

Chapter 17

The Monster Weeps

For several days Jim lay in the hold, too weak to move. His leg hurt so much that he thought he would never walk again. Nick worked round him, watching him and scowling.

‘Get up, can’t you? Get up!’ he shouted at him one day. ‘I’ve got something for you, if you get up.’

Jim struggled to his feet. He was afraid of what might happen to him if he didn’t show that he was willing to work. Nick watched him, whistling.

‘Come over here now.’

Jim limped across to him, pleased with himself for doing it without letting Nick know how much it hurt. As soon as he reached him Nick pushed Jim’s head down and tied a rope round his neck. He fastened the other end to a hook on the deck board.

‘Caught you now, my wild bird!’ he chuckled. ‘There’ll be no flying away now!’

Jim turned away, saying nothing. ‘I’ll get my revenge,’ he thought. ‘One day, Nick. You’ll be sorry you did this to me.’

One summer morning Jim limped from Cockerill’s yard with a brimming pail of water. There was no need these days for Snipe to follow him to the pump yard and back. He would just squat at the gate, watching, his tongue lolling out and his ears up sharp. Even if Jim had managed to untie the rope he wouldn’t have been able to run away from Snipe. It had taken months for the scars in his leg to heal, and even so he couldn’t put his weight on it properly.

He lifted the water on board and made porridge, just as he did every morning when they were moored at Cockerill’s, while Nick shovelled coal into the basket. When the porridge was ready he banged his wooden spoon on the cooking pot. He never spoke to Nick these days. Nick yelled up to White-face to haul up the basket, and as it creaked past him Jim noticed how frayed the rope had become. The strands were taut and straight instead of twisted into a plait, and even as he watched one or two of the threads began to snap. Slowly the basket swayed up. Jim stood up, watching it. The hairs on his neck began to tremble, and his heart began to beat a light, rapid rhythm; a dance of warning.

Nick was groping his way slowly out of the hold. High above his bent back the basket began to tilt.

Then, ‘Nick!’ Jim yelled.

Nick looked up sharply, saw Jim’s upturned face, and flung himself sideways. At that very instant the rope snapped and all the coals rained down.

And then the air settled into a choking silence. Snipe howled, snuffling into the scattered coals. White-face shouted from his top window and came hurrying down the iron stairs of the warehouse, his boots clanging on every step. Jim didn’t move from the spot.

White-face shoved past him and stood gazing down at the heap of coals. He ran back and shook Jim into life.

‘Don’t stand there, boy. Help me.’

With his bare hands White-face scrabbled, moaning out loud. Cold and quiet, Jim knelt down beside him. He eased the coals slowly away, picking them out one by one and placing them behind him. He was deeply frightened.

‘Look!’ he whispered at last, and White-face stopped his scrabbling. The coals seemed to be stirring of their own accord. It was as if they were breathing. A pair of blackened hands groped through, then a face, blinking into the light, and like a monster rising from the deep Grimy Nick emerged. He staggered up, shaking sprays of black dust. Snipe hurled himself against him. Nick crouched down on to the boards again, breathing heavily, staring round him as though he couldn’t believe where he was.

‘I’ll get a doctor for you,’ White-face said. He was shaking.

‘No, yer don’t,’ Nick snarled. ‘I can’t afford a doctor. I’ll live.’

‘And you can thank your boy for that,’ White-face told him. He scrambled back onto the landing-stage, checking the time on his pocket watch. ‘I reckon he saved your life.’ He clanged back up the stairs, counting them out loud as he went.

Jim couldn’t bear to look at Nick. It wasn’t that he was afraid of him. He would never be afraid of him again now, he knew that. But what he couldn’t bear was the noise that was coming from him, little whimpers, bubbling up out of him, blubbers of sound, and when he looked he saw white trails running down Nick’s cheeks, coursing through the coal-dust, filling up and coursing through again, as if they would never stop.