Chapter 12

Shrimps

Next morning Rosie told Jim that he would have to help her if she was going to feed him. She tied an old sack over his shoulders to disguise the workhouse clothes, in case the police saw him.

'You'll have to keep moving, Jim, same as me,' she warned him. 'If the bobbies see me standing still they'll soon pack me off as well. We'll both be running all day.'

Jim liked working for her. When her voice grew tired he would shout out for her. 'Whelkso! Salmon for sale! Pickled fish and shrimpso!' He danced round while he was shouting, partly to keep himself warm and partly so he could watch out on all sides for policemen coming. He had such a light, skipping way of dancing that people stopped to watch him on their way to their shops and offices. They soon got to know him.

'Skip for us, Jimmy!' they used to say, especially if they saw him standing on his own.

'Buy some shrimps and I will!' Jim would say, and Rosie would step up with her tray of seafood and persuade them to buy something. While they were eating Jim would dance for them, and he would close his eyes, close out the street, and close out the faces of all the strangers …

A long time ago his father had danced for him in their cottage. Jim could just remember the laughing faces of Emily and Lizzie as they sat on a long polished bench by the fire. He had been a very small boy then. He remembered clapping his hands and shouting out as his father danced, and the faster his father jumped the more the flames in the fire had danced, like wild, yellow spirits. 'Faster, Pa! Faster!' the children had shouted, and the black shadow that leapt from his father's feet had become a crazy, long-limbed prancing shape across the walls and the ceiling, and Jim had jumped down and run to do a skipping dance with him, and been lifted up to the beams. There he was, in the room again, while strangers watched him and ate Rosie's sea-food in the cold street.

'I'm very pleased with you, Skipping Jim,' Rosie told him, breaking into his dream. 'I'm selling more salmon than I can pickle. They'll have to have it boiled plain if they want more, and like it!'

He had been staying with Rosie a few days when he first saw the doctor. He and Rosie were going back to her cottage one afternoon when they heard a voice behind them calling, 'Rosie! Rosie Trilling!' and they turned round to see Lame Betsy limping after them, holding up her skirts as she tried to hurry through the mud.

'I've been worriting about that boy,' Besty panted. 'Whether he'd find you, and whether you could give him a home, and how he was doing.'

'He's doing fine,' Rosie laughed. 'He's a real little dancing man, ain't you, Jim? But he can't stay with me for long, he knows that. I'm in mortal fear of my grandfather finding him and throwing us both out. You know what he's like, Betsy.'

Betsy stuffed her loose hair back under her cap. ‘Well, I’ve got a fine plan!’ She held out her hand, plump and pink with cold. ‘You come with me, Jim. I’m going to take you to school!’

Jim’s stomach churned with terror. ‘I hate school!’ he shouted. ‘I hate school-teachers!’ He tried to pull himself away from Betsy.

‘He’s not a school-teacher, Jim. He’s a doctor, so they say. And he’s a school going for the likes of you, Jim. He’s a queer soul, they say, and he stands on a box in the middle of the street and asks people to bring their children along to his school, and he don’t charge them nothing!’ She stopped for breath, banging her chest with her fist. She held out her hand again. ‘Come on, Jim! It’s a fine chance for you!’

Jim felt tears scorching. ‘Please don’t make me! Don’t make me go to school!’

But Rosie pushed him gently towards Betsy. ‘Go with her, Jim,’ she said. ‘Somewhere to go where you’ll be warm and dry. And it’s free! Wish I had a chance to go to school!’

‘But I want to help you, Rosie!’ Jim called out, but Rosie hurried away from them.

Betsy pulled him along with her, squeezing out comforting words betwen her breathy wheezings.

‘You’ll hear Bible stories, I should think, and sing lots of nice hymns. I don’t want you getting into bad ways, Jim, just because you ain’t got a mother and father. Look at that crowd! That’ll be him, talking now.’

Besty pushed Jim to the front of the staring crowd. A thin man with spectacles and fluffy side-whiskers was standing on a box, turning from side to side. He spoke in a light, soft voice with an Irish accent which Jim could hardly understand. Some of the people watching him were laughing, and a group of ragged boys were jeering. The man didn’t seem to hear them, but just kept on talking in his gentle voice. Jim strained to hear what he was saying, and then caught the words that he dreaded. It was almost as if he had been hauled by the scruff of his neck into the long, dim schoolroom in the workhouse, with Mr Barrack slicing the air with his whistling rope.

‘God is love,’ said the doctor. ‘God is good.’

‘No he ain’t!’ Jim shouted. ‘He ain’t good to me!’

Everybody broke into a roar of cheering laughter and shouts. One of the boys on the corner picked up a lump of mud and flung it at the doctor. It landed with a splash across his face, stopping up his mouth as he opened it to speak again. The doctor coughed and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He was jostled off his crate. He pushed his way through the crowd, struggling to keep his hat on his head. As he passed Jim he looked at him, just for a second, and what Jim saw in his eyes wasn’t anger, or reproach, but sadness.

