

making the pump in the yard turn into a tree and blaze 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 Jim 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.

Chapter Six

TIP

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

one end with sheets steaming round it. Old women sometimes wandered in to see to the sheets, putting wet ones up and taking down the dry ones to be packed off back to the big houses. These were the washerwomen, and this was their workhouse job, washing the clothes of the rich. The women would sit by the fire from time to time, mumbling to each other in low drones during the lessons, sometimes cackling out remarks to the boys or shouting out the wrong answers to the deaf old schoolmaster's questions.

There were four big arches across the ceiling with letters on them, and Mr Barrack would begin every day by pointing at the arches and then by asking one of the boys to read out the words on them. "God is good, God is holy, God is just, God is love," the women would chant out before the boys had a chance, sometimes in the wrong order just for fun, and they would nudge each other and screech with laughter. One morning when it was Tip's turn to answer the question he turned to the women and held out his hand for them to speak. They shook their heads and pursed their lips, shaking with silent laughter, and Tip, taken by surprise, laughed out loud. Mr Barrack shook him by the back of his jacket,

half lifting him off the floor.

"There's nothing to laugh at here," he shouted.

"No sir, there ain't," agreed Tip, and was given another shaking. The women loved this.

For most of the rest of the morning Mr Barrack read out loud to the boys, pacing up and down the room as he did so, so the candle flames fluttered in his wake and his black shadow danced on the walls. Curled in his hand was the end of a knotted rope, which he swung as he walked, striking it across a desk from time to time to make the boys jump awake. Every now and then he stopped and pointed at a boy, who had to stand up and recite the sentence he'd just heard. If he got it wrong Mr Barrack swung the knotted end of the rope across the boy's hand.

As a change from reading out loud, Mr Barrack would shout at one of the boys to fetch him his shabby old copy of *Dr Mavor's Spelling Primer*. He would pounce on any boy. "Spell 'chimbley'!" he would shout, swinging his rope in readiness.

One morning the boys were given chalks and slates to use. A visitor had brought them in as a present. They sat on the desks through the morning, and the boys all watched them lovingly, longing to have a go.

"Now you can write!" Mr Barrack told them at last, easing himself on to the high stool of his desk and grunting with the effort. Tip put up his hand.

"Please, sir. What should we write?"

"Speak up!"

"What should we write?" Tip roared.

Mr Barrack roared back. "What should you write? The Lord's Prayer, if you please!"

Jim risked a look round at the boys as they bent to their task, their breath smoking from them into the cold air. He put his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands. He was bleak inside himself, lonely and bewildered and afraid. Beside him Tip squeaked his chalk across his slate, scratching out scrawly shapes. His tongue poked out between his lips as he worked. He glanced sideways at Jim.

"Why aincha writing?" he whispered.

"Cos I can't," Jim whispered back. "I never knew how to write."

"Cor, it's easy!" Tip's eyebrows shot up and disappeared into the tangle of his hair. "Just wiggle your chalk across the slate like this." His chalk scraped and laboured, "There!" He leaned back in triumph and blew chalk dust off his slate. He showed it to Jim.

"That's good," Jim agreed. "What does it say, though?"

Tip's amazed eyebrows shot up into his hair again. "I don't know! I can't read!"

Jim spluttered into his hands, and Mr Barrack jerked awake. He hobbled down the aisle towards Jim.

"Did you laugh then?"

Jim felt as if he had frozen into his seat. His lips stuck together as if ice had formed between them.

"No, he didn't. It was me." Tip jumped up as the schoolmaster swung his rope in readiness and swished it down across the boy's outstretched hand. The women folding up the sheets by the fire cackled. The other boys sat in total silence while this was happening, staring straight in front of them, their arms folded.

Mr Barrack towered over Jim. "What did he say to you?"

Jim forced himself to stand up, his legs trembling like reeds in the wind.

"He said he can't read, sir," he whispered, and had to shout it out a few times more until Mr Barrack could hear him.

"Can't read!" the teacher bellowed. "Can't read!"

I'll say he can't read. What's the use of teaching boys like him to read? What do any of you want with reading or writing, miserable sinners that you are?" He pulled Tip's hand towards him again and lashed the rope across it.

Jim glanced at Tip, afraid to speak. He could see that the boy's eyes were wet, and that he was nursing his hand under his armpit.

"Write!" Mr Barrack barked, and Jim picked up his chalk and scribbled furiously with it, just as Tip had done.

At the end of that morning Mr Barrack told the boys to get out their instruments, and with a great shoving of desks and scuffle of boots they ran to the big cupboards at the end of the room, only to be shouted at and made to do it all again in silence.

"I'd have got hit anyway," Tip muttered to Jim under the noise. His eyes were still wet.

"Did it hurt?" Jim asked him.

Tip shook his head. "Once Barrack starts hitting you, Barrack always hits you," he said. He blew his hand and stuck it back under his armpit. "Every day if he can. Just don't let him have a chance to start. Tell Barrack Tip did it, if he blames you for

anything. Tip'll get hit anyway, so you might as well.

