Chapter 27

Barnie

There was no comfort there. At night the wind seemed to crack round the boys like a whip. When it rained they would wake up soaked to the skin. It would be days before they dried off, sometimes. Jim used to lie huddled up, looking at the stars and listening to the boys' breathing. 'This ain't home,' he said to himself.

When morning came with its sooty mist the boys would roll down the wall to be on the alert before the police were about, trying to earn a few pennies to buy themselves a night in a lodging house. They ate what they could, grabbing a bit of cheese here or a crust of pie there, and if they were caught they were hauled off before a magistrate and sent to the workhouse. Jim wasn't as fast as the other boys because of his bad leg, and the only job he could think of doing was skipping for the theatre queues, which made a few people smile, anyway. The other boys worked in gangs when they were stealing, passing the scarf or purse from one to the other so rapidly that it was impossible to tell what was happening. To Jim they were like a big family helping each other. But he wasn't one of them. They tended to leave him on his own.

One day, when he woke up drenched to the skin again, coughing and shaking with cold, he knew he'd had enough.

'If you go on like this, Jim, you'll be where Shrimps is,' he told himself. 'There must be summat else, bruvver.'

It was then that he remembered the Ragged School. He thought of the long shed that the school was held in.

'Somewhere to keep warm,' he thought. 'And that Barnie bloke looked all right. He won't hit you, he won't.'

He decided to give it a try, just for a day. He wandered round until he found the shed again. Children were crowding round the door when he arrived, waiting to be let in. The shed was a big room with boards laid on top of soil for a floor. The walls and rafters had been painted a dingy white, and there were bars across the windows. There was a good fire burning in a grate. Jim sidled up to it. There must have been over a hundred children there. They sat in rows, but there were so many of them that some of them were on the floor.

Jim gazed round him, listening to their chatter, and to the way it faded down when the teacher stood up to talk to them in his gentle, lilting voice. He was a tall, slim man with straight brown hair and fluffy side whiskers and spectacles. Jim recognized him straight away as the man Lame Betsy had taken him to listen to in the back alley. He remembered shouting out at him, and how some of the boys had chucked mud balls at him. And he remembered the man's sad eyes. He ducked his head down, worried now in case he would be recognized and thrown out into the cold.

Yet he could see that the children weren't afraid of the man. They didn't flinch away from him as if they expected him to hit them at any minute. They called him 'Teacher', and they seemed to be happy to do whatever he told them, though they murmured and giggled among themselves as if they couldn't concentrate for very long. The teacher man didn't seem to mind. Occasionally he looked at Jim, but always Jim put his head down or glanced quickly away.

At the end of the day the man asked all the children to stand up and pray with him, and again Jim looked away. He was the only child still sitting, but the man didn't seem to mind. They finished off the day with a hymn, which all the children yelled out cheerfully before they were sent off home.

Still Jim sat by the fire, hoping not to be noticed. The Barnie man finished straightening up the benches and wiping the board, and at last he came over to Jim. Jim clenched his hands together, staring down at them, ready to run if the man hit him. But he didn't. Instead, he sat down next to Jim and warmed his hands by the fire.

'It's time for me to blow the lights out,' he said, in his soft voice.

Jim didn't move.

'Come on, my lad,' the Barnie man said. 'It's time to go home now.'

Jim clenched and unclenched his fists. The gentleness in the man's voice made his throat ache.

The man stood up. 'Come on now. You'd better go home at once.'

Jim tried to make his voice come. 'Please, sir. Let me stay.'

'Stay?' The man stared down at him. 'What for? I'm going to put the lights out and lock the door. It's quite time for a young boy like you to go home and get to bed. What do you want to stop for?'

'Please, sir,' said Jim, not looking at the man but at the flames in the fire, which made his eyes smart and blurry.

'You ought to go home at once,' Barnie insisted. 'Your mother will know the other boys have gone. She'll wonder what kept you so late.'

'I ain't got no mother.'

'Your father, then.'

'I ain't got no father.'

Barnie was getting impatient, Jim could see that. It was almost as if he didn't believe him. 'Where are your friends, then? Where do you live?'

'Ain't got no friends. Don't live nowhere.'

Barnie stared at him. He walked away from the fire and back to it again, then went to the desk. He sat down on his chair and stayed with his fingers drumming across the flat of the desk-top, like the patter of rain on a roof. Jim wondered if he was angry with him.

'It's the truth, sir,' he said anxiously, 'I ain't telling you no lies.' He spoke in the whiney voice the other street boys used to adults.

‘Tell me,’ the man said at last. ‘How many boys are there like you? Sleeping out in the streets?’

‘Heaps,’ said Jim. ‘More than I can count.’

It was Barnie’s turn now to stare into the fire, as if there were secrets in its flames, or answers to great puzzles. He was as still and quiet as if he had gone to sleep, and Jim kept still too, afraid to break into the man’s thinking. The only sound was the spitting of the logs, and outside, the bleak voice of the wind.

‘Now,’ the man said, very slowly, like someone creeping up on a bird in case they frightened it away. ‘If I am willing to give you some hot coffee and a place to sleep in, will you take me to where some of these other boys are?’

Jim looked sideways at him. ‘You wouldn’t tell the police?’

‘No,’ said Barnie. ‘I wouldn’t tell the police.’

‘All right,’ said Jim. ‘I’ll take you.’

It was some time later that they arrived at the high wall of the market. Jim stopped, afraid again. What if Barnie told the police about them, and sent all the boys to the workhouse? But if he didn’t show Barnie, he wouldn’t get the hot meal and the shelter to sleep in. He didn’t know what to do. Barnie seemed to understand and just stood waiting and watching while Jim glanced from side to side, afraid to be seen by anyone in the man’s company. He had almost made up his mind to run away and leave him standing there when the man said, ‘What’s your name?’

‘Jim, sir.’ Out it came, and it sounded such a special thing. ‘That’s it now,’ Jim thought to himself. ‘That’s the last thing I’ve got, and I’ve just give it away.’

‘Where are they, Jim?’

‘Up there, sir.’ Jim pointed to the roof of the market shed.

‘There? And how am I to get up there?’

‘I’ll show you.’ Jim made light work of it. There were well-worn marks on the bricks where the mortar had fallen or been picked away. Jim shinned up quickly and then leaned over the edge, holding down a stick. Barnie grabbed it and heaved himself up, and stood shakily, brushing his clothes and his grazed hands. He held up his lantern.

And there, all round him, lay the boys, curled up in their rags of clothes, sleeping like dogs.