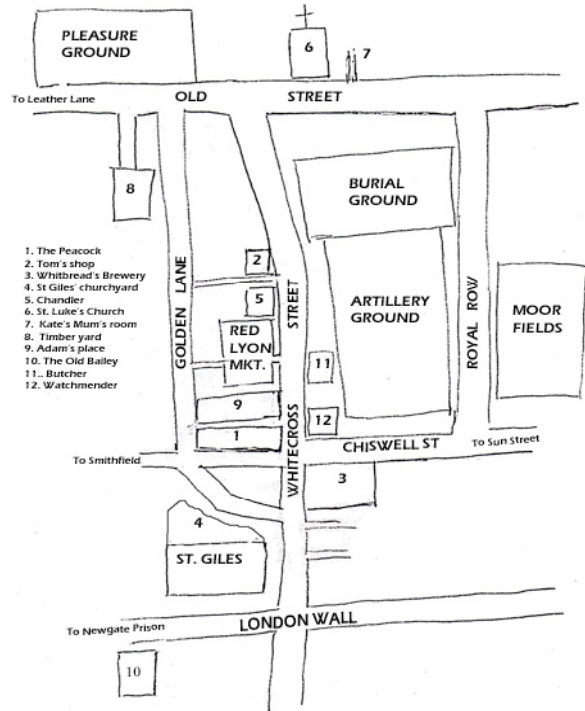


THE BREWER'S BOY



WHERE THE STORY HAPPENS



Also by Feona J. Hamilton

Belaset's Daughter

THE BREWER'S BOY

by

Feona J. Hamilton

BOSON BOOKS

Raleigh



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Published by

Boson Books, a division of C & M Online Media, Inc.

3905 Meadow Field Lane,

Raleigh, NC 27606-4470

cm@cmonline.com

<http://www.bosonbooks.com>

<http://www.bosonromances.com>

ISBN (ebook): 978-0-917990-00-7

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CHAPTER ONE

One of the horses whinnied suddenly and Daniel woke with a start. His heart was banging against his ribs with fright and he lay in the straw, listening hard, to find out what had disturbed the horse. He could hear nothing from his bed in the hayloft apart from the usual soft rustlings and stirring down below him in the stalls, as the other horses shifted in their sleep. His heartbeat slowed down and he lay staring into the dark for a few moments more. Something scuttled along through the hay near him and he kicked out so that the mouse, or, more likely rat, squeaked and ran in another direction. His eyelids drooped and he snuggled deeper into the old rough wool blanket trying to keep warm. Soon he was fast asleep again.

Beneath him, in the stall nearest to the stables door a dark figure took its hand from the horse's muzzle and stroked the soft velvet nose, making a soft, soothing noise to keep it quiet. The horse shook its head but made no further noise. Giving it a final stroke, the figure stepped softly away and out of the stall. It stood motionless for a moment, then, reassured by the silence, crept along between the stalls until it reached the far end. Flinging back the cape that it wore, the figure crouched down and seemed to scratch at the ground. There was a spark, a flare which lit up an intent face for a brief instant, then a small flame began to creep hungrily into the hay. At once the dark figure rose and ran on tiptoe out of the stables, paused at the door of the building and then vanished round the corner.

Out in the street and sauntering casually among the other people wandering along looking for some evening fun, she pushed the hood back impatiently and shook out her rough cropped hair. Putting both hands to her head, she scratched vigorously.

"Cor!" she thought. "Them stables is alive. Gawd knows what's crawlin' about on me!"

She wriggled her shoulders, crinkling her nose with disgust, then shrugged and laughed.

"Still, that's shown you, Mister Bates!" she thought.

Her head high, with the cloak swinging out behind her, she practically danced along the street, she felt so pleased with herself. Past the dingy shop fronts and the dingier doorways she went, until she came to a door that stood wide open. A burst of song and loud laughter came out, along with the smell of beer and hot humanity. Grinning widely, she bounced through the doorway and into the noisy, fuggy atmosphere of the Cock alehouse, where she fought her way across to the table in the farthest corner. Sure enough, as she expected, there sat her Uncle Tom and young Barney, her cousin. She stood in front of them, her hands on her hips underneath the cloak, revealed now in the guttering light of candles as a much worn garment, so thin that even the candlelight shone through it here and there.

"Well, young Kate, 'ave you done it?" said Uncle Tom, his eyes glittering eagerly.

"Yes, 'ave you, Cousin Kate, 'ave you?" said Barney, pushing along the bench to make room between himself and his father.

Kate plumped down between them.

"Course I 'ave!" she said, carelessly. "Just you listen out and you'll 'ear what I done!"

She pushed out a dirty hand towards her uncle.

"Where's the dosh, then?" she demanded.

Uncle Tom shook his head.

"Not yet, young'un," he said. "Not till I knows for meself!"

He took up his ale pot and leant back, his other hand on his knee. Kate stared at him then, as he raised the pot to his mouth, she pushed hard on the bottom and the ale inside foamed out, over his face and all down his chest. He gave a roar of anger and swung his hand at her, but she was already off the bench and out of reach, her face red with fury. Shouts of laughter from the tables in the room where men had seen what she had done made Tom even angrier.

"Why, you little firebrand, I'll teach you..." he shouted, standing up and coming round the table at her.

"You promised to pay me – you promised!" she shouted back at him, her voice shaking with a mixture of fear and anger. Just as he started towards her, there was a sudden shout from outside.

"Fire! Fire!" came the cry.

Everyone inside the Cock rose as one and rushed to get out of the door. Fighting and shoving, men tumbled out onto the street, followed by the serving girls and the pot boys. Sure enough, there were flames shooting upwards from further down the street.

"It's the Peacock!" said a voice and the news travelled through the crowd.

"Come on, lads!" yelled another voice. "Let's see what's a-burning down there!"

At once, the crowd started running down the street towards the flames. Sparks were coming off the top of the flames and leaping higher and higher and a smell of burning wood and straw was tainting the air. Kate could hear the horses whinnying, she thought vaguely. Then she realised – the horses! The horses must be trapped!

"Oh, not them, not them!" she said, suddenly aghast at what she had done. She took a step forward, only to find herself prevented by a hand grabbing at her hair.

"You done it alright, girl!" said Tom's voice in her ear. "Ere's yer dosh – now get away from here and don't spend it all at once. We don't want anyone putting two and two together, now do we? You don't know anyfing and no more do I – got that?"

He twisted her hair so cruelly that it brought tears to her eyes and forced her to turn round and face him. She felt him thrust the coins into her hand, then he let her go with a suddenness that made her stagger. She regained her balance and ran back into the alehouse, through the now empty room, and out through the back. Crossing the yard, she fumbled at the catch on the gate there for a long moment before it gave beneath her hand and she was out in the little lane that ran between the houses.

She turned to her right, away from the fire, and ran as fast as she could until she was at the end of the path and into the wide road that was Old Street. Panting, she drew to a halt and looked about her. There was little light here – most of the shop fronts were in darkness and only the odd flaming torch lit up the person holding it as he hurried past. Most people slipped along in the dark and she could only make out shadows. No-one seemed to be aware of what was happening at the other end of Whitecross Street but, as she looked back over her shoulder, she could see the flames beginning to show against the darkness. There was a shout from her left and she shrank back into a doorway. The man hurried past her, pulling another one along with him.

"Come on mate!" he urged his companion. "There's summat goin' on down there – maybe we can pick up a few bits."

It was beginning to dawn on Kate that maybe she had started something bigger than she had meant to. Were these men going to steal from the Bateses? After all, it was only Mister Bates who

had made her so angry, telling her Uncle Tom they weren't welcome in his alehouse. And she'd only set the fire because Uncle Tom asked her to and offered her money. Slowly, she turned her back on the flames and walked off. Her Uncle Tom had warned her not to go back and he was always right. Sighing, she turned down a small alley between two houses and pushed open the door at the end. It led her into a hovel so small that it was little more than a single room. She could see the figure of her mother, bent over the fire, raking away at the little lumps of coal in an effort to get more flame and more warmth.

As she shut the door behind her, her mother turned round.

"Oh, it's you back," she grumbled. "I don't suppose you've got anyfing to eat, 'ave yer? Or a little sup o' gin for yer pore old Mum?"

Kate shook her head.

"No," she said. "I ain't got food nor gin. I ain't got nuffin'."

"Whatcha come back for then?" said her mother, giving her a push. "Git out there and stay out. I've told you before – don't come back 'ere unless you've got somefing for me!"

She shoved at Kate again, urging her towards the door and Kate let her. The last thing she wanted was for her mother to find out she had money on her. She knew what would happen – it would all be taken from her and her mother would disappear in the direction of the nearest gin shop and stay there until the money ran out, if it wasn't stolen from her as she lay in a drunken stupor somewhere.

Without saying another word, she opened the door and went outside again. The dark was almost a comfort after that reception and she was glad to be out again.

"That's it!" she thought savagely. "I'm never going back to that old bag again. Uncle Tom and Barney will look after me if I ask 'em, I'm sure! She don't want me really I know – unless I've got gin or money to pay for it. Huh!"

And she stamped off down the road, back the way she'd come.

* * *

Daniel was still coughing and gasping, but he had at least woken up in time and managed to get down from the hayloft. His lungs felt as if they were burning, yet still he struggled to get the two horses to safety. They were mad with their fear of the fire and were kicking desperately in their stalls. He unlatched the nearest door and jumped back as the horse charged out and ran into the yard beyond. Quickly, wheezing and gasping as the smoke thickened about him, he found the latch for the second stall and flung it open. The horse pushed past him with such force that he was knocked off his feet, but he staggered up again and followed the animal out into the yard. Taking great gasps of breath, he leant against the wall near the gate which led into the street. The horses had been caught by bystanders and were being soothed. No-one came to soothe him or lead him away, he thought bitterly.

Instead, he felt the heavy hand of his master clamp down on his shoulder and he was lifted off his feet. He would have fallen over completely if Mister Bates hadn't been holding him so firmly.

"What 'ave you done now, you young devil!" he said. "Ow many times 'ave I told you not to take candle ends up there?"

"I didn't do it, honest!" he croaked, his throat still full of the ashy taste from the smoke and flames behind him. "Honest, Mister Bates, honest!"

"E got the 'orses out, din't 'e?" said one of the men standing holding on to one of them,. "I seed 'im do it!"

There was a murmur of agreement from the men and women standing within earshot. Bates let go of Daniel's shoulder and looked round at the others.

"Whether 'e did it or not, will you help me to try and put it out?" he said to the assembled crowd.

"Might as well," said a voice. "Afore it spreads down the 'ole street!"

Quickly, they formed a double line and Bates fetched pails and tankards and anything else that would hold water from the alehouse, which was as yet untouched, as the stables lay on the opposite side of the yard from it. The man nearest to the pump in the yard began working the lever up and down and soon water was gushing out. They passed the full pails and tankards along one way and the empty ones back down to the pump as fast as ever they could. The water hissed and spat on the burning straw and wood, but it was not too long before the flames began to die down. In a surprisingly short time, the fire was under control, with most of the stables saved. A few small flames licked up now and then, but they were small enough to be stamped out.

At last, the fire seemed to be out. Apart from a strong smell of burning and the thickness of the smoke still hanging in the air, making everyone cough and clear their throats, it seemed that the incident was over. People stood around, gasping and hawking, trying to catch their breath again.

Bates stood, hands on hips and feet wide apart, staring at the ground. Finally, he raised his head.

"Where's that boy?" he said, gruffly.

Timidly, afraid of another shaking, Daniel came across the yard from the horses, where he had taken shelter. He stood in front of Bates and looked up at him, his eyes huge in his thin face.

"You did alright, boy," said Dick Bates. "Come into the kitchen and have something to warm you. The rest of you," he said to the crowd. "Go round the front. I'll get the wife to open up and you can all wet your throats on me."

There was a ragged cheer and they moved quickly, out of the yard and round the corner, where the door to the alehouse was opened in a few moments. Daniel, meanwhile, with the unaccustomed feeling of being in someone's good books, followed him into the kitchen and was given a mug of heated ale all to himself – something he could never remember happening before. He sat happily sipping away at the hot drink near the fire which Mrs Bates had stirred back into life. The warmth and the excitement caught up with him and, if it hadn't been for the little servant who was standing watching him with curiosity, he would have dropped the mug on the floor. She caught it just as his head drooped forward and his eyes began to close.

"Oi!" she said softly. "Stick yer feet up on the settle afore you fall off!"

Obediently, Daniel squirmed round and lay down completely. The girl took a sip from the mug she had caught and wrinkled her nose in distaste, before setting it down quietly on the table in the middle of the kitchen. Then she checked the fire was burning low and no sparks were likely to fly out, before tip-toeing out of the kitchen. She shut the door carefully and made her weary way up to her room at the top of the house. Climbing into her narrow truckle bed, she pulled the thin blankets over her head and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

The stables were not as badly damaged as Dick Bates had feared. He stood just inside them now, scratching his head sleepily, and looked carefully around for signs of how the fire had started. Pushing the main door wide open let a shaft of daylight shine in almost to the back of the stalls. The horses were being cared for by his neighbour, so he was able to step inside each empty space and look around. He did not spend long searching in them, but went to the side wall, where the fire had blazed most fiercely.

Daylight showed through the thatch which had burnt in the roof, but the sturdy wooden beams above his head had survived intact, despite the black scorch marks along them. The brick wall was also scorched and burnt, with a few cracked bricks where the blaze had been hottest, but they could easily be replaced or repaired with lime cement. The hay and straw on the floor had clearly been the main part of the fire and there was a heap of ash on the earth floor to show for it. Something caught on the badly burnt wooden slats of the stall nearby caught his eye and he bent closer to tug it loose. It was a scrap of dark green cloth with a few fair hairs caught on it.

“Hmmm!” said Dick to himself.

Carefully, he placed the scrap in his trouser pocket. It was a clue of sorts and, since Daniel’s hair was dark and he had nothing made of green cloth as far as his master knew, it seemed that someone else must have been in the stables last night. He patted his pocket thoughtfully and bent down to look more closely at the ash on the floor. There was nothing else to be seen there which might show how the fire started, but he had an idea that it had been done by someone who wanted to give him a fright, not destroy him totally. The thing was to find out why, and that might tell him who. For now, he was content to see that the fire was out completely and no rogue embers would suddenly flare up again. There was still a burnt smell, so he left the door to the building wide open to clear it. It was no use expecting the horses to go back inside with that smell lingering in the air.

He would have to ask his neighbour to look after the horses and feed them for today. Grumbling to himself, he wandered back across the yard and into the kitchen, looking for his breakfast. Daniel was still fast asleep on the settle, only the top of his head showing above the blanket and his feet poking out from the bottom. He was a good lad, young Daniel, thought Dick Bates. Not that he would tell him to his face o’ course – until he’d really proved himself, that was! Now it was high time he was up and about his morning duties. He kicked the tall side of the settle so that it shook and Daniel’s face appeared, blinking and scowling.

“Wha--? Oh!” he saw who had kicked his bed and swung his legs round quickly.

“Now then, young Daniel!” said Bates. “Get yerself under that pump smartish, then get some breakfast inside yer and go and ask Mr. Shute next door to keep them ’orses in ’is place for the mornin’. Then get yerself back ’ere and clean up our stables and yard.”

“Yes, Mister Bates,” said Daniel, leaping up so fast that he stumbled on the edge of the blanket he was still clutching. “Um, Mr Bates, I never done that fire, sir. I wouldn’t ’urt the ’orses...”

“It’s OK, Daniel, lad,” said Mr Bates. “I know it warn’t you. I dunno ’oo it was yet – but I’m goin’ to make sure and find out. Well – don’t stand gawpin’, get on with it!”

He strode across to the kitchen door and opened it, to bellow up the stairs.

“Oi – anyone goin’ to come and get me breakfast, then?”

Slamming the door behind him, he sat himself down at the table and waited, drumming his fingers impatiently on the table. There were scuttling sounds overhead and the noise of someone clattering down the stairs, then the door burst open and his wife appeared. The little serving maid, who had crept out into the yard while Bates was talking to Daniel, re-appeared, wiping her wet hands on a grubby cloth that she had tied over her dress. Why she had bothered was a mystery, since both seemed as dirty as each other. Quickly, she grabbed an iron kettle from the hob and ran to fill it at the pump set by the sink. Then, staggering slightly from the weight she brought it over and set it on the hob to boil. Mrs Bates had riddled the fire and was slapping great rashers of bacon into the frying pan, which she set next to the kettle. Before long there was a hissing noise as the bacon began to cook and a delicious smell filled the kitchen. Next, she grabbed a loaf from the crock in which it had been sitting. Using the knife that had cut the bacon, she sliced two thick hunks off the loaf and spread dripping on them. She gave them to the waiting servant girl and shooed her out of the kitchen.

"One for you and one for Daniel, mind!" she shouted after the girl. "Eat 'em both and you'll feel my 'and, girl!"

The kettle was singing merrily and she turned to make a pot of tea for herself and her husband. Without a word, she plonked it down on the table. The bacon was nearly ready and she flipped the rashers once to make sure they caught on both sides. Slicing two more hunks off the loaf, she placed one each on heavy earthenware plates, added one rasher for herself and two for her husband, and put both plates down on the table. She took cutlery from the drawer in the old dresser against the wall and sat down opposite her husband with a sigh of relief.

"Ere you are, then, Dick!" she said, setting to with a will. "Eat yer breakfuss!"

There was silence except for chewing and slurping sounds, mostly from Dick, as his wife had some pretences to being 'refained' as she termed it. She frowned heavily at her innocent food and tried to ignore the noises coming from the other side of the table.

"I dunno," she muttered in exasperation, after a particularly noisy slurp followed by a belch from the other side of the table.

"What don't you know, my dear?" said Mr Bates, smiling. He knew what was coming but could not resist teasing his Dolly sometimes.

"Ow can we hever 'ope to get an hotel and attract the gentry, if you're goin' to sit at meals making' them noises?" said his wife plaintively.

"But, my dear," said Mr Bates, cheerfully. "Whatever makes you think the gentry would want to sit down and eat with their landlord? That ain't wot 'appens, and well you knows it!"

He grinned toothily at her and went back to his food. It was no good, she knew, when he was in this mood.

"Seein' as 'ow the stables is burnt and the 'orses is Gawd knows where, you're in a very good mood!" she said. "I thought you'd be rantin' and ravin' and givin' everyone a piece of your mind but no – 'ere you sits wiv a big grin on your face instead. Wot's goin' on?"

"Well now," he said. "Firstly, it ain't that bad. I've looked at the stables and there's just a bit of patching needed for the roof and a bit of washing down of the wall to wipe off the soot, wiv a couple of new planks where the old 'uns are badly burnt. Secondly, the 'orses is next door and they're both all right. Thirdly, we can open up as usual and we'll do very, very 'andsome. All them people 'oo want to come and see and hear wot 'appened! We'll make a nice lot of dosh outta this, see if we don't!"

"Oh, I see!" said his wife, a smile starting on her face, too.

She heaved herself off the chair and walked over to the dresser, where she began opening cupboards and drawers and counting the plates on the shelves. Dick watched her in amazement.

"Now what?" he said.

"Well, my dear 'usband," said Dolly. "Lots of people means lots of ale, it's true, but being curious can make you very 'ungry, too, can't it? I'd better get more food up from the cellar and send that girl to the market too!"

Dick Bates leant back and gave her a fond squeeze.

"I know why I married yer, Dolly!" he said. "You're as fly as me: come the chance and you'll take it. Ha!"

Still laughing, he got up too and went through into the alehouse to get it ready for opening up. The floor was being swept by Daniel and the little servant was clearing off the tables and giving them a quick wipe with an old rag. She picked up a pile of plates and empty pie dishes so high that she couldn't see over it and tottered off into the scullery. Putting everything in the sink with a clatter, she worked the pump handle to one side of the great stone sink and the water gushed in until it was almost full. Leaving the crocks to soak, she went back into the kitchen to stretch her hands out gratefully to the warmth of the fire, until Mrs Bates boxed her ears for her trouble and shoed her away back to the dishes piled in the scullery sink.

* * *

Kate woke up and put a sleepy hand out to where she expected the window to be. It wasn't there and she suddenly realised why. She was in Uncle Tom's house, lying on a truckle bed in one of the upstairs rooms. Lying there, half-asleep and half-awake, she became aware of the noises coming from his shop downstairs. She could hear the rumble of men's voices and the occasional higher tones of his wife as they served the customers. Uncle Tom had his wife were grocers and made a good living – or so she had heard her mother say. Maybe he'd teach her how to serve and she could stand there with the rest of them, behind the counter, chopping up cheese and wrapping bread, she thought, vaguely aware that these two activities certainly took place in the shop.

She sat up and pushed the bed-clothes off, then stopped. Where were her clothes? She had nothing on but her shift and, although she looked all round the room in the light that seeped in through the thin curtains, there was no sign of her other clothes. Nothing was on the stool against the wall but her shoes were on the floor underneath it. Apart from the bed and the stool, there was a dressing table against one wall and a small wardrobe against the opposite wall. Maybe her things were in the wardrobe. She thought, and got out of bed, placing her bare feet on the rag rug beside it.

Shivering slightly in the cold, she was about to stand up and cross the floor when the bedroom door started to open very softly. Quickly, she swung her feet back under the bedclothes and pulled them up to her chin.

