



I woke up the following morning, feeling fresh and prepared for whatever the day might throw at me. Marvello and I were given a quick guided tour of the makeshift hall, inside which we would be performing. It was a great deal larger than our usual venues but that pleased us because the bigger the number of spectators, the more money we would be raking in.

The local town was abuzz with energy. Men carried iron poles and wooden boards for the construction of stages; women held trays filled with jugs of water and sandwiches for those working in the baking sun.

I was determined to have fun, so I introduced myself to scores of local boys and girls. Some were hostile and unfriendly whilst others welcomed me like a long-lost comrade-in-arms and I soon lost count of the number of houses I was invited to.

On the one hand, this felt strange because I didn't have a place of my own to call home, let alone a bedroom. On the other hand, however, it was wonderful. I was taught to play so many games and played with so many toys. One boy, called Henry, had a fabulous cat-shaped music box, full of complicated mechanisms and levers.

I spent the afternoon wandering through Harwood's Open Field, watching all of the people setting up the stalls and activities for the following day. There was a buzz of anticipation in

## The Great Marvello

the air that you could almost hold on to. Men rolled great kegs of beer, women set up folding tables and arranged flower displays and children carted boxes of chocolates, yo-yos and other novelty items to various areas.

Large groups of people were setting up coconut shies, fake horses that took you spinning round a metal track and even a machine that you could climb into and be swung in all directions!

Marvello spent the day wandering among the local people, nodding greetings and making notes and sketches on the yellow pad he always kept with him, his suitcase constantly at his side, of course. This was not unusual. It was his practice every day before we performed. He liked to get a feel for a place and its inhabitants.

As the sun dipped, people lit flaming torches and lengthy shadows were cast across the grass in strange, uneven shapes. Marvello and I asked Mr Fallon and Mr Flack if it would be possible for us to spend some time alone in the performance marquee so that we could make sure that everything would be ready for our stage act.

“Of course,” nodded Mr Flack, “we believe every performer should be entitled to get to know their performance space. Would forty-five minutes do?”

“Perfect,” nodded Marvello.

And that’s all we needed. We checked the stage, cut a very small trap door into it, studied the floors and the walls and made sure the aisle would be narrow enough for me to scoot down without being seen during our *pièce de résistance*.

Everything seemed absolutely satisfactory.

“I have a feeling that tomorrow night will bring us very great riches,” smiled Marvello, stroking his moustache.

“I agree. I reckon there’ll be hundreds in here and with a decent cut of that we should be alright for a good few weeks.”

“I’m not just talking about crowd numbers,” he replied, smiling in a slightly unnerving way. I let it go. He was a strange man at the best of times.

## The Great Marvello

“Remember,” said Marvello, “because this place is bigger than the average town hall, you will need to move extra-fast to get down that aisle in time for the ‘flying’ act. And by ‘fast’, I mean like a cheetah from the African plain. Do you understand?”

“Absolutely,” I nodded, “my knees will be red-raw by the end of the show.”

“It will be well worth it,” he chuckled.

“If you say so,” I replied, knowing that although I would receive a temporary rise in wages, he would be the one to truly benefit. But there was nothing I could do about that. I’d been left to work as his stagehand; it was my fate, my destiny.

Marvello took one more look around the marquee, nodded to himself and said it was time for us to leave. No sooner had we stepped out of the door than we were set upon. I saw instantly that our assailants were the rogues who had tried to rob us in the ditch the other day. They were either local scoundrels or they’d followed us here.

This time they weren’t holding pistols; they each held a flaming torch. The older one swung his torch at Marvello, who ducked out of the way. The younger one then thrust his torch at me as if it were a cutlass. I leaped to the side and hit him hard in the face. He crumpled to the ground, unconscious. I stamped his torch out.

That left the older one. He snarled like a tiger being attacked in the mountains and lunged at Marvello. This time, the magician was too slow to move, so I threw myself forwards and caught the thug with a flying kick to the stomach. He and Marvello both went crashing to the ground, they too both out cold. I couldn’t get to the torch before it had burned a hole in the corner of Marvello’s suitcase.

And then a thought struck me. I left the suitcase for a good thirty seconds more until a good chunk had burnt away. Then, picking up the torch very carefully with my left hand and stamping out the flames, I started rooting around in the suitcase with my right. Within moments, I had made discoveries that rocked me to the very core of my being.