpets are done."

"What's carpets?" asked Jim.

"Dunno," Tip whispered. "They come from the rich houses, and the women here beat 'em, and then they send them home."

"I'm going with them," Jim said suddenly, standing up as soon as the older boys did.

"A daft boy, you are," said Tip. "He asked for big boys."

"You coming or not?" Jim darted off after the big boys, and Tip ran after him.

They were taken into one of the infirmary wards. As soon as he saw the people in their beds Jim thought again about his mother. Was this the room she had been taken into, the night they arrived? He

wondered whether anyone would have remembered her coming, whether anyone had spoken to her.

The air was thick with dust and heavy with a rhythmic thudding sound. Lines had been strung from one end of the ward to the other, and carpets flung across them. Women and big boys with their sleeves rolled up were hitting the carpets with flattened sticks, and at every stroke the dust shivered in the air like clouds of flies. In their beds the sick people gasped and coughed and begged for water, and the old nurse shuffled from patient to patient and moaned with them and told them off in turns.

The woman in charge of the carpet-beaters came down the row and stood with her hands on her hips watching Tip and Jim. The boys stood on their toes trying to reach the middle of the carpets with their sticks. Jim was still so stiff from his beating that he could hardly flex his shoulders.

"Now who sent you two along!" the woman laughed. "Might as well get a pair of spiders to come and do the job!"

Jim staggered back, exhausted, and let the beating-stick drop. "We're really strong, though," he said. "Look!" and he bent his arm back, squeezing his fist

to try to make a muscle bulge. "And we'd do anything to help Mr Sissons, wouldn't we, Tip?"

"You're supposed to thrash the carpets, not tickle them." The woman bent down suddenly and scooped Jim up in her arms. "Oh, you're a big boy, you are!" She pressed him to her. "Not too big for a cuddle?"

Jim struggled to get himself free again, and the woman laughed and lowered him down.

"Need a ma, you do," she said, smoothing her apron. "Like I need a little boy. Lost mine. Soon as I came in here, lost my little boy. But who'd want to bring up a child in here, eh?"

"Come on, Jim," said Tip, embarrassed. "We could go back to the sewing room and do our sacks."

"But we want to help," Jim said. "We're good at carrying, ain't we, Tip?"

"Are you, now?" the woman said. "Well then, before you go, you can just help me carry this carpet out to the yard. The man's out there waiting with his cart."

She hoisted up a long, rolled-up carpet by the middle and nodded to Jim and Tip to take each end. Between them they managed to get it past the beds and the beaters and down a winding staircase. At the

end of the corridor the matron sat by the doorway, knitting a black shawl. Without looking at them, she unlocked the door and sank back into the dim pool of her candlelight to carry on with her knitting.

And outside the door were the railings and the gate.

Jim knew it was the gate he had come in by, all those months ago. He could smell air, miles and miles of air. He could hear the voices of ordinary people in the street outside. He could hear the cries of the city.

A man stood just inside the gate with a cart, and when the carpet woman called out to him he came towards them to help, calling something out to her that made her laugh.

"Now, you can run back in, boys," the woman said, pushing her hair under her cap. "And straight back to your sack-making, mind. No more carpet-beating for you, little spiders, till you're twice your size. Don't you think so, Thomas?"

Her voice was light and laughing, but the boys could see by the way she turned her smiling face up towards the man that he was a friend of hers and that she was far more interested in him than she was

in them. When she followed him to the shadows under the wall they knew that she had forgotten all about them.

And Jim's wild thing was thudding in his chest.

"Tip..." he whispered. There was the gate, wide open, with the cart halfway inside it. There was the road, and the gleam of lamplights, and the clapping of horses' hooves. He felt a rearing of fear and excitement inside him. This was the moment. He felt for his friend's hand and gripped it tight.

"I daren't. I daren't," Tip whispered back.

"Don't forget me, Jim."

His hand slipped away. Far away in the back of his mind Jim heard the scuff of boots on the snow and knew that Tip had run back into the house.

Jim crept forward, invisible in the deep shadows, and stood hardly breathing just inside the gate. He heard the carpet woman laughing quietly, and at that moment he took his chance. He slinked himself like a cat into a thin, small shape, and glided out of the gate. He tiptoed along the other side of the railings and stood with his breath in his mouth till a cart rumbled past. He darted out behind it and ran alongside it until he was well past the workhouse, till his breath was

bursting out of him. At last he fell, weak and panting, into the black well of a side alley.

He was free.

Chapter Nine

THE JAW OF THE IRON DOG

JIM KNEW ONE thing for sure: he must keep away from policemen. "If they see me, they'll send me back," he thought. He remembered the white-faced boys in the yard. "But I'll run away again as soon as I get a chance."

Somewhere in his head was the thought of finding Rosie again. She had been his mother's friend. Maybe, if he found her, he would find Emily and Lizzie too. But London was a huge, throbbing, noisy place. He had no idea which way to go. The shops were still open and busy, and the streets were full of traders carrying trays of fish and fruit, shouting out their wares. A woman was selling coffee from a handcart. The smell of it reminded him of that morning in the kitchen of the big house, when Rosie had given his mother some of his lordship's coffee to drink.

The night noises of the street baffled Jim – he had grown used to the drowning quiet of the workhouse,