

Chapter 23

Shrimps Again

Everything was growing familiar, yet everything was wrong. He was near the river, near the wharves and the warehouses, but the houses had gone. Everywhere he looked men were hammering and digging, lifting loads of rubble onto carts, heaving great planks of wood down to the water's edge. Skeletons of houses crumbled into piles of dust. And Rosie's cottage, and the boatshed where he had first watched the river, had gone.

Jim stared in disbelief at the wreckage around him. It was as if the whole city was being destroyed in order to build a new one.

'What's happening?' he asked someone, a woman who reminded him of Rosie, with fat arms and a brown shawl wrapped over her head and shoulders.

'They're building a big new dock here, for all the boats,' she told him, never taking her eyes off the workmen. 'Wunnerful, ain't it! Wunnerful. They say there's more than two thousand men working here. Fancy! I never knew there was two thousand men in the whole world!' She laughed, a coarse, grating laugh.

'But what happened to all the houses?' Jim asked her. 'And all the people who lived here? Where's Rosie?'

The woman laughed again and rubbed her arms. 'Rosie? I know a dozen Rosies, and they've all lost their homes now. Don't know where any of the Rosies have gone. Pastures new, I hope!'

Jim wandered away from her. She was so fascinated by the builders that she would stand and watch all day, there was no doubt of that, her fat arms folded with patient curiosity, her weight shifting from one leg to the other.

'You're on your own now, bruvver, and no mistake. You ain't got no one.'

Nothing was familiar to Jim any more. He'd lost his bearings. He'd been so used to the slow journey of the *Lily* and the silent company of Grimy Nick that he'd forgotten what it was like to be in the city with its mucky streets and the constant push and stench of the crowds. He wandered round, hoping in vain to see Rosie. He did see one woman selling seafood and he ran up to her to ask her if he could help.

'Help me?' she laughed down at him. 'What can you do to help me, little chap?'

'I could dance for you, and shout out, "Shrimps! Whelks!"' he told her. 'It would bring all the people round to buy from you. I used to do it for Rosie.'

'And as soon as they come, you'd pick their pockets and we'd both be done for it,' the woman said. 'Not likely. Clear off.'

Jim moved away from her. Then he started to skip, glancing at her to make sure she was watching, a little, helpless dance. He was sad and tired and hungry. He didn't feel like skipping at all. His leg

hurt. He felt wretched, deep inside himself, black with wretchedness. The woman shook her head at him and walked away.

'Give us some shrimps, lady?' the street boys called after her in their whining voices. She ignored them.

Jim sank down on to his heels. One of the boys hunkered down next to him.

'You remind me of Skippin' Jim,' he said. 'He used to come round 'ere.'

Jim looked at him. 'You don't know a boy called Shrimps, do you?'

'Course I do!' the boy laughed. 'Everyone knows Shrimps.'

'Know where he is?' Jim asked.

The boy jumped up and darted off, and Jim followed as best as he could, dodging between barrows and stalls right round the back of the market-place. It was dusk, and the stalls had their red wax candles glowing among their fruits and fishes. The little boy snatched at some apples on his way past one stall, and so did Jim. They grabbed out at cheeses and pies, and the child took off his cap and stuffed it full with his takings. Jim's spirits were up. He could hardly believe he was really going to see Shrimps again, after all this time. He knew for sure, as he ran along, that the voice that had been in his head all these months had been Shrimps's.

'Wait till I tell you everything I've done, bruvver!' he thought as he ran. 'Make your ears tingle, it will.'

At the back of the market there were some piled up wooden crates that had held tea from India and spices from Zanzibar, and the little boy wriggled his way through them. He stopped by an upturned crate that was filled with straw. Lying on top of the straw, deep in the shadows, was a thin, pale ghost of a boy, a bundle of bones dressed in dirty rags.

'Here's Shrimps,' the child told Jim. 'Only he's badly now. Awful badly.'

He emptied his cap of the stolen food. 'Here y'are Shrimps,' he said. 'Some bits to eat and that, like I promised. Only I can't stop, there's work to do. But someone's come to see you.' He motioned to Jim to take his place and ran off again.

Jim crawled between the crates.

'Shrimps?' Jim said. He felt awkward and shy. 'It's Skippin' Jim. Remember?' The boy didn't answer. Jim could hear the rasping of his breath.

'You all right?' He could hardly see him, except for the orange tufts of his hair sticking up above his white face. His fingers fluttered like pale moths, edging and fumbling as he pulled his sack towards his face. Jim knelt down and broke open an orange with his thumbs, squeezing the juice into Shrimps's mouth.

'When you're better,' he said, 'we'll go round together, like you said.'

He kept his voice bright, but inside he was deeply afraid. He sat for a long time listening to the way Shrimps's breath rasped and shivered in his throat. The market sounds clamoured into the night,

and long before they died down Jim crawled into the teachest next to Shrimps to try to keep him warm.