A drum was placed on the desk for them to share, and Tip stood up and reached out for a stick. At a wave of the schoolmaster's hand the hymn tune started, such a thumping and wailing that the washerwomen ran out with their hands over their ears. It was like nothing Jim had ever heard before. Tip poked him with a drumstick and mouthed at him over the row to bang the other side of the drum with it. Jim just tapped it at first. He watched Tip to try to work out some kind of rhythm in the mess of noise, and he saw that all the boys seemed to be chanting something, the little black holes of their mouths opening and closing into the thunder of drums and whistles, while the candle flames flattened and danced like tiny white devils.

"What're you saying?" Jim shouted, as close to Tip's ear as he could get. Tip turned towards him.

"I hate this place!" Jim could hear Tip's voice, faint and wailing over the beating of his drum. He had his eyes shut. He thumped the drum in time to every word. "I *hate* this place! Bang bang bang."

"So do I," said Jim. "Bang bang bang." He closed his eyes and put his head back. He shouted into the

darkness, opening up his throat to let all the tightness out. "I want Dad. I want Ma. Bang bang bang. I want Emily. Bang bang bang. I want Liz. Bang bang bang-bang *bang!* I want to go *home.*"

Mr Barrack raised his hand and the sound stopped as if it had been torn away in shreds. Silence, utter, swirling, hugging silence. Jim felt his thoughts tumbling into it and then settling into calm. He felt better.

Chapter Seven

THE WILD THING

"JOSEPH," JIM ASKED the bent man one day out in the yard. "How long have you been here?"

"Been here?" Joseph swung his head round and peered up at Jim. "Seems like I was born here. Don't know nowhere else, son. And I don't know all of this place, neither." He leaned against Jim so he could swing his head up to look at the long, high building with its rows of barred windows. "I've not been in the room where the women go, though long ago I must have been in the baby-room, I suppose, with my ma. I've been in the infirmary wards. But there's all kinds of little twisty corridors and attics and places I've never been in, Jim, and I don't want to, neither. It's the whole world, this place is." He spread out his hands. "Whole world."

"It ain't, Joseph," Jim told him. "There's no shops here, and no carriages. And no trees." He closed his eyes, forcing himself to try and remem-

ber what it was like outside. "And there's no river. There's a great big river outside here."

"Is there, now?" said Joseph. "I should like to see that river. Though to tell you the truth, Jim, I don't know what a river is. Tell you something." He put his arm over Jim's shoulder to draw his ear closer to his own mouth. "I don't want to die in here. If someone will let me know what day I'm going to die, I'll be grateful. I'll climb over that wall first." He dropped his head down again and stared at his boots, whispering softly. "Yes. That's what I'll do."

Tip spluttered and nudged Jim, but Jim was looking up at the high walls that surrounded the workhouse, and at the bleak sky above it.

"How long have I been here, Tip?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Tip hugged his arms round himself. "Keep moving, Jim. It's cold."

It was impossible to tell one day from the next. They were all the same. School, sack-making, bed. The only thing that changed was the sky. Jim had seen the grey of snow clouds turning into the soft rain clouds of spring. He'd felt summer scorching him in his heavy, itchy clothes. And now the sky was steely grey again. The pump had long beards of ice on its handle.

"I've been here a year," Jim said.

It was then that the little secret promise that had nestled inside him began to flutter into life like a wild thing.

"I've got to skip off," he let the mad thought rise up in him. "If I don't, I'll be like Joseph. One day I won't remember whether I was born here or not. I won't know anywhere but here."

During lessons that day the old schoolmaster's voice droned on in the dim schoolroom. The boys coughed and shuffled in their benches, hunching themselves against the cold. Jim's wild thoughts drummed inside him, so loud that he imagined everyone would hear them. He leaned over to Tip and whispered in his ear, "Tip, I'm going to run away today. Come with me?"

Tip sheered round, and put his hand to his mouth. Mr Barrack sprang down from his chair, his eyes alight with anger and joy.

"You spoke!" he said to Jim, triumphant. "It was you."

Tip closed his eyes and held out his hand, but Jim stood up. He didn't mind. He didn't mind anything any more. The teacher hauled him off his stool

and swung his rope round. It hummed as it sliced through the air.

"I don't mind," Jim tried to explain, but this made Mr Barrack angrier than ever. At last he had caught Jim out, and he was beating him now for every time he had tried and failed. He pulled a greasy handkerchief out of his pocket and wound it round Jim's head, tying it tight under his chin.

"Just in case you feels like hollering," he said. All the other boys stared in front of them. The rope stung Jim again and again, and the beating inside him was like a wild bird now, throbbing in his limbs and in his stomach, in his chest and in his head, so wild and loud that he felt it would lift him up and carry him away.

When the schoolmaster had finished with him he flung him like a bundle of rags across the desk. Jim lay in a shimmer of pain and thrumming wings. He wanted to sleep. The bell rang and the boys shuffled out. Jim felt Tip's hand on his shoulder. He flinched away.

"That's what they do to the boys who skip off, Jim," Tip whispered. "They thrash 'em like that every day until they're good."

Jim felt the wild thing fluttering again. "Only if they catch them."

"They always catch 'em. Bobbies catch 'em and bring 'em in, and they get thrashed and thrashed.

Jim struggled to sit up. The stinging rolled down his body. "Won't you come with me?"

"I daresn't. Honest, I daresn't. Don't go, Jim."

Jim looked up at the great archways of the schoolroom. He knew the words off by heart. God is good. God is holy. God is just. God is love.

"I've got to," he said. "And I'm going tonight, Tip."