"Oo's there?" she said in a frightened voice. A head came round the door and, relieved, she recognised her Aunt Joan.

"Just seeing if you was awake yet, my dear!" said her aunt, soothingly.

Kate relaxed.

"Yes, I just woke up," she confessed. "But where's me clothes?"

Aunt Joan looked a bit sheepish.

"I took 'em away for a wash," she said. "I thought you might like 'em to be a bit cleaner. There was straw and soot or somefing on your skirt an' it was torn an' all."

Her sharp eyes took in Kate's expression.

"You know anyfink about that fire down the Peacock last night, then?" she said.

"I saw it all right," said Kate. "I was down Whitecross Street last night, warn't I?"

Her aunt stared at her for a long minute and Kate dropped her eyes and shifted uneasily in the bed.

"This wouldn't 'ave anyfing to do wiv yer Uncle Tom, would it?" said her aunt.

Kate stuck her lip out and gazed down at the bedclothes. Aunt Joan waited for a reply, but Kate obviously was not going to say anything.

"I see," said her aunt. "Well, I daresay he told you to keep it quiet and gave you somefing for yer trouble, didn't 'e?"

Kate nodded, then put her hand over her mouth and looked up fearfully as she realised what she'd done. Aunt Joan said nothing for a while, just folded her arms across her front and looked hard at her niece.

"Well," she said at last. "You can nearly keep a secret and you're a loyal little thing, I give you that. Don't you worry any more about it – I'll sort out yer Uncle Tom, see if I don't! Now, you stay where you are and I'll bring some clothes for you to wear."

She leant forward and twitched away the bedclothes before Kate could stop her.

"Hmmm," she said. "I can find something for you fer now and we'll sort you out properly later."

She bustled out of the room and was back in a very short time with a dress and a pinafore, some woollen stockings and a mob-cap. They were old but clean – and, apart from the mob-cap, much too big.

"'Ere y'are, Kate," she said. "Get these on you and come down to the kitchen. Tie the apron strings tight and roll back the sleeves and that'll do. Out the door and turn right, then down the back stairs."

She nodded briskly and went out, shutting the door behind her. Kate was out of the bed and dressed. The clothes were obviously her Aunt Joan's, but she did as she was told and tied strings and rolled back sleeves until she felt less drowned in clothing. Then she went downstairs as she had been told and found herself in the warmest, cosiest, cleanest kitchen she'd ever seen.

At the scrubbed pine table, set in the middle of the room, Aunt Joan was chopping a pile of carrots and throwing handfuls of the chopped rounds into another large pot sitting on the table beside her. A mound of potatoes, already peeled and scrubbed, was waiting for the same treatment at her elbow. Hearing Kate's entry, she looked up with a pleased expression.

"Don't you look a picture?" she said.

"Come on then!" she went on, handing a knife to Kate. "If you're goin' to wear me clothes, you might as well 'elp out here, too."

"Fair enough," agreed Kate and, grabbing the knife, she took a potato from the top of the pile and started to hack it into big lumps.

"Not like that!" said Aunt Joan. "Ain't you chopped spuds before?"

Kate shook her head and her aunt took up another potato.

"Like this," she said, raising the knife and bringing down swiftly so that the potato was sliced into five or six even rounds. Then she sat the rounds in two neat towers and slice across them again. A pile of neat chunks was thrown into the pot along with the carrots. Kate tried to do the same, but was much slower. Still, she persevered for another ten minutes until Aunt Joan got up and inspected a smaller pot which had been bubbling away.

"Breakfast!" she said.

Picking up a dish from a pile on the table she began to ladle great dollops of porridge into it. She plonked a dish in front of Kate, who tasted it gingerly, decided she liked it, and ate it. Uncle Tom came in just as she started and gave his wife a squeeze before demanding his own plate of porridge. He sat down opposite Kate, nodded briskly at them, and started eating porridge so quickly that she was amazed.

"Don't that burn yer mouth, Uncle Tom?" she asked.

He paused between gulps.

"No, my dear," he said. "My mouth's used to me shovin' 'ot food into it and it don't notice no more."

A snort came from Aunt Joan, standing behind him.

"More likely it's pickled in beer," she said. "Considerin' 'ow much of that you shoves in yer mouth!"

Before Tom could answer, the back door opened and Barney stood there. Kate felt herself going pink and stood up hurriedly, but he took no more notice of her than he ever did.

"Are we goin' down the road today, Pa?" he said. "There seems to 'ave been some excitement last night."

His father swallowed a last mouthful of porridge and stood up. He grabbed his hat from the hook by the door and nodded at Barney.

"Course we are, young 'un!" he said. "I wonder what 'appened?"

He turned and gave Kate a sly wink and then stepped across to his wife and gave her a hearty kiss.

"Come on," he said to Barney, and the two of them clattered out of the kitchen and shut the door behind them with a bang that rattled the plates on the dresser and blew a big flame up the chimney. Joan sighed dramatically, but said nothing. She stood gazing at the fire for a few more moments, thinking hard, then looked curiously at Kate. That young lady could not meet her eye. What have you been up to, I wonder? she thought to herself. But Joan had learned the wisdom of keeping a closed mouth and an open eye and ear and decided that this was not the time to question her young niece on a subject which she clearly knew more about than she was telling.

CHAPTER THREE

Tom and Barney walked down Whitecross Street in a growing crowd. The news of the fire last night had spread well beyond the neighbourhood and more and more people wanted to see what had happened. Among them strode a young man with fair hair, dressed in shirt and breeches, with a jacket slung carelessly round his shoulders.

“Hallo Sam!” said Tom, falling into step beside him.

“Tom,” said the young man in acknowledgement. He nodded at Barney, walking along beside his father.

“Going to see the damage?” said Tom.

Sam nodded again.

“Always interested in what’s happening round here, Tom,” he said briskly.

“Especially if it’s at The Peacock, eh?” said Tom, giving him a nudge in the ribs.

Sam didn’t answer for a moment, then said, “How d’you know it’s The Peacock, Tom? I didn’t know that!”

Tom shrugged.

“Someone must’ve said somefing last night,” he said. “We could see the flames from our ’ouse.”

“But Kate...” began Barney, then yelped as his father cuffed him round the head.

“What about Kate?” said Sam.

“Nuffing!” said Tom. “Kate turned up at our place las’ night and the wife gave ’er a bed. Run away from that Ma of ’ers, ain’t she? Not surprised.”

Sam said no more and by this time they were so close to The Peacock that they could get no further without pushing their way through the crowd already gathered there. Tom felt a wave of disappointment. The Peacock looked undamaged – had the fire gone out so quickly? He had seen the flames and smoke with his own eyes and could have sworn that it had taken hold and that Kate had done a good job. Someone standing a little way ahead voiced his thoughts.

“Don’t look damaged to me – are you sure it was ’ere?” he said, turning to the man standing next to him.

“Course I’m sure!” said his friend, crossly. “I toldya – I see it burning las’ night!”

Jus then, the front door of the alehouse opened and Dick Bates appeared. For a moment a look of complete surprise crossed his face as he saw the size of the crowd outside, then he beamed at them all.

“Welcome to everyone!” he shouted, in a voice that carried to the back of the throng. “Come in and drink – The Peacock is open as usual!”

He turned back inside and the eager crowd, its disappointment at the lack of any apparent damage, pushed and shoved their way in behind him. Soon the place was roaring with its usual noise, as the ale flowed and the serving girls scurried about dumping tankards overflowing with foam on the tables. A delicious smell of freshly baked meat pies began to seep in from the kitchen behind the bar and soon hot pies appeared and were dumped on platters in front of hungry men.

Over in the corner, Sam, Tom, and Barney ate and drank with gusto. Sam, his eyes darting everywhere as he drank, noted the familiar faces among the men sitting there. He said nothing, but sometimes his eyes were fixed on Tom and young Barney. Catching his look, Tom grinned through a mouthful of food.

"Good pies!" he mumbled.

"Indeed they are!" said Sam. "Someone here knows how to make a good pie alright!"

"Good ale, too!" said Tom, waving his tankard at the girl for a refill.

"Yes it is," agreed Sam again.

He rested his arms on the table and leant forward.

"Tom," he said, quietly. "What do you really know about last night? Was it anything to do with you?"

Tom looked injured, then, seeing Sam's expression decided to stop pretending.

"I do," he said, lowering his voice, too. "I got young Kate to pay a visit, but it don't seem to 'ave gone exactly as I planned."

"What did you plan?" asked Sam, curiously.

"Burn the place down!" said Tom, savagely. "Dick Bates is getting' too big for 'is boots!"

Sam stared at him.

"What's he ever done to you?" he said. His answer came from someone else. Before Tom could say anything, a hand came down on his shoulder and he was almost lifted out of his seat.

"I told you," said Dick Bates. "You ain't welcome in 'ere, not you and not yer family. Git!"

Tom pushed off the hand and stood up, taking Barney with him. Sam rose, too, and squeezed out of the corner into the room.

"What's up, Dick?" he said. "Tom's in here with me – as a friend."

"If that's the case," said Dick, grimly. "You ain't welcome no more either!"

Sam's face changed and he scowled angrily.

"Why not?" he said, his face reddening. "I've done nothing to you and nor has Tom, as far as I know!"

"No," agreed Dick. "Not Tom 'imself – 'e gets kids to do 'is dirty work!"

He thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out the scrap of green cloth.

"This is off young Kate's clothes, Tom, ain't it?" he said, shoving it under Tom's nose, so that his eyes crossed when he looked at it.

"Pa--," began Barney, his eyes wide.

"Shut yer face!" said Tom, quickly.

He turned to Dick.

"Ow do I know wot clothes Kate's got?" he said. "She don't live wiv me!"

Sam stood by watching the two men and Barney. It was time to get Tom and his son out of The Peacock before it was too late, he decided.

"Tom's right," he said to Dick. "You can't prove a thing – that scrap of cloth means nothing. You don't even know if it's from a girl's dress. It could be from anywhere – maybe you should look at what that stableboy of yours wearing and see if it's torn!"

Leading the way, he made for the door, the expression on his face enough to clear a path through the crowd for Tom and Barney to follow behind. He strode out of the alehouse and turned up Whitecross Street towards his own place.

"Sam!" said Tom from behind and he turned round.

"You can get good ale in my place, Tom," he said. "And you're welcome any time!"

He stamped off up the street and Tom and Barney watched him go.

"We'll leave it for a bit, Barney," said Tom. "When Sam's in a bate like that it's best to let 'im cool off a bit before you say anythin'."

"But 'e was stickin' up for us, Dad!" said Barney, wishing he'd had time to finish his pie.

"'E was!" agreed Tom. "But you can say somefing that'll get 'im turnin' on you, when he's in a bad mood like that. Best let 'im get over it, son. Come on, let's see if we can 'ear what damage was done from someone else."

They began walking slowly along and stopped outside the baker's shop, where a crowd of men and women were gossiping as they waited for fresh bread.

"Good job that fire at The Peacock didn't do too much damage, eh?" said the man in front of them.

"Yerss," agreed his neighbour. "Just the stables caught it, I 'ear."

"And not much in there," said the first man. "Leastways, the 'orses is safe, thanks to young Daniel."

"Done wonders for today's takings!" said the other man. "Mebbe we should all 'ave little fires – not enough to cause real 'arm, you know, just to get people curious!"

Tom couldn't help butting in.

"D'you think that's what it was?" he said, pretending innocence. "Dick Bates done it deliberate 'imsel?"

"Well," said the man in front. "It's always possible, ain't it?"

"I s'pose so," said Tom, trying to sound doubtful. Tugging at Barney's coat, which he had held firmly all through the conversation, he backed out of the crowd and turned up back into Whitecross Street. He hurried Barney along so fast that he had to trot to keep up, until they were back in the kitchen, where Joan was showing Kate how to make a pie crust.

Tom leant across the table and said, "Not much damage down at The Peacock, then, by all accounts!"

Kate stared at him.

"Saw the flames, though, didn't we? Must have been some fire!" she said.

Joan noticed that the girl looked strained, but said nothing.

"Nah," said Tom. "Just a bit o' damage to a stable wall – well, and the roof thatch, I s'pose. Must 'ave been something like that we saw, girl! Nuffin' to see now – leastways, not from the front."

"Oh," said Kate, dropping her eyes and fiddling about aimlessly with the pastry mix in front of her.

"Well that's all right, then!" said Joan. "Not much damage and no-one 'urt, I 'ope?"

She stared hard at her husband.

"Not as I 'eard," he said. "Even the 'orses out safe. That Dick Bates is a very lucky man!"

"You goin' to muck about with that pastry much more, Kate?" said Joan. "Or are you ready to put it on the pie-dish, like I just showed yer?"

She jerked her head silently at Tom and Barney, telling them to get out of the kitchen and, for once, they went meekly enough. She put her arm round Kate's thin shoulders and gave her a quick hug.

"I'd forget all about it, if I was you," she said softly. "It's over now and it's more than Dick Bates who's bin lucky, I reckon!"

Kate said nothing, but gave a half-nod and stifled a sob quickly. She blinked and bent over the pastry mix, giving it one final squeeze, before taking the rolling-pin that Joan held out and rolling the ball of dough out fiercely and hard. Joan caught her by the arm, as the sheet of dough began to stretch thinner and thinner.

"That's thin enough, Kate!" she said, laughing. "Come on, fold it nicely over the rolling-pin, just like I showed yer and I'll bring over the dish with the meat in it. There y'are!"

She put the pie-dish on the table in front of the girl, then guided her hands until the pastry was exactly above it. Gently, she pushed down on Kate's hands, until a lid had been put over the chopped beef and carrots which lay in it. Swiftly, Joan took a small knife and cut two slits in the centre, to allow the steam to escape as the pie was cooking, then she crimped the edges all the way round with her finger and thumb. Finally, she brushed it over lightly with beaten egg, picked it up, and pushed it into the oven beside the fire. She shut the oven door with a clang and said: "There, that's done! Now, wipe yer 'ands on yer pinny and let's do those other veggies!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Daniel sat in the stable and looked about him. As far as he could see, things were more or less back to normal. In the two days since the fire, he had cleaned away all the ash and washed down the sooty wall. His master had brought in fresh hay for stalls and arranged for the repair of the roof, where the flames had caught hold of the beams and thatch. Daniel had also spent hours polishing the tack which had escaped with just a wetting and some streaks of soot. Now the leather of the reins and harnesses gleamed with dubbin and the metal parts gleamed from the wash and polish he had given them. Even the horse brasses, which the horses wore on special occasions had been polished and buffed until they winked in the rays of sun which came in through the doors. The dust motes danced in the sun, too, and Daniel sneezed occasionally, but who cared? The horses would be in their stalls by the afternoon and Daniel was looking forward to having them back.

He leaned back against the wall and folded his arms with a contented sigh. He had hated the upheaval, but now it seemed the problems were over. Not only that, but Mr Bates has been very kind to him recently – he knew that it was because he had saved the horses, and it wouldn't last, but still.... He sighed again and tipped his cap forward and closed his eyes.

Dick Bates found him fast asleep, five minutes later, when he came into the stables to see how Daniel was getting on. He was just about to kick the lad's boots to wake him up, when he realised that everything had been done. For a moment he stood, hands on hips, gazing around at the pristine interior of his stables. Then he nodded with satisfaction, and leant forward to shake Daniel's shoulder. The boy woke and scrambled to his feet, looking scared.

"It's all done, Master," he said, with his voice quavering slightly.

"So I see, Daniel," said Bates. "Looks good, too – you've done a good job 'ere, lad!"

He looked closely at Daniel.

"Don't shiver and shake like that, now!" he said. "Surely you're not so scared of me are you?"

"N-no, sir," said Daniel, doubtfully.

"Listen, lad," said Bates, gently. "You don't need to fear me. I won't 'urt you and I'm sorry that there's those who've done so before. But I've told you, Daniel, you're safe now, lad. No-one can take you away from me unless I say so – and I wouldn't say that. D'you understand?"

Daniel looked up at him, his eyes filling with tears, and nodded without speaking. Mr Bates clapped a large hand on his shoulder.

"Then come into the kitchen an' get yer dinner," he said.

They walked across the yard together, with Mr Bates' hand still on Daniel's shoulder. He looked down at the boy and felt a rush of pity for him. He had no idea what had happened to Daniel before he found him wandering in Golden Lane one day and took him in. It was all of a year ago now, but no-one had ever come asking about him and Daniel didn't seem to know who his family were. Whenever Bates had asked him questions about his life before he joined them, Daniel just shrugged and looked away. Either he truly could not remember, or it was so awful that he didn't want to talk about it. Maybe one day, thought Dick Bates, he'd learn the truth about the little foundling, but meanwhile, Daniel was a good worker who was clearly happy around horses. In fact, thought Dick suddenly, he was happier with the horses than he was with humans. That

must be some kind of clue to his former life – he obviously knew exactly how to look after them. Dick had never had to explain anything about mucking out the stable, preparing the feed, or cleaning tack. Wherever he came from, it wasn't nearby, or he would have been recognised by now.

In the kitchen, Dolly was already sitting at table, with the little servant standing behind her, ready to carry the stew-pot from the fire and place it on the table. Daniel and Dick slid into their places and she started ladling a thick, meaty stew onto the plates and handing them round. There was a loaf of fresh bread waiting in the middle of the table, and Dick sliced chunks off it and handed them round, too. The servant took a smaller portion for herself and sat at the end of the table near the fire. They ate in silence until their plates were clean. Dick took a great draught from the tankard of ale set beside his plate, belched loudly, and patted his stomach as he leant back in the chair.

Dolly looked up and shook her head at him, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Dick took no notice and carried on peacefully drinking his ale until the tankard was empty.

"That was good, wife!" he said, fondly. "Want some more, Daniel – that plate's goin' to lose the pattern if you carry on much longer!"

Daniel shook his head and put down his spoon. He felt the warmth of the food in his stomach and leant back too, copying his master's posture without realising. He was learning slowly that this big man would not ill-treat him, but he still reacted badly when alarmed. When he felt Mr Bates hand on his shoulder just now, he had thought it would surely be followed by a cuff, as it had done before in his short life. Briefly, his mind drifted back to a memory of a shed, noise and dust, and a frowning face which loomed over him, before a shove between the shoulders sent him out of the building and on to his face in the mud. He pushed the memory away again, but not before his expression had caught Dolly Bates's attention.

"What's up, Daniel?" she said. "Have you remembered something?"

If she hoped that the boy would finally open up, she was wrong. Daniel just stared down at the table, his cheeks reddening, and gave his usual shrug. Like her husband, Dolly wondered what had happened to the boy before he came to live with them. It was something bad, she knew in her heart, but until he chose to tell someone about it, no-one could help him.

Bates stood up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Come on, Daniel," he said. "Let's go and git them 'osses back!"

He turned to his wife.

"Ow's it going in there today?" he said, jerking his head towards the taproom in the front of the building.

"Still goin' very nicely," said Dolly, with a satisfied smile. "That fire did us a favour. People came in to see what the damage was and stayed when they found the ale was the best in the street!"

"And the pies, my love, and the pies!" said Dick, with a fond smile.

He nodded to Daniel to follow him and together they went into the front room. Daniel had seldom seen this room and now he followed Dick with his eyes darting everywhere to take in the scene around him. The room seemed huge to him and the noise tremendous. Tables with benches were set about the room and a long counter ran along the side. A fire was burning to one side and here there were tables with proper chairs set round them. The men sitting here were much better dressed than most of the other people. At one particular table two men had

travelling cloaks and big slouch hats beside them, while the two others who drank with them talked earnestly, occasionally waving their ale tankards for emphasis.

The rest of the room had locals sitting or sprawling at the tables, depending on how much ale they already had inside them. Here and there, a man was asleep with his head on his arms. The serving girls were doing their best to weave between the tables and place more ale in front of those who shouted for more. Now and then, one of the girls would slap down a man who had got too close, or reply to a comment with something equally raucous, which made whoever had spoken either roar with laughter, or, sometimes, redden as his friends roared at his expense.

As Dick and Daniel crossed the room, there were shouts of greeting from most of the tables. Dick grinned and waved back, answering the shouted questions about damage with a shake of his head and a shrug of his shoulders. Only the group by the fire said nothing to him, although they all looked up quickly as they heard his name being called. Dick seemed not to notice the group, but Daniel did, and something told him that he should note who they were and keep them in his memory. He stared hard at them as he walked behind Dick.

Then they were out in Whitecross Street and making their way to the neighbouring house. Dick rapped hard on the door and it opened at once.

"Well now, Dick Bates," said the man in the doorway. "Come for the 'osses, 'ave yer? They're quite safe - come and 'ave a look!"

He led the way through the shop and out into the yard at the back, then stopped dead, so that Dick almost cannoned into him. There was the stable – but the door was wide open and it was clearly empty. The big gates at the back of the plot were open too. The horses had been stolen!

"O my Gawd!" gasped the neighbour.

He turned to face Dick, his confusion and embarrassment clear.

"They was 'ere first thing," he said. "I came in myself to feed and water 'em, along with me own. I thought you'd be by for 'em later on today. The gates were closed and I never 'eard a thing!"

"When was that, Adam?" asked Dick.

"Not two hours gone," said the man. "I dunno what to say, Dick..."

He was so distressed that Dick could not bring himself to blame the man.

"Listen," he said. "You done yer best for me and yer didn't know this would 'appen. But who would want to steal from you? 'Ave you got any enemies?"

