

Chapter 18

You can do it, Bruvver

It was autumn. The procession on the river was headed by a washing-tub drawn by six geese. Men swam behind it. All the barges and lighters were decorated with flags and flowers and white rags that fluttered like the feathers of swans. Some of the men were being rolled down the river in barrels, to hoots of laughter. The banks were lined with watchers all dressed in bright rags and shiny coats, playing bugles and beating drums. A family of beggars was singing hymns, and the tiny voices of the children piped like birds. It was the miners' pageant, and the *Lily* drifted along in the procession, freed from work for the day. Nick and his fellows shouted to each other and sang.

Drawn up among the watching people were some painted wagons. Two clowns stood with mournful faces, holding up a green and crimson banner. 'Juglini's Champion Circus', Nick read out.

'What's a circus?' Jim wanted to ask, but wouldn't. The showman's family came out of their wagon to watch. The man and the woman each carried a child and older children danced round them. A boy of Jim's age did a handstand and waggled his feet at the barges. Jim waved to him and the boy dropped down, waved, and swung up again.

'See,' the voice in his head said. 'Another bruvver, Jim. They're all over the place, ain't they?'

For a time, as the procession sailed past, the circus boy ran alongside the *Lily*; waving and shouting. 'Come to the circus! Come to the circus!' he shouted, then fell back as the crowd became thicker. Jim cupped his hands round his mouth. 'I will! I will!' he shouted back. They were nearing another village. Jim stood up and strained to keep the boy in sight. He could hear the circus band, the roll of drums, the tooting of trumpets and trombones. He imagined he could still hear the boy's voice.

The main point of the pageant seemed to be for the coalmen and lightermen to pull up at every village and visit the local ale-house, and get as drunk as possible on their pageant money. Grimy Nick lurched and stumbled with the rest of them, and his singing became louder and more slurred. He stowed his long oar inside the hold and laughed down at Jim's excited face.

'Want to go pageanting, do you?'

'Please Nick ... Can I?'

Nick whistled in his scornful way and stumped off. Jim watched him go, hating him. He crouched down by Snipe, fingering the rope round his neck. Night was settling down on the water, though it was still warm. Families were gathered on the banks, and children were being called together by their mothers. They eyed him curiously as they went past, and whispered to each other, their hands across their mouths. Jim knew they were laughing at him.

'What are you doing here,' the voice in his head asked him, 'tied up like an animal, eating and sleeping like an animal, no one to talk to? Time you went. Time you skipped away, bruvver, and no mistake.'

He stood up, and Snipe snarled at him. Jim thought about his lucky chance at the workhouse when he had decided to escape with the carpets, how he had leapt at it, how well it had worked. If he had managed that time, he'd manage again. His last attempt had been reckless; he'd jumped without thinking. He would be mad to think of taking a chance like that again. But this time his thoughts were calm and steady. He wasn't going to leap at anything. But he was going to get away. He knew that.

By the time night was out, he knew, Grimy Nick would be drunker than he'd ever been before. It was Jim's perfect chance. He knew exactly what to do.

While he waited, he lowered himself down into the hold and found some big heavy chunks of coal. He carried them up on to the boards and hid them. Then he found a small, sharp piece. He ran his hand along the edge of it. Just right.

He laid the boards down across the coamings till they covered the hold completely, except for the small hatch board. Then he took the piece of sharp coal and rubbed it against the rope that was round his neck. It seemed to take hours. He thought the rope would never begin to fray, but all at once he felt the strands fluffing up and beginning to weaken. His wrist was aching. If Nick came while he was doing it, he thought, he would just put his head down and pretend to sleep. It was only a matter of time now. The rope had to give. Bursts of sound erupted on the river and from the village. Jim worked on, scraping and scraping at the rope. It had to give.

At last he was through. The last slice of the coal cut his neck as the final strand snapped, but he didn't care. He held the frayed end in his hand and edged up to Snipe, careful not to startle him. The dog opened his yellow eyes and growled.

'It's all right Snipe. It's all right.'

He forced himself to stroke the dog's matted fur. Again Snipe growled. Jim kept on stroking him and talking to him softly, all the time listening out for Grimy Nick. At last he judged the dog to be calm enough. He slipped the rope round Snipe's neck and secured it. Good.

Then he heard Nick coming back, singing and stumbling along the river bank. It didn't matter. Jim had a plan for that. When Nick lumbered on deck he raised the lantern and saw his boy and his dog sleeping side by side, the boy with his hand on the dog's neck. He was touched by their peacefulness. He tried to creep past them, lost his footing; and tumbled into his hold. Jim and Snipe both strained their ears, listening. Almost at once Nick's breathing steadied into a rumbling snore.

For a long time Jim waited. Onshore, all the voices had quietened down. The hens and dogs, the cows and pigs in all the backyards of all the villages had settled in for the night.

Jim stirred slowly. Snipe half woke. Jim sat for a bit and then sidled his way to the hold. He watched the dog till it sank its head back into its paws.

'Come on. You can do it, bruvver. You can.'

And he knew that he could.

Slowly, slowly, he stood up, took hold of the hatch cover, and lowered it down. The dog slept on. One by one, and taking what seemed to be an eternity over it, he lifted up the big chunks of coal that he had brought up earlier and, without making a sound, placed them on the hatch. He worked slowly and steadily, and still the dog slept. Then he straightened himself up. Nothing moved. Not a sound.

He crept over to the side of the deck, glanced quickly round at the dog, and with one swift movement rolled himself off the lighter and on to the bank. He righted himself, and began to run.