

TREACLE
WALKER



ALAN GARNER

Treacle Walker

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Dedication

For MGS

Epigraph

Il tempo è ignoranza
Time is ignorance

Carlo Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo*

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About the Author
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I

‘Ragbone! Ragbone! Any rags! Pots for rags! Donkey stone!’

Joe looked up from his comic and lifted his eye patch. Noony rattled past the house and the smoke from her engine blew across the yard. It was midday. The sky shone.

‘Ragbone! Ragbone! Any rags! Pots for rags! Donkey stone!’

Quick, Joe. Now, Joe.

Joe pulled the patch down, got off his mattress on the top of the chimney cupboard and stood at the big window.

The last of Noony’s smoke curled through the valley and along the brook. He could see no one in Barn Croft or Pool Field or Big Meadow or on the track between the top and bottom gates; and trees hid the way up from there to the heath. He went back to bed.

‘Ragbone! Ragbone! Any rags! Pots for rags! Donkey stone!’

The voice was below the window. He climbed down again.

There was a white pony in the yard. It was harnessed to a cart, a flat cart, with a wooden chest on it. A man was sitting at a front corner of the cart, holding the reins. His face was creased. He wore a long coat and a floppy high-crowned hat, with hair straggling beneath, and a leather bag was slung from his shoulder across his hip.

‘Ragbone! Ragbone! Any rags! Pots for rags! Donkey stone!’ He looked up at Joe.

Joe opened the window. Even from there he saw the eyes. They were green violet.

‘What do you want?’ he said.

‘Rag and bone,’ said the man. ‘And you shall have pot and stone. That’s fair. Or isn’t it?’

‘Wait on,’ said Joe. ‘I’m coming.’ He rummaged in the cupboard and found an old pair of pyjamas. He ran downstairs to his museum and raised the glass lid. There was his collection of birds’ eggs and a lamb’s shoulder blade he had picked from a mole hill by the railway embankment. He took the shoulder blade, opened the door and went into the yard.

‘I’ve got these.’

‘Come aboard, buccaneer,’ said the man.

Joe put his foot on a wheel spoke and climbed onto the cart. The man made room for him at the corner, and Joe sat down. He turned his face away.

‘What is wrong?’ said the man.

‘You smell.’

‘Not I, Joseph Coppock,’ said the man. ‘You smell that I stink. Let words be nice.’

‘How do you know my name?’ said Joe.

‘“More know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows,”’ said the man. ‘Or don’t they?’

Joe jumped from the cart.

‘Cob you! Cob you, then!’

‘Master Coppock. Come up.’

Joe climbed back, but sat further along the cart.

‘What have you brought to market?’ The man took the pyjamas. ‘These are yours? Your own? You have worn them?’

‘They’ve got holes in.’

The man put the pyjamas to his face and sniffed.

‘They’ve not been washed,’ said Joe.

‘And what bone?’

‘I found this down the banking, near the brook. It’s a lamb.’

‘Well cleaned, scapulimancer.’

‘Are you daft?’ said Joe.

‘“As Dick’s hatband”, as they used to say. Open the chest. And choose.’

Joe got up and went to the chest. He lifted the lid.

‘Heck!’

The chest was full. Bedded in layers of silk, there were cups, saucers, platters, jugs, big and small: coloured, plain, simple, silvered, gilded, twisted; scenes of dancing, scenes of killing; ships, oceans, seas; beasts,