

'Will we go back to our cottage?' Jim asked.

Lizzie shook her head. 'You know we can't go there, Jim. We had to move out when Father died.'

'Eat your pie,' said Emily. 'She wants us to enjoy it.'

But the pie had grown cold before the children finished it. They pulled their rag-pile close to the hearth and curled up together, Jim between Emily and Lizzie. In all the rooms of the house they could hear people muttering and yawning and scratching. Outside in the street dogs were howling, and carriage wheels trundled on the slushy roads.

Jim lay awake. He could hear how his mother's breath rattled in her throat, and he knew by the way she tossed and turned that she wasn't asleep. He could tell by the way his sisters lay taut and still each side of him that they were awake too, listening through the night to its noises, longing for day to come.

The Stick Man

They must have slept in the end. The next thing Jim heard was a stamping of heavy feet on the stairs and the rapping of a cane on the floor outside their room.

'The Stick Man!' whispered Emily.

Before the children could sit up the door was flung open and in strode the owner of the house, stamping snow off his boots. He swung off his cape, scattering snowflakes round the room, and as he shook it into the hearth the white embers spat.

'I did knock,' Mr Spink barked. 'But when lie-abeds don't answer then lie-abeds must be got up.'

Emily and Lizzie scrambled to their feet at once. Jim would have crawled under the covers but his sisters hauled him up between them. The children stood in a limp row in front of their mother.

Mr Spink pushed the damp, yellowy strings of his hair behind his ears and peered over their heads at her. His breath came in little wheezing gasps.

'Is she dead?'

'No, sir, she ain't dead,' said Emily, fright catching at her throat.

'Sick, then?'

'No, sir, she ain't sick, neither,' Emily said.

Jim looked at her in surprise. It seemed to him that his mother was very sick, and had been for days.

'Then if she ain't dead nor sick what's she doing down there? Lying under the covers like a grand lady with nothing to do! Hiding is she? Counting all her money?' Mr Spink pushed the children out of the way and lifted up the rag pile with his cane.

The children's mother had her eyes closed, though the lids fluttered slightly. In the daylight Jim could see how pale she was. He felt for Lizzie's hand.

'Leave her, sir. She's tired out, she's been working that hard,' Emily said. 'She'll be off out to work again soon.'

Jim could tell by the way her voice shook how afraid she was, and how brave she was to talk back to Mr Spink like that.

'Well, if she's been working, she can pay her rent, and we'll all be happy. Up you get, woman!' With the silver tip of his stick he lifted the rags clean away from her.

Lizzie knelt down and helped her mother to sit up.

'Where's your money, Mrs Jarvis?' Mr Spink thrust his cane under his arm and stood with his hands in his pockets, jingling the loose coins there like little bells, as if they made sweet music to his ears. He saw the purse bag on the floor and peered down at it. He leaned down towards Jim, who backed away from his wheezy breath.

'I'm an old man, and I don't bend. Pick up that purse for me, sonny.'

Jim bent down and picked it up. He held it out at arm's length for Mr Spink to take, but the man rolled his eyes at him.

'Is it empty, sonny? Empty?' he said, as if he couldn't believe it. He saw the pie cloth in the hearth, with the crumbs of pastry that the children had left, and the stain of gravy on it. He started back as if the sight of it amazed him and glared round at them all.

'Did you eat pie last night?'

The girls were silent.

'Did you, sonny?'

'Yes,' Jim whispered.

'Was it a lovely meat pie, all hot and full of gravy?'

'I don't know.' Jim's throat was as tight as if he still had a piece of pastry stuck there, refusing to be swallowed. He looked at Emily, who had her lips set in a firm line, and at Lizzie, who was sitting now with her head bent so her hair dangled across her face, hiding it. He looked at his mother, white and quiet.

'I bought it,' he burst out. 'It was Ma's last shilling, but I bought the pie.'

He heard Emily give out a little sigh beside him.

Mr Spink nodded.

