

Chapter 21

Circus Boy

By midday the huge tent was up, and sawdust had been scattered in its ring. Madame Juglini was away for most of the day, but came back at dusk, just as the lanterns were lit around the field, hanging from trees like ripe orange fruit. The tent glowed with yellow gas-light. Jim and Antonio stood by the gates of the field beating drums, and the circus band paraded round the tent, bugles and trumpets blaring into the twilight. Bats skittered over their heads like black rags.

Up the lane came a rumble of wheels, and the children of the circus cheered. 'The people are coming, the people are coming!' At the door flap of the tent Madame Juglini was taking money and shouting; 'Roll up! Roll up, for the greatest show on earth! See the Flying Horses of Arabie! See Madame Bombadini as she flies through the air! See the Strongest Man in the Universe!'

Jim and Antonio ran inside the tent, and wriggled underneath the tiers of benches. They squatted there, arms folded, beneath the drumming feet of the impatient audience. Bits of orange peel and nut shells showered down on them. Antonio smiled at Jim.

It would be all right now. Everything would be all right. Tonight Jim would sleep in the green caravan with the brass door knocker, and tomorrow he would help to take down the big tent with the men and the children. He would march in the procession with his drum. Roll up! Roll up! He closed his eyes, letting the music and the voices swirl round him.

Antonio nudged him. The drums started up a booming roll. The crowd roared. Mr Juglini ran in to the ring and cracked his whip for silence. The band blazed, and into the ring ran the horses, the beautiful, powerful horses, scudding and shining, the thundering, billowing horses. Juglini cracked his whip again, and the horses reared on to their back legs, and into their circle another horse galloped with a woman standing on the saddle, her muslin skirts tucked up high. As the crowd cheered she leaned right back, her arms outstretched, and somersaulted: 'One, Two Three!' Juglini shouted. 'Four! Five! Six!' the crowd roared. Over she went, and over again, and came up each time smiling and proud. Jim cheered and clapped. He wanted to stand up and shout, 'Hooray for Juglini's circus!'

It was then, as the horses turned with a swish of their tails and a prancing of long legs, that Jim saw the thing he had never thought to see again in his life. The entrance flap of the tent was lifted up briefly. He could just make out the face of Madame Juglini, peering and anxious. He saw her hand, stretched up to receive a coin. And next to hers, like a spectre, another face, looming in the glow of the lantern; a blackened face, and square, with hair like a slipping thatch, and eyes that bulged through like lamps.