

One of them was a red-haired, pokey sort of boy. He reminded Jim of Tip, just a bit. His hair was bright and untidy and it poked out of the holes of the cap he wore on the side of his head. His toes wriggled like cold pink shrimps out of the ends of his boots and his shirt hung off his skinny arms like tattered sails hanging off the spars of a ship. He made a sort of living selling bootlaces.

'Bootlaces, mister!' he shouted at passers-by, whirling the laces above his head as if he was a ribbon-seller at a fair. 'Three for the price of two! You don't want three, sir? Well, two for the price of three then, can't say fairer than that, can I?'

When Jim was skipping, the boy used to sit with his mouth wide open as if he was afraid to laugh out loud. His eyes darted round, furtive, on the look-out all the time for likely customers, or for the police, or for something to help himself to. He would suddenly leap up and dash past a stall when the owner wasn't looking, and grab a lump of cheese or the broken end of a pie, or a hot muffin. He'd run into a dark corner and stuff his cheeks full with it. Jim reckoned he must swallow it whole, it disappeared so fast.

If the stall-holders saw him doing it they usually swore loudly at him or chased him, but sometimes they saw him coming and looked the other way. It never occurred to Jim, watching him, that one day he would be doing this too, and be thankful to steal enough crumbs in a day to keep himself alive.

Jim liked the look of this boy. A few times he went over to him to say something, but the boy would just run off as soon as Jim came near, as if he'd just remembered a job that needed doing. Jim would feel awkward then, and would pretend to be searching for something on the ground where the boy had been squatting. But every day he thought, 'I'll talk to him today. I'll find out what he's called, that's what.'