

He tumbled down the steps, tripping himself up in his big boots, and fell against the door.

"Emily! Emily!" he shouted out. Before he could raise his fist to hammer on the door it was pulled open, and he staggered against a girl.



"We don't give to beggars," the girl said, trying to edge him out of the door again with her knee.

"I'm looking for Emily."

"Emily? There's no Emily here."

"Emily Jarvis. She helps Rosie out in the kitchen."

"Rosie? Who's she?" The girl was laughing down at him through her loose hair.

"Rosie," Jim said. "You must know Rosie. She's got big arms. And she don't like making bread."

The girl burst out laughing and looked over her shoulder at a woman who was sewing by the table.

"Hear that?" she said. "There's no one here who doesn't like making bread, is there?" She laughed again, and the other woman laughed back in a mocking sort of way.

Jim peered past the girl. Surely it was the right kitchen. It had to be.

"You'll have to go, sonny," the girl said. "You've snooped round for long enough, I reckon."

"There was a lady with a black crinkly dress," Jim said. "Called Judd. She'll remember."

"Judd!" the other woman said. She put her sewing down. "She was the last housekeeper. She was sent away. And there was another woman too, the cook. I got her job. They were found hiding some street children in the kitchen, and his lordship dismissed them."

"They were my sisters," said Jim. The drumming in his head was so loud that he could hardly hear his own voice. "Emily and Lizzie. Please, miss, where are they? Where's Rosie?"

The cook stood up and came to the doorway. She stood with her arms folded, frowning out at Jim. Her face softened when she saw him in the light.

"Are they workhouse clothes?" she asked.

"Please don't send me back there," Jim begged.

"I wouldn't send my worst enemy there," the cook said. "You go off to bed," she said to the girl. "I'll put him on his way."

The girl, who seemed to think it was all a fine joke, tweaked Jim's cap over his eye and took her

candle up the side stairs that led to the servants' quarters. The cook drew Jim in and told him to sit by the fire.

"Lucky for you," she said. "His lordship's away for the night. If he was here you wouldn't set foot over this doorstep, or we'd all be off to the workhouse. And lucky for you I've decided to stay up and get this sewing done. And don't think you can pinch anything."

Jim shook his head, afraid to speak.

"Don't you dare move from that spot." She put her glasses on the end of her nose and glared at Jim as he squirmed in the chair. The heat from the kitchen made him drowsy. He slid his hand in his pocket and felt for the last of his cheese. It had gone, and he knew that the boy sweeping the road had pinched it. He tipped the last few breadcrumbs into the palm of one hand. Without saying anything the woman put down her sewing and ladled some stew from the big pot on the hearth. She pushed the bowlful in front of him and winked without smiling, and Jim did his best to wink back. He ate in silence, and she sewed in silence, frowning at her needle as she rethreaded it, glancing at Jim over the tops of her glasses from time to time.

Gradually he sank asleep. Sometimes during the night he woke up and heard a little soft purring sound, and knew that the cook was snoring into her pile of sewing, but then she would wake up with a snort and Jim would drift away again. And at last they were both startled out of their sleep by a sharp rapping on the glass, and a voice calling out, "Half past five, time to be alive!" and there was the knocker-upper hobbling past the window on his morning rounds, and Jim and the cook were awake for good.

She sent him out to the back yard to fetch in water and sticks, and got the fire going and a pot of water boiling on the hearth. The girl came downstairs, yawning like a cat, and scratched Jim's head as she passed him.

"You still here?"

"He's going any minute," the cook said. "Soon as the dairywoman comes he's on her cart and away, and he's never coming back. That right?"

Jim nodded. He wished they would ask him to stay. He liked the warm kitchen, and the winking cook, and most of all he liked her warm, sweet-smelling bread. If only Emily and Lizzie were here too, this would be a fine place to stay.

They heard a bell ringing out in the street and the cook picked up a couple of jugs. "Here's Lame Betsy now."

Jim followed her out to the road and up the steps. Lame Betsy was leading a knock-kneed horse from house to house, selling milk from a slopping churn on the cart.

"This boy," said the cook, pushing Jim forward, "is looking for Rosie, and if I'm right she's a friend of yours, Betsy."

The dairywoman grunted and pushed her hair under her cap. She ladled milk into the cook's jugs, her breath coming thick and slow.

"She's gone down in the world, Rosie Trilling has," she said. "Nice job she had here, and now she's selling whelks for her grandfather. All because of a couple of street kids."

"This boy's sisters, they were," the cook put in, and Betsy set down the jugs and pushed her hair in her cap again.

"Were they now? Doesn't seem right, does it?" she went on. "Just for helping people out like that. Your sisters, were they? Didn't look like street kids to me." Her hair floated free again as she shook her

head, thick grey strands of it dipping into the milk as she ladled it out of its churn. "She was a fine woman, your ma, or so Rosie said."

