

*The Workhouse*

Jim and his mother walked for most of that day but they made very slow progress. They rested a bit near a statue of a man on a horse and after a very short distance they had to stop again for Mrs Jarvis to scoop water from a fountain. And on they went, trudging and stopping, trudging and stopping, until Jim's mother could go no further. She put her arms round Jim and pressed her head down on to his shoulder.

'God help you, Jim,' she said.

It seemed to Jim that she was simply tired then of walking and that she decided to go to sleep, there on the pavement. He squatted down beside her, glad of a chance to rest, feeling dizzy and tired himself, and was aware of a worry of voices round him, like flies buzzing. Someone shook him and he opened his eyes.

'Where d'you live?' a voice said.

Jim sat up. Already it was growing dark. There were people round him and some were kneeling by his mother, trying to lift her. 'We used to live in a cottage,' said Jim. 'We had a cow and some hens.'

'Where d'you live now?' It was a different voice, a

bit sharper than the last one. Jim tried to remember the name of the street where they had rented a room in Mr Spink's big house, and couldn't. He couldn't understand why his mother didn't wake up. He looked round for his bundle and saw that his wooden horse had gone. He clutched Lizzie's old boots.

'You haven't got nowhere?' the same voice asked.

Jim shook his head. Someone was doing something to his mother, rubbing her hands, it looked like, dabbing her face with her shawl. 'Get them to the workhouse,' someone said. 'There's nothing we can do for her.'

'I'm not taking them there,' another voice said. 'Prison would be better than there. Tell them we caught the boy stealing, and let them put them both in prison.'

'Someone stole my horse,' Jim heard himself saying. He couldn't keep his voice steady. 'I didn't steal anything.'

'Give him his horse back,' someone else said. 'It's all he's got, ain't it? A pair of boots what's too big for him, and a wooden horse. Give it back.' There was a burst of laughter and some children broke away from the group and ran off.

The next minute there was a shouting from the far end of the street, and the people who had been crouching round Jim and his mother stood up and moved away. He heard other voices and looked up to see two policemen. 'Get up!' one of the policeman ordered. Jim struggled to his feet. 'And you! Get up!' the other one said to Jim's mother. She lay quite still.

The first policeman waved his hand and a boy

with a cart ran up. Between them they lifted Jim's mother onto it. Jim watched, afraid.

'Take 'em to the workhouse,' the policeman said. 'Let them die in there, if they have to.' The boy begun to run then, head down, skidding on the snowy road, weaving the cart in and out of the carriages, and Jim ran anxiously behind. They came at last to a massive stone building with iron railings round it. Weary people slouched there, begging for food. The boy stopped the cart outside the huge iron gates and pulled the bell. Jim could hear it clanging in the distance. At last the gates were pulled open by a porter who glared out at them, his lantern held up high.

'Two more for you,' said the boy. 'One for the infirmary, one for school.' The porter led them into a yard. There on the steps on each side of the main door stood a man and woman, as straight and thin and waxy-faced as a pair of church candles, staring down at them. The boy held out his hand and was given a small coin, and the master and matron bent down and lifted Jim's mother off the cart and carried her into the house. The boy pushed his cart out and the porter clanged the gates shut.

The matron poked her head sharply round the door.

'Get in!' she told Jim, and pulled him through. 'You come and get scrubbed and cropped.'

The doors groaned to. They were in a long corridor, gloomy with candle shadow. In front of them a man trudged with Jim's mother across his shoulder.

'Where's Ma going?' Jim asked, his voice echoing

against the tiles like the whimpering of a tiny, scared animal.

'Where's she going? Infirmary, that's where she's going. Wants feeding and medicine, no doubt, and nothing to buy it with neither.'

'Can I go with her?'

'Go with her? A big strong boy like you? You can not! If you're good, Mr Sissons might let you see her tomorrow. Good, mind! Know what good means?' The matron closed her ice-cold hand over his and bent down towards him, her black bonnet crinkling. Her teeth were as black and twisted as the railings in the yard.

She pulled Jim along the corridor and into a huge green room, where boys sat in silence, staring at each other and at the bare walls. They all watched Jim as he was led through the room and out into another yard.

