



CHAPTER 1

It was the summer of the Great Heat. And the word on the street was that London was being roasted alive for its sins.

Bartholomew Fair was as hot as a baker's oven that August, and the heat was coming at the tumblers, Stick and Spud and Sparrow, from all sides. The sun had been beating down from above for weeks, but here in the heart of the city there was an uneasy feeling that the heat was now rising from below as well. The tumblers' hands and bare feet were singeing from turning somersaults on the burning cobbles.

"'Tain't right, 'tain't normal!" The holiday crowds were all over sweat and full of grumble. 'Old Scratch is blowing on his coals, down there,' they grizzled, keeping a sharp eye on the ground like it might open up any moment beneath

their feet. ‘And we’ll be baked to death in our beds before Bartlemy Fair’s over.’

That’s what they said, but Stick didn’t hold with no Devil. He was a practical lad who dealt only in facts, and he’d never seen Beelzebub or Old Scratch or Old Nick or Old Bendy – or whatever they called it. He didn’t need to believe in all that, because he’d got memories buried deep of worse. But that was a long time ago, and he’d never told nobody nowt about any of it. Stick had always been the quiet one, never one to waste words when there was no call for them. Not even with his oldest friend, Fly the chimney-sweep, who had sailed off months before in the company of a tiger, to nobody knew where.

‘We’ve got enough devils to deal with up here,’ he remarked to Spud and Sparrow now. ‘Without worriting ourselves about what some old varmint that don’t even exist is doing down there.’

No, Stick wasn’t one to believe in summat he’d never clapped eyes on. But that was before everything happened. Afterwards he wasn’t so certain sure what he believed. About anything.

Today there had been no pleasing the overheated and uneasy crowd who normally rained pennies on the tumblers on this, St Bartholomew’s Day, the biggest holiday of the



year. Earlier that morning, the boys had promised to treat the other gutterlings – their gang of fellow street urchins – to a pennyworth of pudding apiece when they met up again that night. But right now it didn't look like they'd even make enough to fill their own bellies.

In the end, Stick and Spud and Sparrow had given up chucking cartwheels from blistered hands to blistered feet and back again for no thanks, and were taking a break for a while the right way up. An ominous heat-haze brooded over Smithfield, thick with the stink of evaporating blood from the meat market. The tumblers' palms were red from the stained cobbles.

Skinny as a row of skittles, the three of them barely had a full set of togs between them. None of their tattered rags met in the middle, but on a day like this, for once it was no bad thing to have a few gaps to let the air in.

Stick, the thinker – acknowledged by all the gutterlings to be the best at plans and wheezes since Fly had gone – was as long and thin as a pencil. His face was long and thin to match, with hair and brows as black as boot polish, beneath which his grey eyes twinkled, bright as brimstone. He was almost too tall now for tumbling, though it meant that his legs were long enough to tie up in knots like a German sausage, which always made the toffs laugh.



Spud was the stubborn one, especially when it came to getting ha'pennies out of the customers. He was a little rounder, and his face was pockmarked like a potato from a near-death brush with the smallpox, which is how he'd earned his nickname. He wasn't as naturally nimble as the other two, but he'd taught himself to roll head over heels as neat and quick as a woodlouse.

Spud had always been a straight-talker – he'd had to stop working as a crossing-sweeper, because he'd given offence to so many toffs who'd walked across his nicely swept crossing and not tipped him so much as a farthing. Even now he was a tumbler, he wasn't one for flummery when the customers didn't come up with the tips.

'Fungus-faced old fossils!' Spud yelled now after an elderly couple who had watched the whole show but sidled off without a tip. 'Fair's fair,' he added. "'Tain't right.' Such penny-pinching offended Spud's strongly held sense of right and wrong.

'What the mischief's up with them all today?' he grumbled. 'Sour-faced skinflints!'

He made sure he was speaking loud enough to give offence. Spud prided himself on a fine repertoire of foul-mouthed insults, which was at odds with his choir-boy smile. Together with his mop of curls, which might have



been fair if he'd ever washed, his smile gave him the air of a smut-stained cherub who had somehow tumbled out of heaven and got lost in the gutter.

Last and very much least came Sparrow. He'd been bought from the workhouse by a house-breaker almost as soon as he could walk, because he was so tiny he could be shoved through even the smallest window, and then sneak round to open the front door. But the work hadn't suited Sparrow, who didn't see why he should risk hanging just to steal stuff for other people. First chance he'd got, he ran away to join the gutterlings on the streets, and turned his skills to tumbling instead.

Sparrow was the smallest of the three, but he was also the sharpest at spotting food and danger. He never seemed to grow, no matter how much food he managed to snabble. He was no more than a basket of bird-bones with rags for feathers, and his clothes were the most threadbare because the reach-me-downs always came to him last. He was so skinny and light he could chuck a dozen handsprings in a row, and got extra tips for tumbling on tables without touching a single glass.

'Here – look what I has prigged . . .' Sparrow plunged under the nearby stalls and came back clutching a paper twist full of fried fish that had been left unguarded.



Spud seized a grubby fistful. ‘Cor, me belly thought me throat’d been cut!’ It was the first time the tumblers had eaten and it was full on midday, by the height of the sun.