Jim couldn't look at her. He reached up to pat the horse's bony head and it snorted and pulled back its lips, scaring him. "What happened to Emily and Lizzie?" He couldn't bring himself to look at Lame Betsy. He was frightened of what her answer might be.

She shifted her weight from one leg to the other. "Don't ask me that, because I don't know the answer," she said. "If you wants to climb on the cart I'll take you to your Rosie. But where the girls is, I don't know, and that's the truth."

Jim scrambled up on to the cart, slippery and sour-smelling with milk. The cook said something to the kitchen girl lounging against the railings, and she ran down the steps into the kitchen. She came back up again with a small loaf in her hands. She passed it to Jim, laughing up at his surprise. It was still warm. He tried to thank the cook with a wink, but she turned away.

"Don't you dare come back," she said. "There's nothing we can do for you." Her voice had gone thick in her throat. "God bless you, child. I hope He

takes care of you." And she hurried away without looking back at him.

Jim spent the morning jolting from side to side on the cart, jumping down from time to time to help Betsy heave the horse over sticky heaps of snow.

"There's my yard," Betsy grunted to him at one point. "And there's my cows. Hear them talking to each other? Like old men in an alehouse they are, full of wind and wisdom. Now, this is where my round finishes, but if Albert will let you we'll carry on to the river."

Jim jumped down again and they both hauled on Albert's reins until they'd coaxed him past Betsy's yard and the mumbling of the cows.

"Let's smell your bread, Jim," Betsy said. He had already nibbled the end of it, and was keen to save the rest for his next few meals. Betsy reached out for it and took a huge bite, her loose teeth bending forward as she chewed it.

"Poor old Rosie Trilling," she kept sighing in her breathy voice. "Poor old Rosie."

They were coming near the river. Jim could smell it, and he could hear the gulls keening across it. The street they were in now was littered with the heads

and spines of fish, and women sat on crates gossiping as they worked at their filleting. Their hands were slimy and red with fish entrails. Cats and children prowled round them. A dairywoman with her pails slung across her shoulders on a yoke trudged past them and shouted out something at Betsy. Betsy clicked at Albert to stop.

"She'll be gutting me," she grunted, "if she thinks I'm selling milk on her patch. Hop down, Jimmy, and ask someone where Rosie Trilling lives. Someone'll know her."

Jim slid down from the cart and watched Lame Betsy coaxing her horse round and limping back along the street.

"I could stay with her," he thought, "if I don't find Rosie. I could milk her cows for her and carry her pails. Surely she could give me a home."

He started after her. "Betsy..." he called, but she didn't hear him. She and the younger dairywoman were shouting at each other across the street, while the knock-kneed horse nosed into the muddy road and snorted at the fish-heads.

Jim ran down the side street. The houses backed on to the river and had boats in their yards, spars

and masts rocking gently, tinkling in the early breeze. Men were edging barges out, shouting across to each other, their voices bouncing off the buildings and echoing over the water. Some women were standing, hands on hips, watching them.

Jim couldn't remember what Rosie looked like any more. In his mind he saw a big woman with floury hands and her hair neat under a white cap, a starched apron tied over her long black dress. There was no one here like that. The women he saw had drab shawls draped across their heads and shoulders, and wore coarse dresses with ragged hems. He listened to their voices, trying to pick out one that he recognised, but they all sounded the same, pitched to shriek against the bustling noises of barges on the move and the screaming of gulls.

At last he plucked up the courage to ask someone where Rosie Trilling lived.

"If she's in," he was told, "she's at the white cottage at the bottom end."

When he knocked at the door a woman's voice shouted to him to come in, and he knew it was Rosie's.

And she was there, crouching over a brazier that

was glowing with hot coals, coaxing flames out of it. She was holding a twisted wire with a glistening herring skewered to it. An old woman, wrapped in bundles of brown and grey shawls, huddled next to her in a chair that seemed to be made out of boxes roped together. Rosie was breaking bits off the herring and feeding the old woman with it. She looked up at Jim, surprised.

"The men have set off, son," she told him.

"Rosie," said Jim. His eyes stung from the smoke. He rubbed them with the backs of his hands.

"Yes, I'm Rosie," she said. "And I told you..."

"I've come about Lizzie and Emily," he said. The smoke seemed to be in his throat now, twisting down inside him. It was hard for him to breathe. "I'm Jim Jarvis."

"Lord bless us." Rosie dropped the herring into the flames, where it sputtered like a blue light. The old woman swore at her.

"Annie's little boy?" Rosie stared at him, her hand to her mouth.

Jim nodded. He bit the back of his hand to try to make the stinging in his eyes go away. He could hardly see Rosie. Now she was a brown, blurred

shape that was moving round the brazier and coming towards him. She smelt of warmth and fish. She squatted down to his level, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Ma died. A long time ago," Jim began.

Rosie pressed him to her and ran her hands through his hair, hugging him as if he was a tiny child again, and for the very first time since Joseph had told him the terrible news, Jim let out all the hurt that had been locked up inside him and cried for his mother.