Jim turned away. Betsy was wiping her eyes on her sleeve. ‘Go on!’ she laughed. ‘Back to your Rosie, you vagabond! There’s not much you don’t know!’

Jim raced off through the alleyways to find Rosie. He was followed by some of the boys from the crowd. ‘Hey, Skipping Jim!’ they shouted. ‘Wait for us!’

But Jim didn't stop until he had found Rosie again. The boys panted up to him, cuffing him lightly with their fists to show they wanted to be friends.

'Come on, Skipping Jim. Dance for us!' they shouted, and they stood about in their tattered clothes, hugging themselves against the cold, while Jim capered round to make them laugh.

'You'll soon wear those boots out,' Rosie warned him. 'Save your dancing for the proper customers.'

But Jim wanted to dance for the boys. They didn't often laugh. There wasn't much for them to laugh at. He was always too shy to talk to them. But after that day when he had made them laugh at the doctor they often came to watch him dance in the streets.

One of them was a red-haired, pokey sort of boy. He reminded Jim of Tip, just a bit. His hair was bright and untidy and it poked out of the holes of the cap he wore on the side of his head. His toes wriggled like cold pink shrimps out of the ends of his boots and his shirt hung off his skinny arms like tattered sails hanging off the spars of a ship. He made a sort of living selling bootlaces.

'Bootlaces, mister!' he shouted at passers-by, whirling the laces above his head as if he was a ribbon-seller at a fair. 'Three for the price of two! You don't want three, sir? Well, two for the price of three then, can't say fairer than that, can I?'

When Jim was skipping, the boy used to sit with his mouth wide open as if he was afraid to laugh out loud. His eyes darted round, furtive, on the look-out all the time for likely customers, or for the police, or for something to help himself to. He would suddenly leap up and dash past a stall when the owner wasn't looking, and grab a lump of cheese or the broken end of a pie, or a hot muffin. He'd run into a dark corner and stuff his cheeks full with it. Jim reckoned he must swallow it whole, it disappeared so fast.

If the stall-holders saw him doing it they usually swore loudly at him or chased him, but sometimes they saw him coming and looked the other way. It never occurred to Jim, watching him, that one day he would be doing this too, and be thankful to steal enough crumbs in a day to keep himself alive.

Jim liked the look of this boy. A few times he went over to him to say something, but the boy would just run off as soon as Jim came near, as if he'd just remembered a job that needed doing. Jim would feel awkward then, and would pretend to be searching for something on the ground where the boy had been squatting. But every day he thought, 'I'll talk to him today. I'll find out what he's called, that's what.'

One evening, just as dark was coming, the lad was sitting watching Jim in his nervous, fox-like way when a raggedy woman crept up behind him. She put her hands on his shoulders and shook him.

'Gotcha!' she said. 'You bin hiding, aincha?'

He jumped up, trying to get away, but she pushed him to the ground and pinned him there with her knee on his chest. Her hair was as wild and red as his, and her voice thick and slurred.

‘Where’s yer money?’ she demanded.

‘Ain’t got none,’ the boy said.

She flipped him over as if he was a wooden doll, felt in his back pockets and held up some coins. ‘Now you’ve got none,’ she laughed, and before he could sit up she’d gone.

Jim had been crouching on the other side of the road, watching. The boy saw him looking and turned away, covering up his face with his hands. He stayed hunched up just as the woman had left him. Jim stood up and clicked his fingers to make the boy look at him. Then he started to dance, just a few skipping steps. ‘Laugh,’ he wanted to say, but daren’t. ‘It’s all right. Laugh.’

It was then that the boy seemed to make up his mind about him. He jumped up and joined Jim, kicking up his legs in imitation of Jim’s dance, holding his arms high above his head so his laces fluttered round like maypole ribbons. His pink shrimpy toes wriggled above the flaps of his boot soles, and with each step he took he slapped his foot down again so firmly on the road that the muck spattered round him like flies round a cow. He danced with his eyes closed and his mouth wide open, in a kind of trance, and the more the watchers clapped, the wilder his dance became. Jim could hardly keep up with him for laughing, and even Rosie had to smile. She sold off most of her trayload to one family.

‘Here,’ she said. ‘Shrimps, or whatever your name is. And you, Skipping Jim. You can finish off these for me – I’m going back to get some more. I’ve never sold two whole trayfuls like that in one day, never. You should go on the shows, you two! You should join a travelling circus!’

The two boys sat side by side near a night watchman’s fire, peeling the shrimps with their teeth and spitting off the shells.

‘I love shrimps, I do,’ said the boy. ‘But I’ve never pinched none off Rosie’s stall, never.’

‘You wouldn’t dare,’ said Jim. ‘She’d pickle you if you did.’

‘I dare do anyfink, I do,’ the boy said. ‘But Rosie, she’s like me. She ain’t got no more money than me, she ain’t.’