Stick leaned back against a wall after he’d taken his share, the soot-stained brick burning through his threadbare shirt, and surveyed the packed fairground crowd that was heaving like the surface of the sea before a storm. Spud and Sparrow were still heads-down, licking the last grains of salt from the fish paper. He took out his never-lit pipe and clenched it between his teeth, one knee bent and one bare foot propping up the wall. Anyone who knew Stick would know Stick was thinking.

‘Something ain’t right,’ he observed, to no one in particular.

The air shifted and sighed, so thick you could have sliced it with a bread knife and toasted it with dripping.

‘Show! Show! Show! Show!’ The panting, sweating crowd had gathered around a tall red-and-white-striped puppet booth, where Punch was loading his wife Judy into a wheelbarrow and was trundling her towards the mouth of a dragon, urged on by hysterical gin-soaked onlookers.

‘That’s the way to do it, Mr Punch!’ They pressed against the rickety tent, baying for Mrs Punch’s blood, until it swayed and almost pitched over. ‘Feed her to the beast!’

Their shouts mingled with Punch’s cackles and Judy’s



screams and the roar of the dragon. Above it all echoed the cries of a preacher, all trussed up in black with a face like a dying duck in a thunderstorm and intent on spoiling everyone's fun.

'Repent,' the preacher was shouting, 'for the Day of Judgement is upon you!'

Then several things happened at once and nothing was ever the same after that.

A suffocating blast of hot air blew up from below, enveloping the fairground, blowing the women's skirts up like balloons and scorching the hairs on the men's shins. It felt like it came from a pair of great bellows deep underground. It sounded like a sigh, a groan of immense weariness, and it smelled of bad eggs and something long-buried.

There was a lot of screaming and a dozen women went down in a faint. The surface of the earth rippled gently, like a snake getting ready to shuffle off its skin.

The crowd, which a moment before had been shrieking for Mrs Punch's blood, fell silent. It wasn't a normal state of affairs to feel the earth moving beneath your feet, even after so many hours of jollification. The most rickety of the stalls swayed and buckled, sending trinkets and treats and jiggumbobs spilling out on to the cobbles.



Stick propped himself more securely against his wall and waited for what would come next. He clenched his teeth on his pipe to steady his nerves. All was still for a moment, but he somehow knew in his long bones that this was just the start.

Out of the silence, the whispers started up.

'That preacher were right, 'tis the Day of Judgement . . .'

'Old Nick is on his way . . .'

'And me not even washed me smalls!'

Then the earth bucked violently and gave a mighty heave, like the innards of a pie, hot from the oven, bubbling up to shake off its crust.

Bartlemy's two church towers lurched like a pair of drunks too tossicated to stand upright, and congealed blood from the meat market melted and bubbled up between the loosened cobbles.

'Saints alive!'

'What in thunderation . . .?'

'S'help me! 'Tis the end of days . . .'

The puppet booth collapsed in a heap. The shrieking crowd went down like ninepins, and the tumblers went down with them – all but Stick, with the wall still propping up his back.

So Stick was the only one standing a few minutes later when a lone man emerged from the chaos and

comflobstigation. The man was strikingly tall, with a chimney-pipe hat so high you couldn't see where it stopped and the sky started.

Cor, Stick thought. You could keep a meat pudding hot in that hat!

Beneath the hat, the man's nose stuck out, sharp as a pickaxe, from a beetroot-red face laced with bulging blue veins. His jacket flapped open to reveal a richly embroidered waistcoat of the same purple as his cheeks. It was straining at the buttons, over a great beer-barrel of a chest.

Stick couldn't take his eyes off him. Something was trying to crawl out of the cupboard in the back of Stick's head, where he'd locked up all the bad stuff.

'He's dressed like a toff,' he muttered uneasily. 'But he's built like a brickie.'

Over one shoulder the man was carrying a large sack that was bulging and wriggling like it was full of live eels, and he held a tightly rolled umbrella, which he was brandishing like a weapon. He was swearing at the drunks who were too comfoozled to get out of the way. 'You fools . . . you know not what lies beneath!'

Why's that cove need an umbyrelly on a day like this? thought Stick. It was an odd thought to bother his head



with, when the world was in the process of turning upside down, but it seemed somehow important.

Confused noises were coming from the bag, and the man gave it a few hard blows with the umbrella until the noises stopped. 'Cut your clack,' he growled. 'You'll be fresh meat soon enough.'

At that moment, the man turned his face full towards Stick. His burning eyes were full of savagery and greed – he had the look of a man possessed. But it wasn't just the madness in those eyes that made Stick turn quickly away and duck his head.

'It can't be him . . . not here . . . not him . . .' Stick's voice was shaking, but nobody was close, so nobody heard the fear. 'I thought he were dead . . . leastwise, I hoped he were.'

By the time Stick cautiously looked up again, the man had gone, as suddenly as he had appeared, and all around the fairground the rattled and befuddled crowd were struggling back to their feet.

'Blimey, what a to-do!'

'Bust me! What do they put in that beer?'

'Never known nowt like it in all my born days!'

'Ought to be a law against it!'

Soon the fainting women were fanned and set back on their feet, and the usual clamjamfry of Bartlemy Fair was

restored. It wasn't long before the holiday crowd had forgotten the moment the earth moved beneath their feet.

But Mr Punch and his long-suffering wife and the puppet theatre were gone.

And so, it turned out, were Sparrow and Spud.

