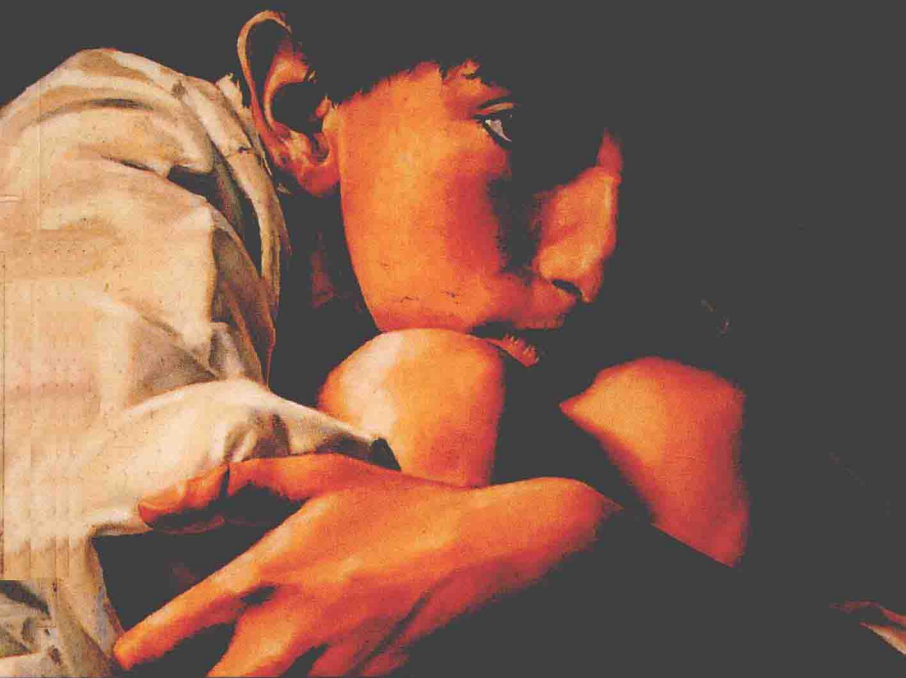


A
CHANCE CHILD

Jill Paton Walsh



How will Creep's brother ever find him now?

A
CHANCE
CHILD

Jill Paton Walsh

A SUNBURST BOOK
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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A Chance Child

Also by Jill Paton Walsh

FIREWEED

GOLDENGROVE

THE EMPEROR'S WINDING SHEET

UNLEAVING

THE GREEN BOOK

A PARCEL OF PATTERNS

GAFFER SAMSON'S LUCK

TORCH

BIRDY AND THE GHOSTIES

*To: Robert Blincoe, poorhouse apprentice;
Thomas Moorhouse, aged nine, a collier;
Margaret Leveston, aged six, a coal bearer;
Witness No. 96, aged sixteen as far as he could
guess, a nailer; Jacob Ball, aged twelve, a dish
mold runner; Joseph Badder, spinner, who
was sorry to beat little children; Joseph Heber-
gam, a worsted spinner from seven years old,
whose mother wept to see him grow crooked;
William Kershaw, aged eight, a "piecener"
whose mother beat his master over the head
with a billy roller; Emanuel Lovekin, mining
butty, who learned to read and write while
lying injured; and many others whose names
and stories I have made use of in this book in
one way or another, and to innumerable others
like them.*

J.P.W.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The landscape of this book is fantasy, and yet for every place described in it, some such place somewhere exists. Similarly the work described in this book was really carried out by young children in mines and cotton mills, both in Great Britain before the Factories Acts controlled working conditions, and in industrialized areas of the United States.

A Chance Child

chapter one

Rain had been falling on the cardboard box for nearly an hour when it began to move. The box was lying on a dump, with other abandoned and useless things. Above it a gray sky oozed a misty rain of fine droplets that gradually moistened the surface of everything beneath, coating it all with a slick of wetness. The letters on the cardboard box, red stencil, saying SURPLUS TO REQUIREMENTS, were quickly blurred. Then, as more rain fell, the card became sodden and began to disintegrate into a pale brown slime. And though everything else bore its wetting patiently, unmoved by the fall of rain, the box wriggled, shuddered, shifted as it soaked through.

