

Chapter 14

The Waterman's Arms

Jim woke up before Grimy Nick. The river was overflowing with mist and seemed to be breathing with secrets, with dark looming shapes. When the mist began to lift they bloomed into life, like a city, street upon street of boats. He could see downriver to the long silver gleam of water, under the dark arches of a bridge, and he knew that far away from there it flowed out to the sea. He imagined slipping the knot of the *Lily* and drifting downstream with her past all the floating castles of tall sailing ships and out to the huge ocean.

When Grimy Nick lumbered up from his dark hole he swore at Jim for letting the fire in the brazier go out. 'You'd think we didn't have any coal on board, you fool.' He laughed at his own joke, a great startling whoop of laughter that set Snipe leaping up out of his sleep. Jim tried to laugh with him.

'Get water from the yard,' Nick snarled. 'Start the day off right.'

When Jim came back with his slopping pail he found Nick toasting fish by the fire. He threw a piece in one direction for Jim and some heads in another direction for the dog. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and belched.

'Work!' he told Jim. 'When we clears this lot, we goes out for more, off one of them big boats. So don't think yer work's done. Yer work's never done. Not while there's coal in the ground.'

It took them the whole of that day to clear the hold of coal. Jim thought every bone in his body must break before he'd finished, but Nick kept grimly on, shovelling and lifting and tipping, shovelling and lifting and tipping, his body a grunting shadow swinging across the glow of the lantern. 'Work!' Nick shouted at him, whenever he paused to rest, swinging his shovel round to crack across the boy's back. Jim struggled to keep up. Sweat poured down him like rain, soaking into him, and when he rubbed his eyes the grit of coal-dust smarted and stung him. By the end of the day he couldn't see what he was lifting or where he was tipping, and no sooner was the basket winched up than he was shovelling coals into empty space, and being shouted at by Nick for his stupidity.

But at last the hold was empty. Nick went up to the desk in the warehouse to get his payment, then came back on board, jingling the coins in his pocket.

'You're only a bundle of sticks,' he said to Jim, 'but you've worked. If yer wants a bowl of mutton stew come with me to the alehouse, and I'll see you're set up.'

Jim was so tired he would rather have slept, but he reckoned that Nick's invitation was meant to be some kind of compliment. He didn't dare turn it down. He stumbled after Nick, and the dog loped between them, turning its yellow eyes first to one and then to the other of them.

The Waterman's Arms was dark and noisy, with a low blackened ceiling and lanterns hanging from the beams. It was thick with smoke from the fire in the hearth, and from the men and women who were puffing away at pipes. Grimy Nick pushed his way towards a crowd of men, who all wore

large metal badges on their arms like him to show they were watermen. They whistled in contempt when they saw him, but he only laughed in his loud, sharp way. 'This is my midget, little Jim, here. Show 'em your muscles, little Jim! Didn't know 'e 'ad any, till he came to work alongside of me.' He patted Jim's head in a fatherly sort of way and told him to find a stool by the hearth and to keep quiet.

The barmaid set a bowl of hot stew in front of Jim, and a small draught of ale. He could hardly keep his eyes open now. Before he was half-way through it the noises around him softened out into murmurs, and spread across a wide, dark sea, lapping as quiet as long ago. He was slipping into the sea, which wasn't sea at all but a cradle with soft warm cloths, and it was rocking him as if he were a baby.

There was a crash, and he woke up with a start to find himself lying face down in the sawdust and his bowl of stew broken and spilt in the hearth. Nick lifted him up and swung him across his shoulders, and Jim was carried outside past all the laughing, upturned faces and propped up on a bench in the dark, with Snipe growling at his feet.

'Wait there,' Nick grunted, and went back inside.

Jim was glad to be outside, with the air cold and smarting on his cheeks. He could hear Grimy Nick's voice inside, loud and boastful, his quick, surprising bellow of laughter. He was joined by other children, all squatting or standing in a silent line, waiting for their masters to come out with their food or their pay. Jim puffed himself up a bit. He was the only child there with a beer-pot in his hand, even if he did think it tasted like copper coins. He wished he could have his hot mutton stew back.

'You with Grimy Nick?' one boy asked. Jim nodded, taking a quick swig from his pot and scowling at its bitterness.

'His last boy was took to ospickal,' the boy muttered. 'Beat to bits.'

'Won't beat me,' said Jim, full of beery bravado, 'I'll beat him first.'

The other children giggled into their hands at this, turning knowing looks at each other. They were a miserable lot of scarecrows, Jim thought, sipping again at his ale. Some of the children slept where they waited, leaning against each other. One group, roped together, told him they were a field gang, and were waiting to go with their gang-leader to dig up turnips on farms. They were led away at last, and one by one the other children ran off with their coins in their hands. At last Nick came out, breathing bad temper into the cold night.

'Jim, you faggot, it's time for you to take me home,' he bellowed as if Jim was two miles away instead of standing beside him, and he leaned his weight on Jim's shoulder. Together they made their slow way to where the *Lily* was moored. Nick stumbled down to his gritty bed in the hold and snored like a fog-horn all night.

It seemed as if Jim had only just gone to sleep when he was kicked awake again. Nick, yawning and coughing, pulled him to his feet.

'Move!' he shouted. 'Tide's turning!'

Jim staggered up. A fluttering of excitement lit up like a small candle flame inside him. It was time for them to move downstream. Beneath his feet the *Lily* was rocking round, soft as breaths. Jim ran to the wharf and fetched water, and Nick knocked on the door of a nearby cottage and came back with hot bread wrapped in a cloth. By this time the tide was streaming underneath the boat. She nudged round to face downstream, and Nick threw her rope on deck and jumped on board. Jim's dream had come true. They were heading towards the sea.