



THE SPITTING CROW

Rosie sat on the floor and rocked Jim until he had sobbed himself to sleep, and then she lowered him down and went outside. The old woman stuck out her foot and tried to nudge Jim awake, but he was just too far away for her to reach. She spat into the fire instead.

Rosie had gone down the yard to a shed that was built out over the river. Foul-smelling water lapped round it. Inside, it was heaped with bits of yarn and tarred ropes, but she managed to push those to one end to make a bed of some sorts out of old sacks. She went back into the cottage and filled a tray with whelks and eels that she was going to sell down near the shops, and hurried out. She knew that if Jim woke up he wouldn't wander far, and she also knew that she couldn't afford to miss the morning shoppers.

The old grandmother edged her box chair closer and at last managed to kick Jim awake. He sat up

slowly, puzzled to find himself in this strange, smoky room with a toothless old woman peering down at him. Then he remembered where he was. He was in Rosie's cottage, and he was safe.

The old woman nudged him again with her boot and nodded towards the half-eaten loaf that was sticking out of his pocket. She stretched out her clawed hand and Jim broke off a piece of bread and held it out to her, afraid of her glaring eyes and her restless, chewing mouth. She scowled at him and pecked at his hand, then opened her mouth wide. Jim broke off a bit of bread and fed it to her, and like a greedy bird she pecked and waited, and he fed her bit by bit. Sometimes, when she was slow, he bit a piece off for himself.

When she nodded off to sleep he wandered outside and sat by the river. It was as busy as a market, with sailing ships ploughing their way through the mist, and barges nudging in and out of the wharves. Far out he could just make out the bulk of a paddle steamer, huge and wheezing. He wondered how far the river went, and what it would be like to be on one of those boats, rocking in the wake of the steamers.

When Rosie came home it was nearly dark again.

Jim stayed outside all the time, a little afraid of the spitting grandmother and her greedy, pecking mouth. Quite a few people seemed to go into the cottage, mostly men and boys, and there came from time to time the sound of arguing and shouting. There was an old man who seemed to come and go a lot, and who did most of the shouting whether there was anyone else with him or not. When he wasn't shouting he was laughing to himself, in a dry, coughing way that wasn't laughing at all. Jim wondered if he was Rosie's grandfather.

It was cold out on the bankside, but Jim didn't want to go back into the cottage. He watched some boys playing in the snow and tried to join in, but they ran away as soon as they saw him. When at last he saw Rosie coming he ran to her. The tray that she had strapped to her shoulders was half-empty. She dragged her feet as she walked.

"Well, Jim," she said, "I've no time to talk to you now. I've food to cook for my grandfather and my uncles, as they're kind enough to give me a home." She stopped by the cottage. "And I can't ask you in. Grandfather would throw you to the gulls, and me with you, if he thought you were intending to stay.

There's too many of us. Do you understand?"

Jim stared up at her.

"Don't look at me like that, Jim," she said. "You don't know my grandfather, or you wouldn't look at me like that. But I'll show you where you can sleep tonight, if you promise to be careful."

She took him down to the shed. "Will you be all right here?" she asked. "It's cold, and it don't half stink with all that rot on the river, but it's dry enough."

"I like it," said Jim. "I can pretend I'm on a boat, Rosie."

"So you can." She stood at the door and looked out at the darkening water as if she'd never seen it before, her eyes narrowing. "Like to sail away, would you, Jim? I know I would. Far away to anywhere. Anywhere would be better than this. Drowning would be better than this." She turned round abruptly. "You bed down then, and I'll bring you some cooked fish in a bit."

Jim could hear shouting from the cottage when Rosie went down to it. He could hear the old pecky woman crowing for food, and the grandfather coughing. Nobody seemed to talk quietly. From all

the cottage doors and windows along the wharves there spilled out the sounds of shouting and arguing. Jim remembered the quiet of the wards and wondered whether Tip was asleep by now, and whether he was missing him.

Later Rosie brought hot fish and tea and bread, and a candle in a holder for him. Jim had been lying on his stomach watching the boat lanterns glimmering like eyes on the water, as if they were creatures turning themselves upside down in the darkness. She knelt down and tucked the sacking round him.

"Don't you ever let Grandpa know you're here. See?"

"I won't."

"Good boy. I'll go in soon, and see to the old lady."

"She's like a sparrow," said Jim.

Rosie laughed. "A crow, more like. Seen crows, Jim? Flappy, greedy things? That's Grandma, when she gets going. A spitting crow. I sometimes think she'd peck my hand right off if she was hungry enough."

"Rosie," said Jim. "Can I stay here?"

She held the candle up so she could look down at

him. "Stay here? I don't know how long I'll be staying here myself."

"Can't you ever go back to his lordship's house?"

"I wish I could! I was very comfortable there. I was very lucky to get that job. It was because Lame Betsy spoke up for me that I got it. But never mind. I lost it, and that's that."

"Was it because of Lizzie and Emily that you lost it?"

Rosie was silent for a bit. Then she said, "Lord, no. Whatever made you think that, Jim? It was because my cooking was so bad! I've never cooked anything but fish in my life! And they expected me to bake bread. Bread! My bread broke the flagstones if I dropped it."

Jim smiled to himself in the darkness. He'd just tried some of Rosie's bread and he reckoned she was right.

"But what about Emily and Lizzie? They didn't get sent to the workhouse, did they?"

Rosie blew her nose on her fishy apron. "To the workhouse? Emily and Lizzie? I'd have fought them all, his lordship included, if they'd done that. No, I'll tell you what happened to Emily and Lizzie. Close

your eyes and I'll tell you what happened."

Jim listened quietly while Rosie told him about a grey-eyed lady who had visited the big house. She had come right down into the kitchen to see the two girls for herself. "She took them upstairs, Jim, and had them washed in her own wash room. And she sent out for dresses for them, a blue one for Emily, and a white one for Lizzie. And then she took them in a carriage, a beautiful carriage drawn by four white horses. You should have seen them setting off, as proud as little queens! They went all the way to the countryside, to her summer home, to be looked after there."

She tucked the sacks round him and crept out of the shed and back to the noisy cottage, and Jim lay for a long time listening to the soft lapping of the river against his shed, thinking about the story Rosie had told him. And hoping it was true.



Next morning Rosie told Jim that he would have to help her if she was going to feed him. She tied an old sack over his shoulders to disguise the workhouse clothes, in case the police saw him.

"You'll have to keep moving, Jim, same as me," she warned him. "If the bobbies see me standing still they'll soon pack me off as well. We'll both be running all day."

Jim liked working for her. When her voice grew tired he would shout out for her. "Whelkso! Salmon for sale! Pickled fish and shrimps!" He danced round while he was shouting, partly to keep himself warm and partly so he could watch out on all sides for policemen coming. He had such a light, skipping way of dancing that people stopped to watch him on their way to their shops and offices. They soon got to know him.

"Skip for us, Jimmy!" they used to say, especially