'Joseph!' the matron called, and a bent man shuffled after her. His head hung below his shoulders like a stumpy bird's. He helped her to strip off Jim's clothes and to sluice him down with icy water from the pump. Then Jim was pulled into rough, itchy clothes, and his hair was tugged and jagged at with a blunt pair of scissors until his scalp felt as if it had been torn into pieces. He let it all happen to him. He was too frightened to resist. All he wanted was to be with his mother.

He was led back into a huge hall and told to join the queue of silent boys there. They stood with their heads bowed and with bowls in their hands. There were hundreds and hundreds of people in the room,

all sitting at long tables, all eating in silence. The only sound was the scraping of the knives and forks and the noise of chewing and gulping. All the benches faced the same way. Mr Sissons stood on a raised box at the end of the room, watching everyone as they waited for their food.

Jim was given a ladle of broth and a corner of bread.

'I don't want anything,' he started to say, and was pushed along in the queue. He followed the boy in front of him and he sat on one of the benches. He glanced round him, trying to catch someone's eye, but none of the boys looked at him. They all ate with their heads bowed down, staring into their bowls. The boy next to him sneaked his hand across and grabbed Jim's bread. Jim ate his broth in silence.

After the meal the man with the hanging head gave Jim a blanket and showed him a room full of shelves and long boxes where all the boys slept. He pointed to the box Jim was to sleep in. Jim climbed into it and found that he only just had enough room to turn over in it, small though he was. He tied Lizzie's boots to his wrists in case anyone tried to steal them. The dormitory door was locked, and they lay in darkness.

During the night an old woman prowled up and down the room with a candle in her hand, holding it up to each boy's face as she passed. Jim could hear boys crying, stifling their sobs as she came and went, little puffs of sound that were hardly there at all. He lay with his eyes closed, the candle light burning red against his eyelids as she approached and stopped by

him. He could hear her snuffly breath, and the creak of her boots. He hardly dared to breathe. He lay awake all night, thinking about Emily and Lizzie and worrying about his mother. He longed to see her again. If she was better maybe she could ask Mr Sissons to let them go.

As soon as it was morning the door was unlocked. Old Marion's place was taken by the bent man. He shouted at the boys to queue up in the yard for their wash.

'I've already broken the ice for you,' he told them. 'So no thinking you can dodge it.'

Jim ran after him. The man was so stooped that the top half of his body was curved down like a walking stick, and when Jim spoke to him he swung his head round to look at the boy's feet.

'Please, sir . . .' Jim said.

'I'm not sir,' the man said. 'I'm only doing my turn, like the rest of them. I'm only Joseph, not sir.' He swung his head away from Jim's feet and spat on the floor. 'I hate sir, same as you.'

'Please, Joseph, tell me where the infirmary is.'

'Why should I tell you that?' Joseph asked, his eyes fixed on Jim's feet again.

'Because my ma's there, and I've been good,' Jim said. 'Mrs Sissons said if I was good I could go and see Ma in the infirmary today.'

'So you was the boy as came in last night, and your ma was brought on a cart?'

'Yes,' said Jim. 'Please tell me where the infirmary is.'

Joseph made a little chewing noise. 'Well, it's

upstairs,' he said at last. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and tilted his head sideways, squinting round at Jim. 'Only the message I was given by Mrs Sissons is, don't bother taking the boy up there, because his ma . . .' He stopped and shook his head and chewed again. 'Your ma's dead, son.'

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*Behind Bars*

Jim forced his fists deep in his pockets and turned his face away. There were boys all round him, shuffling out to the cold yard, and they blurred into smudges of grey. He screwed up his eyes against the terrible blinding white of the sky. He wouldn't cry here. His lungs were bursting and he thought he would never be able to gasp for air again, but he couldn't cry here. The only person he wanted to be with was Rosie. She would know what to do. She would tell Emily and Lizzie. But there was no chance of being with Rosie.

'I want to go home,' he said.

Joseph swung his head and spat. 'Home?' he said. 'What d'you mean, home? What's this, if it ain't home?'

So, Jim thought, this is my home now, this huge building with iron bars at the window and iron railings outside. His parents must be Mr and Mrs Sissons, as thin and waxy-pale as candles. And if they were his parents then his brothers and sisters were the shambling, skinny boys who slept and sobbed in the same room as him, and the scrawny girls who seemed to have forgotten how to smile.

'Can't I see her, all the same?'

Joseph shook his head. 'She was took into the dead-house in the night, and put on the paupers' cart before light, son. Speedy despatch, paupers get. No money for bells nor nothing like that, eh?'

