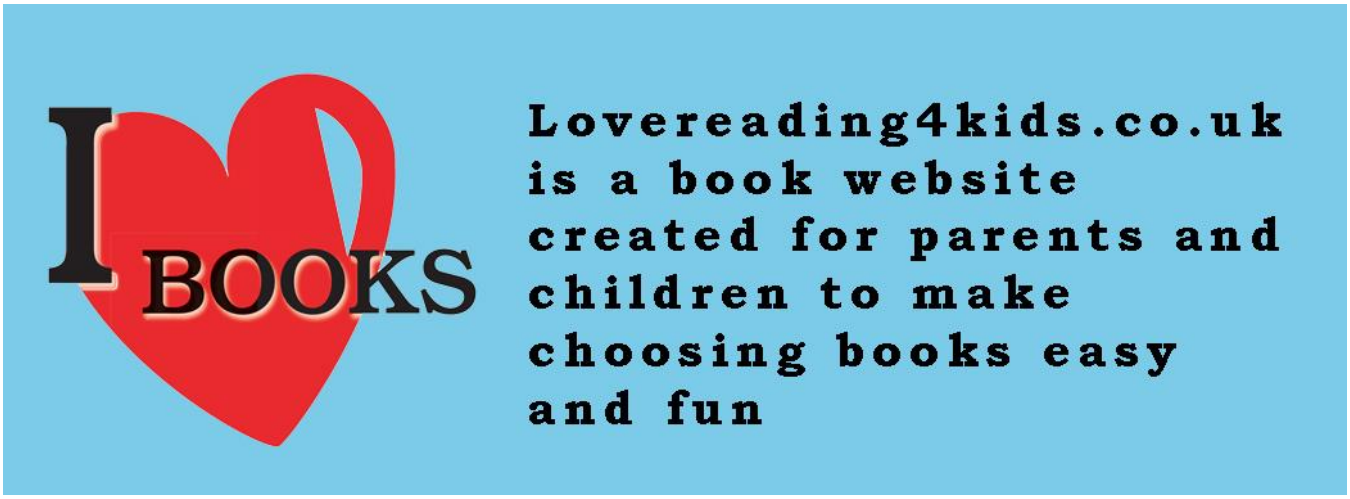


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For Hilda Cotterill

With thanks to the children of Lynne Healy's class at Dobcroft Junior School in Sheffield, who helped me with their advice and enthusiasm, and to Priscilla Hodgson, Deborah Walters, Mike Higginbottom, the Barnardo Library, Dickens House, The Ellesmere Port Boat Museum and Sheffield Libraries, who all helped me with their knowledge.

Tell Me Your Story, Jim

JIM JARVIS. WANT to know who that is? It's me! That's my name. Only thing I've got, is my name. And I've give it away to this man. Barnie, his name is, or something like that. He told me once, only I forgot it, see, and I don't like to ask him again. "Mister", I call him, to his face, that is. But there's a little space in my head where his name is Barnie.

He keeps asking me things. He wants to know my story, that's what he tells me. My story, mister? What d'you want to know that for? Ain't much of a story, mine ain't. And he looks at me, all quiet.

"It is, Jim," he says. "It's a very special story. It changed my life, child, meeting you."

Funny that, ain't it? Because he changed my life, Barnie did.

I can't believe my luck, and that's a fact. Here I am with food in my belly, and good hot food at that, and plenty more where that came from, he says. I'm

wearing clothes that smell nice and that don't have no holes in, neither. And I'm in this room where there's a great big fire burning, and plenty more logs to put on it so it won't just die off. There's just me and him. The other boys are upstairs in their hammocks, all cosy in the big room we sleep in. And downstairs there's just me and him, special.

I want to laugh. I'm so full of something that I want to laugh out loud, and I stuff my fist in my mouth to stop myself.

Barnie gives me that look, all quiet. "Just tell me your story."

My story! Well. I creep back to the fire for this. I hug my knees. I close my eyes, to shut out the way the flames dance about and the way his shadow and mine climb up and down the walls. I shut out the sound of the fire sniffing like a dog at a rat-hole. And I think I can hear someone talking, very softly. It's a woman's voice, talking to a child. I think she's talking to me.

"Mister," I says, just whispering so's I don't chase the voice away. "Can I tell you about my ma?"

