

Chapter 25

The Ragged School

Next morning, early, he waited for the coffee woman to bring her cart. When he saw her dragging it up through the mud he ran to meet her.

‘He’s worse,’ he panted. ‘Can you come to him?’

‘I can’t leave my stall,’ she told him. ‘If I don’t give breakfast to the early workers I’ve lost my best trade.’

‘If you tell me where that school is, I’ll go there.’

‘It’s round about. Over there somewhere. Somewhere round Ernest Street.’ The woman waved her arm vaguely. She was sorry enough for the boy, but there were plenty more where he came from. Skinny, helpless sparrows. The streets were full of them. If she helped one, they’d all be round for help, and she had her own children to feed. If she didn’t earn enough to keep her rent paid, they’d all be out in the streets. All in the same state as Jim. It didn’t bear thinking about. She had to keep going.

Jim ran off. Some of the street boys shouted after him, ‘How’s Shrimps?’ but Jim didn’t even bother to tell them. No child could help Shrimps now.

‘Know where the Ragged School is?’ he asked one of them, a crippled boy called Davey, who was older than most of them. Davey shook his head.

‘I’ve heard of it,’ he said. ‘There was a man with a donkey used to come round wanting boys to go to his school. We used to chuck tomatoes at him, though. School!’ He spat out of the corner of his mouth. ‘Don’t trust them places, I don’t.’

Jim managed to coax some milk from a dairy woman and he ran back to Shrimps with it, moistening the boy’s lips. His hair was dark with sweat, but he was cold.

‘Please let them take you to the hospital, Shrimps,’ he said, but Shrimps shook his head.

‘I’m all right here. Proper little palace, this crate.’

Davey and some of the younger boys came to see Shrimps, and Jim left him to them and went off again. At last, when it was nearly dark, he came across a group of children, brothers and sisters they must have been, they were so alike. They were coming up a back alleyway together, and some of them were clutching slates. They were dressed in rags but they obviously had a home to go to.

‘Have you been to the Ragged School?’ Jim asked them.

One of them nodded.

‘Is there a doctor there?’

The children looked at each other. ‘That Barnie bloke said he was a doctor, didn’t he?’

‘That’s right. Only ‘e don’t give us medicine, ‘e gives us hymns!’

One of the children started singing and the others giggled.

‘Where is it?’

The older child ran back with Jim and pointed out a long, shed-like building. ‘There it is,’ he said. ‘And there’s that Barnie bloke, just coming out now.’

Jim raced down the street. The man locked the door of the shed and began to move quickly in the other direction.

‘Doctor Barnie!’ Jim shouted out, but his voice was drowned out by the rumble of carriage wheels. He pressed himself against the wall to let the carriage pass. The doctor raised his hand as the carriage approached and the driver reined in his horse. Jim started running again. ‘Doctor!’ he shouted.

But the man hadn’t heard him. He climbed up into the carriage and was away before Jim reached it. Mud splattered up into Jim’s face.

When he got back to the crates behind the market the other boys had gone. Someone had placed a small candle in a bowl, and its soft light was some kind of comfort in the dark. Jim crawled in beside Shrimps.

‘It’s going to be all right now,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve found a doctor, and he’s coming to see you tomorrow.’

But even as he spoke, the words were like stones in his throat. He reached out and felt for the boy’s hand. It was cold.