

## Chapter 16

### Boy in Pain

Jim lay awake listening to the sounds of laughter that floated down from the *Queen of the North*. He felt very lonely. Clouds had thickened, and the sky was darker than he had ever known it. The night seemed to stretch on for ever.

'I wish I'd got a brother,' he thought. He said it out loud. 'I wish I'd got a brother.' His voice was a tiny, quavering thing. He stood up and shouted. 'I wish I'd got a brother!'

He thought of Tip, sleeping in the workhouse in the snuffling darkness. He thought of Shrimps in a lodging house full of snoring old men. He thought of Josh's son, tucked up in a proper bed with a real mother and sisters.

'You got lots of bruvvers, Jim,' he said to himself, the way Shrimps would have said it. 'Only they ain't around at the moment, is all.'

He pulled his sack round him and fell asleep.

Grimy Nick was laughing softly to himself as he came down the ladder. The sky was the colour of milk. Jim started up out of his slumber, his first thoughts to the fire in the brazier, in case he'd let it go out. Nick tossed a bone to the dog, who leapt on it, growling. Jim held out his hands for his food. Nothing.

'There's work to do soon, such as you've never seen before,' Nick told him. He half-fell down into the hold, sending the packed coals skittling.

Snipe snarled and guzzled over his bone, his paws securing it. Jim could smell the meat on it. 'Tell him, bruvver,' a voice in Jim's head said. 'He's forgot you. Tell him!'

'Nick,' Jim whispered.

Nick snorted and turned over.

Hunger gave Jim courage. 'Did you forget my food?'

With one rapid movement Nick tossed away his blanket. He hauled himself up out of the hold and onto the boards.

'Forgot, did I?'

'I think so, Nick.'

'Here's food for you.' Nick bent down and snatched the bone from the dog's jaws. Snipe's teeth snapped down on it and Nick kicked him off. He grabbed Jim's hand and thrust the boy's face into the bone, so his mouth was pressed against it. He could smell the dog's breath on it. Jim squirmed to get away. The dog sprang and fixed his teeth round Jim's hand, and as Jim tore it away Snipe bit again, worrying and snapping, till with a shout of laughter Nick flung the bone across the boards. The dog pounded after it and lay guarding it, growling, his eyes fixed on Jim.

‘There’s food for you, if you want it,’ Nick said. He stood with his arms on his hips, watching Jim. The boy sank back on his heels again.

‘No time for eating now, nor sleeping.’ Nick lifted up his head, sniffing the air. ‘I reckon we’ve got the tide.’

With the hold full of coal the lighter lumbered slowly back upstream. Nick stood working the oar, staring ahead of him, yelling sometimes to other lightermen as they drew close. The whole fleet of rivercraft was moving home at the same time, like flies swarming.

It wasn’t until they were in sight of the wharves again, and all the bridges and domes and towers of the city, that Nick leaned round to look at Jim.

‘You done all right,’ he told him, and taking a handful of scraps of meat out of his pocket he threw them at him, laughing at Jim’s surprised face.

But Jim didn’t dive for them, as Nick expected. Nothing would have tempted him to pick up the meat. He wanted to kick the meat overboard into the river, but he couldn’t bring himself to admit that he had even seen it. Better to pretend it wasn’t there at all. He turned away, fists clenched, and thought of the big bowl of meat Nick would have eaten on the *Queen of the North*, with gravy and mustard and hot potatoes. He could have called to Jim to come up with him and share it with him. Instead he had shoved the left-overs of his plate into the grimy dust of his pocket. Jim hated him for it. When he turned round again he saw that the dog had eaten the lot.

‘You wouldn’t have ate it anyway, bruvver,’ the voice in his head muttered. ‘Would have stuck in your gullet.’

Nick stood with his hands in his pockets, whistling quietly and watching the dog. ‘Well, you’re an odd one,’ he said to Jim. ‘I don’t knows if I understands you.’

‘Don’t answer him, Bruv,’ Jim thought. ‘If he can’t be bovered to give you proper food, don’t you be bovered to talk, see? Just pretend he ain’t there at all.’

As soon as the *Lily* had nosed into the wharf outside Cockerill’s coalyard Jim and Nick set to work. White-face lowered down the basket and they filled it up, watched it being winched up to the chute, waited for it to come down empty again. Jim knew the pattern of his life now, filling up the hold of the *Lily* from the big coal-carrying ships that waited outside the port, bringing it upriver to the warehouse, emptying it so it could be taken by horse and cart to the people of London. Backwards and forwards, filling and emptying, shovelling and piling, day after day after day. And never a word spoken between him and Nick. He would sleep on his hard bunk every night of his life. He would eat when Nick thought fit to feed him. He was Nick’s slave, and he was treated worse than an animal.

‘I wish I was Snipe,’ he thought sometimes, when Nick fondled the dog’s head and fed him tasty scraps from his pocket.

Once or twice when they moored up to the *Queen of the North* again Nick showed by a jerk of his head that Jim was to follow him on board. Jim looked round eagerly for Josh, but he never saw

him again. 'He got a job on shore,' one of the men told him. 'Wanted to see more of his family. Said he'd met a little boy who made him long to be at home again.'

Jim didn't like the rough company of the men any more than Josh had done. Their voices were loud and boastful, but at least they were a change from the silent, brooding company of Grimy Nick, and he was sure of food when he went on board. But he never again thought of hiding on deck and sailing off with them. If he did the men would find him and take him back to Nick, he was sure of that. There was no escape, ever.

But Jim did try to escape one night. He had been living with Nick nearly a year before his chance came.

There was a sudden storm that was so wild that they made straight for the river bank instead of heading back to the wharves. The river rolled and heaved like a boneless beast, tossing the *Lily* as if she was made of matchsticks. Jim clung to the side, weak and afraid, but as soon as they pulled in and tied up to land he felt better. Nick and Snipe settled again into sleep.

Jim heard the faint sound of bells. Through the slant of rain he could see a village in the distance, and a church tower. He could run to it for shelter. Maybe the storm was making such a noise that Nick and Snipe wouldn't even hear him going.

'Come on, bruvver!' the voice in his head urged. 'You can do it! You can do it!'

Jim slid over to the coamings. They were awash with rain. He swung one leg over the edge, then the other, and just as he was about to lever himself up to jump his arm caught on the oar, which had been propped up across the boat. It slid down with a sickening thud. Snipe's ears jerked up to listening points. Immediately into the storm were tossed strange pieces of sound – the barking of a dog, the shouting of a man, and the crying of a boy in pain.

'Thought yer'd try it, did yer?' Nick bellowed. He picked Jim up and threw him down into the hold of the *Lily* on top of the coals. 'Yer'll know better next time!' He slid the hatch boards shut over Jim's head.

Jim lay in the dark, nursing his leg where Snipe had ripped his flesh. It was hot and wet with blood. He had never known such pain in his life before.