Adam shrugged.

"We've all got people 'oo want to do us down, Dick – you know that!" he said.

"Ye-e-ess," said Dick, thoughtfully. "Mebbe it's not some as wants to 'arm you at all – it's someone 'oo wants to do me down. And I know 'oo that is, too!"

He clapped the other man on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry you've 'ad yours thieved an' all," he said. "But if I'm right, I know exactly where they'll be. If we're quick, we might be able to get 'em back – otherwise, they'll be sold and on their way out of London! Come on!"

He started out of the yard at a fast trot and Daniel and Adam ran behind him. All the way down the alley behind the houses they ran, until Dick swung to his right and across Golden Lane. He plunged to his left and they ran past the Charterhouse, then, as Smithfield came into view,

Dick slowed down. Panting heavily, he stood with his hands on his hips, scanning the crowds and stands, looking for the horse sales. It was Adam who spotted the right group first and he tugged at Dick's sleeve.

"Over there!" he gasped, pointing to their left. "I recognise my Rosie!"

"And I can see both of ours!" said Dick, starting forward again.

The three of them pushed and shoved their way through the crowd, sometimes being cursed as someone almost overbalanced. Past herds of sheep and pigs, where the buyers and sellers bargained at the tops of their voices, past groups of people standing and gossiping, their buying and selling done for the day, until finally they reached the place where their four horses stood among half a dozen others. The man selling them had his back to the three and was still shouting out for buyers 'for these beautiful 'osses wiv years o' work in 'em' when a heavy hand landed on his shirt collar and he was spun round to face a furious Dick Bates and Adam. Daniel, standing to one side, marvelled at the way his master's face could get so purple without exploding.

"Oy!" said the man, struggling feebly. "Wot's your game, then?"

"What's yours?" said Dick, grimly. "Where did you get my 'osses from then? I didn' sell 'em to you."

"Nor me!" said Adam, standing threateningly beside Dick, his big fists clenched at his side.

The crowd, realising that there was a possible fight on, gathered round to watch and listen. One or two of the buyers slid away quietly through them and disappeared, shaking their heads sadly. They'd missed a bargain and they knew it. All four horses were clearly in prime condition, well fed and well looked after. Now the owners had appeared and it was clear that all four had been stolen. Maybe it was as well that the sale had stopped when it did – who would want two angry men like Dick and Adam to deal with?

"Put 'im down, Dick," said Adam. "'E's choking!"

Dick opened his hand and just let the man drop to the ground. He stumbled, but kept his balance, breathing hard and rubbing his neck where the shirt had pressed. Adam grabbed him by his grubby shirt sleeve and held him in place.

"Well?" said Dick, fiercely, thrusting his face close to the man's. He recoiled, his fear evident.

"Someone brung 'em along earlier, din't they?" he said, sullenly. "H'offered 'em cheap if I could sell 'em today."

"And you didn' see nothing funny in that, I s'pose?" sneered Dick.

"Don't ask questions, do I?" said the man.

"No, you don't!" said Dick.

He spat on the ground in disgust.

"Seen this flower before, 'ave yer?" said Adam.

His voice was much quieter than Dick's but the menace was unmistakable and the man tried to take a step back. He started to shake his head, but the thought better of it.

"Yerss," he said, suddenly realising he could blame someone else. "Always 'ere for the 'osses, ain't 'e?"

"How about now?" demanded Dick. "Can yer see 'im?"

The man turned round and looked across the Smithfield area. His face changed and he pointed.

"There 'e is!" he said, sounding pleased and relieved at the same time.

The others looked in the same direction and Dick frowned.

"No surprises, then!" he said quietly to Adam.

"Right, you!" he said, turning back to the man, who was still held by the shirtsleeve. "Make yerself scarce. You don't want to see what 'appens next!"

Adam let go his grip and the man shot off, running and stumbling and nearly tripping over the kerbstone in his haste to get away from these two men, who had given him the fright of his life. Dick, Adam and Daniel stood and watched him go.

"What will you do?" said Adam, curiously.

"Not a thing right now," said Dick, surprisingly. "But Daniel can do somefing for us!"

Daniel stared up at Mr Bates in alarm, but was rewarded with a grin.

"It won't 'urt yer, Daniel!" said Dick. "I just want yer to keep an eye on that Tom for me. I know he 'ates me, specially since I told 'im not to come to the Peacock. I wants yer to tell me where 'e goes and 'oo 'e talks to. Can yer do that for me?"

Daniel's eyes shone with excitement.

"Course I can!" he said, eagerly. "Yer wants me to be like a spy, Mr Bates?"

"That's it!" said Dick. Like a spy – and that means not gettin' caught out. That Tom's a fly one alright and 'e knows there's plenty that don't like 'im, so 'e'll keep 'is wits about 'im. Don't let 'im see you watchin' 'im."

Daniel darted off without another word and vanished into the crowd.

CHAPTER FIVE

It took much longer for Daniel to get back to Whitecross Street than it had taken to get from there to Smithfield. First, he had to get close enough to Tom to keep him in sight, but not so close that he would be seen himself. He knew Tom so well that it was not hard to spot him, as he wandered around the market, but Daniel was worried that he would slip round a corner, or behind a stall, and then he would be gone. Mr Bates had entrusted him with an important task and Daniel was determined to show how well he could do it. So round and round the market he went, trailing Tom as he stopped and spoke to this man and that, until Daniel felt quite dizzy.

At last, Tom turned back towards Whitecross Street and retraced his steps past the Charterhouse, across Aldersgate Street and on to the corner of Whitecross and Chiswell Streets. Here, to Daniel's surprise, instead of turning left and going past the Peacock to his shop, he walked straight ahead and then turned right at the entrance to Sam Whitbread's new brewery. Daniel hovered, jiggling from one foot to the other, as he debated what to do next. He had no idea how long Tom would be inside the new brewery, or who he would talk to there.

Perhaps if he crept along the wall and just put his head round the corner, he might see where Tom had gone, at least. His heart thumping, he tip-toed along the wall until he could just put his head round the corner of the gateway. He stared inside and saw a big, cobbled area, surrounded by walls with long windows. There was another, narrower door over to the left, but it would be a taking a great risk to try and cross the cobbles. He poked his head a bit further in, to see if there was anyone standing in the area.

"Oppit!" said a voice suddenly, from just above his head.

Daniel looked up and saw a man looking back at him. The man was sitting at an open window in what was clearly a small guardroom on one side of the archway. He was the gatekeeper, sitting there to make sure that only people who had a reason to go in were allowed to carry on into the brewery buildings. At the moment, he looked extremely cross, with big, beetling eyebrows and glaring eyes.

Daniel turned and ran, across the road and into Whitecross Street, dodging round a surprised woman and almost knocking her shopping basket off her arm. She took a swipe at him and missed, catching the small child with her round the head instead, who promptly burst into tears. Horrified, she bent down to comfort the little girl, soothing and shushing her.

Daniel ran down the side of the Peacock and reached the safety of the stables, where he slipped into a stall beside one of the horses and slid down with his back to the wooden side. The horse, looking round and seeing only the familiar figure of the boy who looked after him, turned back to the manger and continued peacefully champing away at the contents. Gulping and panting, Daniel sat perfectly still, as his breath came back and his heart stopped trying to leap out from his ribcage.

"That was a near thing!" he thought to himself. "I nearly done it all wrong then – and what would Mr Bates 'ave said, if I'd got caught that quick?"

What had he learned to tell his master so far? Only that Tom was well known enough in the brewery to get in without being stopped by the man in the window. Why had Tom gone there? That was a mystery, although it clearly had something to do with Sam Whitbread and the brewery. Was Tom working for Sam Whitbread?

His stomach rumbled suddenly and he stood up and went across the yard and into the kitchen. Mrs Bates was busy cooking as usual, turning out pies, while the little servant girl was slicing chunks of bread and placing them on the plates laid in rows on the table in front of her. A great golden round of cheese stood on the table, with two great glass jars of pickled onions, waiting to be divided among the plates, too. Daniel's stomach rumbled again, so loudly that the servant girl and Mrs Bates both looked up at the noise. The little servant grinned and even Mrs Bates smiled at him.

"'ungry again, eh?" said Mrs Bates. "A growin' lad, if h'ever I saw one!"

She jerked her chin towards the table.

"Give 'im some o' that bread 'n' cheese!" she said.

Daniel held out his hands, eagerly, and the girl put a chunk of bread in one and a slice off the cheese in the other. He slapped the cheese on top of the bread and opened his mouth as wide as he could to take a bite.

"Sit down, boy!" said Mrs Bates. "You'll get a stummick ache if you stand and stuff yer food in like that! 'Ere!"

She poured a beaker of small beer from the jug on the dresser and put it in front of him.

His mouth still too full to speak, Daniel nodded his thanks and subsided on to a chair. He swallowed noisily, coughed, drank from the beaker and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Fanks, Missus," he said. "I was starvin'!"

"So we 'eard," said the servant and got a push from her mistress.

"It ain't nice to make comments on that sorta fing," said Mrs Bates. "It ain't refained! You may be only a servant, my girl, but you can still be'ave polite to people!"

"It's only Daniel, Missus!" protested the girl.

"It don't matter!" said Mrs Bates. "Manners is manners – and I'm goin' to learn you yours. Then you'll be used to speakin' nice and be'avin' proper to 'ooever comes in 'ere, ready for when we gets a better class o' people in the old Peacock!"

She turned back to the fire and continued stirring the contents of the pot hung above the flames. Daniel and the servant grinned at each other, but said nothing more. He watched as she sliced the cheese and added to the bread on each plate. Then she took the cover off the jar of pickled onions, wiped her hands down the side of her skirts and took a deep breath before she stuck one hand down inside the jar and pulled out the first of several handfuls of pickled onions. These joined the bread and cheese on each plate.

Mrs Bates stopped her stirring and slammed the metal lid on top of the pot.

"Right!" she said. "Leave them plates there until they're wanted, girl. Get yerself some bread an' cheese an' go outside with Daniel to eat it. I've got to get the master 'is dinner!"

The girl did as she was told and left quickly, with Daniel close behind her.

"Want ter come into the stables, then?" said Daniel, looking at her blue hands and seeing her shiver.

"Luvly!" she said, gratefully, so he led the way. Inside, he started to climb the ladder, then remembered that the girl had both hands full.

"Ere!" he said, turning round on the second rung. "Give us the bread – promise I won' eat it!"

"Wha' for?" she said, suspiciously.

"Ow you goin' ter get up this ladder unless you got one 'and free?" said Daniel, crossly.

"Oh!" she said, as if she hadn't thought about it.

He rolled his eyes at her silliness and reached down for the bread that she handed over to him. Then, using just one hand, he ran up the rest of the rungs easily and stepped off into the soft hay in the loft. He turned round to see if she was following. Very slowly and nervously, she put her foot on the bottom rung, grabbed the side of the ladder, and pulled herself up, so that she stood there with both feet.

"Come on, then!" said Daniel.

She looked up at him with a scared expression.

"Whassup?" he said, puzzled.

"Ain't never bin up a ladder before, 'ave I?" she said.

"Not scared, are yer?" he said, amazed. How could someone never have been up a ladder before in their lives? Again, he had a sudden vision of the dusty shed, with himself peering down from a gallery and knew he must have climbed a ladder there.

"No-oo," said the girl, but she was, he knew.

Sighing with pretended annoyance, he reached down for the cheese, but she wasn't going to give him that, as well. He squatted back on his heels, looking down at her, then made up his mind.

"Tell yer what," he said, kindly. "Just lie against the ladder and come up slow. I'll lean over and catch yer 'and as soon as I can. But don't look down."

She nodded mutely and did as he suggested. Very slowly, she inched her way up, first one rung and then another. It took only a minute or two, but it seemed eternity to her, scared as she was. She had only climbed three more rungs, when Daniel's hand came down and grasped her shoulder. She looked up at his face, quite close to her own, and he grinned at her again.

"Now give us yer blinkin' cheese!" he said, and this time she did. He dropped it by his side and leant down again to catch both her hands in his and half-pull, half-guide her up the remaining rungs, until she fell beside him into the straw and scrambled away from the edge until she felt safe enough to turn round and sit hugging her knees.

Daniel stood up with the bread and cheese in his hands and walked over to her. The food had bits of straw and the dust sticking to it, but the girl just grabbed it, blew on the bread and swiped the cheese with one hand, then bit into it. She tore a piece off the bread and pushed that into her mouth, too, and sat with her cheeks bulging, chewing away as fast as she could.

"old on!" said Daniel. "Yer'll make yerself puke, if yer go at it that fast!"

The girl swallowed hard, hiccupped and swallowed again, then nodded her head at Daniel.

"I will an' all," she said.

They sat together in friendly silence for a minute or so, then she started to eat again, taking smaller mouthfuls and chewing more slowly.

"Ta for bringing me up 'ere," she said, pausing between bites. "It's nice – warm 'n' that."

She looked round the hayloft and over to where the horses hindquarters could be seen below them, each in its own stall.

"It's the 'orses wot keep it warm," explained Daniel. "It's where I sleeps usually."

She gazed at him.

"I know," she said, solemnly. "Yer could've bin killed in that fire, if you 'adn't got out in time."

"I could an' all!" said Daniel. "Fanks for puttin' that blanket over me the uvver night. This is my good turn fer you, seein' as you done me one. This is my secret place, mind!"

He leant towards her.

"Yer can't come up 'ere unless I sez so!"

He sat back suddenly as a thought struck him.

"'Ere!" he said. "Wot's yer name – I've never 'eard anyone call you anyfing but 'girl' or 'you'!"

The mistress calls me Maggie when she's in a good mood," said the girl shyly. "So I suppose that's me name."

"I s'pose it must be," agreed Daniel. "Well, like I was sayin', Maggie, you c'n come up 'ere when I invites yer, but only then – got it?"

Maggie nodded.

"Yerss," she said "Only when you sez I can."

And she held out a piece of the cheese to him.

CHAPTER SIX

Tom swaggered out of the brewery building and across Chiswell Street. Hands clasped behind his back, he turned right and went along the length of the street to where it ended opposite the Moor Fields. Crossing Royal Row, he went into the fields themselves. As usual, there were archers practising and he narrowly missed being pierced by an arrow, earning himself an angry shout to get out of the way. He ignored it and made his way across the rest of the field safely. He darted down the streets on the other side until he was in Sun Street. It was lined with small, two-storey houses. He reached a dingy doorway, set back off the street, glanced behind him and then, reassured that nobody had followed him, he rapped smartly on the door, turned the handle and stepped inside, closing the door behind him with a bang.

"Charlie?" he called and waited for a reply. There was the sound of scuffling and shuffling somewhere above him then, as his eyes grew used to the gloom, he saw someone coming slowly down the stairs which led to the upper floor.

"Ere!" said Tom, anxiously. "Wot's 'appened to you, Charlie?"

The shuffling figure made its way down to the bottom of the stairs before answering. Still holding on to the banister, he swayed slightly as he peered at his visitor.

"I've 'ad a little bit o' trouble, Tom," he said. "That stuff ain't as steady as it should be sometimes."

He let go of the banister and gestured to Tom to follow him. Leading the way and limping badly, he took him into a back room and sank into a chair.

"Open them shutters, old friend!" he said.

Tom crossed the room and did as he was asked, flinging back the wooden shutters which covered the window and letting in a sudden flood of light. He turned back to Charlie, who shaded his eyes from the glare for a while, then took his hand away from his face.

Tom stared at a face with one eye black and half-closed, bruises on the cheeks and a cut on the chin. Charlie's clothes, which he had clearly slept in, were covered in small scorch marks and sooty. One foot was wrapped in a cloth on which a large red stain showed where it had bled copiously.

"Charlie!" said Tom. "Wot you bin doin' to get in such a state?"

Charlie waved his hands in front of him.

"Get me some gin from over there first," he said, huskily. "I needs to wet me whistle afore I can tell yer."

Tom took the bottle of gin from the shelf where it stood next to a grubby looking glass and poured it out. He looked round for some water, but Charlie shook his head, wincing.

"Don't pollute it, Thomas," he said, trying a smile and giving up as he felt his cheeks hurt.

He grabbed the glass from Tom eagerly and emptied it in three huge gulps, coughed once, groaned, and leant back in the chair. Tom sat himself down on the chair on the other side of the fireplace and crossed his arms over his chest as he waited for Charlie to start talking. Finally, Charlie gave another groan, this time of relief, and opened his eyes.

"I gets some o' that gunpowder an' I takes it off to do a little bit o' demolition work for someone," he said. "I lays it out nice, puts in the fuse, lights me lucifer – and bang! A spark must've 'it the powder instead of the fuse. Standin' right over it, too!"

He shifted carefully in the chair.

"Got blown across the room, Tom!" he said. "Mind you, that room ain't there no more!"

He chuckled and winced again.

"Did the job, see? So I'll get the cash all right!"

"Won't be doin' anuvver one too soon, though, hey?" said Tom.

Charlie narrowed his eyes and looked at him, then leaned back and shook his head.

"Not yet awhile, old friend," he said regretfully. "I 'urts too much at present. Might it wait?"

"It might," said Tom.

He stood up and looked down at Charlie.

"Get me word when you're workin' again, then," he said.

Charlie grunted, but said no more. Tom looked at him, hesitated, then turned round and left the room. He let himself out of the front door again and closed it behind him more softly than when he had entered. Still he hesitated, standing on the pavement and looking down at his feet. Then he walked slowly back the way he had come, his head lowered.

He was back in Whitecross Street before his decision was made. Going into the shop, he went round behind the long counter and picked up a sack. Quickly, he took a loaf of bread, some potatoes, carrots and a large cabbage from where they were piled and put them in it. Taking the smallest ham hock he could find, he added it to the rest of the food and then gathered the top of the sack and tied it with a length of coarse twine. Then he stuck his head round the door that led to the parlour and called for Barney.

"You know where Charlie lives, in Sun Street?" he said to his son, who had come lounging round into the shop.

Barney nodded without enthusiasm.

"Take this stuff round to 'im," said his father.

"Why me?" said Barney.

"'Cos I don't want anyone else to know 'e's in a bad way!" said Tom.

Barney looked nervous.

"'E ain't dyin', is 'e?" he said. "I won't ketch nuffink, will I?"

"No, you won't!" said Tom, sharply. "But I'll fetch yer one, if yer don't 'urry up!"

Knowing only too well that his father's short temper could end in a beating, Barney took the sack and scuttled out. He slung it over his shoulder and set off, muttering darkly to himself, but soon the novelty of being out on his own, being trusted with a secret, made him cheer up in spite of himself. He straightened his back, settled the sack more comfortably and began to whistle.

He trudged along Chiswell Street, across the open land and into Sun Street, where he knocked loudly on Charlie's front door and pushed it open.

"Charlie? Me Pa sent me," he shouted.

"'Oo's me?" came the reply from the back room.

Barney went in the same direction and looked in at Charlie, still sitting where Tom had left him.

"Barney," he said. "Tom's boy. He sent me wiv some vittles for yer."

"Well, come in, then!" said Charlie crossly. "I can't abide a boy wot 'uvvers!"

Barney went in without another word and dumped the sack on the table in the middle of the room.

"Not on there, boy!" said Charlie. "'Ow can I see wot's in it, if you put it over there? Bring it 'ere!"

Gritting his teeth, Barney lifted the sack up again and took it over to where Charlie sat. As he got closer, his eyes widened as he took in Charlie's injuries.

"Cor!" he breathed. "My Pa said you was in a bad way – 'e didn't say you got beat up!"

"I didn't get beat up," said Charlie. "I done it meself!"

Barney's mouth fell open and he took a step back.

"It was a h'accident!" said Charlie. "You fink I'm barmy, or sumfing?"

Barney shut his mouth with a snap and shook his head.

"Wot 'appened?" he said.

"I warn't careful enough, that's wot 'appened," said Charlie. "You look at me, young 'un, and you swear never to 'ave nuffink to do wiv gunpowder!"

"Cor!" said Barney again. "If gunpowder done all that, I ain't goin' near it, never!"

"And you'd be right!" said Charlie. "Remember wot you see 'ere and remember wot you just said!"

He stuck out his chin towards the sack that Barney still held.

"What's in there, then?" he said. "Open 'er up and let's 'ave a look!"

Obediently, Barney opened the mouth of the sack and rolled it down so that Charlie could see what was inside. He brought one hand up and poked about among the vegetables until he found the bread and ham hock and brought them out.

"Aaah," he said, with satisfaction. "'E's a good mate, your Pa!"

It was a more sober Barney who went back into his father's shop half-an-hour later. He went through into the kitchen, where his father and mother, her hands idle for once, were sitting together at the table. They looked up as he entered and his father broke off in mid-sentence.

"Did as I said, then, for once?" said Tom, taking in Barney's expression.

Barney nodded mutely.

"Learn from what you saw, then?" said Tom.

"And what did 'e see?" said Joan, suspiciously.

"'E saw a man wot didn't take care and paid the price!" said Tom and would not be coaxed into saying any more. Barney stood silently behind his father's chair, wishing he could get away from everyone, so that he could think things over. His mother, looking at him curiously, stood up with her hands on her hips.

“Well, Tom,” she said. “I dunno where you sent ’im, but ’e’s ’ad a shock, anyone can see that. If you don’ want ’im for anyfing – and I don’t – let ’im alone for a bit!”

