

Chapter 4

THE WORKHOUSE

Thoughts flash round Tommo's head as he rushes off along the road, wary of the fact that the Cornermen now know he lives with Nellie. His worries gradually fade as, in the distance, he spots a high, pointed steeple seated on the dark, grey, slated roof of a church clock tower. Spinning round on the very top is a weather cock that seems to be calling to him. Tommo slows his run and starts taking in the surroundings. As he enters the

churchyard, pigeons take to the air in fright, making him duck as they skim over his head. There is a fearful, high-pitched whistling sound from above as a hawk drops from the sky, landing on the back of a small bird that screams in terror as the hawk claws and rips away at its body until it becomes still and quiet. This swift and brutal act of nature actually shakes Tommo, and he stands in silence, looking in awe as the hawk flies off with its prey.

He takes a minute or two to get himself together, but the comforting sound of church bells calms him as he makes his way across a grass verge.

Walking up to an old beggar who is sitting on the church steps he asks him, eagerly. “What way is it to the workhouse, mister?”

“Hey? What’s that you say?” asks the old man, looking up, squinting, cupping his hand to his ear.

“The workhouse, where is it?” shouts Tommo, using his hand like a megaphone.

“It's over there, lad, second turning on the right. Don't know why you want to go there, the house of death that place... house of death I tell yeh!” croaked the old man, wiping his face with a dirty, screwed-up handkerchief.

Following the old man's directions, Tommo moves along an old pathway, stumbling slightly on broken paving stones. He reaches the end of the path leading to an opening that is covered with overgrown bushes and weeds. He pulls down a low-hanging branch and comes face to face with the workhouse.

It's a grim-looking setting. Love and compassion have never been allowed to enter the cold, hostile surrounding walls. Tyranny and starvation are cast as the devil's disciples as they lie in wait in friendly disguise. High up in the centre of the building stands a pointed bell tower that seems to be reaching up, trying to pass through a cloud of despair that shields the resting place that lost souls call heaven.

Tommo slowly approaches the tall wooden gates before pausing to look up at this Bastille-like building, wondering what's inside. Cold rain begins to lash against his face as he hesitates. Lifting and banging a heavy brass knocker he's confronted by a dour looking man who opens the creaking gate, asking sternly, "What can I do for you, boy?"

"I need to see the doctor, my ma's baby is sick."

“I don't know if the doctor's here right now, seems to be more work for Father Dunn than anyone else,” says the gateman, dryly.

“But I've got to find the doctor! Cum on, you've gotta help me,” pleads Tommo.

“OK, take it easy boy; follow me and we'll see if he's around.”

Tommo steps into the yard and, as if daylight suddenly lost all memory of this place, darkness immediately falls as the gateman leads the way; holding a swinging lamp in front of him, mumbling and cursing life as they move across a slimy cobblestone yard.

They enter the dispensary through two swinging doors to the sickening moans of young children, crying out for the protective arms of their parents.

A grey door slowly opens from the dead room, and two robotic-looking men emerge, carrying a cheap wooden coffin. The gateman steps to one side and bows his head respectfully as they pass by. Tommo goes an ashen colour.

“Doesn't he 'ave any family to see him off?”

“Well, ‘he’ is a young woman who died giving life to some poor wretched child, and no, she doesn't have anyone. You

know the old saying don't you lad, 'rattle her bones, over the stones, she's only a pauper whom nobody owns'?"

The gateman's rhyme is interrupted by the abrupt arrival of the Master of the Workhouse, who is more than interested in the new inmate standing before him.

"Who's this? What's your name, boy?"

"David Thomas."

"David Thomas what, lad?" he asks, angrily.

"David Thomas, sir," gestures the gateman to Tommo in a hushed voice.

"Oh yeah, David Thomas, sir," he says, looking to the floor. Tactfully, the gateman intervenes. "I'm searching for the doctor, sir; this boy's baby brother is ill. When I find him I will send the lad on his way."

There's a creepy, uneasy silence as the Master stares down at Tommo with a look of distaste, before smartly turning on his heels and marching away.

"Where'd you learn to talk to your betters like that, boy?" asks the gateman, shaking his head. "I hope to God you never end up in 'ere, the Master is not the kind to cross swords with, believe me."

"I only told him my name. What's 'is problem?" shruggs

Tommo.

