

## Chapter 20

### The Green Caravan

Jim woke to the sound of horses, a thudding of hooves that made the earth shake. He ran to the edge of his field and scrambled through the thickness of trees till he came to a wide clearing in another field. There must have been twenty or more horses being exercised, all in a ring. In the centre of the ring a man stood with a whip, lashing the ground with it and shouting out commands which made the horses stop, rear, turn and trot in the other direction. They were nothing like the workhorses that Jim had seen pulling carriages, or *Lame Betsy's* bony old knock-kneed dairy horse. These horses were powerful and lively, high-stepping like dancers.

At the other end of the field was a monster tent. Men and children were shouting and laughing out loud, hauling on the ropes to pull it upright. The tent was like a huge green bird that wouldn't lie still. And all round the sides of the field were vans, all painted with bright colours.

The biggest of them had words painted on them, and Jim knew for sure that they would say '*Juglini's Champion Circus*'. The van had a green door with a brass knocker, and cabin windows with muslin curtains, and a funnel at the back with smoke curling from it. From the back window a woman gazed out at him, as if she were day-dreaming, not really noticing him at all. Jim guessed that this would be *Madame Juglini* herself. He remembered how her children had danced and waved to him from the river bank, and instinctively he put up his hand to feel for the rope that had tied him round the neck. But he was free of that; forever, he hoped.

A wonderful smell of cooking arose from the van. Jim couldn't remember when he had last eaten. Whenever it was, it had only been the scraps from *Grimy Nick's* pockets. As Jim watched the woman disappeared and was replaced by two small children. Jim recognized them as the two younger ones who had been carried on their parents' shoulders the day before. They caught sight of him and pointed at him, laughing.

The woman opened the door to the van. Her children squirmed on to the step in front of her and giggled at Jim.

'Please, ma'am ...' Jim began. If he hadn't been so hungry he would have run back into the trees to hide, but the smell of food was stronger and sweeter than ever. He waved his hands to where the men were heaving and straining at the tent ropes.

'I've come for a job if you'll give me one,' he faltered. Memories of *Nick* came floating up to him. What have I done? he thought. What's happened to *Nick*? Immediately, hunger chased the thoughts away. Eat first, and then think. That was best. 'I'll help to put the tent up. I'll muck out the horses, and clean 'em up bright and smart. And I don't want money, missis.'

'Don't want money?' *Madame Juglini* frowned down at him. 'I've never heard that before.'

'If you'll feed me, missis,' Jim said, all his confidence gone. 'I'll do anything.'

He gazed at the little van, and his old longing rose up in him again. How good it must be to live in this green van with the shining brass knocker on the door and the chimney curling out smoke. He dug his hands deep in his pockets. There was nothing more he could say. A boy came running across the field to the caravan. He stopped short, staring at Jim.

Madame Juglini went back up the steps. 'Antonio, you bring the boy inside.'

Jim followed the boy Antonio into the van, and gazed round at the bright cushions and curtains, at the small fire crackling in its burner, and at all the neat shiny fittings. He had never seen anything that looked so much like a home. He was conscious now of his filthy hands and broken, blackened nails, and of the tattered state of his clothes.

Madame Juglini gave him some food and watched him while he ate. She knew the white marks round his eyes for what they were. She sighed. 'We have a busy day. We have a costume to make for the Strongest Man in the Universe. The last Strongest Man ran away with a Flying Lady and took his loin-cloth with him.' Her children giggled. 'You don't sew, I suppose?' she asked Jim.

Jim could have told her about the weeks he'd spent making sacks in the workhouse, but he daren't in case it was a trick question. He shrugged. 'I might be able to,' he said. The small children laughed at him. Mr Juglini came in, rubbing his hands together, and tousled Jim's hair as if he was quite used to seeing him sitting at his table. A cloud of black dust rose from Jim's head and Antonio pretended to dodge away from him, coughing.

'This boy says he wants a job,' his wife said.

Mr Juglini sat down opposite Jim and stared at him. Then he leaned towards him.

'Now tell me true,' he asked. 'Have you run away from home?' His black eyes seemed to burn right inside Jim's. Jim felt the scorch of tears, and tried to rub them away.

'I used to live on a coal-lighter,' he said. 'I ... I think the lighterman might have died, sir. I think he might have got trapped. It was ... I ... did ...'

Madame Juglini and her husband exchanged glances.

'He can whiten the harnesses with Antonio. There's a job. Let's see how well he does it.' Juglini smoothed his moustaches and went quickly out of the van.

Jim gazed after him, so many words tumbling about in his head that he couldn't find a single one to say.