

Chapter One: In which Jorian scrubs toilets

Jorian was an orphan. He had not always been one. He had dreams sometimes, and memories, but it was no good telling the other children about them, because they were as dull and gray as the land of Gaol. As damp as the mist that hung low. As dense as the gray brick that made the orphanage building.

So Jorian stared out of the window, out over the gorge.

The orphanage was built at the edge of a cliff. Below the cliff, far below, was a ravine, a chasm in the land that went so deep you could not often see the bottom (or ever?). Beyond the ravine— no one had ever told him what lay on the other side, and the clouds of mist hung so thickly there that he had never caught a glimpse of it.

“Jorian? Jorian?” Missus Figgypott’s voice carried from down the bare hall. He scowled and sighed. He was supposed to be cleaning the bathroom floors. Everyone had a job to do, and this month this was his. He hated it. Better to be casting stones over the edge of the cliff or herding the sheep, damp as those jobs were.

Missus Figgypott reached the bathroom, breathless. She was a plump woman with grayish hair the color of dishwater, which she covered with a similarly graying kerchief. Jorian knew it wasn’t really her fault that his life was dull and miserable; she was kind enough and gave them stew (the same stew, day after day, in the same dinner bowls at the same worn tables!) and she never beat them. She was only doing her job, but that was the problem. That’s all anyone was doing, without a speck of curiosity or life or adventure, without ever questioning why the mist wouldn’t lift, why the sun never appeared, why there were no storytellers or musicians anymore. Jorian doubted that anyone but him remembered that there *could* be stories or songs— and at times he didn’t quite believe it himself, it seemed like a very far off dream he had had once and was fast forgetting.

“Jorian! Goodness, have you not been working at all?” Missus Figgypott’s voice lilted and rolled. It sounded like music to him and Jorian closed his eyes. This did not improve her temper, but when she was irritated was the only time Jorian felt any life in her, and so he provoked her often.

“Jorian— answer me! All the children have been doing their work and finished long ago. Have you even begun?” She surveyed the still-dry floor with dirty shoe marks on it.

Jorian, his eyes still closed, listening to the cadence of her voice, shook his head.

“Cushmolochree! I have half a mind to throw you out! —”

Jorian didn’t hear the words. He was listening to the music, and this particular song went on for a full minute. He sighed when at last the lifting and falling, lilting, roiling sound fell silent; he opened his eyes and looked at Missus Figgypott wistfully.

“Hmph. I’m glad to see you’ve taken something in. You should feel contrite.” She shook her head and hesitated, then said, “Jorian, if you can’t control your behavior I shall have to recommend you to Father James.”

Jorian’s eyes bulged. “Missus, you wouldn’t!”

“I don’t know but I would,” she answered, though there was no sting in her words, only a mist-like sadness in her voice. “We all of us have work to do, and if you’re to stay here you must do your part.” Her voice softened and she took a step closer. “If you stop your dreamin’ you’ll find it much easier...”

Jorian shook his head and the doors closed behind his eyes, Missus Figgypott could see that. “That I won’t do. I’ll scrub these floors until I wear a hole through ‘em, but I’ll not give up my dreams. They’re the only splash of color in this place, and I know they’re real. They come from somewhere.”

Missus Figgypott said nothing, though she opened her mouth for a moment. Her shoulders sagged. “I’ll leave you to your work. If you’re late, you’ll miss the stew.”

As she stepped through the doorway, Jorian called out, “Missus? Where did I come from?”

She turned and looked at him, with sad seal eyes.

“Who left me here? What happened?”

She shook her head. “That I cannot say.”

Jorian stayed still until the sound of her black boots died from the hall. He took one more look out across the ravine into the mist. “There’s something there— I know it.”

Then with practiced hate, he shoved the scrubbing brush into the bucket, which was now cold, and attacked the floors as if to truly scour them straight through to the dormitory room below.