

Chapter 22

On the Run Again

Far away behind him Jim could hear the beating of the drums and the blare of the trumpets and trombones, the roar of the crowd. When he paused to look round he could see the glow of the huge tent and the dark shapes of the caravans parked round the edges of the field. He could just make out which one was Juglini's.

He turned away again and ran until he could run no more. He reached a barn near a farmhouse. The door was open. He crept in and curled himself up in a pile of straw. His last thoughts, as sleep overtook him, were of something that Shrimps had said, long ago.

'I'd rather sleep in a barnful of rats, and I've done that a time or two.'

Jim listened to the scurrings round him. 'Well,' he thought, 'rats is charming company, bruvver. At least they knows where it's warm and dry.'

The cry of the farmyard cockerel woke him up, and the sun striping through the barn roof. Jim lay still and tense, listening to the sound of the farm-workers making their way to the fields. When their voices had died away he went out of the barn. Hens cluttered round him and squawked away again. An old woman, swaying as she walked, came out of the farm building carrying two large pails. She swayed past the barn where Jim crouched, afraid, her skirts sweeping up the hens' grain as they bobbed around her. She went into the milking shed. Jim could hear her talking to the cows, and the low muttering the beasts made.

He dared himself to creep out of the barn again. The old woman had left open the kitchen door. Jim peered in. He could see bread on the table, left over from the men's breakfast – pies and cheeses, a big jug of milk. He slipped in to the kitchen. Maybe if he asked the woman she would give him food. Maybe she would shut him in a back room and go and fetch Grimy Nick. He didn't feel he could ever trust anyone again. He glanced round the yard and sneaked into the kitchen, stuffing as much food as he could in his mouth, cramming his pockets till they bulged. He heard a creak on the stair, swigged from the jug and grabbed one last desperate handful of cheese, and turned to see a girl on the middle step, her hand to her mouth. He dropped the jug and ran. The girl followed him, shouting, the jug clattering still on the flagged floor. The old woman hurried out of her milking shed, and all the farm dogs barked. Jim was away like a hare before a hound, streaking up to the lane.

He had no idea, now, where he was. The river was a long way away, and he could no longer see any signs of villages. A stage-coach rumbled past and he flung himself into the trees, turning his face away from the dust and the staring eyes of the passengers. What if one of them was Grimy Nick, glittering with revenge?

He limped steadily on. His leg hurt a lot now. He passed a family of beggars, trudging in their bare feet, bundles on their backs.

‘At least you don’t have to carry anything,’ he said to himself. ‘You count yourself lucky, bruvver.’

His boots flapped as he walked. The nails had worked their way out and the soles were like lolloping tongues.

‘Chuck them in a ditch,’ he told himself, but he knew he couldn’t do that. They were Lizzie’s boots, from long ago. They were the only things he had to call his own, beside his name. He shoved one in each pocket. Now he couldn’t even hear his own footsteps. Every now and again a lapwing squeaked in a ploughed field, or a small animal rustled the hedgerow leaves, startling him. He seemed to be walking forever along the silent lanes with the huge grey sky arching over him. He was tense with listening. He imagined he saw Grimy Nick lurking behind every tree, his shadow flittering every time he turned round, his thin, mocking whistle piercing through every bird song.

‘Keep going, bruvver,’ he urged himself. ‘This must lead somewhere.’

At last he came to a signpost. It was a magic thing, he felt that. He traced the letters with his fingers, one by one. “LONDON TOWN”. It has to be,’ he said.

‘You’re going home!’ he whispered. ‘Rosie lives in London Town, Jim!’

Home. He ate some food under his magic signpost and set off again, faster this time. The sun was setting low and red across the fields, but the air was becoming hazier and sootier. London was near, he knew it was.