“When we reach the end of the building, if we still 'aven't found the doctor, it would be wise for you to leave through the back entrance,” the gateman cautions.

As they sidle along narrow corridors, talking in whispered voices, Tommo is taken aback by the sights and sounds that befall him.

Without warning, a deranged woman suddenly runs out of a room, trying to claw at Tommo's face, screaming and spitting hate from her lips, shouting the devil's curses at the top of her voice.

“Grab hold of her,” orders the Mistress, as two nurses struggle to restrain the woman.

“She'll be going to the asylum,” the gateman warns Tommo, who is pinned up against a wall in shock. Tommo wipes his face with his hands and sees the blood drawn by the woman.

“She's ripped me face! Where did that nutter come from?”

“Like I said, boy, it's the safety of the asylum for her and us!”

“Shall we try to find the doctor?” insists Tommo, wanting to move on.

“Yes,” says the gateman, pointing forward, “this way,

through the bakery.”

The gateman thrusts open the swinging doors. Tommo turns his head away sharply as a force of hot air is expelled, snatching away his breath. Entering cautiously, he’s brought to a sudden stop by the disturbing sights that greet him.

Groups of small, broken-spirited children pass him by; exhaustion etched upon their faces. The poor little devils are as pitiful to look at as the uniforms they are dressed in.

“Twelve hours a day they work. They get food in their bellies and a roof over their heads; pretty fair I’d say, wouldn’t you?” brags the gateman.

“That’s sh…”

“And…” interrupts the gateman, “if they step out of line it’s a night in the cell with nothing but bread and water. Those foolish enough to break windows or plates can be taken to the courts and disciplined with a whipping.”

Tommo starts to wish he was living back home, which, in comparison with this place, was like living the life of a millionaire. He had never thought for one minute that he’d ever feel that way about home. His mind spins back to the time he kicked off; shouting and cursing because he wanted money for new trainers and PlayStation Games, feeling he was hard done

by. The thought of being stranded here frightens the life out of him. He knows he could never survive this kind of poverty. Tommo walks in silence as they pass through the bakery door, leading to a hallway.

The heavy silence is broken as two porters with shaved heads appear from nowhere. Spotting Tommo they move quickly towards him, shouting. “Come with us. New inmate, are you?”

The gateman tries to explain, “I’m tak..!” But they just push him aside. Tommo struggles as they drag him along.

“It’s a quick hosing-down for you, boy,” the porters laugh as they force him into a cold musty room.

Tommo tries to get free, but it’s no good. Another man joins them as they pull his clothes off and hose him down with freezing cold water. “Time to wash the dirt from your soul, boy.”

“That’s right,” laughs the porter, “we just need to get the stink off you before we lock you up.”

Tommo sits in the corner, cowering and shivering as a rough damp towel is thrown at him.

“Here, dry yourself on this; then, because of your violent

conduct, you're going to the cells for the night, and if the Master sees fit he'll let the courts deal with you, then maybe you'll behave yourself," cautions the man harshly, as he lashes a prison uniform at him. "Get that on and let's move!"

Tommo is held by the arms and frogmarched along dark vacant corridors.

One of the men has a wicked streak in him and stops to kick open the door to a punishment room, gloating as he shows Tommo a woman wearing a Scolds Bridle. The poor soul has what can only be described as an iron mask over her head.

"That'll teach her to talk back to her betters," says the man, glaring at Tommo, who turns away with a heavy sigh, not wanting to look. They move on amidst lunatic shouts from inmates maddened by burning fever. Threats come ringing out as boys his own age spot this new lad going for lock up.

"In you go," sneers the porter as he throws Tommo into the cell.

The door slams loudly with a shrill, delayed echo that walks in harmony with the footsteps of the porters as they fade into the distance.

Tommo turns and catches sight of a withered-looking man sitting crookedly on a hammock.

“What are you in for?” asks Tommo, looking upwards, holding out both hands to catch drips of condensation as they fall from the arched ceiling.

“I came here looking for a place to live; didn't know they would split me and my kids up,” sighs the man in a broken voice.

“What do you mean?” questions Tommo, frowning.

“Well, when you come into this place, men, women and children have different living areas, and you're not allowed to even talk to your own kids. If you do, you can be punished. That's why I'm sitting here with you,” says the man ruefully. Tommo perches on the end of his hammock, angrily pushing himself backwards and forwards, frustratedly explaining why he shouldn't be here to the old man.