At last there was a sudden convulsive movement from within the wilting cardboard, and out of it crept a ragged and shivering child.

The child crouched beside the box, its thin arms hugged around its ribs, and looked about, with a bird-like, darting glance. It had bright brown gimlet eyes, screwed up against the gray rainlight. It seemed to find nothing cheerful in its surroundings. A sigh as large as its body suddenly shook its frame. Then it stood up, tottering a little on thin, stick-bone legs, and began to weave to and fro, traversing the Place, up mounds and down pits, while the rain beat lightly and steadily down.

The Place was pitted and mounded. Not with earth, though on the rotted-down surface, here and there, brave dirty weeds had taken precarious root. Some of the mounds were of rubbish, reeking of fermentation, of corruption; more were of things. Crushed, broken, mangled, rusting, and perishing things—old cars, iron mechanisms, squashed drums lay in such confusion that the eye refused to sort them. Perhaps the pits were something, perhaps they were only the absence of mounds; they appeared, steep and deep though some of them were, not to reach down as far as native earth. Stone and gravel were embedded in their floors, and twisted and broken rails threaded through the greasy glint of foul puddles lying down there.

First the child climbed into the rusting body of a

doorless car, but with a grinding shriek the car tipped over, and, bringing with it an avalanche of tangled metal, slipped a yard or two down the tip on which it had been perched, and threw the child out. The child got to its feet without a whimper, and stared about him. The Place itself might have been a pit, for all around it walls towered. On one side rose a featureless and windowless wall of a stained and leprous white, on which the names of every sort of filth had been scrawled in deformed letters. On two more sides hung the broken ends of row houses, leaning onto huge structures of wooden props, and staring back at the child with the soot-lined blind sockets of fireplaces high above him. From behind the nearest houses came a noise of demolition, repeated rumbling and avalanching of brick, while a pinkish cloud of plaster dust drifted across the backdrop of windowless rows, waiting their turn. The child looked long in that direction.

Then it found a piece of plastic sheeting, half buried, and began painstakingly to scratch it out of the rubble. When it was freed, the child began to stretch it over the top of a hollow, weighting it down at the edges with handfuls of grime. But when the child tried to crawl beneath it, a gust of dirty wind with litter on its breath snatched at the plastic and tore it away.

The child sat down beside the roofless hollow, and looked at the Place again. On the fourth side lay a bend

of black water, and, rising sheer from this, a rumbling and hissing building. It was composed partly of brick, thickly crusted and scabbed with soot though the sore red beneath blistered through it here and there, and partly of soiled concrete. All over it a maze of corroded piping connected dozens of metal vats. Through unglazed arches a lurid light could be seen playing intermittently over the void within. Two huge chimneys rose to smear the sky above, and below the piping emitted gusts of stinking vapor. At the bottom, drainpipes from the walls excreted continuously into the black water, spewing arcs of hot smoking fluid with a stench that hurt the nostrils and brought tears to the eyes. As the child watched, a man passed across a narrow walkway through the vats. He seemed scarcely of human size, among the installations. He wore a silver boiler suit, a helmet, and a face mask, like someone dressed for survival in the air of the wrong planet. He held an incomprehensible tool. He never looked down at the Place.

The child sat very still, staring, but nothing more moved in the Place except the vomiting liquid, and scavenging crows flapping their greasy black feathers over the rubbish dumps, gliding like smuts against the sky.

But soon the child himself was moving purposefully down toward the stretch of black water. There seemed down there to be a sort of hut thing, a boxlike shelter,

like the little shed road menders use. It had caught the child's eye.

There was indeed, at the water's edge, a battered steel box, to which a few scraps of dark blue paint still clung. It was at one end of a tray-like object, massively built of riveted rusted iron, and decked at the other end with a few strakes of weathered, splintered wood. The child stepped into the tray-like thing, and looked gloomily at the iron door of the box, heavily padlocked. A rusty tin chimney projected from the roof of the box, suggesting all sorts of safety within. The child reached out, and wrenched at the padlock. Flakes of rust caked its wet palm. The child rubbed its hand on its rags, and tried again. The padlock tore through the rust-riddled plate into which it had been slotted, and came away in the child's hand.