Tom looked at Barney’s face again and nodded.

“Go on, then!” he said. “Get back ’ere in time to ’elp me shut up the shop, that’s all!”

Gratefully, Barney took his leave and went back out into the street. He’d go up to Old Street, he decided and make his way to the pleasure grounds just behind it. He liked looking at the fine ladies and gentlemen that went there. He imagined himself in some of their clothes, rich and therefore happy, as he thought must surely be so.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dick Bates and Daniel stood together in the stables.

“Where did that Tom go, then?” said Dick.

“I follered ’im all round Smithfield,” said Daniel. “E must’ve stopped an’ talked to nigh on a dozen people, afore ’e left it and come back this way.”

“Did you know anyone ’e spoke to?” said Dick.

Daniel shook his head.

“And?” prompted Dick.

“And then ’e come back ’ere and went into Sam Whitbread’s new place, on the corner o’ the street,” said Daniel, looking nervous.

“Wot ’appened next?” said Tom, his mouth twitching at one corner. He could guess what Daniel was going to say.

“We-ell,” said Daniel. “I poked me ’ead round the corner of the gateway, ’oping to see where ’e’d gone, but a man saw me and told me to ’oppit – so I ’opped!”

He looked up into his master’s face.

“I couldn’t ’ang about after that, could I, Mr Bates?” he said.

“No,” agreed Dick. “Course not – you didn’t want anyone else to see you ’angin’ about round there. You done the right thing coming back, Daniel – I expect Tom done the same thing after his meeting with ’ooever ’e saw in there!”

He rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

“E was very pally with young Sam Whitbread when ’e come in ’ere,” he said.

“Maybe that’s who ’e saw,” said Daniel.

“Mmm,” agreed Dick.

He thought for a moment.

“Want to come up Whitecross Street wiv me and just see if we can spot ’im?” he said, kindly. “Not to stand and stare, see, just to ’ave a glance as we passes by ’is shop. We’ll go up to Old Street and look out some new planks for the stable wall.”

One glance at Daniel’s glowing face gave him his answer. Together they walked through the alehouse and into Whitecross Street, followed by the curious gaze of the men assembled in the room.

Daniel felt his whole body swell with the pride and the glory of it, as he trotted along beside Mr Bates the length of Whitecross Street. People they passed nodded to Mr Bates, or greeted him with an enquiry as to the state of the stables and his master assured them that all was well, ‘thanks to the lad here!’ Then Daniel got a smile of approval, too. He felt like pinching himself, so sure was he that he must be dreaming!

As they walked past Tom’s shop, they both glanced inside. It was busy with people buying their food for the day. Joan could be seen darting to and fro, filling baskets for the customers and taking payment. There was no sign of Tom or Barney in the shop, but, to Daniel’s secret relief, Tom appeared from the alley at the side of shop. Coming face to face, the two men glared at each

other, but said nothing. Dick continued to walk along at the same speed as before, while Tom stood stock still behind them, watching their progress. Daniel felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck and walked a little closer to his Mr Bates for protection – what from, he wasn't sure, but it felt safer.

They reached Old Street and went along it a short way to the timber-yard, where Daniel's eyes widened as he saw the high stacks of different woods piled up in the yard. There were great planks of oak and beech for flooring and even big panels, ready for lining the walls of the new town houses which were being built everywhere, including along Chiswell Street. Men hauled loads of timber on and off the carts lined up in the yard, shouting warnings for people to 'Mind yer backs!'. Loaded carts, with huge carthorses to haul them, left the yard with a great clattering of hooves, as the horses fought for purchase on the cobblestones, and a jingling of their bits as the drivers urged them on. He loved it all and could have stared forever.

"This is the best timber-yard round these parts," explained Dick. "I know there's the yard nearer the Peacock, but the planks in there ain't so well seasoned and dried, see? If they're still green when we puts 'em in among the rest of the ones already there, they'll change their shape as they dry properly. Then that'll make the other planks shift about to make room for 'em, like, and that'll crack the old, dry ones. So we needs good planks to start with, see?"

Daniel gazed at the busy yard and nodded his head vigorously to show he understood. Dick Bates put his hand gently on Daniel's shoulder and turned him to face himself.

"I'm goin' into the h'office, Daniel," he said. "You just stay 'ere and wait for me, all right?"

Daniel smiled up at him happily and stood where he was, close to the wall by the entrance, his eyes darting everywhere as first one activity and then another caught his attention. Mr Bates grinned to himself and walked quickly to the office to discuss his needs with the man who sat there for that very purpose. It took quite a time and Daniel could see that his master was clearly driving a hard bargain, as first one man and then the other shook his head firmly. At last, Dick Bates held out his hand and the other man took it and shook it, wearing a polite smile. Then he made a note on a pad of paper that he had on his desk, and came round to the door, which he held open for Dick.

Looking satisfied with the result of his bargaining, Dick came back to where Daniel stood.

"Come on then, young'un!" he said. "I must get back to the Peacock and get ready for the evenin' rush and you must feed and water the 'orses and make sure they've got enough beddin' for the night!"

They walked out of the timberyard and almost under the hooves of a horse returning with an empty cart. The driver, cursing, hauled back on the reins and the horse's hooves skidded on the cobbles as it tried to stop dead. It snorted and rolled its eyes and Dick stepped forward to snatch Daniel out of the way.

To his astonishment, instead of being scared, Daniel stood where he was. He reached up for the cheek strap that formed part of the harness and spoke gently to the great beast, which stood trembling, its flanks heaving. Immediately, the horse calmed down, its snorting breath slowed and it lowered its head so that Daniel could stroke it and scratch its ears. He murmured to it in a low crooning voice. The effects were so sudden and the sight of the small boy taking such complete control of so large an animal, that even the driver was frozen in his seat, his mouth open.

When the beast was clearly calmed, Daniel gave it a final stroke and pat on its neck, then stood back. The driver flicked the reins and said "Giddap!" in a quiet voice and the horse moved on into the yard as if nothing at all had happened.

"Well, Daniel!" said Dick Bates. "That was a sight to see, that was!"

Daniel gave him his usual timid look.

"Didn' I do right then, Master?" he said. "I didn' think!"

"You did more'n all right, young Daniel!" said Mr Bates. "But 'ow did you know wot to do?"

The moment had passed and Daniel was back in his shell.

"I dunno, Mr Bates," he said, in a voice that trembled on the edge of tears.

Dick Bates looked at him and he turned his head away, but not before Dick could see that his lower lip was quivering and his cheeks were flushing. Dick sighed inwardly and decided that this was something that needed talking over with his Dolly. Maybe a woman could find out what Daniel could remember of his life before he came into the Peacock. It was a mystery, and one which Dick would dearly like to solve.

"Look, Master!" said Daniel, suddenly, in an urgent whisper. "Over there, on t'other side!"

Dick looked across to the other side of Whitecross Street, which they had just entered. There was Tom, striding down the road as fast as he could go, almost running after the tall figure in front of him.

"That looks like Sam Whitbread!" said Dick.

At that moment, the front man turned round and beckoned Tom to catch up. Sure enough, it was Sam Whitbread.

"Well, them two's in a tearin' 'urry and no mistake!" said Dick. "Why don't you get arter 'em and see where they goes, lad?"

"I will!" said Daniel. "An 'this time I'll see if I can find out what they're plannin', shall I, Master?"

"If you can, Daniel – but mind!" said Dick. "They mustn't know you're spyin' on 'em!"

"I promise they won't, Master!" said Daniel, his face alight with excitement.

He trotted across the street and down towards the two men. Dick carried on at his usual pace, apparently wandering slowly back to the Peacock, but all the time his eyes were on the vanishing figures in the distance. He saw the small figure of Daniel draw closer and closer to Sam and Tom, who were now walking along together. Just as Dick thought Daniel must be getting too close, the boy slowed and stopped, apparently absorbed in looking in at the watchmender at work in his shop. Dick nodded to himself.

"Good lad!" he murmured.

Daniel glanced to his right and saw Tom and Sam just crossing the road and turning into St Giles' churchyard. What should he do now, he wondered. If they went into the church itself, should he follow? To his relief, as he walked after them, he saw them go round the end of the church and stroll in among the tombstones. He shivered slightly at the thought of walking among the graves, but, since Tom and Sam had stopped and were talking animatedly, he crouched and crept between the tombs until he could hear their voices clearly.

"They must be leaning just on the other side of this tomb!" he thought to himself. "If I stay 'ere, I'll catch every word!"

He leant against the moss-covered stone, trying to get comfortable without making any noise. As he settled, he could hear their voices clearly and they seemed to be arguing.

"What d'ye mean, Charlie can't do it after all?" said Sam, angrily.

"I'm sorry, Sam!" said Tom, sounding almost humble. "I saw Charlie this mornin' and 'e's bin 'urt bad in a h'accident. Burnt an' that an' 'is foot's reelly bad. I saw the blood meself."

"Then you'll have to do it instead!" said Sam.

"I dunno 'ow to blow fings up!" protested Tom. "I could blow meself up an' wot good would that do us?"

Sam grunted and there was a short silence.

"We-e-ll," he said, slowly. "I s'pose it'll have to wait a bit – but I want the Peacock closed down somehow or other and as soon as possible!"

Daniel was so horrified by these words that he made to run, then realized where he was and crept back against the tomb.

"What was that?" he heard Sam Whitbread say.

There was another short silence and Daniel pressed himself against the tomb and prayed that they would not come round and look.

"Nuffing," said Tom, finally. "Prob'ly a rat or somefing."

There was the noise of boots swishing through the overgrown grass in the churchyard and then silence. Daniel stayed where he was for what seemed a very long time, before he found the courage to stand and look around him. There was no sign of the two men in the churchyard, so he ran round to the side of the church and slowly put his head round the corner. To his relief, he could see Tom and Sam standing on the other side of Fore Street. As he watched, they walked back up to the corner of Chiswell Street and Sam's brewery, where they shook hands and parted. Tom went back up Whitecross Street, clearly on his way back home and Daniel began to follow him, keeping what he considered to be a safe distance behind.

He was concentrating so hard on keeping Tom in sight that he was taken by surprise when a figure suddenly appeared from one of the alleys on the other side of the road. Before he had time to gather his wits and run, Sam had caught him by the collar and dragged him across Whitecross Street and into Fern's Yard. He found himself being picked up and tucked under one of Sam's arms, while the other arm reached across and a hand came over his nose and mouth. He tried kicking and struggling, but he couldn't breathe properly.

Sam carried him round the corner and then set him back on his feet, still with his hand across Daniel's face.

"If you want to breathe, young'un, you won't make a sound when I take my hand away – understand?" said Sam.

Daniel nodded, his eyes huge and frightened. Sam took away his hand and Daniel took a great whooping breath, followed by an equally wheezy breath out. For some seconds he stood gasping, while Sam stood beside him, both hands on his hips under his frock coat.

"Right!" he said. "What're you up to?"

"Nuffing, Mister!" said Daniel.

His brain worked frantically, looking for a reason why he should be following someone.

"I-it was a game I was playin'!" he said.

"What d'ye mean – a game?" said Sam, still suspicious.

"Well, I-I saw Tom and I thought I'd see if I could follow 'im wivout 'im noticin'", said Daniel.

"Why?" said Sam, but Daniel could see he was beginning to believe him.

"I told yer, Mister!" he said. "It was a game – just a game!"

Sam stared at him for a long moment.

"Hmmm," he said, thoughtfully. "I might as well believe you, I suppose. But mind – that's the kind of game that could get a boy into a lot of trouble!"

"Yes sir," said Daniel, looking miserable.

"Go on, then!" said Sam. "Get on about your business! And don't let me catch you playing silly games like that again!"

He pushed Daniel ahead of him and back out into Whitecross Street. Daniel took to his heels at once and ran all the way back to the Peacock, arriving in the stable-yard just as Dick Bates came out of the brewhouse. Daniel came over to him at once.

"I follered them into the churchyard, Mr Bates," he said. "An' I 'id be'ind the tomb and 'eard wot they said. Sam Whitbread was telling Tom that 'e had to close down the Peacock somehow and Tom was sayin' as 'ow someone called Charlie couldn't do it because 'e was 'urt."

"Wot!" said Dick Bates, shocked. "Close me down? Why? Wotever 'ave I done to make an enemy of Sam Whitbread?"

"I saw Tom goin' on back down Whitecross Street, arter they left," Daniel went on. "An' then Sam Whitbread popped out of Fern's Yard an' grabbed me! I thought 'e'd gone back to 'is brewery, but 'e must 'ave come through a back way, 'cos I never saw 'im until too late!"

"Wot did 'e do, Daniel?" said Dick. "You're not 'urt, are you?"

"Nah," said Daniel, finding his courage coming back suddenly, now that he was safe. "'E shoved me down the alley and said 'e'd give me wot for if 'e see me follerin' Tom again. But I told 'im I was just playin' a game."

"D'you fink 'e believed you, then, Daniel?" said Dick, his eyes beginning to twinkle at the thought of Daniel's quick thinking.

"Ye-e-s," said Daniel. "I fink 'e did."

"Well done, Daniel," said Dick. "You're a good lad. I'm very pleased wiv you!"

He put his arm round the thin shoulders and urged Daniel towards the door that led into the kitchen.

"In you come, lad," he said, cheerfully. "Come and eat, then get to bed!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Barney had enjoyed himself hugely, watching the gentry at play and marvelling at what fools the men made of themselves over the ladies. He was interested to see that some ladies were dressed more gaudily than others, and these were approached with great familiarity by the men. They bowed slightly, but quickly stood very close to these ladies and took them by the elbow as if they'd known each other for years. Well, maybe they had, but Barney's instincts told him that this was not always the case.

Other ladies were approached very differently. Usually, he noted, a couple would be strolling about together, then they would meet another couple, and there would be an enormous amount of bowing and scraping by the men. The women would ply their fans, hiding behind them and peeping out at the men, or lowering their eyes to the ground, looking very demure. If a man greeted a woman, or was introduced, she held out her hand, palm down, and the man bowed low over it, but without touching her at all. It was all very puzzling!

Just as he left the pleasure grounds he caught sight of his cousin Kate, walking along Old Street not far ahead of him. He followed her, thinking he would catch up with her and give her a fright. They were past St Luke's Church and the top of Whitecross Street, but still Kate kept going. She was walking at a very brisk pace, with her shoulders squared, as though heading for a place that she would rather not be, and he remembered that her mother lived round here somewhere.

He was almost within touching distance when she suddenly veered off down a narrow alley and he almost overshot it. Swinging after her hurriedly, he saw her picking her way through piles of stinking refuse and then vanish into a doorway. He stopped, uncertain whether to follow her or not, and stood where he was. As he fidgeted about trying to make up his mind, she reappeared.

"Kate!" he said. "Wot you doin' round 'ere?"

She looked at him, then, realising that she knew him, she grabbed his arm and hustled him into the dirtiest, smelliest room he'd ever seen.

"Wot you follerin' me for?" she hissed.

"I wasn't really," he said, frightened by her glaring eyes and the awful surroundings. "I saw you in front of me as I came on to Old Street and I was just goin' to give you a fright for a laugh!"

She shoved her face so close to his that he could feel her spittle hit him.

"Well, I've 'ad a fright!" she said. "Where's my Ma – wot's the silly fool done now?"

He looked around the room in disgust. Old clothes, all torn and stained, lay on the muddy floor. Filthy straw was piled in one corner, with an old blanket tossed on top of it. Empty gin bottles lay here and there and a very small piece of candle was stuck by its own wax on the seat of a broken stool, which was propped against one wall to keep it upright.

"D-does yer Ma live 'ere, then?" he said, disbelievingly.

"She did lars' time I saw 'er!" said Kate.

There was a noise outside and a slatternly woman stuck her head in the doorway.

"'Allo, young Kate, my dear!" said this vision. "Lookin' for your dear ma, are yer?"

"Yerss!" said Kate. "Where is she?"

The woman cackled.

"Bin took down the Old Bailey, ain't she, fer thievin'!" she said.

Kate grabbed Barney's hand.

"Come on!" she said. "We better get down there!"

She pushed past the woman, who held her hand out.

"Wot about somefing for me trouble, dearie?" she said, but Kate was already back on Old Street, dragging Barney along with her. Behind him, he could hear the woman they had left in the alley shouting and swearing at them, but Kate ignored it all and pulled him along at such a pace that he was too breathless to speak.

They ran down the whole length of Golden Lane and Red Cross Street, through Silk Street and down as far as London Wall and the old Roman bailey where the court sessions were held. As they neared St Anne's Church, they could hear the sound of shouting and jeering and Kate jerked at Barney's arm and pulled him in the direction of the noise.

"They're takin' 'em already!" she said, tears running down her face.

"Takin' 'oo?" said Barney, completely lost. "Where?"

"Look!" she said, pointing.

Two carts were coming along the road, pulled by two old nags and filled with people. Some sat on the sides of the carts, with their backs to those who ran alongside. Some stood up and stared defiantly ahead of them. A few hid their faces and huddled down in the bottom of the cart and one or two had their arms around each other and looked lost and bewildered. The court session was clearly over and these were the people who had been found guilty. They were being taken to Newgate down the road to where the prison loomed over the crossroads.

Kate ran out and forced a place for herself alongside the first cart. She peered in and shook her head, then ran back to the other cart toiling along behind. She still could not find who she was looking for and walked round to the far side from where Barney stood waiting. Suddenly, above the noise of the crowd, he heard her scream "Ma!" and again, "Ma!"

Then the carts had passed him and the onlookers were leaving the side of the road where they had stood to watch the spectacle. There was Kate, her head sunk low, her hands up to her face, sobbing as if her heart would break. Quickly, he crossed the road and stood beside her. He put his hand out and awkwardly stroked her hair, but she shook him off.

"She didn' even look at me, Barney," she said, sadly. "I don' know if she even 'eard me."

"Maybe she didn' want to," said Barney. "Maybe she felt bad, knowing that you'd seen 'er."

Kate snorted.

"Nah!" she said, suddenly tossing back her hair and wiping her eyes with a bit of rag from her pocket. "Nah! She don't care. She didn't want to see me because she ain't interested in me or wot 'appens to me."

Barney didn't know what to say to comfort her. All he knew was that Kate was upset and that he didn't like seeing her in such a state. He couldn't remember ever feeling like this about anyone before. He'd felt cross with people, or scared of someone, or even – very rarely – sorry for someone. Now, for the first time in all his thirteen years he felt like taking care of someone.

"Come on, Kate," he said. "Come 'ome and get somefing to eat."

It was so typical of Barney that Kate couldn't help a shaky laugh.

"That's yer answer to everyfing, ain't it?" she said. "Eat and it'll all be better!"

"It makes me feel better," he said. "Anyway, there's not much you can do for yer Ma fer now, is there? Wotever 'appens, she'll be in Newgate fer tonight. Come 'ome, get fed, and ask my Ma and Pa wot to do. They always knows."

She nodded and they set off back the way they'd come. Barney was right, she thought. Her Uncle Tom and Aunt Joan would know what to do about her Ma. It would be good advice, she knew, but would she want to hear it? What if they told her to try to forget about her Ma and get on with her own life? Kate knew in her heart of hearts that she couldn't really do that. But then, what if they told her she should go to the prison and visit her Ma, take some food to her, make sure she wasn't in danger? Kate didn't think she could face doing that, either. She walked along with Barney, her mind spinning, as her thoughts went this way and that.

They were back in the kitchen with Joan without Kate realizing it. Barney opened the door and pushed her in front of him. Joan took one look at her and put her arms round the girl in a big hug. All Kate's bravery left her and she sobbed and sniffed against Joan's rough apron for ages. Her aunt smelt comfortingly of apple pie for some reason and Kate found it very soothing.

At last she calmed down and Joan sat her gently in a chair by the table. Barney had vanished, finding all this emotion too much for him and hugely embarrassed to find that he was near to tears himself at the sight of Kate crying so hard.

"Wotever's wrong, girl?" said Joan and so Kate told her the whole sad story. All the way through, Aunt Joan tutted and shook her head, but her eyes never left Kate's face and her kind heart was clearly very upset.

When Kate had finished, Aunt Joan sat quietly thinking. At last, Kate could bear the silence no longer.

"Aunt Joan," she said timidly. "Will I 'ave to go to that place to see my Ma?"

"You don't 'ave to, my duck," said her aunt. "But is it somefing you feel you oughter do?"

"I dunno," said Kate, miserably. "She was always drunk an' that, when I lived at 'ome. But now she's in trouble and she is my Ma..."

Her voice trailed away and she sat looking at her hands. Joan sighed and made up her mind.

"Do yer want me to go wiv you? She's my sister, arter all," she said. "We can go termorrer if you want."

Kate looked up.

"Can I decide termorrer?" she said. "I dunno wot I feel like doin' at the moment. It's all such a muddle and a mess in my 'ead!"

"Course you can, Kate!" said Aunt Joan. "But fer now, seein' as I'm cookin' as usual, why don't you lend a 'and and show me 'ow yer pastry's coming along?"

She got a watery smile in exchange for her offer and Kate was given an apron of her own, which was so large that she almost disappeared into it. Her aunt pushed her sleeves up to Kate's elbows, then set the flour, water and suet in front of her with a great bowl for Kate to put everything she measured into. Before long, the two of them were working away in a companionable silence, with Aunt Joan nodding her approval as Kate set about her task.