'No money.' He nodded again, and for a moment Jim thought he'd done the right thing to tell him that the pie had cost him Ma's last shilling. Mr Spink put out his sweaty hand and took the purse from Jim. He pushed his fingers into it as though it was a glove puppet, and then he dropped it on the floor and

jabbed at it with his stick. He took out his silk handkerchief and flapped it open, wiped his hair and his face with it and then had a good blow.

'Oh dear,' he said. He blew his nose long and hard. Jim stole a glance at Emily but she wouldn't look at him. 'No money, no rent.' Mr Spink blew his nose again. 'No rent, no room, Mrs Jarvis.'

'We've nowhere else to go,' said Jim's mother, so quietly that Mr Spink had to stop blowing his nose and bend towards her to listen.

'Ma,' said Jim. 'Couldn't we go back to the cottage? I liked it better there.'

Mr Spink gave a shout of laughter, and for a moment again Jim thought he'd said the right thing.

'Your cottage! When you came crawling to me twelve months ago you was glad of this place, make no mistake about it. But if you like a cottage better, find yourself a father, and let him pay for one. Can you do that?'

Jim shook his head. He swallowed hard. His throat filled up again.

'We're quite happy here,' Jim's mother said. 'Give us a little longer, and we'll pay our rent. The girls can help me.'

Mr Spink flapped his handkerchief again and stuffed it in his pocket.

'I've made up my mind, Mrs Jarvis. I've a family wants to move in here tonight. There's eight of them - don't they deserve a home, now? And what's more - they can pay me for it!'

He swung his steaming cape back over his shoulders and strode out of the room, and they listened in

silence to the sound of his cane, tap-tap-tapping on the floor outside the next room. Jim watched with a cold dread as his sisters moved slowly round the room, gathering up their belongings. They had no furniture, though they had seemed to have plenty when they piled it high on the cart the day they left their cottage. But it had all been sold, piece by piece, and what hadn't been good enough to sell had been broken up and used as firewood.

'Get your horse, Jim,' Emily said, indicating the wooden horse that Jim's father had carved for him two Christmases ago. 'And Lizzie's boots. You might as well have them. They're too small for Lizzie now.'

He picked them up. The boots were too big for him to wear yet, but he folded his arms over them and stuck the wooden horse between them. The children stood by the doorway clutching their bundles, while Mrs Jarvis tied her bonnet and fastened her shawl round herself. She moved slowly and quietly, as if all her thoughts were wrapped up deep inside her and she was afraid of breaking them. At last she was ready. She looked round the bare room. The snow had stopped, and sunlight came watery through the window.

'Ma . . .' said Emily.

Mrs Jarvis looked down at her daughter. She was pale and strained. 'I'm coming,' she said.

'But where can we go?'

'I'll find us a home,' her mother said. 'Don't worry.'

Rosie and Judd

Mrs Jarvis used up a lot of her remaining strength that morning. She led the children away from the slums where they had lived for the past year and down street after street until they came to a much quieter part of town, where the houses were big and stately. She leaned against some railings to rest. Emily sat down next to her, anxious for her mother.

'Now you've got to be good,' Mrs Jarvis said to them. 'I'm going to take you to the house where I used to work, only you must be good. Promise me now?'

'Ma! Course we'll be good,' Emily said.

Mrs Jarvis nodded. 'Yes. You're always good,' she said. 'That's one thing I did right, anyway.'

In the window behind them a finch sang in a tiny cage. It only had room to hop from the floor of its cage to a little perch, and down again, hop, hop, hop, up and down.

'Listen to that bird,' said Jim.

'They only sing when they're on their own,' Emily told him. 'He's singing for a friend.'

'Poor little thing,' said Lizzie. 'Trapped in a cage.'

'We'd better go on,' their mother said. 'I'm going to take you to see the only friend I've got in the world. Rosie, she's called. You've heard me talk about Rosie at the big house?'

The children nodded. It was a long time since their mother had worked in his lordship's kitchen, but she still had stories to tell them about it.