Jim went dumbly from room to room as he was told, from the sleeping-boxes to the yard, the refectory, the yard, and back to his box . . . It was like a slow dance, and the steps were always the same, repeated day after day after day.

Morning started with the six o'clock bell, when all the boys had to wash under the pump. Joseph watched them, swinging his head from side to side and bending his neck round like a hunched bird of prey. He kept flapping his arms across his bent chest to beat the cold away.

'Get yerselfs washed quick, boys,' he said. 'Afore the wevver bites me bones off.'

Across the yard from the pump was the asylum. Mad people were locked up. They wailed and shrieked for hours on end. They stretched their hands out through the bars of their prison. 'Give us some bread, boy!' they begged. 'Let me out! Let me out!'

'Don't take no notice of them,' a woolly-headed boy whispered to him one day. 'They're mad. They're animals.' Jim was shocked. He stared again at the men and women and children who were all squashed up together. Their cage was too small to hold them all. Their wailings echoed round the yard all the time. 'Animals, animals,' Jim said to himself, trying to drive their noises out of his head. He looked away from them, pretending they weren't there.

'No, they're not animals, Jim,' Joseph told him. 'They're people, they are. People, Jim. My ma's in there.'

There was a shed at the other end of the yard. Boys gazed out at them through a small barred window. Their white faces were even more frightening than the wailings of the mad people. Joseph sidled over to Jim that first morning and swung his arm across the boy's shoulder, bringing his head round to mutter down Jim's ear. 'Now, them's the boys what tried to run away. They catch 'em and beat 'em and stick 'em in there till they're good. Remember that.'

After the cold wash in the yard Jim had to help to clean it out with brooms twice as tall as he was. They had to sweep it till the ground was bare and clean, even if hundreds of leaves had fallen in the night and come drifting over the high walls. At breakfast the boys queued up with their bowls in their hands for bread and tea. The bread was meant to last for every meal, but if Jim tried to save it he soon had it stolen by one of the older boys. He learnt to gulp his food down as quickly as they did; boiled meat at dinner time, cheese at night, all swallowed rapidly and in silence.

Sometimes Mr Sissons read to them while they were eating, always Bible stories, and his whistly voice would glide round the echoing room over the clatter of knives and forks. Jim never listened to him. All he wanted to do was to think about his mother and Emily and Lizzie.

But every now and then Mr Sissons stopped

reading and lowered his book. He stared round the room, his eyes like round, glassy balls and his fingers cracking together. Jim stopped eating, afraid that he had done something wrong. He sat with his spoon held somewhere between his mouth and his bowl, until the boy next to him nudged him into action again. Mr Sissons put down his book and jumped off his dais. He came gliding down the aisles between the long tables like a thin black shadow. Jim could just see him out of the corner of his eye. He daren't for the life of him look up.

The master lunged out at one of the boys at random, pulling him away from his bench by the back of his collar and sending his bowl flying and the contents spattering across the faces and clothes of the other boys.

'Misbehaving, were you?' he said, his voice as dry as a hissing swan's. 'Eating like a pig? Get to the trough, animal!' And the boy crouched on his hands and knees in front of a pig's trough that was always there, and had to eat his food from that, without a fork or spoon. Sometimes there were half a dozen people troughing, usually just for Mr Sisson's amusement.

'Please don't let it be me. Please don't let it be me,' Jim said deep inside himself as Mr Sissons glided past, and the air turned as cold as ice around him.

Jim had no idea how long he had been at the workhouse when he first thought of trying to escape. At first it seemed an impossible idea, as impossible as making the pump in the yard turn into a tree and

blaze out with leaves and blossoms. He remembered the runaway boys locked up in the shed in the yard for everyone to see. Even so, he had to try. One day, he promised himself, he would go. He would watch out every moment, sharp as a bird, for a chance to fly. And when he did he would never be caught.

He was almost too afraid to allow himself to think about it, in case Mr Sissons pounced inside his thoughts and strapped him to a chair and beat him as he beat other reckless boys.

It was only at night that he let himself imagine escaping, and it was as though he was opening up a box of secret treasure in the dark. Old Marion crept and wheezed her candle-path around the room where the boys lay in their boxes pretending to sleep, and Jim let his thoughts wander then. He would escape. He would run and run through the streets of London until he was a long, long way from the workhouse. He would find a place that was safe. And he would call it home.