The next morning Kate had made up her mind.

"I can't abide the thought o' that place, Aunt Joan," she said, earnestly. "But I got to go an' see wot's 'appenin' to 'er. Like – she ain't bein' treated bad, or anyfing..."

Despite her promise to herself to be strong, she could feel her eyes filling with tears again and she shook her head, angrily.

"Come on, then, girl!" said Aunt Joan. "We'll take a pie for 'er."

Not that she'll see a morsel, thought Joan, darkly. If the stories she heard about Newgate Prison were true, the warders would take the pie off them almost before they had stepped inside the prison gates. Still, she took a pie from the batch baked yesterday and put it in her basket. Then she covered it with a bit of sacking.

"Let's look at yer – your Ma'll want ter see yer lookin' nice!" she said to Kate.

She certainly looked very different from the young ragamuffin who had come to their home only a week ago, she thought. Now Kate was wearing a clean dress and apron and a mob-cap on her shining hair. Although she looked unhappy, there was a healthy colour in her cheeks and she was beginning to put on weight. Joan nodded, satisfied, and put out her hand.

"Come on then!" she said again, with a kind smile.

They went out through the shop and she pointed at the door as she caught sight of Tom. Thinking they were just going across to the butcher opposite, he nodded and smiled and waved goodbye to them. Barney, stacking shelves near the door, looked at them anxiously as they left.

"You goin' there?" he said in a whisper, as they went past him.

"Yes," said Joan. "It'll be all right, Barney, I'm goin' too. Just to set Kate's mind at rest, see? Don't say nuffin' to yer Pa!"

With a quick nod, Barney turned back to his task. Joan and Kate walked out into the sunshine and down the road. Before she wanted to, Kate could see the prison and the gates through which they would have to go. She could feel her stomach doing funny things and her heart beating faster, but she clutched at her aunt's hand and walked on, watching that awful entrance draw closer and closer.

Finally, they were at the gate and Joan was pulling on the bell-rope. A small door in one of the gates opened so suddenly that they both jumped. A surly man, unshaven and smelling of ale, looked out.

"Yuss – 'oo d'ye want?" he said, sternly.

His eyes fell on the basket.

"Well, come in, come in!" he said, leering horribly.

He stood back and Joan stepped through into the yard behind, pulling Kate after her.

"We've come to see our kin," she said. "Poll Deane - come in yesterday."

"Wot for?" said the gatekeeper.

"To see she's all right," said Kate, before her aunt could say anything.

The gate keeper guffawed.

"Not why you come!" he said, highly amused. "Wot's Poll Deane come in 'ere for – wot's she done?"

Kate hung her head, too ashamed to say anything more.

"She got done for thievin'," said Joan. "So I 'ear, anyways."

The man shook his head.

"She ain't 'ere no more, then," he said.

"W-w-where is she, then?" said Kate, forgetting her shame in her alarm.

"Somewhere on the way to Souf'ampton by now, I sh'd say," said the man, with great satisfaction. "All taken at dawn, wasn't they – everyone wot gone done for thievin' yesterday, got transported today. That's 'ow it works!"

He took hold of the basket on Joan's arm.

"So she won't be needin' wotever you got in there!" he said, flicking back the cover. His eyes widened as he saw the pie.

"But I'll 'ave it for me dinner in a bit!" he said, putting his other hand in and taking out the pie.

Joan knew it was no good arguing, but Kate did not.

"It ain't fer you," she said, angrily. "It was for my Ma!"

Joan shook her shoulder, urgently.

"It's no use, Kate!" she said. "Let 'im 'ave it – we can't give it to yer Ma now, that's for certain!"

"I 'ope it chokes yer!" spat Kate, but the man just laughed.

"Proper little firebrand you got there!" he said. "I likes to see a girl with spirit!"

Joan pressed her lips together and hurried Kate out into the street again. Just as the man was pushing the door closed, Kate turned round.

"Take a good look, 'cos you ain't never goin' to see me again, mister!" she said and marched off, her head high. Aunt Joan hurried behind her, with a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. The man was right, horrible though he had been. Kate had a lot of spirit and Aunt Joan was determined to encourage it!

CHAPTER NINE

Dick Bates and Adam Shute were leaning against the wall by the brewhouse.

"I don't understand why you didn't 'ave a go at that Tom," said Adam. "We know 'e stole the 'orses and sold 'em on – but you say don't do nothing. Wot's in yer mind, Dick, old friend?"

"Well," said Dick. "I don't fink Tom would do somefing like that of 'is own accord. I know 'e don't like me, 'cos I threw 'im out, but 'e wouldn't try and ruin me. More likely come round 'ere and punch me one!"

"That's true enough," agreed Adam. "More likely to settle a argument wiv 'is fists, is Tom Smith. So wot's this about then?"

"It's that Sam Whitbread," said Dick. "Wants me closed down, accordin' to wot young Daniel 'eard 'im saying to Tom!"

"Where was this?" asked Adam.

"Down in St Giles churchyard," said Dick.

He fidgeted about and looked at Adam doubtfully.

"Come on, Dick!" said Adam, with a grin. "Tell me wot young Daniel was doin' in the churchyard, just at the moment when Sam and Tom were there talkin'!"

"Young Daniel's a bright lad – and I trust 'im," said Dick. "So I give 'im a little job – watch what Tom's up to and see if 'e can find out what's goin' on. So 'e spots Tom and Sam goin' down Whitecross togevver for all to see and off 'e goes after 'em. They goes to the churchyard and Daniel trails along and gets 'imself be'ind the tomb they're leanin' on – and 'ears all about it!"

"Blimey!" said Adam. "E took a chance!"

"Yerss, well, 'e got caught in the end," said Dick, ruefully. "On the way back, 'e thinks Tom and Sam 'ave gone their separate ways. So they 'ad – but Sam nips out of Fern's Yard and catches 'im. Asks what's 'e up to."

Adam raised his eyebrows.

"Wot did Daniel say?" he asked with interest.

Dick laughed.

"Quick as a flash, the lad says yes, 'e was followin' Tom, but it were just a game – and Sam Whitbread believes him!"

They chuckled at the thought of Sam Whitbread being fooled by Daniel, but soon Adam looked serious again.

"You'd better tell your lad to lay off for a bit," he said. "That Sam's a smart'un, as we know. Just look at 'is progress with that brewery."

"I know," sighed Dick. "But why must 'e get rid of the rest of us? There's room for more than one brewer round 'ere. Leastways, there always 'as been!"

"That's it, though, i'n'it?" said Adam. "There was until now. Now Mister Samuel Whitbread wants it all!"

"But he brews porter and I brews ale!" protested Dick. "T'ain't the same."

"We knows that, Dick," said Adam. "Still – Sam wants all the trade round 'ere. Tell yer wot – wiv Daniel laid off, we'll just 'ave to keep our own eyes and ears open for a bit!"

Dick stuck out his hand.

"You're a real mate, Adam!" he said, pleased by his friend's offer to help. "Let's do that – but don't get yerself in trouble for me!"

"Right then," said Adam, cheerily. "I've got to get some stuff from Sarah Smart's. I'll have a good look round while I'm there."

"Seein' as she runs the chandler's shop 'ere and keeps gunpowder and wot not, she might 'ave a visitor we know, then!" said Dick, laughing.

He shook his head in disbelief at the idea of Tom Smith going so far as to blow up the Peacock. Tom and he had been friends not so long ago – and no doubt, when all this silly business blew over, they would be again, he thought.

"I'm off to the butcher's," he said to Adam, over his shoulder. "Mebbe h'e'll 'ave Tom Smith there, too, buyin' a big bone to clout me wiv!"

Laughing to himself, he went inside and called to his wife.

"Is it time for me to go over to old 'iggins the butcher, my dear?" he said.

Dolly appeared, wiping her hands on a dishcloth.

"It would be such a 'elp if you would, Dick," she said. "The steak 'n' kidney pies 'ave got that pop'lar since the fire! I only did 'em because it was all I 'ad in the place, but now they keeps askin' for 'em!"

"Better make sure we've got plenty, then, eh?" said Dick.

He came round the table and gave her a great hug and a hearty kiss on her cheek.

"Get off me, you silly big fool!" she said, putting her hands up to straighten the mob-cap he'd knocked askew. "You don't know yer own strength!"

"Ho yuss, I do!" said Dick, nodding his head and placing both beefy fists on his hips. "And there are other people in this street as 'ad better know it, too!"

He winked at her and picked up a large, square basket made of stout willow.

"I'm off, then!" he said.

Striding through the bar, he nodded to his customers who were just coming in for a morning draught of ale. Most of them had been working for two or three hours already, especially those who had put up stalls in the street and in the Red Lyon marketplace nearby. The serving girls were already moving about and placing brimming tankards of ale in front of the men, who lifted them from the table-top almost before the girls had let go. They took great draughts of the ale and let out sighs of contentment afterwards.

"Any food yet?" called one of the men. He was a burly fellow, sitting on a bench almost by himself. Not because he was unpopular, but because his great frame almost filled the space available.

"There's some bread and cold meat," said Dick. "No 'ot pies as yet, if that's wot yer lookin' for."

He waved the basket at them.

"When you sees me come back in with this full again, you'll know the pies won't be long!"

“Ere Dick!” said the fat man. “Since when did the missus get you doin’ the shoppin’ for ’er?”

A roar of laughter greeted this sally, but Dick just grinned good-humouredly.

“Since I ’ad the good manners to offer!” he said and ducked out the door, followed by more laughter from the room.

He strode up Whitecross Street to the shop which announced that it belonged to Anthony Higgins, Butcher and stepped inside. Higgins himself was standing at the back of the shop behind the counter. There was a very large side of beef in front of him and he was wielding a hacksaw with a great deal of grunting and puffing. His back was to the door and he was unaware of Dick until he placed the basket down on the counter and cleared his throat.

“Sorry, Dick,” said Higgins, turning to see who had come in. “Can’t get through this ’un’s ribcage.”

“Must ’ave been a sight when ’e was runnin’ about!” said Dick, with admiration.

“Yerss,” agreed Higgins.

He laid the hacksaw on the bench beside the side of beef and wiped his hands perfunctorily on his bloody apron.

“Wot’s yer pleasure?” he said.

“Dolly wants more of your steak ‘n’ kidney,” said Dick. “As fast as she makes ’er pies, they gets eaten – dunno if it’s ’er pastry or your meat, or a mix of the two.”

“Prob’ly that,” agreed Higgins.

He went to one side and fetched some chopped steak, then added some kidneys from another part of the counter.

“That enough?” he said, gesturing at the heap.

“I s’pose so,” said Dick. “Is that the usual amount?”

“I should say it was,” said Higgins, studying it with his head on one side.

He weighed it on the scales, juggling the weights until both side balanced, then wrapped it in paper.

“Eightpence,” he said, handing over the bundle. “I’ll put it on yer slate.”

“Thanks,” said Dick. “I’ll settle up soon.”

Higgins shrugged.

“When yer ready, Dick!” he said. “I knows you pays reg’lar!”

He nodded at his neighbour and turned back to his task. Before Dick was out of the shop, he could hear the butcher sawing away again as if his life depended on it.

As he walked back down the street, he saw Sam Whitbread strolling along towards him. He felt his temper rise, but pressed his lips together and willed himself to say nothing as they passed. Sam raised his hat and bowed as he drew alongside Dick, but the latter just nodded slightly and walked on past. He knew Sam had stopped and was watching him walk down the street.

Sam had stopped all right and was looking after Dick’s retreating figure. Had someone told him that it was Sam Whitbread who was behind recent events? If he knew, who was it who had not been able to keep a secret? Maybe someone had overheard him talking with Tom.

He snapped his fingers suddenly, as he remembered catching the brewer's boy sliding along the street behind Tom.

"I thought so!" he muttered to himself. "That boy must have heard us in the churchyard. Next time I see him, I'll make him wish he hadn't! I'd better warn Tom and Barney to watch out for him too!"

He walked on, now much faster, and swung into Tom's shop. As he expected, Tom and Barney were both busy with customers, but he jerked his head at Barney as soon as he caught his eye. Pointing over his shoulder to the street outside, he went out again and waited. Very soon after, Barney appeared.

"allo, Mr Whitbread," he said. "Wot's up?"

"I need to talk to your Pa, Barney," said Sam. "And as quick as maybe!"

Barney nodded.

"Go round the side there," he said. "My Pa'll come as soon as 'e can – I'll tell 'im it's urgent."

Sam went round into the alley that led down the side of the shop and into Tom's store. It was warmer inside the building, with its shelves stacked with crates of potatoes and sacks of carrots and cabbages. Onions hung in long strings from the beams in the roof and so did several large hams. He could see bunches of herbs and their pungent smell filled the whole place. He sniffed appreciatively, then leant against the door-frame and waited, arms folded.

Tom appeared looking anxious.

"Somefing up, Sam?" he said.

"Not yet, but we're going to have to be more careful what we say and where we say it," said Sam. "That boy who works for Dick Bates must've heard everything we said in the churchyard the other day. I told you I thought he'd been following you!"

"Dammit!" cursed Tom. "I thought we were safe enough in there!"

"Small boys get everywhere," said Sam. "And no-one notices 'em!"

"D'ye think Dick set 'im on us to see wot 'e could find out?" said Tom.

Sam nodded.

"Must've done!" he said.

"And that must be why 'e never done anything else about the 'orses and the stable fire," said Tom. "I know they was told it were me as stole 'em from Adam Shute's place. I wondered why they never come to me."

"How do you know they were told it was you?" asked Sam, curiously.

"That 'iggins the butcher said the man I sold 'em to in the market pointed me out," said Tom. "But when nothing more 'appened, I thought 'e'd made a mistake."

"And now we know he didn't," said Sam. "Dick Bates is a smart'un – he's trying to make sure he knows exactly who's trying to close him down. Then he'll make his own move, I suppose, by taking out a writ against me or something."

"Huh!" said Tom. "P'raps we'd better make sure 'e can't do that ever! Maybe old Charlie's fit enough to pay a visit to the Peacock, eh?"

"Maybe he is, Tom," said Sam. "Why don't you find out?"

"As soon as I can!" promised Tom.

The two men shook hands and went their separate ways.

CHAPTER TEN

Kate was worried. It was ages since she'd overheard her Uncle Tom and Sam Whitbread talking in the store. Ever since Uncle Tom had told her to set fire to the stables at the Peacock, she had felt bad. Seeing her Ma taken away and knowing she'd been transported to Australia made Kate feel nervous, too. She knew what she'd done was very wrong – suppose she'd been caught? It had seemed exciting at the time, but the last few days had changed her a lot. Besides, her Aunt Joan had guessed, she was sure, although she never said anything.

Kate had watched and listened to everything that Uncle Tom and Barney had said in the house ever since she heard the conversation between the two men. She watched to see if Barney was sent off on an errand and she listened hard for the name 'Charlie', but no-one had mentioned him at table or in the shop – at least, not when she was there.

She didn't know what she should do next. Her uncle and aunt had been very good to her – especially her aunt, who was kind and patient and was teaching her all sorts of things about cooking and keeping house. On the other hand, surely she should warn someone if she knew that they might be hurt by someone else's actions? In her heart, she knew that it was right.

She sighed heavily, wrestling with the problem. Aunt Joan heard her and thought perhaps young Kate was getting bored.

"Want to go outside, Kate?" she said. "I need some more candles from Sarah Smart. She'll put it on our account, there won't be no need for you to pay 'er."

Gratefully, Kate stood up at once.

"I'll go right now fer you, Aunt!" she said.

"You just ask 'er for three dozen of my usual candles an' she'll wrap 'em fer you to bring back. No need to 'urry yerself – 'ave a walk round a bit, eh? Per'aps you'll see a nice shawl in Red Lyon market – 'ere's a shillin' for yer!"

Kate's eyes widened as the shilling was dropped into her hand.

"Oh, Aunt!" she said and hugged her aunt, then ran out quickly.

Aunt Joan looked after her with a pleased look on her face. Our Kate's comin' along nicely, she thought. That's the first time she's hugged me first! Maybe she's goin' to settle in and be a good girl. She's had a rough time so far, but per'aps 'er ma bein' taken like that will turn out to be all for the best. Where I ever got a sister like that I'll never know! And she shook her head sadly.

Kate walked down the street and turned into the marketplace. She'd have a good look round, she decided, and collect the candles on her way back. The marketplace was teeming, as usual. There was a man selling all kinds of fish and shellfish. Kate wrinkled her nose as she came to the stall, not liking the smell at all, but she stopped to look all the same. She watched the long, snake-like eels squirming about in a barrel and the shrimps wriggling around. Some lobsters and crabs climbed over each other in another box. Steaming trays of shellfish – cockles and winkles – lay waiting to be shovelled into paper cones.

She hurried past the stall selling the same things as her Uncle Tom sold, noting that his vegetables and dried hams looked much fresher than these poor examples. The baker's stand looked better, she thought, critically, but still not as good as they sold in the shop.

Now she had reached the stall she wanted to look at. Piles of shawls lay heaped in pretty coloured mounds, with some hung round on poles stretched across at the back. There were some

fine woollen ones and some pretty, lacy patterns which had been crocheted by skilled women. She touched them gently, enjoying the soft feel. They would cost more than she could afford, she knew, so she turned away and looked at the heavier wool ones.

"See what you want, dearie?" said the old woman who was standing watching her.

Kate picked up a blue one, with a red stripe running through it.

"I like this one," she said, shyly. "Ow much d'ye want for it?"

"Ow much 'ave yer got to spend, dearie?" said the woman.

Kate held out the shilling, proudly.

"A shillin'!" she said.

"Why!" said the woman, in surprise. "If that ain't exactly 'ow much this lovely shawl costs!"

Kate handed over the money, delighted that she had picked something for exactly the right money and was given her precious shawl. She put it round her shoulders at once, feeling very pleased with herself. Just as she moved away, she heard a voice beside her.

"Give the girl 'er change, then!" it said.

Kate turned and saw a girl her own age standing there at the stall, looking cross.

"I bought one o' them shawls last week and it were ten pence," the girl went on. "So don't swindle 'er outta tuppence. Give it 'er!"

The old woman grumbled under her breath, but said nothing loud enough for the others to hear. She plunged her hand into the pocket of her apron and brought out two pennies and handed them over.

"Come on," said the girl.

"Fanks," said Kate, but she looked crestfallen to think that she had been fooled like that.

"Don't fret yerself," said the girl, leading the way out of the market. "You'll know next time! Never tell one of them stall'olders 'ow much you've got. Ask 'em 'ow much first, then offer a bit less. Yer'll get wotever it is for somewhere in the middle see? That's bargainin', that is!"

She looked at Kate, curiously.

"You live round 'ere, doncha?" she said.

"Yes," said Kate. "I lives wiv me Uncle Tom and Aunt Joan just up the street a bit."

She jerked her head towards the shop.

"Oo are you?" she said.

"Me name's Maggie," said Maggie. "I works fer the Bateses in the Peacock."

"Oh!" said Kate, surprised. "I ain't never seen yer there."

"I works wiv Mrs. Bates," said Maggie, with a toss of her head. "Looks after their 'ome see? I don't work in the taproom, servin' ale an' that!"

"That's why I didn' know yer, then," said Kate, relieved. If Maggie had never seen her in the taproom, she reasoned, she wouldn't have seen her there with Uncle Tom and Barney when they were thrown out.

Maggie looked shocked.

"Why – you weren't spendin' time in the taproom was yer?" she said.

"No!" said Kate, hastily. "But I've walked past, ain't I? Seen people comin' in and out and bin to the door for a jug, like!"

"I gotta go and get some candles from the chandler's shop," she went on. "Want to come?"

Maggie considered her for a moment. This was an overture of friendship, clearly, and she liked the idea.

"All right then," she said.

The two girls walked away together and along Whitecross Street, chattering away as they got to know each other. Maggie was surprised to learn that Kate had only been living with her uncle and aunt for a short while, but Kate didn't trust her new friend enough yet to explain why. They went into the chandlery and Kate asked for the candles her aunt usually had. Immediately, Mrs Smart nodded her head and turned to take two handfuls of candles from the shelf behind her. She counted them out, tied them in three bunches of a dozen each and gave them to Kate.

"Aunt Joan said could you put them on the account, please?" she said, half expecting to get a box on the ear in reply. But Mrs Smart just got a slate out from under the counter and chalked an amount on it without comment, then smiled pleasantly at the girls and wished them good day.

This was a new experience for Kate. To be a respectable person and have other people smile at her was very pleasant indeed, she discovered. Now that she was dressed properly, in clean clothes instead of ragged, dirty cast-offs, with her hair neatly tucked into a pretty mob-cap, she wondered if even her own mother would recognise her! Clearly, no-one she had met while out had associated her with the urchin who used to wander the streets. She liked it and decided that 'respectable' was something to be admired.

The two girls parted outside the shop, Kate feeling she should go back to her aunt and Maggie was aware that Dolly Bates would wonder where she was, if she delayed. They said goodbye to each other, both hoping they'd meet again in the next few days.

That evening, Kate sat for a while with Aunt Joan, trying to learn how to hem neatly. Kate's lack of what Joan saw as ordinary domestic skills was shocking, she thought. Kate herself, although she enjoyed learning how to cook and how to prepare meals in the kitchen, wasn't so sure about learning how to sew. The needles were fiddly to hold and had a nasty habit of stabbing her fingers, or sliding out of her hands completely. Trying to thread them in the first place was nearly impossible, she found, as the end of the cotton slid to one side of the eye of the needle, time after time. Then, having got the cotton into the needle, she was expected to make tiny, regular stitches in a straight line!

