

Chapter 24

Looking for a Doctor

Next morning Jim searched round for sacking and straw to help to make Shrimps more comfortable. He managed to prop him up so he could eat more easily. But the boy only pecked at food.

‘Shrimps,’ said Jim, uneasy. ‘What’s up with you?’

‘Old age, bruvver.’

In his heart Jim was afraid it might be the cholera. Many people were dying of that, he knew.

‘What really happened, Shrimps?’

‘I got beat up, didn’t I? This old gentleman give me a guinea, honest he did. Probly thought it was a farthing, but he give me a guinea, fair and square. I think he took a fancy to me charming face.’

‘I believe you.’

‘And I was follered down this alley. Some bloke said I’d nicked it off the old gentleman and I had to give it back. And when I said I hadn’t they started kicking me and punching me like I was a rag doll. But I wasn’t going to give me guinea up, was I? It was a present. Sooner give it me ma than them blokes. So I stuck it under me armpit. Anyway, they must’ve knocked me out good and proper. When I came to, me jacket had gone and me guinea wiv it, and all me laces, too. So the lads brought me here. Carried me, they did.’

‘You should be in the hospital.’

Shrimps panicked then. ‘I don’t want no ospickal. I don’t want no ospickal.’ He was so scared that he tried to scramble out of the crate, knocking over the pot of water Jim had brought for him.

‘I won’t take you there,’ Jim promised him. ‘Not if you don’t want to go.’

Soon Shrimps drifted off to sleep. It frightened Jim, watching him. It reminded him of the way his mother had been. He was afraid to leave him, and he was afraid to stay with him. When Shrimps woke again he coughed as if his body would break in half. He leaned back after the fit, exhausted.

‘Fink I swallowed a fly, Jim,’ he said. ‘Must’ve slept wiv me mouth open.’

As he was drifting back to sleep again Jim told him about Rosie’s grandfather and about Grimy Nick and Snipe. He told him about the terrible night when he thought he’d murdered Grimy Nick, and about the circus, and about Grimy Nick’s appearance in the big tent.

‘Ghosts is s’posed to be white and fin, not coalie-black wiv eyes like fires,’ chuckled Shrimps.

When Shrimps slept again Jim went off in search of food and help. One stallholder threw a cabbage at him, and he caught it before it hit him. ‘Thanks, mister!’ he shouted. He ran back to the crates with it, broke up some boxes for firewood, and that night he begged a light from the night-

watchman. He ran back to the crates with his flare blazing and cooked the cabbage in the water pot over the fire. He ate well that night, and even Shrimps managed to swallow some of the soupy liquid.

‘That was a feast, Jim,’ he said, belching softly and lying back. His face in the firelight was full of deep shadows. ‘I’ll be better soon.’

But Shrimps didn’t get better. He had been starving for too long. Jim didn’t know what to do to help him. He brought him fresh straw to lie on but it was all he could do to roll him over and stuff it underneath him. Shrimps was afraid that their hiding-place would be found by the police. He made Jim pile up more and more boxes round them. The nights were bitterly cold, and the sun was so weak that the daytime was hardly warmer. Winter was upon them.

Jim had asked all the costermongers at the market for help. Some of the women came to peer at Shrimps in his crate, but they’d seen many a child in that state before, and they just shrugged. The street boys brought him things to eat, but he was too ill to touch it.

‘Needs a doctor, he does,’ one of the women said.

‘He can’t go to the hospital. I promised him,’ Jim said. He was desperate for help. Didn’t anybody care? ‘He’s scared of being taken to the workhouse.’

The woman nodded. ‘Nowhere else for him,’ she said, turning her back on the crate, rubbing her arms for warmth. ‘Cept a pauper’s grave, and that’ll be a blessing.’ She was already walking away as she said it.

Jim tried begging for money. He waited outside the theatres where Shrimps used to sell his laces to the rich people. ‘Please,’ he would say to the ladies and gentlemen stepping out of their carriages, ‘my brother’s ever so ill. Please can I have some money for a doctor?’ But they would turn away as if they hadn’t really seen him. When he went back to Shrimps he didn’t even try to get him to eat. He just moistened his lips with water. Shrimps’ eyes flickered open.

‘Lovely bit of beer, that is,’ he whispered, and fell asleep again.

One night Jim went to the theatre queue again, but this time he didn’t ask for money. He skipped for them instead, and when they saw that he wasn’t holding his cap out for coins, and how lightly he danced, they started to take notice of him. Through the ragged holes in his trousers they could see the deep scar on his leg, but he danced as well as he had ever done. When quite a few people were gathered round him he stopped and clapped his hands.

‘Can anyone give me the name of a doctor, please?’ he shouted. ‘One that won’t charge money?’

Nobody answered him. The theatre doors opened and they swarmed in, forgetting him.

The woman with the coffee-cart called him over. She gave Jim a mug of coffee to warm him up.

‘Seen you skipping,’ she said. ‘How’s that friend of yours? He still bad?’

Jim nodded. He wished he could carry the mug of coffee to Shrimps, but he knew it wouldn’t do any good. Jim gulped the coffee down. ‘I’m looking for a doctor for him. Don’t know one, do you? One that won’t charge. I could do jobs for him.’

She frowned. 'There is a doctor of some sort, not far from here. But I've never heard of him doing any doctoring, like. Barnie something, they call him. The little kids next door to me go to his school.'

'School? I don't want anything to do with school.' Jim remembered the schoolroom at the workhouse; the lofty room, and the boys quiet and afraid at their desks, the pacing schoolmaster.

'The Ragged School. Ain't you heard of it?' the woman went on. She stopped to serve someone with pickled eggs and coffee. 'All I know is it's somewhere kids go when they don't have money to pay for school. They do a lot of praying.'

Again Jim remembered the schoolroom with the painted arches: God is good. God is holy. God is just. God is love. He could hear again the thin chanting of the boys' voices as they recited it every day.

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I wouldn't go there, missis. Never.'

'Suit yourself,' she said. 'He's the only doctor I know of.'

But during that night Shrimps grew worse. He was hot and feverish, and weak though he was, he coughed all the time. Jim put his hand under his friend's head to prop him up. He pulled away the straw to push some fresh under, and saw that it was spotted with blood.