

Chapter Five

BEHIND BARS

walking stick, and when Jim spoke to him he swung his head round to look at the boy's feet.

"Please, sir..." Jim said.

"I'm not sir," the man said. "I'm only doing my turn, like the rest of them. I'm only Joseph, not sir." He swung his head away from Jim's feet and spat on the floor. "I hate sir, same as you."

"Please, Joseph, tell me where the infirmary is."

"Why should I tell you that?" Joseph asked, his eyes fixed on Jim's feet again.

"Because my ma's there, and I've been good," Jim said. "Mrs Sissons said if I was good I could go and see Ma in the infirmary today."

"So you was the boy as came in last night, and your ma was brought on a cart?"

"Yes," said Jim. "Please tell me where the infirmary is."

Joseph made a little chewing noise. "Well, it's upstairs," he said at last. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and tilted his head sideways, squinting round at Jim. "Only the message I was given by Mrs Sissons is, don't bother taking the boy up there, because his ma..." He stopped and shook his head and chewed again. "Your ma's dead, son."

JIM FORCED HIS fists deep in his pockets and turned his face away. There were boys all round him, shuffling out to the cold yard, and they blurred into smudges of grey. He screwed up his eyes against the terrible blinding white of the sky. He wouldn't cry here. His lungs were bursting and he thought he would never be able to gasp for air again, but he couldn't cry here. The only person he wanted to be with was Rosie. She would know what to do. She would tell Emily and Lizzie. But there was no chance of being with Rosie.

"I want to go home," he said.

Joseph swung his head and spat. "Home?" he said. "What d'you mean, home? What's this, if it ain't home?"

So, Jim thought, this is my home now, this huge building with iron bars at the window and iron railings outside. His parents must be Mr and Mrs Sissons, as thin and waxy-pale as candles. And if

they were his parents then his brothers and sisters were the shambling, skinny boys who slept and sobbed in the same room as him, and the scrawny girls who seemed to have forgotten how to smile.

"Can't I see her, all the same?"

Joseph shook his head. "She was took into the dead-house in the night, and put on the paupers' cart before light, son. Speedy despatch, paupers get. No money for bells nor nothing like that, eh?"

Jim went dumbly from room to room as he was told, from the sleeping-boxes to the yard, the refectory, the yard, and back to his box... It was like a slow dance, and the steps were always the same, repeated day after day after day.

Morning started with the six o'clock bell, when all the boys had to wash under the pump. Joseph watched them, swinging his head from side to side and bending his neck round like a hunched bird of prey. He kept flapping his arms across his bent chest to beat the cold away.

"Get yerselfs washed quick, boys," he said. "Afore the wevver bites me bones off."

Across the yard from the pump was the asylum. Mad people were locked up. They wailed and

shrieked for hours on end. They stretched their hands out through the bars of their prison. "Give us some bread, boy!" they begged. "Let me out! Let me out!" "Don't take no notice of them," a woolly-headed boy whispered to him one day. "They're mad. They're animals." Jim was shocked. He stared again at the men and women and children who were all squashed up together. Their cage was too small to hold them all. Their wailings echoed round the yard all the time. "Animals, animals," Jim said to himself, trying to drive their noises out of his head. He looked away from them, pretending they weren't there.

"No, they're not animals, Jim," Joseph told him. "They're people, they are. People, Jim. My ma's in there."

There was a shed at the other end of the yard. Boys gazed out at them through a small barred window. Their white faces were even more frightening than the wailings of the mad people. Joseph sidled over to Jim that first morning and swung his arm across the boy's shoulder, bringing his head round to mutter down Jim's ear. "Now, them's the boys what tried to run away. They catch 'em and beat 'em and stick 'em in there till they're good. Remember that."

After the cold wash in the yard Jim had to help to clean it out with brooms twice as tall as he was. They had to sweep it till the ground was bare and clean, even if hundreds of leaves had fallen in the night and come drifting over the high walls. At breakfast the boys queued up with their bowls in their hands for bread and tea. The bread was meant to last for every meal, but if Jim tried to save it he soon had it stolen by one of the older boys. He learnt to gulp his food down as quickly as they did; boiled meat at dinner time, cheese at night, all swallowed rapidly and in silence.

Sometimes Mr Sissons read to them while they were eating, always Bible stories, and his whistly voice would glide round the echoing room over the clatter of knives and forks. Jim never listened to him. All he wanted to do was to think about his mother and Emily and Lizzie.

But every now and then Mr Sissons stopped reading and lowered his book. He stared round the room, his eyes like round, glassy balls and his fingers cracking together. Jim stopped eating, afraid that he had done something wrong. He sat with his spoon held somewhere between his mouth and his bowl, until the boy next to him nudged him into action

again. Mr Sissons put down his book and jumped off his dais. He came gliding down the aisles between the long tables like a thin black shadow. Jim could just see him out of the corner of his eye. He daren't for the life of him look up.

The master lunged out at one of the boys at random, pulling him away from his bench by the back of his collar and sending his bowl flying and the contents spattering across the faces and clothes of the other boys.

"Misbehaving, were you?" he said, his voice as dry as a hissing swan's. "Eating like a pig? Get to the trough, animal!" And the boy crouched on his hands and knees in front of a pig's trough that was always there, and had to eat his food from that, without a fork or spoon. Sometimes there were half a dozen people troughing, usually just for Mr Sissons's amusement.

"Please don't let it be me. Please don't let it be me," Jim said deep inside himself as Mr Sissons glided past, and the air turned as cold as ice around him.

Jim had no idea how long he had been at the work-house when he first thought of trying to escape. At first it seemed an impossible idea, as impossible as

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making the pump in the yard turn into a tree and laze out with leaves and blossoms. He remembered the runaway boys locked up in the shed in the yard for everyone to see. Even so, he had to try. One day, he promised himself, he would go. He would watch out every moment, sharp as a bird, for a chance to fly. And when he did he would never be caught.

He was almost too afraid to allow himself to think about it, in case Mr Sissons pounced inside his thoughts and strapped him to a chair and beat him as he beat other reckless boys.

It was only at night that he let himself imagine escaping, and it was as though he was opening up a box of secret treasure in the dark. Old Marion crept and wheezed her candle-path around the room where the boys lay in their boxes pretending to sleep, and he let his thoughts wander then. He would escape. He would run and run through the streets of London until he was a long, long way from the workhouse. He would find a place that was safe. And he would call it home.

AT FIRST JIM couldn't tell one boy from another. They all had the same sallow, thin faces and dark sunken eyes, and they all wore the same scratchy grey clothes and caps. They had their hair cropped and combed in exactly the same way, except for the boy who had spoken to him in the yard. His hair had a wild way of its own. He found himself following this boy round because he was the only one he could recognise, but it was a long time before he spoke to him. It was a long time before Jim felt like talking to anyone. He was numb, and wrapped up inside himself; but it was one morning in the schoolroom that Tip spoke to him and became the nearest thing to a friend that Jim could ever hope to have.

The schoolroom where the boys spent every morning was a long, dim room with candles set into every other desk. The little window had been painted over so they couldn't look out. There was a fireplace at