"I can't, Aunt!" she wailed, as the needle lost its thread once again.

"Well, never mind for this evening, lovey!" said Aunt Joan. "It'll come wiv practice!"

The thought of having to do more of it made Kate's heart sink, but she said nothing. Perhaps, she reasoned, if she showed that she could cook really, really well, her aunt would let her off the sewing. She hated needles and thread more than anything else on earth, she decided, sucking her sore thumb.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Well pleased with his morning's work, Dick turned to go back into his brewhouse, when he was halted by what sounded like someone hissing his name from the lane outside. He turned back and looked in both directions, but, as far as he could see, there was no-one there. Puzzled, he went back inside a little way and again heard his name, this time a bit louder.

He strode outside again and stood with his hands on his hips and said:

"If someone wants to talk – show yer face!"

There was a pause, then a face peered out from under some ivy. Dick peered at it suspiciously, then beckoned.

"Come 'ere, then!" he said. "I don't bite!"

Slowly, the ivy was pushed right back and a girl came out from behind it. She walked towards Dick, twisting her hands in front of her and looking at the ground. She stood still a way off from him and looked up at him with something like defiance. Dick stared and then stepped forward.

"Oo are you?" he said, suspiciously.

"Kate," said Kate, nervously.

Clearly the name meant nothing to him and she relaxed slightly.

"Kate 'oo?" said Dick.

"Kate Deane," she said. "Tom Smith's me uncle."

"Oh, is 'e!" said Dick, a frown beginning.

"Don't do nuffing, mister!" said Kate, stepping back hurriedly and raising her arms as if to ward off a blow.

"I won't do anyfing to you!" said Dick, quickly. "Kate, you say?"

She nodded.

"Well, Kate – wot you doin' 'ere?" he said.

"Not sure," she said, with a shrug. "I s'pose I want ter talk to someone from the Peacock."

"You'd better talk to me, then," said Dick. "Secin' as I'm the owner!"

He folded his arms across his chest and waited, but Kate gave a scared look over her shoulder and said nothing more. He gazed at her for a moment, then made up his mind.

"Come into the 'ouse!" he said. "My wife will be there, too. You can tell both of us wotever it is you want to say!"

Kate nodded eagerly and was inside the yard and scuttling towards the house before he'd shut the gate properly. He strode after her and got into the kitchen just as she did. Dolly looked up in surprise as her husband came in with a strange young girl, but said nothing.

"This 'ere's young Kate – Tom Smith's niece, she says!" he announced.

"Well, Kate, you'd better park yerself on a chair in the parlour," said Dolly, taking in the girl's scared face and making up her mind that she was no threat to her family and home. She led the way across the kitchen and through into another room, furnished with upholstered chairs and

a small bookcase. Two small tables, looking too delicate to have anything placed on them, stood by two of the armchairs and a fire burned cosily in the fireplace.

Kate sat down nervously and twisted her hands round her apron. Dick and Dolly stared at her, waiting for her to say something. Suddenly, Dolly grabbed Dick's arm.

"I know where I've seen 'er before!" she said. "Your Ma lives up near St Luke's don't she – down one of the alleys there!"

Kate burst into tears.

"She did live there," she said, between sobs. "But she ain't there no more!"

"I didn't mean to upset yer, Kate," said Dolly in a kinder voice. "Wot's 'appened - is yer Ma ill?"

Kate shook her head, still sobbing.

"It's worse than that!" she said.

"Oh, lovey, I didn't know!" said Dolly, full of sympathy. "When did she die then?"

Kate still shook her head.

"She ain't dead!" she said. "She's gorn – been took to Australia."

Dolly drew back, her face hardening.

"What for?" she said.

"Thievin'," said Kate, staring at her lap.

Dolly sniffed, but Dick's kind heart was touched by the girl's distress.

"Now then, wife," he said. "It don't mean that Kate would do such a thing, do it?"

"We-e-ell," said Dolly, still doubtful. "I don't know ..."

"I wouldn't missus, honest!" cried Kate, suddenly finding her courage. "I know my Ma was a bad'un. She drank an' that an' she got into trouble because of it. I 'ope I never taste a drop o' gin meself. I've sworn I never will!"

"We-e-ell," said Dolly again, but she was softening, it was clear.

"At least give 'er a chance to say wot she's come to say," urged Dick.

He leant forward and bent down to Kate as she sat in the chair.

"Wot was it?" he said. "Wot made yer come 'ere?"

Kate looked into his face and saw no reason to be afraid.

"I wasn't goin' to," she said. "'Cos Uncle Tom and Aunt Joan been good to me an' that. But I 'eard Uncle Tom an' Barney planning something awful and I couldn't fink wot to do. And I 'eard you an' Mr Shute talkin' –

Her voice tailed away as Dick began to frown.

"Wot's that got to do with anyfing?" he said.

"I 'eard you say as 'ow my Uncle Tom needed keepin' an eye on," said Kate. "On account of wot 'im and Sam Whitbread were talkin' about."

She stopped again, and swallowed hard.

"Go on, girl!" said Dick.

She sighed heavily and then – “I’ve ’eard Uncle Tom and Barney talkin’ about getting’ rid o’ the Peacock for Sam Whitbread,” she said. “And sayin as ’ow it’s a shame someone called Charlie’s in such a bad way.”

Dick sat up very straight.

“Charlie?” he said. “They don’t mean Charlie the demolition man, do they?”

“Oh, Dick!” said Dolly. “Surely not!”

“I dunno,” said Kate. “If that’s the only Charlie you knows of, maybe it is.”

She gasped.

“Wot – yer mean Sam Whitbread and Uncle Tom are goin’ to ’ave you blowed up?” she said.

Dick gave her a hard look.

“You sure they said Charlie?” he said.

She nodded.

“I’m certain,” she said. “They were talkin’ in the store and I ’eard ‘em. I was goin’ in to get some more onions down and I ’eard them talking, so I stopped and listened.”

She blushed as she realized what she had said.

“You done the right fink, girl!” said Dick. “Good job you did – and good job you’ve come an’ told me.”

“Why did you come, Kate?” said Dolly.

“I met Maggie wot works for yer in the market an’ she done me a good turn yesterday. Besides, it ain’t right, that’s all,” said Kate, still blushing. “You ain’t never ’urt them, so why should they ’urt you?”

“Sam Whitbread wants his own way, that’s why,” said Dolly, grimly. “E don’t want no-one else making ale and sellin’ it to customers an’ that, so that everyone will buy what ’e’s makin’ in that grand new brewery of ’is!”

“It’s not ale ’e’s makin’,” said Dick. “It’s porter. Stronger stuff altogether. Then ’e’ll sell it on to them as runs the taverns and such but don’t run a brewhouse, too.”

“So ’e’ll ’ave one o’ them wotsits!” said Dolly.

“Monopoly,” said Dick, nodding.

“Wot’s that, then?” said Kate, intrigued.

“It’s when you can only buy from one person or comp’ny,” said Dick. “Like if we all ’ad to buy meat from ’iggins and nobody else!”

“Well, that ain’t right!” said Dolly, firmly. “If there’s only one supplier, they can charge wot they like and no-one can argue.”

“It means you can only buy wot they offers, too,” said Dick, grimly. “So no more different ales, dependin’ on ’oo makes it. Just porter, always tasting and lookin’ the same as last time. Huh!”

He snorted in disgust and folded his arms across his chest.

“So – can you stop ’im, Mr. Bates?” said Kate, timidly.

“I can ’ave a very good try – and I’m goin’ too!” said Dick.

"You can't do it on yer own, Dick!" said his wife. "There's more than just Sam Whitbread – there's Tom Smith and his son, to start wiv, and 'oo knows 'oo else is involved?"

"We'll just 'ave to find out, won't we?" said Dick. "Don't worry, wife, I'm not goin' to try and do this alone. Adam's already said 'e'll 'elp and there's still young Daniel."

He turned to Kate.

"You done the right fing, comin' and tellin' me, girl," he said. "I won't forget wot you done."

"Can't I 'elp, too?" said Kate, her eyes shining with excitement. "I might 'ear all kinds of stuff that I can tell you. I might even get to go along with 'em when they goes to see Charlie!"

Dick shook his head.

"Don't you go gettin' yerself into danger, now, Kate!" he warned. "Girls ain't like boys – they can't move as quick when need be an' they ain't as strong. You be careful!"

Kate opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again without saying anything. She'd show him! Instead, she smiled as sweetly as she knew how and stood up.

"I'd better get back," she said. "Aunt Joan will wonder where I am. She wants to teach me 'ow to darn."

She turned and left the house swiftly and they could hear her clattering down the side alley and out into Whitecross Street. Dick went out through the kitchen, one hand in his pocket. As he passed the fireplace he took out his hand and threw a scrap of green cloth onto the flames. No need to hang on to that, he thought, I knows where that came from now and it don't matter no more.

Dolly had caught the movement, but said nothing. She pursed her lips and shook her head slightly, wondering if her husband was doing the right thing saying nothing to Kate, even though he realised she was the one who had set the fire in the stables. She went over to where a door in the corner that hid the stairs to the upper floor stood ajar.

"Maggie?" she called. "When you've finished up there, come on down and get started on the supper!"

"Comin' Mistress!" called back Maggie, from somewhere above her head.

She hurried to finish the dusting, flicking the feather duster over dressing chests and bedheads, but she was thinking over what she had just heard. So – her friend Kate was the niece of the Smiths who ran the grocer's shop, was she? And Tom Smith was up to no good, it seemed. Well, thought Maggie, we'll 'ave to stop 'im, that's all!

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maggie was glad of the light from the full moon as she picked her way across the yard and into the stables. She had only her stockings on her feet and the cobbles were cold and hard, but at least she was going quietly. She looked behind her as she reached the stable doors, but the house was completely dark and everyone else seemed to be asleep.

She raised the latch on one of the big doors and tugged at it until there was enough space for her to squeeze through. Inside it was much darker. She could see absolutely nothing at first, but as her eyes adjusted she could make out the shape of the stall and see the ladder that led up into the loft.

Swallowing hard, she inched forward and held both side of the ladder, then pulled herself up on to the first rung. Slowly and carefully, her heart hammering in her chest so loudly that it made her breathe oddly, she inched her way up. When she felt the top of the ladder, she gasped with relief and stayed where she was, hanging on tight.

“Daniel!” she hissed. “Wake up!”

There was a rustling noise and the dark shape over in one corner moved.

“Wossamatter?” said Daniel, sleepily. “Oo’s that?”

“It’s me, Maggie!” whispered Maggie. “Don’t talk so loud.”

Daniel sat up, rubbing his head, so that his hair stuck up all over it. He pushed back the blanket he’d been lying under and crawled across to Maggie, who was still holding fast to the ladder.

“Wot’re you doin’?” he said, puzzled.

“I’ve come to tell yer wot I ’eard in the ’ouse earlier,” she said. “But I’m scared to get off this bloomin’ ladder, ain’t I?”

Daniel sighed. Just like a girl, he thought, to get scared and stuck on top of a ladder. He put out his hand.

“Come ’ere, then!” he said, grumpily. “Give us yer ’and and I’ll pull you up.”

Maggie put her hand out and caught hold of his then, with a squeak of fear, she was off the ladder and in the loft. She had landed on her hands and knees, so she crawled away from the edge and rolled over until she was sitting. Panting, she waited for her heart so stop beating so fast. Daniel moved until he was sitting next to her and waited patiently.

“It’s like this,” she said. “I was upstairs, but the door at the bottom was open a bit and I could ’ear everyfing people said. The master come in with a girl called Kate wot I met in the market yesterday.”

She paused.

“Well?” said Daniel. “Wot about ’er?”

“Wot I didn’t know,” said Maggie. “Was that her aunt an’ uncle are the Smiths wot own the grocery shop up the street.”

“Yer mean Tom Smith?” said Daniel.

"Yerss, 'im," said Maggie. "She told the master and the mistress that she'd 'eard Tom Smith and 'is son talkin' about gettin' rid o' this place for Sam Whitbread."

Daniel said nothing, but he was thinking hard.

"Listen," he said, finally. "This is a big secret an' I dunno if I ought to tell yer, but the master already knows as 'ow Tom's bin tryin' to do 'im 'arm."

He could see Maggie's eyes glisten in the dark as she stared at him.

"Ow d'you know?" she said.

"Cos Mr Bates asked me to look out fer 'em and foller 'em," he said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice. "An' so I follered 'em to the churchyard a few days ago and 'eard them talkin' about it. Then I come back 'ere an' told the master."

"Cor!" said Maggie, admiringly.

"That wasn't all," said Daniel.

She might as well hear how brave he'd been, he decided.

"I was just walkin' be'ind that Tom Smith up the street when Sam Whitbread leaps out and grabs me by the ear!" he said. "'E drags me down Fern Alley and asks me wot I'm doin' follerin' Tom Smith. Very angry, 'e was and I thought I was for it!"

"Cor!" said Maggie again. "Wotever did you say?"

"Well, I finks quick, see, and I tells 'im it's just a game," said Daniel, proudly. "An' 'e believes me an' lets me go."

Maggie said nothing for a minute, then said 'Cor!' for the third time, very softly to herself.

"I wasn't 'urt, though," said Daniel. "In case you wondered."

Maggie giggled.

"I knows that!" she said. "I've seen you runnin' about since then, ain't I? Lookin' after the 'orses an' that."

"I just thought as you might have wondered," said Daniel. "Seein' as it was Sam Whitbread. 'E's big, you know – lifted me almost off the ground, didn' 'e? By the ear, too!"

He rubbed the one that had suffered. *That* had hurt all right! Maggie didn't seem to care and how could you impress someone by telling them you'd had your ear pulled? It sounded funny, even to him.

"Anyway," said Maggie, soothingly. "It must 'ave shook you up."

"Yes, it did," said Daniel.

There was a thoughtful silence.

"Wot we goin' to do then?" said Maggie, finally. "We've got ter stop 'em some'ow. I don't want the master and mistress 'urt – an' if they blows up the Peacock, we won't 'ave nowhere to live, will we?"

"I know!" said Daniel, crossly.

He couldn't think what to do and it didn't help to have Maggie painting such an awful picture. He could see it now – the Peacock lying in smoking ruins, the horses gone and the Bateses lying unconscious and bloody amid the ruins. He shuddered and blinked his eyes to get rid of the sight.

"There's one fmg we could do!" said Maggie.

"Wot?"

"We could talk to Kate and ask 'er to tell us whatever she 'ears, too. Then per'aps we can stop it before it 'appens."

"But wot if she tells 'er uncle about it?" said Daniel.

Maggie shook her head.

"She won't tell 'em," she said. "Kate's on our side."

She gave him a nudge in the ribs and made him jump.

"I'll look out for 'er tomorrow and ask 'er to 'elp us!" she said, excitedly.

"All right," said Daniel, reluctantly.

He wondered if he should have told Maggie everything that he had. It was too late now, though, even if he did remember very clearly that Mister Bates had told him to keep it a secret. Then again, if he couldn't follow Tom Smith and Sam Whitbread, how was he going to find out what they planned in time to prevent it? Suddenly, a thought struck him.

"Ere!" he said, louder than he meant to.

"Sssshh!" said Maggie. "You'll bring Mr Bates in 'ere!"

He dropped his voice back to an urgent whisper.

"I've just thought," he said. "That Sam Whitbread knows me, but do Tom Smith and Barney? 'E sends Barney off on 'is own – I've seen 'im. I could follow Barney still and you or Kate could follow 'is Pa and Sam Whitbread!"

"We could an' all!" said Maggie. "It ain't 'ard fer me to get out an' do the shoppin' an' that. I goes most days getting fings fer the mistress. Can you get away that easy, though?"

"Course I can – specially if I tell Mr Bates wot the idea is. After all, 'e *wants* me to find out wot's goin' on. As long the 'orses are looked after an' he don't want me ter do anyfing else in the yard, 'e'll let me go."

"Good!" said Maggie. "I'm goin' back to me bed now. I'll see yer in the mornin'!"

She looked at the top of the ladder.

"I suppose you wouldn't just 'elp me on, would yer?" she said, shyly.

"Course I will!" said Daniel, gallantly.

She was down the ladder quickly, feeling safer than she had before. She could hear Daniel rustling back into his bed and settling down, as she opened the stable door again and slid through. Back she went across the yard, in through the kitchen and up the stairs. When one of them creaked as she stepped on it, she froze, with her heart in her mouth. She could hear snoring coming from the Bateses bedroom and it went rhythmically on as she stood still on the creaky stair.

Reassured, she crept up the rest of the stairs, past their bedroom door, and up into her own little bedroom under the eaves of the house. She slid under the covers with a sigh of relief. Her feet felt cold, but she rubbed them together vigorously until she felt them grow warm again. Turning on her side, she put one hand under her cheek and fell fast asleep.

In the morning she got up at 6 o'clock as usual and went downstairs to riddle the grate in the kitchen and get the fire started again. It was soon burning nicely and she hung the black kettle of

water on its chain to warm it up for Mr Bates to use for shaving. He liked to start each morning shaving the beard from his chin. Maggie was fascinated by this ability of men to grow so much hair on their faces overnight but, of course, she couldn't ask him about it. It was a mystery! If she ever had the good fortune to get married, she promised herself, it would be one of the first things she would ask her husband to explain.

Busily getting everything ready in the kitchen, she pondered on the night's conversation with Daniel. She almost burnt herself on the big frying pan as she loaded it with rashers of bacon and then she nicked her finger as she was cutting bread from the loaf.

Mrs Bates arrived to find her staring stupidly as the blood welled from the cut and dripped onto the table.

"Lor', Maggie!" she said. "What were you thinking of? Come 'ere, girl, and let me wrap it in a bit o' rag for you."

Maggie obediently held out her thumb.

"I'm sorry, Mistress," she said. "I dunno why that 'appened."

"Well, I do," said Mrs. Bates. "You was dreamin', that's what! Now keep yer mind on what yer doin' girl, or you'll 'ave a real h'accident!"

"'Ere," she went on, taking plates and cutlery from the dresser. "Put these on the table and go and call Daniel in from the yard."

Quickly, Maggie did as she was told. The plates and cutlery were soon ready and she scurried outside and met Daniel just emerging from the stables.

"Yer breakfast's ready," she said to him.

"Right!" he said and that was all.

She looked at him, but he shook his head at her as he went past.

"Later on!" he whispered and she had to be satisfied with that.

Daniel was kept busy for the rest of the morning and it was nearly mid-day by the time he was able to speak to Maggie again. She had carried out her usual household tasks by then. She had emptied the slops from the night before, rinsed out the jugs and ewers at the pump, and placed them back on the stands in the bedroom, ready for the next morning's hot water. Then she had dusted the furniture and swept the floors as well as she could.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she had rolled her sleeves back as far as her elbows and donned a white apron, just like the bigger ones worn by Mrs Bates. Then the two of them had plunged into an orgy of chopping and dicing the meat for the famous pies, adding spices, salt and pepper and covering them with a layer of pastry. These had been put to one side while the dough which Mrs Bates had made earlier was dealt with. The dough had risen in the bowls and had to be turned out and kneaded once more before it was placed in rounds and plaits inside the wall oven to bake.

The bread was no sooner baked than it was shovelled out by Mrs Bates and placed on the board on the table to cool. The oven was quickly filled with the pies, so that they would cook too and all would be ready in time for the eager customers, as they expected.

So, feeling hot from her exertions in the kitchen, Maggie was glad to take the chance of a stroll outside for a little while, cooling off. Mrs Bates vanished upstairs 'for a little rest, my dear', as she put it. Maggie went over to the stables, but there was no sign of Daniel. Disappointed, she went down the side alley and into the bustling street beyond. There he was – leaning idly against the gatepost, looking at the scene in front of him. A dray from Whitbread's, with two great horses

pulling it, had got stuck between a cart coming the other way and the corner of the public house. There was a lot of shouting and cursing going on – both the drivers were yelling at each other to move back and assorted onlookers were shouting instructions.

Daniel turned his head and grinned at her as she came up to him.

“Gets themselves into a right old to-do, don’t they?” he said. “That’ll take a while to sort out!”

He pushed his hands deeper into his breeches pockets and stood upright.

“Let’s go an’ see wot else is ’appenin’, shall we?” he said. “Furver up the street.”

Together, the two wandered along up Whitecross Street towards Old Street. They peered into the different shops as they passed. Anthony Higgins the butcher was busy serving people with sausages and chops. The poulterer was taking down chickens, from the hooks on which they had been hung that morning. Eager customers waited for their chosen bird. The street hawkers were crying out their wares and being stopped for people to buy from them.

They came to Sarah Smart’s and Daniel peered inside her shop, which always like a treasure cave to him. All manner of goods were piled on the shelves and on the counter top in front of the shopkeeper. As he looked in at the door, a man pushed his way in. He was limping slightly and he had a bruised face.

“‘Allo, Sarah!” he said in a husky voice.

“Oh, you’re back, are yer?” said the shopkeeper. “Wot mischief you up to now, Charlie? I ’eerd as ‘ow you got yerself in trouble not long back!”