‘Are you really called Shrimps?’ Jim asked him.

The boy shrugged. ‘Shrimps is what they call me, and Shrimps’ll do.’

‘Sounds like a funny name to me,’ Jim said. ‘Who was that woman?’

The boy narrowed his eyes. ‘My ma,’ he said. ‘Only she kicked me out years ago, didn’t she? She only comes looking for me when she wants money for gin. Not much of a ma, she ain’t.’

‘Where d’you live, then?’

‘Depends, don’t it? See, if I makes a copper or two selling laces, I spends it on a lodging house for the night.’

‘Cor. On your own?’

‘On me own and wiv about fifty other geezers wot snore their heads off all night! It’s like a funder-storm sometimes! And if I don’t have no money,’ he shrugged, ‘I sleeps where I can, don’t I? Where the bobbies won’t find me, that’s where I live.’ He jerked his thumb at Jim’s jacket, where the sacking shawl had slipped away. ‘I spent a week in that place. Worse’n anyfink I ever knowed, that workhouse was. Worse’n sleeping in a barn full of rats, and I done that a time or two.’

‘Worse than that,’ Jim agreed. ‘Worse than sleeping in a sack full of eels.’

The boys both giggled.

‘Eels!’ snorted Shrimps. ‘Eels is charming company. I ate an eel once, when it were still alive. It wriggled all down my throat and round my belly and up again and out through my mouth! “Bellies!” said the eel. “Boy’s bellies is nearly as bad as the workhouse!” And it wriggled off home. It was all right, that eel.’ He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at Jim sideways. ‘You got a bruvver, Skippin’ Jim?’

‘No,’ said Jim. ‘Have you?’

‘Used to have. But I ain’t got one now.’ Shrimps dug the flaps of his bootsoles into the mud. ‘I’d like a bruvver to go round wiv.’

‘So would I,’ said Jim.

The two boys stared straight ahead, saying nothing. The watchman poked his fire so the flames hissed. He got slowly to his feet. ‘Five of the clock,’ he shouted, and trudged off to light up the lamps between the houses. ‘Five o’clock, my lovelies!’

‘Got to go,’ Shrimps said. ‘I got a queue to see to. People often breaks their boot-laces when they’re standing in queues. Just snaps off, they do, if I crawls round and tweaks ’em when they ain’t looking.’

‘Will you be here tomorrow?’

Shrimps looked down at Jim. He took a bunch of laces out of his pocket and swirled them round his head. Then he shrugged and ran off.

That night, as Jim ran home to his shed, his head was busy with new thoughts. There was easily enough room for another small boy to squeeze in. It would be warmer with two of them. Rosie wouldn’t mind, especially if Shrimps got his food in his usual way. ‘Be nice to have a brother,’ he thought as he ran. ‘A brother like Shrimps. Real nice, that would be.’

It would be a long, long time before he slept so well again. His sleep that night was broken by a stomping of boots and the screech the catch gave as the door was pulled open. It was as if someone had let the river in. A candle was held out towards him and Jim opened his eyes. Two men stood looking down at him, their eyes black holes in the candle-light, their beards froths of

fur. Jim recognized one as Rosie's grandfather. The other man was square with a box-like face and hair that slanted across his eyes like a slipping thatch.

'This boy, d'you mean?' He gave Jim a kick. Jim sat up in fright, clutching his sack around him.

'I knew I'd seen a lad running in here,' Rosie's grandfather wheezed. 'A little rat, he is, skulking in my shed. I'll weasel him out, I thought to myself. I'll winkle him out when the time is right.'

'Please, mister,' said Jim. 'I ain't doin' no harm.'

'Stand up,' the square man said. His eyes bulged above his fat cheeks as if they were lamps trying to make their way through the thatch.

Jim struggled to his feet.

'He's only a twig,' the square man said. 'There's no bones in him, hardly.'

'He'll grow,' said the grandfather. 'I know his type. He'll grow big and powerful. You can train him up, Nick, when he's only that big. Won't give you no trouble, that size. He's just right. And while he's training he won't eat much.'

Nick grunted. 'Well, he's here, and I'm stuck for a boy, so I'll take him.'

Grandpa sighed with pleasure. Nick fumbled in his pocket and gave him a coin, which the old man held out to the candle, chuckling.

'Come on, boy,' Nick said. 'Bring your bed. You'll need that.'

Jim stumbled after him, pulling the sack round his shoulders for warmth, and the door screeched behind him as the old man fastened it to.

'Tell Rosie …' Jim began, and Grandpa swung round and snarled at him.

'She won't need no telling. I'll thank her, shall I, for stealing food from her grandmother's mouth to stuff in yours? Go on. Go with Grimy Nick. You've got a home and a job now. You've nothing more to want in life, that's what.'

He walked slowly back to his cottage, laughing aloud in his coughing way, spinning the coin that Grimy Nick had given him so it gleamed in the air like a little sun.