

Chapter 26

Goodbye, Bruvver

Old Samuel, the night-watchman, took Shrimps' body into his hut. He set candles round it, and as the street boys heard of his death they came to have a look at him. They came in groups and stood in a huddle in the doorway, not daring to come in, and soon ran off again.

Jim sat with his head in his hands all day. Samuel shook him by his shoulder.

'Reckon you'll have to go, Skippin' Jim,' he told him. 'They'll be bringing the pauper's cart for Shrimps here soon, an' if they sees you here you knows where they'll take you.'

Jim didn't care. He almost felt it would be good to be back in the workhouse. He would see Joseph again, and Tip. His life would be ordered and regular, there'd be food at mealtimes and sleep at bedtimes. He wouldn't have to run away from anyone, or hide, or steal food. But then he thought of the mad people wailing, and the runaway boys in their cage, and the children crying in the night, the long, echoing, dark corridors, and the sound of keys turning in locks. Shrimps had died rather than go back there. Well. So would he.

Samuel went out to call six o'clock at the street corners. Jim took a last look round the quiet hut with its dim candles, and at the figure wrapped in a sack. He took his boots out of his pockets. They were in shreds.

"Bye, bruvver," he said. He put the boots next to the sack, and slipped away.

He had no idea where to go now. He knew he couldn't live in the crates again, not without Shrimps. He shivered in a shop doorway until he saw policemen coming, then darted across the road. It was easy to hide in the darkness between the lamps, but he couldn't stay there all night. It was too cold to stand still, and too muddy to sit down. For the first time he wondered where all the other street boys slept. He remembered what one of the boys had said:

'He ain't got the strength to climb up with us, so we brought him here.'

Climb? Jim thought. Climb where?

He wandered round the back of the crates, round behind the market stalls. Nothing. Nothing to see. Yet he thought he could hear a slight burst of chattering, like the whistlings of starlings. He stood still. The sound was coming from over his head. Then he heard a slight scuffling. He glanced round. No one in sight. He ran to the support wall of the market and heaved himself up, hand over fist, and at last hauled himself on to the roof. He stood up slowly, gazing across at the looped tarpaulin. Everywhere he looked there were black bundles, like little heaps of rags, but as he stood still and let his eyes grow used to the new darkness he could see that those bundles were boys, huddled up for the night on their rooftop home.