Daniel and Maggie looked at each other. Could it be that they were looking at Charlie the demolition man?

Charlie shrugged.

“We all makes mistakes now an’ then,” he said, carelessly.

“I wouldn’t want ter be round one of your mistakes, Charlie, I must say!” said Sarah.

“Never mind that!” said Charlie. “Just gimme the usual and look sharp. I needs it fer a job I got comin’ up!”

Sarah turned her back and opened a drawer near ground level. She brought out a small sack and laid it carefully on the counter.

“Need the rest of the fixin’s?” she asked. “Or ’ave yer got some left over?”

Daniel had been gradually edging in, trying to see what it was that she had on the counter. Her eyes fell on him and she waved her hands at him.

“Get out of it, boy!” she said. “Shove off – I’ll call yer master, I will!”

“‘Oo’s that, then?” said Charlie, idly, gazing at Daniel’s back as he disappeared from view.

“E’s that boy as Dick Bates ’as got workin’ in ‘is stables,” said Sarah. “Wanders around ’ere too much on ’is own, if you asks me. He needs more work to keep ’im busy – I dunno wot Dick’s finkin’ of, lettin’ ’im roam wild like ’e does!”

“Is ’e now?” said Charlie. “Roams around, does ’e? Well, well...”

He paid for the little sack and tucked it carefully into a cloth which he tied at the corners and held. Then he nodded his farewell to Sarah and limped out of the shop, to stare both ways up the street before crossing it.

Maggie and Daniel watched him go from the alley they had dodged down.

“Should one of us follow ’im?” said Maggie.

“Yerss – me!” said Daniel, promptly. “You better get back. Tell Mr Bates where I am and say I’m follerin’ a good lead!”

Maggie nodded her head vigorously.

“I will,” she promised. “I’m goin’!”

She hesitated.

“Go on then!” said Daniel, impatiently. “I got to go now, afore he goes round a corner or somefing and I loses ’im!”

He darted off and she watched him go, then turned and went back to the Peacock as she had promised. She found Mr Bates at the pump and went up to him, waiting until he’d finished rinsing his forearms under the water.

“Well, Maggie,” he said. “Wot do you want, girl? I can see you want to tell me somefing!”

“It’s Daniel, Mr Bates,” she said, nervously. “I got a message from ’im. ’E’s gone off up the street an’ ’e says to tell you ’e’s follerin’ a good lead.”

“Oh?” said Dick Bates. “A good lead, is it?”

“Yes,” said Maggie. “We fink it’s Charlie wiv more gunpowder.”

“And wot do you know about Charlie and gunpowder?” said Dick Bates.

Maggie clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Oh!” she said, remembering too late that Daniel had told her it was a secret.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Charlie was moving along at a fair speed for someone with a limp and Daniel had to keep breaking into a trot to keep him in sight. He turned into Tom Smith's shop so quickly that Daniel had no choice but to keep walking. If he had stopped suddenly, it would have been clear to anyone seeing him that he was following Charlie. Remembering what happened when Sam Whitbread had caught him, Daniel wasn't taking any more chances of being discovered. He walked along until he came to the next turning off the street and turned into it.

He was in Playhouse Yard, he realised. If he wanted to, he could go right through to Golden Lane, then walk past Tom's shop as if for the first time. If Charlie came out in the meantime, he would be able to see him, whether he went on up Whitecross Street, or crossed the road and went along one of the alleys opposite. It was a good plan, he thought, and trotted along the length of the alley, past the ruined wall of the old theatre that gave the alley its name and out into Golden Lane. As he came out of the alley, he almost collided with Kate.

"You're Daniel, ain'tcha?" she said.

"Wot if I am?" he said, struggling to get free of the grip she had on his arm.

"I'm wiv you!" she said. "I'm Kate and your Maggie's me friend!"

He stopped struggling at once and she dropped her hand.

"I saw yer go past our window just now, when Charlie come in," she said. "You was follerin' 'im, wasn't you?"

"Wot if I was?" said Daniel, still suspicious.

"I come to tell yer what 'e *said!*" said Kate, impatiently. "E's goin' back to 'is place and my Uncle Tom and Barney are goin' over there this evenin'. They're goin' to make their plans, Uncle Tom said."

"Wot – fer the Peacock?" said Daniel.

"Yes – Uncle Tom said Charlie must get it right this time, because Sam Whitbread was gettin' fed up wiv waitin'," said Kate.

"Lumme," said Daniel, with feeling.

"Wot're you goin' to do about it?" said Kate.

"We got to stop 'em," said Daniel, firmly.

He thought hard for a minute.

"Where does Charlie live?" he said.

"Sun Street," said Kate. "But I dunno which 'ouse."

"I'd better get after 'im and find out, then," said Daniel. "Maybe I can get 'old of that sack 'e's carryin'. I bet that's gunpowder in there!"

He turned and darted back up the alley, ignoring Kate's voice behind him. As he got near Whitecross Street, he slowed down and put his head round the corner of the building. He was just in time to see Charlie limping across the road and into Blue Anchor Alley.

Daniel's heart sank as he realised that Charlie was going to cross the artillery ground. There was no point in even trying to follow someone across such a wide open space without being

noticed. He'd go through the burial ground instead, he thought. He ran through it and came out the other side into Royal Row. The road led into the city and was as busy as always, with carts and carriages mingling together and people on horseback trying to pick their way through. Charlie, emerging from the artillery ground, simply stepped out into the road and hobbled to the other side, taking no notice of the shouts and curses of those whom he caused to haul back on the reins they were holding. One wagon lurched against a carriage and stuck fast, the wheels entangled. It was enough to make everything else come to a full stop and, taking advantage of the chaos, Daniel slipped across, too. No-one noticed a boy scuttling across, dodging horses' hooves with practised ease.

He looked round anxiously, afraid he had lost his quarry. No – there was Charlie, looking nowhere but in front of himself, on his way down Royal Row. It was easy to follow someone who never looked round, thought Daniel. They went down the road until they turned into Windmill Hill Row and then Worship Street. Here, Charlie turned to his right and made his way across the tenter ground, now empty of its usual lengths of cloth, laid out to dry on tenterhooks.

Charlie turned into a footpath and then into Long Alley, which he followed for some time, before finally darting into a short and dark path. Daniel went in after him and was very relieved to see that, as he came out of the other end, they were at last in Sun Street. Along the road they went, until Charlie came to what was clearly the house he lived in, as he produced a key from his pocket, fitted it into the front door and let himself in. Daniel stopped where he was, a few yards up the street, and gazed at the house. It was in a very bad state of repair, he could see, with the paint peeling round the windows and door. All the lintels over the door and windows tilted slightly to one side, as if the house was beginning to slide and only its neighbours prevented it collapsing completely.

What should he do now? thought Daniel. The sensible thing to do would be to go back home and tell Mr Bates where he had been, but the temptation to see inside the house was too strong. Perhaps, he thought, if he could just peer in a window somehow. Maybe it would be a good idea to go round the back of the house.

He looked about him and saw a promising alley leading off to his left. He walked down it and there, as he had hoped, was a footpath leading along behind all the houses. Counting along, he came to the gate leading into the yard at the back of Charlie's house and tried the handle, cautiously. To his surprise, the gate opened silently and he slipped through.

Behind the gate stood Charlie, waiting for him. He grabbed Daniel by his coat sleeve and dragged him across the yard and into an evil-smelling kitchen. Dirty pots and pans stood in the sink and some bread and cheese, both with mould on them, stood on the unscrubbed table. Two broken chairs were all the other furniture and a small fire burnt in the fireplace, making the air sooty with smoke which whirled about the room, as if the chimney were blocked.

"Wot you want?" growled Charlie, shaking Daniel by his arm as if he would pull it off.

"Nuffing!" said Daniel, his head whirling as he was shaken to and fro in Charlie's strong grip. "I don't want nuffing, mister! Lemme go!"

Charlie stopped the shaking and pushed Daniel against the table.

"Well, wot yer follerin' me for, then?" he wheezed, pushing his face so close to Daniel's that he could smell his awful breath. Charlie's eyes glittered underneath his bushy brows as he studied the boy's face. He bared his black teeth at him and growled.

Finally, he stood up and pulled Daniel along with him out of the kitchen and towards a door set under the stairs.

"I'm too busy to waste time on you!" he said. "You can stay safe in 'ere till I decides wot to do wiv yer!"

He opened the door and pushed Daniel into the small cupboard underneath the stairs and then slammed the door shut. Daniel heard the bolts being shot across at the top and bottom of the door and then a shuffling sound as Charlie limped away.

The cupboard door was not very well made and there were some small gaps between the planks which let in a little light. As Daniel's eyes grew used to the gloom he could see odd bundles piled up against the wall and he stumbled towards them and felt them. They were carpets of some kind and he sat down on them gratefully. The cupboard was too low even for him to stand upright in, except for the part near the door, he realised, looking around.

What was he going to do now? Kate and Maggie both knew he was following Charlie, but only Kate knew where the man lived. Would she manage to get a message to Maggie – or even to Mr Bates himself? He suddenly felt very scared. Maybe they wouldn't find him until he'd starved to death? His stomach gave a loud rumble at the very thought and he realised that he was hungry, thirsty and very, very tired. His eyelids drooped and his head fell forward with a jerk, making him wake up again with a jump.

He couldn't go to sleep now, he told himself sternly, but he might just as well get comfortable while he waited. He curled up on his side against the carpet and folded his arms across his chest. Before he knew, his eyes had closed and he was fast asleep.

Charlie sat in the back room on the other side of the staircase, checking that he had everything he needed for that evening's work. Tom and Barney would turn up as soon as it was dark enough, he knew, and he wanted to be ready for them. He fumbled in the small wall cupboard and brought down three lengths of fuse for laying at the end of the gunpowder trails he intended to put down. There would be one by the stables and one in the brewhouse itself. Barney knew how to get him in without anyone seeing him. The stables were no problem, now that he had the boy who looked after the horses safely shut away.

Then, finally, one down the side of the Peacock, in the side alley. He liked the kind of job where he didn't have to go inside! There would be a lot damage done, he knew, with all the alcohol fumes there, ready to catch fire as soon as the gunpowder went up. He grinned to himself as he thought of the pleasure he got from a well done job. Sam Whitbread would pay handsomely, he knew. If someone got hurt, too bad, as long as the Peacock was put out of action.

He put the fuse lengths and the little sack of gunpowder into a sack and tied it with a slip knot, so that he could undo it again easily. Then he picked up the packet of lucifers and put them carefully into a pocket of his greatcoat. They must be kept well away from the sack – he didn't want another mistake like last time! A sudden pain shot through his foot as if to remind him and he cursed and bent down to rub it tenderly.

* * *

Kate sat at table with Uncle Tom, Aunt Joan, Barney and Rachel. As they were served their meal, she listened to the conversation. If she was lucky, they would talk about this evening, she thought, and she was in luck.

"Barney, I want you wiv me tonight," said Uncle Tom.

"Where we goin', then?" said Barney, shovelling a huge forkful of food into his mouth.

"You know very well!" said Tom. "So be ready to go as soon as I say, right?"

Barney nodded, his mouth too full for speech.

"Where are you off to then?" said Aunt Joan. "It's been a long day – I'm too tired to do anything but sit about and do some sewing."

Aunt Joan was trying to teach her how to do different embroidery stitches. Kate could only watch in amazement, as her aunt's needle flew in and out of the cloth, while she poked about haphazardly.

"Um - , "she said.

"Ave you got other things to do, Kate?" said Aunt Joan.

"I'd like to go and talk wiv my friend wot I met in the market, Aunt Joan," said Kate. "She's bound to be free by now, wot wiv the market bein' closed an' all."

Uncle Tom looked as if he was about to forbid her, but Aunt Joan answered before he could say anything.

"Well, I'm glad you're makin' friends, Kate," she said. "As long as you're back before it's really dark! Eh, Tom?"

Tom grunted something and carried on eating. Kate breathed a sigh of relief. She knew she'd have been in trouble if he had known that her new friend was from the Peacock. By saying they'd met in the market she'd told the truth even if it had given a wrong impression. She attacked her food with renewed appetite, eager for the meal to finish so that she could go out.

At last it was over and the table was cleared.

"Can I go now, Aunt?" said Kate.

Tom and Barney were already putting on coats and hats.

"Course you can, girl!" said Joan, cheerfully.

Kate hurried to put her new shawl round her shoulders and pat her cap to make sure it was in place. Satisfied, she went out of the side door into the little alley and out into Whitecross Street. She could see her uncle and Barney swinging down the road at a good pace and, as she watched, they turned into Chiswell Street.

She hurried down the street herself, wondering how to get Maggie to come out. When she got to the Peacock she hovered about, trying to decide whether to go in the front or round the side. While she dithered, a window above her was pushed up and she heard her name being called. She looked up and there was Maggie, waving at her.

"Can you come out?" said Kate.

"Yes!" said Maggie. "I done all me duties for today. Just wait down there!"

The window was banged down again. Kate waited on the pavement outside. Very soon Maggie appeared from the side of the building.

"I'm reelly glad to see you, Kate!" she said, grasping Kate's arm and hurrying her along the road. "Daniel's still out and the Master's getting' worried!"

Kate stopped dead.

"Yer don't mean he's still at Charlie's place?" she said.

"Must be," said Maggie. "Nobody's seen 'im since 'e went off after 'im."

"That's bad," said Kate. "My Uncle Tom and Barney 'ave just gone out. They didn't say where they was goin', but I reckon it was to meet Charlie."

"Which way did they go?" said Maggie, her eyes huge with worry.

Kate pointed.

"That way," she said. "Along Chiswell Street – an' I knows that Charlie lives in Sun Street. That's the right way to go to get to 'is place!"

"Well, come on then!" said Maggie. "We got to get there too – maybe Daniel's in trouble. 'E don't know this area that well and I don't fink 'e's ever been on t'other side of Royal Row. 'E may be lost – "

"Or Charlie might 'ave caught 'im!" said Kate, interrupting her.

They caught each other's hands and walked quickly along. The other two were so far ahead now that they would never catch up with them, thought Kate. Maybe it was just as well – how would she explain their presence at Charlie's house? Still, she began to look ahead of them, to make sure they didn't suddenly bump into Uncle Tom and Barney.

They saw no sign of them until they emerged from the little alley that led into Sun Street from Long Alley. She pulled Maggie to a halt as she saw Uncle Tom's back ahead of them both. The two girls stood in the shadows and watched as Uncle Tom and Barney disappeared into a doorway a few houses along.

"That was lucky!" said Maggie. "We might've walked straight up to 'em wivout realisin'!"

"But now we know which house Charlie lives in," said Kate, with satisfaction. "Wot shall we do – walk past the front or go roun' the back?"

"Roun' the back, o' course!" said Maggie, promptly. "If we can get near a window wivout 'em secin' us, we might 'ear wot they're up to!"

They scuttled round to the path leading between the backs of the houses and counted along until they were at the back of Charlie's house. The gate was ajar and it took no time at all to slip through and cross the little yard, until they were crouched under the window near the back door. As long as no-one came out to the out-house in the yard they were safe.

Someone spoke so close to their heads that they both jumped. It was Uncle Tom, standing so close to the window that they both pressed themselves against the wall as though they could climb inside it.

"You got everyfing ready, 'ave you?" he said.

"Yerss," said a husky voice from further inside the room. "Told yer I would 'ave, didn't I?"

The owner of the last voice coughed and sniffed juicily. Kate caught Maggie's eye and pulled a face.

"So all we got to do is wait a bit, eh?" came Uncle Tom's voice again.

"Yerss," said the cougher.

"Is it tonight then?" said a younger voice, sounding very nervous indeed.

Kate put her mouth very close to Maggie's ear.

"That's Barney," she whispered. "'E's scared stiff of Charlie!"

Maggie nodded, then grabbed Kate so hard she almost lost her balance.

"Wot about that blasted boy of Dick Bates' then?" said Uncle Tom. "'Ave you seen 'im lately?"

"I seen 'im all right," said Charlie, with an evil chuckle. "Don't you worry about 'im, old mate!"

“Wot yer mean?” said Tom. “You ’aven’t done ’im in, ’ave yer?”

There was another sniff.

“Nah!” said Charlie. “It were a temptation but ’e’s in me cupboard fer now. ’E can stay in there till it’s all over.”

“Wot’ll you do wiv ’im then?” said Barney. “’E’ll tell on us all if yer let ’im go!”

“Not when I’ve ’ad my say, ’e won’t,” said Charlie. “’E’ll just want to get as far away from ’ere as ’e can!”

“Leave ’im to Charlie, Barney!” said Tom, firmly. “T’ain’t nuffing to do wiv us wot someone does wiv a intruder!”

His voice faded slightly as he moved away from the window.

“Wot we goin’ to do wiv ourselves for a bit, then, Charlie?” he said.

“I fought as ’ow I’d take yer to the Black ’Orse,” said Charlie. “Nice drop o’ beer they gives yer there and good food, too. I reckon we got time to enjoy ourselves there for a little while and get up our strength. Wot d’ye say?”

“Come on, then!” said Tom. “Let’s get out of ’ere. I dunno ’ow you stand it, Charlie – it’s the most mis’rble place I ever seed anyone live in!”

“Not like your place, Tom,” said Charlie. “Needs a woman, it does – and so do I!”

There was much sniggering and laughing and then the girls heard footsteps and the bang of what sounded like the front door. Kate looked at Maggie, eagerly.

“Shall we try it, Maggie?” she whispered. “Let’s go in and find Daniel and set ’im free!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Maggie raised her head slowly above the level of the window sill and peered into the room. There was no-one in there and she decided it was safe to stand up properly, so she did so, pulling Kate up with her.

“Look!” she said, still whispering just in case there was anyone in earshot. “The window’s not down properly. Let’s push it up and climb in!”

Kate looked at her pityingly and went to the back door instead. She twisted the handle and the door opened inwards.

“Don’t give yerself trouble yer don’t need!” she said, grinning.

The two girls stepped inside and paused, listening for sounds from inside the house.

“Come on!” said Kate, in a normal voice.

She walked through the kitchen and into the hall that led to the front door. The stairs leading to the floor above were on her left.

“I bet ’e’s up there somewhere,” she said, turning to Maggie.

There was a scraping sound from under the staircase and Maggie jumped.

“Wha-what’s that?” she squeaked.

The cupboard door under the stairs rattled and a muffled voice said “Oy!”

“Well, it ain’t rats, that’s fer sure!” said Kate.

She bent and pressed her ear to the door.

“That you, Daniel?” she said.

More muffled shouting came through the door. Maggie pushed her friend to one side and quickly slid back the bolts at the top and bottom of the door, then unlocked it. It flew open and Daniel tumbled out.

“‘Allo!” said Kate, cheerfully.

Daniel stood up and glared at her as he dusted himself off.

“Why didn’t you open up straight away?” he grumbled. “Stead o’ playin’ silly games – askin’ was it me? ’Oo else would it be?”

“I dunno,” said Kate with a shrug.

Maggie was dancing with impatience beside them.

“Come on!” she said. “We got to get back to the Peacock! We don’t know ’ow long we’ve got before that Charlie blows it all to Kingdom come!”

“She’s right!” said Kate. “Sorry, girl – it ain’t funny really!”

The three of them ran back down the hall and through the kitchen. Just as they were about to run outside, Kate stopped.

“‘Ang on a mo!” she said.

Running back to the hall, she shut and bolted the cupboard door again. Then she went back to where the others hovered anxiously in the doorway and they were out, with the door closed behind them, and across the yard into the little path. Still running, down the path and into the alleyway, then out and across the road and into Crown Alley. Past the gardens they ran and all the way into Upper Moor Fields.

"Slow down!" gasped Daniel. "I got a pain in me side something cruel!"

They slowed to a walk and crossed the fields trying to look as innocent as possible. Maggie glanced behind them more than once, but every time the field behind them was empty. Kate saw her anxious glances and laughed.

"They'll be a long time, now they've gone to the publick!" she said. 'Ain't yer never seen men when they gets drinkin'? Be there hours, they will!"

She tossed her head and walked on, humming a little tune. Daniel and Maggie trotted along behind her, not speaking. Daniel was so pleased to be out of the dark cupboard and breathing fresher air that he wanted to enjoy it to the full. Something even more important came into his head and he stopped dead.

"I'm starvin'!" he complained.

"Don't you fink of anyfing else but yer stummick?" said Kate, crossly. "Wot about sayin' fanks to me an' Maggie afore you start moanin' on about bein' 'ungry?"

"Fanks," said Daniel. "But I'm *really* 'ungry – I'll fall down if I don't get somefing to eat soon!"

Kate said something that sounded like 'tchah!' and felt in the pocket of her apron. Her hand closed on a wizened apple and she handed it to him without a word. He bit into it and spat it out immediately, screwing up his face at the sourness.

"Urgh!" he said. "Where's that come from?"

"Sorry!" said Kate, but she didn't sound it. "I put me 'and in me pocket and that's what was in there."

Maggie hid a grin, but she felt sorry for Daniel nonetheless.

"If we get to the Peacock as fast as we can," she said. "The mistress will give yer somefing, you know she will!"

The pause had got rid of the pain in Daniel's side and they started off again, this time moving at a steady trot. It took only a few minutes for them to get to Whitecross Street and run down to the Peacock. Dolly Bates was standing in the doorway of the alehouse, looking anxiously from side to side. As she caught sight of them, she called 'Dick!' over her shoulder and hurried towards them.