'And if Rosie can't help us,' she sighed, 'nobody can.' Emily helped her up again and they moved slowly on, pausing as the carriages swept past them.

When they reached the big house at last, Mrs Jarvis was exhausted and sat down on the steps to rest again. The children gazed up at the tall building.

'Is this where we're going to live?' asked Lizzie.

'It's too grand for us, Lizzie!' said Emily. Even though she was only ten, she knew that families like theirs didn't end up in houses like these.

Jim's eyes were fixed on something he could see on the top steps, just by the front door. It was an iron boot-scraper, and it was in the shape of a dog's head. The huge snapping mouth of the dog was wide open, so people could scrape the mud off their boots in its teeth. 'I'd never put my foot in there,' he said. 'Not even with Lizzie's boots on, I wouldn't. It'd come snarling down at me and bite my toes right off.'

When their mother was rested she picked up her bundle again and led the children down some steps to the basement of the house. She sank against the door, all strength gone.

'Be good,' she murmured to them. She lifted the knocker.

They heard rapid footsteps coming. Mrs Jarvis

quickly bent down and kissed both the girls on the tops of their heads.

'God bless you both,' she said.

Emily looked up at her, suddenly afraid. She was about to ask her mother what was happening when the door was opened by a large, floury woman in a white pinafore. She had the sleeves of her dress rolled up so her arms bulged out of them. Her hands and wrists were covered in dough and as she flung up her arms in greeting Jim could see that her elbows were red and powdery.

'Annie Jarvis!' the woman gasped. 'I never thought to see you again!' She hugged her, covering her with bits of dough. 'You ain't come looking for work, have you, after all this time? Judd's going spare, she is, looking for a new cook. She's got me at it, and my dough's like a boulder - you could build cathedrals out of it, and they wouldn't ever fall down! She'll soon put me back on serving upstairs!'

While she was talking she hauled Mrs Jarvis and the children into the kitchen and set stools for them round the stove, balancing herself on a high chair and scooping up more flour. She pushed aside the big mixing bowl and sat with her elbows on the table, beaming across at them, and then her smile changed. She reached over to Mrs Jarvis and put her hand on her forehead.

'Hot!' Her voice was soft with concern. 'You're so hot, Annie, and white as snow.' She looked at the children, and at the bundles of clothes and belongings that they were still clutching. 'You've been turned out, haven't you?'

Mrs Jarvis nodded.

'You got anywhere?'

'No.'

'And you're not fit for work. You know that? There's no work left in you, Annie Jarvis.'

A bell jangled over the door, and Rosie jumped up and ran to the stove.

'Lord, that's for the coffees, and I ain't done them. Anyone comes down, and you duck under the table quick, mind,' she said to the children. The bell rang again.

'All right, all right,' she shouted. 'His lordship can wait five minutes, can't he, while I talk to my friend here?'

She glanced at Mrs Jarvis again, her face puckered in frowns. 'My sister, as good as. No, he can't wait. His lordship waits for nothing.'

As she was talking she was ladling coffee and milk into jugs and setting them on a tray. She rubbed her floury hands on the pinafore, took it off and changed into a clean one, and as a quick afterthought she poured some of the coffee into a cup and edged it across the table towards Mrs Jarvis.

'Go on,' she urged. 'Take it for all the good bread you've baked for him.' She ran to the door with her tray rattling in her hand and paused to pull a face at the bell as it jangled again. 'There's only one home left to you now, Annie. It's the House, ain't it, heaven help you. The workhouse!'

As soon as Rosie had left the kitchen and gone upstairs with her tray, Jim slid off his stool and ran

to his mother. She sipped at her coffee, holding the cup with both hands.

'We ain't going to the workhouse, Ma?' Emily asked her.

The children had heard terrifying stories about workhouses. Old people spoke of them with fear and hate as if they were worse than hell on earth. They'd heard that people who went there sometimes had to stay for the rest of their lives. People died in there. Some people slept out in the streets and the fields rather than go to the workhouse. The two girls sat in silent dread each side of their mother.

