

## Chapter Four

### THE WORKHOUSE

JIM AND HIS mother walked for most of that day, but they made very slow progress. They rested a bit near a statue of a man on a horse and after a very short distance they had to stop again for Mrs Jarvis to scoop water from a fountain. And on they went, trudging and stopping, trudging and stopping, until Jim's mother could go no further. She put her arms round Jim and pressed her head down on to his shoulder.

"God help you, Jim," she said.

It seemed to Jim that she was simply tired then of walking and that she decided to go to sleep, there on the pavement. He squatted down beside her, glad of a chance to rest, feeling dizzy and tired himself, and was aware of a worry of voices round him, like flies buzzing. Someone shook him and he opened his eyes.

"Where d'you live?" a voice said.

Jim sat up. Already it was growing dark. There

were people round him and some were kneeling by his mother, trying to lift her. "We used to live in a cottage," said Jim. "We had a cow and some hens."

"Where d'you live now?" It was a different voice, a bit sharper than the last one. Jim tried to remember the name of the street where they had rented a room in Mr Spink's big house, and couldn't. He couldn't understand why his mother didn't wake up. He looked round for his bundle and saw that his wooden horse had gone. He clutched Lizzie's old boots.

"You haven't got nowhere?" the same voice asked.

Jim shook his head. Someone was doing something to his mother, rubbing her hands, it looked like, dabbing her face with her shawl. "Get them to the workhouse," someone said. "There's nothing we can do for her."

"I'm not taking them there," another voice said. "Prison would be better than there. Tell them we caught the boy stealing, and let them put them both in prison."

"Someone stole my horse," Jim heard himself saying. He couldn't keep his voice steady. "I didn't steal anything."

"Give him his horse back," someone else said.