

"It's all he's got, ain't it? A pair of boots what's too big for him, and a wooden horse. Give it back." There was a burst of laughter and some children broke away from the group and ran off.

The next minute there was a shouting from the far end of the street, and the people who had been crouching round Jim and his mother stood up and moved away. He heard other voices and looked up to see two policemen. "Get up!" one of the policemen ordered. Jim struggled to his feet. "And you! Get up!" the other one said to Jim's mother. She lay quite still.

The first policeman waved his hand and a boy with a cart ran up. Between them they lifted Jim's mother on to it. Jim watched, afraid.

"Take 'em to the workhouse," the policeman said. "Let them die in there, if they have to." The boy began to run then, head down, skidding on the snowy road, weaving the cart in and out of the carriages, and Jim ran anxiously behind. They came at last to a massive stone building with iron railings round it. Weary people slouched there, begging for food. The boy stopped the cart outside the huge iron gates and pulled the bell. Jim could hear it clanging in the distance. At last the gates were pulled open by a porter

who glared out at them, his lantern held up high.

"Two more for you," said the boy. "One for the infirmary, one for school." The porter led them into a yard. There on the steps on each side of the main door stood a man and woman, as straight and thin and waxy-faced as a pair of church candles, staring down at them. The boy held out his hand and was given a small coin, and the master and matron bent down and lifted Jim's mother off the cart and carried her into the house. The boy pushed his cart out and the porter clanged the gates shut.