Eagerly the child heaved the door open on squealing hinges, and went in. The darkness was dry. At once the child felt how wet it had become, and shivered, frowning into the gloom. A black stove stood beneath the chimney, with its dead fire spilled out across the floor. Opposite the stove was a bare wooden bench. The child sat down on it. It was cold. The child pulled the iron door shut. Now it was cold and dark. Sighing with relief the child stretched out on the bench, pillowing its head on its arms. The child felt a curious lack of solidity in the

box, as though it shifted slightly from time to time. But soon the child slept.

When, some hours later, it pushed open the iron door again, the rain had stopped. A watery sun had risen high over the houses beside the Place, and was casting a blurred shadow of their roofs over the rubbish heaps, diamonding every bit of can or broken glass on the surface. Even the black water was graced by a sullen gleam, and a slick or two of dirty rainbow. The child, however, was interested more in another change. It was no longer alone.

Another blue hut had appeared a little way along the waterside, with smoke floating upward from its chimney. A step away from it a workman was heaving something up a slope, and dumping it. The child scrambled out into the air, and tottered across the Place on his matchstick legs. He crouched on his haunches, and silently watched the workman.

The workman was sorting lengths of chain. The chains had been shackled together, and he was working with pliers, removing the pins from the shackles, and laying out the chain on the platform in front of his hut, in zigzag piles. He was wearing thick scruffy trousers, held up with a leather belt that had itself lost its buckle, and was tied with string. His blue shirt had frayed, leaving the white weft threads hanging in patches of fringe. He was tanned very brown. When the child had been staring for

some time, the workman, without looking up, said, "Mornin'." The child started violently, flinched almost, at being spoken to. Then, after a pause, it said, "Can I ask yer somthink?"

"You can ask. T'aint to say you'll get told."

"How did I get here?"

"Ah," said the workman. He appeared deeply absorbed in the shackle he was opening. Then he looked up. His eyes were bright gray, oddly pale in his swarthy face.

"Best not reckon much o' that," he said.

"Oh," said the child.

"Here for long, then, are you?" said the man.

"Can't *stay* here," said the child. "Where could I go?"

"Well, see here . . . er . . . what's your name, then?"

The child was silent.

"What does your mother call you?" said the man.

"She calls me that bugger, or that creep."

"I'd fix on Creep, out of those two," said the man.

"I'm Jack. Pleased to meet yer."

"Creep is what my brother calls me," said the child, as though to himself. "You haven't answered what I asked."

The man looked at the child again, with strange cloudy, rainlit eyes. "You asked me how you got here, and I said best not reckon. And you said you weren't stopping. Can't recall you asking owt else."

“Where could I go?” asked the child.

“Either way. Cut goes two ways from here, like from most places.”

“Cut?”

“The canal.” Jack gestured vaguely toward the stretch of black water. Then he plodded off, his heavy boots crunching the assorted filth of the ground, to fetch another length of chain.

Creep returned to the iron shelter, and sat beside it, looking, mystified, at the water. Far below him he saw the silver technician, upside down, crossing the catwalk with the incomprehensible tool in his hand. He could also see that what he had taken to be a pool, merely a larger version of the flashes of foul liquid on the dump behind him, could possibly be a continuing length of water, curving around the Place, and going somewhere, so that what looked like the end of it was merely a sharp bend, cutting off the view. It did not look enticing, disappearing between two black scabrous walls, and it was dry and comfortably dark in the hut. He thought about it, this way and that.

“Still here, Creep?” called Jack in a while. “I thought you wasn’t stopping!”

“*How* do I go?” asked Creep.

“You don’t know much, son,” said Jack. “Look here, then, and I’ll show you.” He bent, and lifted from among the weeds fringing the canal bank a length of chain fixed