"Mrs Bates, Mrs Bates!" they chorused. Then they all started telling what had happened in their own way and made such a babble that she shushed them all until they were quiet.

By this time Mr Bates had arrived.

"Now then!" he said. "Wot's the story? Why did all three of you disappear wivout a word to nobody?"

The babble started up again. People were beginning to come out of the other buildings to find out what was going on. You could see pointing fingers and shrugging shoulders, with not a few grins as they saw it was three children all shouting at once at the Bateses.

"Come on inside and tell us all about it," said Mr Bates in the end. He couldn't work out what they were trying to say, but it sounded as if Daniel had been shut away somewhere and someone else had gone for a drink before they came and blew them all to pieces. That couldn't be true!

He hustled everyone into the taproom and straight across that into the back of the building. Into the kitchen they went and, when everyone was sitting round the table, he sat down himself

"Right!" he said. "Daniel – you first. Wot 'appened when you followed Charlie?"

Before Daniel could open his mouth, Kate burst out.

"We've got to make plans!" she said. "Afore they come and put gunpowder all round the Peacock!"

"Eh?" said Dick Bates, startled. "Gunpowder?"

"Oh, Dick," murmured his wife, grabbing his arm.

"Now then, Dolly!" said Dick. "Let's get our facts right!"

"It's true!" said Daniel. "Charlie shut me in the cupboard and then Tom Smith an' Barney turned up an' they was talkin' in the back somewhere an' I couldn' 'ear wot they said –"

"But Maggie an' me could, 'cos we went there and 'id outside under the winder!" said Kate. "An they was talkin' about doin' the job 'ere –"

"Only that Charlie said not till it was dark an' to go to the Black 'Orse wiv 'im for some ale first!" said Maggie.

"So we let Daniel out the cupboard an' ran back 'ere to tell yer afore they got 'ere!" said Kate, triumphantly.

Dick's face had been growing darker and darker as the story unfolded and now he got to his feet.

"Blow me up, would they?" he said. "We'll put a stop to that!"

"Wot yer goin' to do, Dick?" said Dolly, looking scared.

"It's wot we're *all* goin' to do!" answered Dick. "We're goin' to 'ide ourselves and then step out an' stop 'em, that's wot!"

He pointed to Daniel and Kate.

"You two go and 'ide in the stables, an' take some buckets of water from the pump wiv yer," he said.

Next, he pointed to his wife and Maggie.

"You two go and 'ide upstairs, wiv some water to chuck on 'em if they comes to the front," he said. "That'll cool 'em down!"

"Wot about you, Dick?" said Dolly.

"I'm goin' to stand round the end of the brewhouse, down the alley," he said. "It's where they're most likely to try and do some mischief. And if they do...!"

* * *

It seemed a long time before it was properly dark, but at last the shops were all closed and the street was quiet. There were candles flickering through some of the shuttered windows on the

upper floors, but most of the buildings were dark. Maggie and Mrs Bates looked out of the window from time to time, but Maggie could feel her eyelids growing heavy after all the excitement.

Just as she was dropping off, Mrs Bates said her name and she jumped up and crossed the room to look out of the window to the street below.

"Look!" said Mrs Bates, pointing to the left.

Three figures were making unsteady progress along the street, now on the pavement, now in the gutter. One of them limped and one was shorter than the other two. The one in the middle seemed to be doing his utmost to keep them all walking along together.

"That's them!" said Mrs Bates. "Look at the state they're in – I'm surprised they've found their way 'ere!"

"But Tom and Barney lives 'ere!" said Maggie, shyly.

"True enough, my girl!" said Mrs Bates. "Like pigeons, ain't they – always finds their way 'ome!"

They watched as the three wavered nearer. They stopped on the pavement beneath the window and their voices could be clearly heard by the watchers upstairs.

"Thish ish it!" said Tom Smith in a loud whisper. "Where'sh the shtuff Charlie, my old friend?"

"'Ere!" said Charlie.

He plunged his hand into his pocket and brought something out in a small sack, which he waved in front of Tom's nose. Tom stepped back smartly and fell against the wall.

"Not sho closhe!" he hiccupped.

"Look!" said Charlie, waving it in front of the smallest of them.

"Whoar!" said Barney's voice. "Get away!"

"I'll g-g-give you some!" said Charlie, beginning to untie the neck of the bag. "It don't 'urt you while izz on izz own."

"You sure?" said Tom.

Charlie shook his head emphatically and nearly lost his balance.

Mrs Bates stepped back from the window.

"Go downstairs and tell the master they're 'ere in the front!" she said in a low voice. "When they starts getting that powder out I'll tip the water over 'em and make it all wet!"

Maggie nodded and left the room. Mrs Bates could hear her pattering downstairs and along the passage to the side door. She poked her head out of the upstairs window and saw Charlie and Tom fumbling about with the sack between them. Quickly, she lifted the ewer full of water and tipped it out of the window.

There was a splash, a shocked silence and then shouting from below. At the same time, there was a roar of anger from the side alley and out rushed Dick Bates, heading straight for Tom. He grabbed him and shook him so hard his head looked as if it would fall off. Barney tried to run away back up the street, but by that time Kate, Maggie and Daniel had appeared and they all rushed at him. Kate gave him a push that made him lose his balance and fall on the pavement. With a whoop, Daniel jumped in the air and sat down hard on the prone body.

Still reeling about soaking wet outside the Peacock, Charlie was shouting, "Wait fer me!" He looked up and down the street desperately, trying to work out what was happening, but he was too late to get away.

Dick caught both Tom and Charlie by their collars and bundled them in through the front door and into the empty taproom. The three children brought Barney in between them. He was a sorry sight – his clothes were torn and dirty where he had been pushed over and jumped on and his face was pale, with a bloody mouth. He put up his hand and spat a tooth into it.

"Look at that!" he moaned, holding his hand out in the general direction of his father.

Daniel and Kate had provided themselves with ropes from the stables before they rushed out and Mr Bates pushed Tom, Charlie and Barney together on the floor and then, aided by Daniel, roped them all securely together. They sat back to back, looking very sorry for themselves.

Mrs Bates arrived in the taproom and looked at the scene with satisfaction and pride.

"Now what?" she said to her husband.

"Now we get two people to look at this pretty group," he said. "Kate, step up to yer aunt and ask 'er to come and collect 'er menfolk. I'm goin' to get Sam Whitbread."

"No-o-o!" came a fearful and wavering cry from Tom Smith.

"Wot's up?" sneered Dick. "Don't want Sam Whitbread to see what a bunch of idiots he's got workin' for 'im?"

"I don't care wot Sam finks!" snapped Tom, deeply offended, then his voice changed to a whine. "But don't get Joan – I'll never 'ear the end of it!"

He looked so worried that Dolly couldn't help laughing and Kate was grinning, too, as she left the room and set off up the street.

Dick nodded curtly at the three on the floor.

"You sit tight while I gets Sam, then!" he said. "And don't try anyfing – my Dolly's got a good strong arm and these two'll help 'er keep an eye on yer while I'm out! Make yerselves comfortable, then, gents!"

He gave a mocking bow and left the room.

"Right then!" said Dolly, sighing happily. "You sit by the winder, Maggie, and tell me when someone comes. Daniel, you stand on the other side of this little lot and watch 'em like a 'awk!"

No-one would ever forget the awful wrath of Joan Smith that night. She arrived within minutes, with Kate panting behind her. Maggie barely had time to say she could see someone with Kate, before they were both in the room. Joan's face was red with anger and embarrassment as she steamed into the taproom and saw her husband and son on the floor, tied up with Charlie.

"Wot 'ave you been *doin*?" she said, with an awful gleam in her eye.

She aimed a kick at the soles of her husband's boots and he drew his feet up hurriedly. Then she bent down and grabbed him by the ears and shook his head to and fro. Then she turned her attentions to Barney and boxed his ears so that his head rang.

"Ow!" he said. "Don't, Ma! I only done wot Pa told me!"

"I daresay you did!" said Joan. "But it was still wrong, goin' round tryin' to blow innocent people out o' their beds!"

She turned to Dolly Bates, her bosom heaving from her exertions.

"I dunno *wot* ter say, Dolly!" she said. "I'm ashamed o' both o' them and I don't know which one is the daftest!"

Just at that moment, in came Dick Bates and Sam Whitbread. Sam stood just inside the door, with his arms folded across his chest, and stared at the three pitiful objects on the floor. Saying nothing, he turned on his heel and beckoned to Dick to follow him back into the passage. Their interested audience strained their ears to hear what was being said, but, apart from the odd word or two, they spoke too quietly.

"That's fine by me!" said Dick, finally, in a normal voice. "I'll let them all go, then."

There was the sound of the door closing behind Sam, then Dick reappeared. He strode over to the group on the floor and untied them.

"These two are all yours, Dolly!" he said, pointing at Tom and Barney as they scrambled to their feet.

"As for you, Charlie," he went on, hauling the demolition man's arm until he was more or less upright, "Sam's waiting outside to take care o' you!"

Sadly and very, very soberly, the three left the room, their heads hanging and their feet dragging. The Bates household could hear Joan begin to harangue Tom and Barney again. Phrases such as 'in all my born life' and 'leading Barney astray' floated back, punctuated by 'Yes dear' and 'No Ma' and occasionally 'Ow!'.

Finally, Dick and Dolly Bates looked at each other and nodded.

"That's that, then!" said Dick. "Daniel, you and Maggie are little 'eroes, you really are. I'm proud of both of you!"

"So am I!" said his wife. "But now I think it's time we all went to sleep. You two are worn out!"

Just as she said that, Daniel and Maggie both yawned so widely that their jaws cracked. Without a word of protest they wandered off to the attic and the stables. In minutes everyone in the Peacock and its stables was fast asleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Daniel was busy in the stables. First, he mucked out the stalls, filled the mangers with oats and then let the two horses back in. Then he took the bucket and went to the pump in the yard. He filled the bucket over and over again and tipped the water into the old stone trough, so that the horses would have fresh water to drink. The trough had been there for over two hundred years, Mr Bates had once told him.

As he was getting ready to curry the horses, his master appeared and called him into the house to eat. The bacon sizzled and the bread was fresh and everyone enjoyed the meal. Mr Bates smacked his lips and belched and his wife looked at him reproachfully. Maggie grinned at Daniel, then hid her mouth behind her hand and coughed, as Mrs Bates looked round at her.

"Tut, tut!" she said to Dick, trying to sound cross. "Really, 'usband, wot bad manners you 'ave!"

She couldn't be cross with him today, though, as Dick well knew. Hadn't they saved the Peacock last night? Hadn't he had a long and very satisfactory conversation with Sam Whitbread in the passageway after they'd caught Charlie and the others? And hadn't she been pleased as punch when she heard what they'd been talking about?

So Dick smiled widely at her and said he was sorry, and Dolly leant across the table and patted his hand in forgiveness.

"Shall I tell 'em now, then?" he said to her.

She nodded her head.

"Now's a good time, Dick," she said, fondly.

Daniel sat in his place staring at them. Maggie, over by the oven, turned round and stared, too.

"Well, now!" began Dick Bates, looking very pleased with himself. "Last night, when we'd got them villains tied up nice an' tight, I went for Sam Whitbread, didn't I?"

Three pairs of eyes looked at him and three heads nodded solemnly up and down.

"An' Sam Whitbread, 'e feels very bad about wot them three tried to do, don't 'e?"

Again the heads nodded, three pairs of eyes never leaving his face.

"So –" said Dick, pausing for effect.

"Oh, go *on*, Dick!" said Dolly, exasperated.

"Sam Whitbread's buyin' the Peacock!" said Dick, in a rush.

He sat back and surveyed the others.

"There!" he said. "Wot d'ye think of that?"

Daniel and Maggie's mouth opened in astonishment. Then Maggie's eyes filled with tears.

"But wot about us?" she wailed. "Where will Daniel an' me go? I don't want ter work for Sam Whitbread!"

"Nor me!" said Daniel, hastily.

"No, no, no, my dears!" said Dolly. "You'll come wiv us wherever we go – won't they Dick?"

"Well o' course they will!" said Dick. "I thought they understood that – you pair of sillies!"

Maggie's tears dried like magic and Daniel's face lit up.

"Cor!" they said together.

"– an' today," went on Dick. "Daniel an' me are goin' up Leather Lane in the wagon."

He turned to Daniel.

"Would yer like that, lad?" he said. "You can 'elp me pick up some stuff there and we'll 'ave a look round and a bite to eat while we're there!"

"Yerss," said Daniel, eagerly. "I'd like that all right!"

"And Maggie an' me'll go round Long Lane an' look at the clothes and the world passin' by – and we'll 'ave a little sumfing to eat an' all!" said Dolly.

"Wot about the Peacock?" said Maggie, anxiously. "Wot about the people who come 'ere for a drink an' a pie?"

"They can want for the day!" said Dick, grandly. "We ain't goin' to be 'ere much longer, anyway!"

They finished eating at top speed and then Daniel went to the stable to hitch the horse to the wagon. He was standing in the yard, holding the horse's head, when Mr Bates appeared.

"Right then!" he said. "Let's get going!"

He got up on the seat and Daniel went to get into the back, but Mr Bates stopped him.

"Not in the back today, lad," he said. "Climb up 'ere and sit beside me."

It was the proudest moment of Daniel's life. To view the world from the wagon seat, beside his master, instead of sitting in the back, bumping along backwards, was wonderful. As they made their way out of the yard and into Golden Lane, then down Fann Street and across Goswell Street, he thought he would burst with pride. He sat bolt upright, one hand holding the edge of the seat, and looked around him.

On they drove, along Charterhouse Street, down Cowcross Street and over Farringdon Street, then up the hill until they were at Hatton Garden. Here, Mr Bates turned the horse's head until they were at an entrance to a stables.

"We'll leave old Beauty 'ere," said Mr Bates, getting down and beckoning to an ostler. Daniel climbed down and looked around him. They had come in under an arch and into a mews. Other wagons with the horses still between the shafts with their nosebags on stood about the area. He saw Mr Bates hand over some coins and the ostler nodded and then Mr Bates came back to Daniel.

"Come on, lad," he said and walked back under the arch and into Hatton Garden. Soon, he turned left and they were at the beginning of Leather Lane. The long narrow street was crammed with stalls selling all manner of things and the noise was tremendous. Daniel saw fruit and vegetable stalls, flower stalls, clothes stalls, shops with their wares displayed on stalls in front of them. There were men and women selling all manner of things to eat – shrimps and cockles, oysters and whelks, pies and buns and bottles of small beer to wash it all down.

He walked along with Mr Bates, his eyes darting everywhere. It was strange, but he felt as if he knew this place, although he could not have said when he had been here before. As they passed the wide entrance into Brooke's Market, he saw a woman with two huge baskets of

lavender. She was talking to a dark haired man in colourful clothes and she looked in their direction as they walked past. Her eyes widened and she pointed towards Daniel and Mr Bates.

The scent of the lavender wafted on the breeze and the man turned his head and stood frozen for a moment. Daniel felt his heart jump and he knew with awful foresight what was going to happen next.

“Oy!” shouted the man, striding across to them. “Come ’ere you young blighter – where you been all this time?”

He reached out to grab Daniel, but Mr Bates was too quick for him. Daniel found himself pushed behind his master, who drew himself up and stared at the gypsy standing in front of him.

“Oo d’you think ’e is, then?” said Mr Bates. “Cos ’e’s my stable lad as far as I know and ’as been for this last year or more!”

“E’s my boy Danny, that’s ’ool!” said the man. “You must ’ave stole ’im off the street! Good fer nuffing, ’e is, but you ain’t got no right to ’im!”

Daniel could feel his knees shaking and he put his hand out and caught hold of the hem of Mr Bates’s jacket to steady himself. Dick could feel the boy trembling as he stood behind him and he thrust his hand behind him and held his shoulder.

“You didn’t look very ’ard, did yer?” he said. “E warn’t so far away!”

“Mr Bates!” whispered Daniel, fearfully. “Don’t make me go back to ’im – don’t!”

The gypsy made a sudden dart for Daniel, who shot round to the other side of Mr Bates, whimpering. A crowd was gathering by now and there were comments being made and head shaking in puzzlement.

Mr Bates looked down at Daniel and smiled at him.

“It’s all right, lad!” he said. “Don’t you worry yerself.”

He turned back to the gypsy.

“E don’t want to go wiv yer,” he said. “E’s that terrified of yer – wot you done to ’im before I found ’im?”

“Nuffing that a father can’t do to ’is boy to make ’im be’ave proper,” said the man, sullenly. “But ’e were no good, I’m tellin’ yer.”

“E’ll beat me, Mr Bates,” said Daniel, gulping. “*Please* – let me stay wiv you!”

Dick stared at the gypsy for a long moment.

“Tell yer wot,” he said, finally. “You say ’e’s good for nuffing, but I say ’e’s good for somefing. I’ll give yer a golden guinea for ’im!”

“Two!” said the man promptly. “Give me two golden guineas and I’ll be well rid of ’im!”

Without another word, Dick put his free hand in his pocket and pulled out two golden guineas, which he handed over to the gypsy. The man snatched them, bit them, spat on the ground at Dick’s feet and walked off. Seeing the fun was over, the crowd dispersed and left Daniel and Dick standing on the pavement near the lavender seller.

“That’s that, then!” said Dick. “Not exactly wot I planned to buy ’ere today – but I reckon I’ve got a bargain. Dolly’ll be pleased, too – see if she ain’t!”

He grinned down at Daniel and patted him clumsily on his shoulder. Then, to Daniel's astonishment, his master bent down and hugged him! He straightened quickly and cleared his throat then laughed at Daniel's expression.

"Let's go 'ome, Daniel," he said. "And if you feels like it, you can tell me all about it."

All the way back, sitting beside Mr Bates, Daniel talked about his life before he had come to the Peacock, as the memories flooded back into his mind. He told about his father and his mother and the way they travelled from place to place, picking up work wherever it was offered.

"We lived in a wooden caravan, drawn by a chestnut 'orse. We went to fairs, where Pa bought and sold 'orses and Ma told fortunes," he said.

"Didn't Smithfield remind you o' that, when we went there?" asked Mr Bates.

"Nah," said Daniel. "It were seeing and smelling that lavender just now wot done it."

There were the lavender fields, spreading over acres and acres in Clapham and beyond. There were golden wheat fields, where they helped to harvest the crop and stood threshing for hours in the huge, dusty barns.

"Anywhere they used 'orses," he said. "Pa taught me how to look after 'orses."

"Wot about yer Ma, lad?" said Mr Bates.

Daniel looked sad.

"They fought a lot," he said. "I can remember lying in bed, listening to them arguin' and shoutin' at each other. Then, one morning, she just wasn't there. I never saw 'er again."

His father drank more and more after that, until he was always drunk and the jobs grew fewer and fewer. He lost his temper and beat him for all kinds of reasons, until Daniel could never work out the right thing to do. Whatever he did, he was beaten. In the end, he was afraid of his father coming near him.

"So – did yer run away, then?" said Mr Bates.

"Nah," said Daniel. "What 'appened was that we drove across the river with a wagon full of lavender. We took it round to the markets until, at Leather Lane, it was all sold on."

"So that's wot you were doin' round 'ere!" said Mr Bates.

They had turned back towards Clapham and Daniel remembered sitting on the tailgate at the back as his father drank from the bottle he had hidden in his coat pocket. The wagon swayed back and forth across the road and then, without warning, went over a stone and Daniel was thrown out.

He lay in the road half-stunned, listening to the wheels and the horses' hooves as the wagon rolled away. Dazed and shaken, he hadn't been able to call out to his father to stop. He crawled to the side of the road and lay down on the verge, where he must have slept for some time.

"When I woke up," he said. "I didn't know where I was, but I fought I was goin' towards the river and that would be the right way to go. I went that way 'cos it slopes down'll and all the roads to the river seem to do that."

"And you was walkin' along like that when I stopped and picked you up!" said Mr Bates. "And brought you back 'ere."

Daniel realised he had talked all the way back to the Peacock. Gratefully, he climbed down and made to unhitch the horse and lead it into the stable. Dick watched him and decided to let him do it. The routine will calm him down, he thought wisely.

"Come into the kitchen when you're done lad!" he said.

Daniel took his time, making sure that Beauty was safely in her stall, with plenty of oats and water. He hung the tack up on its proper hook and made sure that the wagon was under cover and that the brake was on. Then, feeling nervous, he went across the yard and into the kitchen.

Mr and Mrs Bates were sitting on the settle and Maggie was stirring something at the table. There was a bundle of clothing tied in string in front of Mrs Bates.

"Come in, Daniel," said Mrs Bates. "Dick 'as told me about this afternoon. So you've remembered what 'appened before you come to us, then?"

"Yes, mistress," said Daniel, timidly.

"And 'e's told me as 'ow 'e bought you off yer Pa," she said. "You know what that means, don't yer?"

"It means I belongs to you now, I s'pose," said Daniel.

"Well, in a way – but mostly it means you're really one of us!" said Mrs Bates, "And just as well, seein' as Maggie an' me spent a good while findin' these for you!"

She pushed the bundle across the table at him and he undid the string. There was a jacket and breeches, a waistcoat and a shirt. Right in the middle there was a pair of stockings and some boots.

"Cor!" said Daniel.

THE END