“It's all a big mistake, mister,” moans Tommo, “I only came round to find a doctor for the baby who's sick. I've got to get out of 'ere.”

“You're gonna have to wait till morning, lad, and pray to God that they don't keep you here,” mumbles the old man, scratching his head while twisting and turning on his hammock, trying to get comfortable.

In no time at all, the man is asleep; snoring and talking to

himself with tortured breath.

Through a small, barred window, Tommo slowly looks out. He's greeted by the cold stare of the moon as she hangs, monarch-like, in the clear night sky while, at her side, loyal silver stars peer down like soldiers standing guard over every lost soul that ever dwelt within this awful place.

The night is long and plays out to every inhuman cry that belongs in some other world. Tommo is now alone; there is no one to help him, but oddly enough, all he can think about is baby John. He decides that in the morning he will beg them to let him go. "They've just got to let me go," he says to himself, crossing his arms, trying to force the aching feeling from his chest.

Morning arrives with heavy footsteps and the welcoming sound of keys turning in the lock.

"Look, I'm sorry," pleads Tommo, jumping up as the door creaks open.

There, standing before him, is the dark figure of the Master.

"Silence!" orders the Master in a menacing voice.

For once, Tommo obeys, standing with head bowed respectfully, praying that they free him.

"Well, lad," says the Master, "I knew you would end up in

here, I just didn't think it would be so soon!”

Tommo is about to talk when he catches sight of the gateman putting a finger to his lips, gesturing a ‘shush’ sign.

“Were you about to say something, boy?” snarls the Master.

As the Master walks in slow circles around the cell, tapping his pouted lips with his forefinger in an attempted gesture of deep thought, Tommo remains silent.

“The gateman tells me you were taken in by mistake. I'm not too sure,” he says, disdainfully throwing Tommo's clothes to the floor.

“Get dressed, boy! And let this serve as a lesson to you, always respect and obey your betters. Now, be gone with you.” In a flash, Tommo is dressed. He turns to the old man who is standing beneath the barred window, and nods to him.

“See yeh, mister.” The old man turns away in a strange manner and doesn't answer. As Tommo leaves the cell, he notices two porters taking instructions from the Master. Sensing danger, he's on his toes ready to make a move, but he's too late. One of the porters sneaks forward to grab him and all hell breaks loose as Tommo attacks him; punching and kicking him, before throwing him into the Master. Both the porter and the Master land in a heap in the corner.

“Christ, he's broke my nose!” shouts the porter, holding his bloodied face with both hands.

“Don't let him get away, grab him you fools!” orders the Master, throwing the porter to one side.

Tommo legs it down the corridor, knocking over anyone who gets in his way.

“You'll pay for this, boy! You're in for a whipping!” Warns the master as Tommo runs up winding stairs and eventually finds himself up in the Bell Tower. He clammers up a wooden ladder and kicks it away behind him, giving himself time to climb out onto the roof, where he looks down over the ledge, thinking. “Shit, I didn't think it was this high up!”

Old slates come loose, causing his feet to slip beneath him as he moves along the roof. Below him he can hear shouting and dogs barking, but he keeps going, telling himself, “I can't let them catch me; I'll never get outta this place if they do.” Reaching the end of the roof, Tommo starts to climb down a drainpipe, but suddenly he feels the pipe coming loose and, as it breaks away completely, he grabs the window ledge and manages to scramble back into the workhouse through the window. He finds himself at the top of a dark stairway, but just above him, on the roof, he can hear the men coming closer.

This is his chance to escape. He flies down the stairs and heads for the door... and freedom. Suddenly, right in front of him, the porter with the wicked streak appears.

“Just me and you now, boy.”

Tommo looks him straight on. “Just let me out, mister; that's all I want.”

The porter wipes his bloodied nose and shows his hand to Tommo. “All I want is some blood, even things up a little, shall we say?”

Tommo kicks him in the balls, throws him against the wall and knocks him out cold before making for the open door.

As he runs, he hears the Master calling out from the rooftop.

“He's escaping! Somebody stop him!”

The open door leads Tommo out through the back of the workhouse, taking him to freedom.

Tommo legs it down the road, repeating to himself over and over, “Gotta find a doctor...gotta find a doctor...gotta find a doctor.”