Chapter One

The Shilling Pie

Jim Jarvis hopped about on the edge of the road, his feet blue with cold. Passing carriages flung muddy snow up into his face and his eyes, and the swaying horses slithered and skidded as they were whipped on by their drivers. At last Jim saw his chance and made a dash for it through the traffic. The little shops in the dark street all glowed yellow with their hanging lamps, and Jim dodged from one light to the next until he came to the shop he was looking for. It was the meat pudding shop. Hungry boys and skinny dogs hovered round the doorway, watching for scraps. Jim pushed past them, his coin as hot as a piece of coal in his fist. He could hear his stomach gurgling as the rich smell of hot gravy met him.

Mrs Hodder was trying to sweep the soggy floor and sprinkle new straw down when Jim ran in.

"You can run right out again," she shouted to him. "If I'm not sick of little boys today!"

"But I've come to buy a pudding!" Jim told her. He danced up and down, opening and closing his fist so his coin winked at her like an eye.

She prised it out of his hand and bit it. "Where did you find this, little shrimp?" she asked him. "And stop your dancing! You're making me rock like a ship at sea!"

Jim hopped on to a dry patch of straw. "Ma's purse. And she said there won't be no more, because that's the last shilling we got, and I know that's true because I emptied it for her. So make it a good one, Mrs Hodder. Make it big, and lots of gravy!"

He ran home with the pie clutched to his chest, warming him through its cloth wrapping. Some of the boys outside the shop tried to chase him, but he soon lost them in the dark alleys, his heart thudding in case they caught him and stole the pie.

At last he came to his home, in a house so full of families that he sometimes wondered how the floors and walls didn't come tumbling down with the weight and the noise of them all. He ran up the stairs and burst into the room his own family lived in. He was panting with triumph and excitement.

"I've got the pie! I've got the pie!" he sang out.

"Ssssh!" His sister Emily was kneeling on the floor, and she turned round to him sharply. "Ma's asleep, Jim."

Lizzie jumped up and ran to him, pulling him over towards the fire so they could spread out the pudding cloth on the hearth. They broke off chunks of pastry and dipped them into the brimming gravy.

"What about Ma?" asked Lizzie.

"She won't want it," Emily said. "She never eats."

Lizzie pulled Jim's hand back as he was reaching out for another chunk. "But the gravy might do her good," she suggested. "Just a little taste. Stop shovelling it down so fast, Jim. Let Ma have a bit."

She turned round to her mother's pile of bedding and pulled back the ragged cover.

"Ma," she whispered. "Try a bit. It's lovely!"

She held a piece of gravy-soaked piecrust to her lips, but her mother shook her head and turned over, huddling her rug round her.

"I'll have it!" said Jim, but Lizzie put it on the corner of her mother's bed-rags.

"She might feel like it later," she said. "The smell might tempt her."

"I told you," said Emily. "She don't want food no more. That's what she said."

Jim paused for a moment in his eating, his hand resting over his portion of pie in case his sisters snatched it away from him. "What's the matter with Ma?" he asked.

"Nothing's the matter," said Emily. She chucked a log on the fire, watching how the flames curled themselves round it.

"She's tired, is all," Lizzie prompted her. "She just wants to sleep, don't she?"

"But she's been asleep all day," Jim said. "And yesterday. And the day before."

"Just eat your pie," said Emily. "You heard what she said. There's no more shillings in that purse, so don't expect no more pies after this one."

"She'll get better soon," Lizzie said. "And then she'll be able to go back to work. There's lots of jobs for cooks. We'll soon be out of this place. That's what she told me, Jim."

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

The Stick Man

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

"The Stick Man!" whispered Emily.

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

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

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

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

"Is she dead?"

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

"Sick, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the rags clean away from her.

Lizzie knelt down and helped her mother to sit up.

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

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

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

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

"Did you eat pie last night?"

The girls were silent.

"Did you, sonny?"

"Yes," Jim whispered.

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

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

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

He heard Emily give out a little sigh beside him.

Mr Spink nodded.

"No money." He nodded again, and for a moment Jim thought he'd done the right thing to tell him that the pie had cost him Ma's last shilling. Mr Spink put out his sweaty hand and took the purse from Jim. He pushed his fingers into it as though it was a glove puppet, and then he dropped it on the floor and jabbed at it with his stick. He took out his silk handkerchief and flapped it open, wiped his hair and his face with it and then had a good blow.

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

"We've nowhere else to go," said Jim's mother,

so quietly that Mr Spink had to stop blowing his nose and bend towards her to listen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ma…" said Emily.

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

"But where can we go?"

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