'Help Rosie out with her bread, Emily,' Mrs Jarvis suggested, her voice steady now, and stronger. 'It'd be a good turn that she'd appreciate, and his lordship would too!'

Emily did as she was told. She washed her hands in the jug of water on the side and then poured some of the frothing yeast into the bowl of flour. A few minutes later Rosie came down. She put her finger to her lips and pointed up the stairs.

'I've asked Judd to come!' she mouthed.

There was the rustle of a long skirt on the stairs, and the housekeeper came in, stern and brisk. Jim tried to slide under the table but she stopped him with her booted foot.

She came straight to Mrs Jarvis and stood with her hands on her hips, looking down at her. 'Rosie tells me you're in a bad way, Annie Jarvis,' she said. 'And I must say, you look it.'

'I haven't come to make trouble, Judd,' Mrs Jarvis said. 'And I'm sorry if I've interrupted the work. I've

only come to say goodbye to you and Rosie, because you've always been so kind to me.'

'If we've been kind to you it's because you've always done your work well, and that's what matters,' Judd sniffed. She looked over Emily's shoulder as the girl dolloped her dough onto the table and pushed her hands into it to knead it. Rosie dodged behind her, her hands clasped together, her face anxious. It was as if Emily was performing some kind of magic, and they were afraid to break the spell, the way the three women watched her in silence.

'Can cook, can you?' Judd asked Emily at last.

'She can cook as well as me,' said Jim's mother. 'And she can scrub the floor for you, and run errands. She can sleep on the kitchen floor and take up no room.'

'She wouldn't need paying,' Rosie said. 'She'd be a saving, Judd.'

Emily flattened and rolled the dough with the heel of her hand, stretching it out and folding it over time and time again, listening with every nerve in her body to what the women behind her were saying.

'But I couldn't do anything for the other girl,' Judd said.

'Judd, I've a sister who's cook at Sunbury. She might give her a chance,' Rosie said. She stood on the tips of her toes like a little girl, her hands clasped behind her back and her eyes pleading. 'If you just let little Lizzie sleep down here with Emily till Sunday, and I can walk her over to Moll's then.'

'I don't want to know they're here, Rosie. If his

lordship finds out, it's every one of us for the workhouse. You know that, don't you? I don't know they're here, these girls.'

Judd swept out, her straight back and her firm stride telling them that she had never seen these girls in the kitchen. They listened to the swing of the door and for the clicking of her boots on the stairs to die away.

'It's the best I can do to help you, Annie,' Rosie said. 'I can't do no more.'

'It's more than I expected,' Mrs Jarvis said. 'At least you've saved my girls from that place.'

She stood up unsteadily. 'We'd better go,' she said to Jim. 'It's not fair to Rosie if we stay here any longer.'

'I'll leave you alone to say your goodbyes, then,' said Rosie. She touched her friend quickly on the shoulder and went into the scullery, her face set in hurt, hard lines. They could hear her in there, banging pots around as if she was setting up an orchestra.

Emily said nothing at all, and that was because she couldn't. Her throat was tight with a band of pain. She couldn't even look at her mother or at Jim, but hugged them quickly and went to sit down at the table, her head in her hands. Lizzie tried to follow her example, but as soon as Mrs Jarvis had put her hand on the door that led up to the street she burst out, 'Take us with you, Ma. Don't leave us here!'

'I can't,' her mother said. She didn't turn round to her. 'Bless you. I can't. This is best for you. God bless you, both of you.'

She took Jim's hand and bundled him quickly out

of the door. Jim daren't look at her. He daren't listen to the sounds that she was making now that they were out into the day. He held his face up to the sky and let the snowflakes flutter against his cheeks to cool him. He had no idea what was going to happen to him or his mother, or whether he would ever see Emily and Lizzie again. He was more frightened than he had ever been in his life.