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ALSO BY ALAN GARNER

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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, birds, fishes, whales, monsters, houses, castles, mansions, halls; cherubs, satyrs, nymphs; mountains, rivers, forests, lakes, fields and clouds and skies.

'Choose,' said the man. 'One.'

'They're worth loads, this lot,' said Joe.

'Choose.'

'More than jamas and bones.'

'Choose.'

Joe took out every piece and laid them on the cart.

'This,' said Joe.

'That is the least,' said the man.

'It's the bestest.'

Joe held a round jar no bigger than his hand.

'It is small,' said the man.

'I don't care.'

'Of little price.'

'I don't care. It's grand. Grand as owt.'

The jar was white, glazed, and chipped. Under the rim was painted in blue: 'Poor Mans Friend', and beneath, 'price 1/1½'. On the other side was: 'Prepared only by Beach & Barnicott, SUCCESSORS TO THE LATE Dr. Roberts, Bridport.'

'It's old,' said Joe.

'As some would reckon.'

The man put everything back in the chest and closed the lid. There was an oval brass plate in the middle of the lid, and on it Joe saw a name engraved in flowing letters.

‘Blinking heck!’

‘What is wrong?’ said the man.

‘My name! That’s my name! My own name! There! And Real Writing! See at it!’

‘At this time all is yours. You have chosen. Next, you shall have this.’

‘Blinking heck.’

The man opened his bag and took something out. ‘Here.’ It was a stone, rough and grey, the size and shape of a bar of soap.

‘Blinking heck.’

He put the stone into Joe’s hand. One side was plain; on the other was cut the outline of a horse, legs and tail outstretched, head forward, long.

‘We are equal. The trade is done.’

‘And what am I supposed to do with this effort?’ said Joe.

‘Use it.’

‘How?’

‘As you have need.’

‘You’re twitting me,’ said Joe. ‘I’m going in. I mustn’t catch the sun.’

‘You would be swift to outrun that one,’ said the man. ‘The craven nidget who flees the dark and will not come back till morning.’

‘I’ve been poorly,’ said Joe.

‘Then I shall bid you good day; but have shade here under your pear. Heat and old meat don’t marry. And the leaves of pear are cold, its virtues earthy.’

‘You can come inside, if you want,’ said Joe. ‘It’s cooler.’

‘Since I may.’

‘Suit yourself. I’m not bothered,’ said Joe.

He went into the house. The man followed, but paused and looked at the step as he crossed the threshold.

The house was three rooms parted by timber-framed walls and joined by open doorways. A round iron fire basket was in the base of the chimney,

which was a room of itself, made of the same timbers, walked through from two opposite sides.

Joe and the man went into the chimney and sat on the oak sill of the base, facing each other across cold ashes. Joe put the pot and the stone next to him on the sill. The man took his bag from his shoulder and set it on the floor.

‘Why the patch, buccaneer?’ said the man.

‘I’ve got Lazy Eye,’ said Joe. ‘I must wear the patch over the good one so the other will catch up. But it’s not doing owt. It gives me headaches. And I can’t see proper.’

“‘What the eye doesn’t see,’” said the man, “‘the heart doesn’t grieve for.’” Or does it?’

‘It’s a flipping nuisance,’ said Joe. ‘Eh, but my name ... And Real Writing.’

‘Patience, my amblyopic friend. Patience.’

‘Oh ha ha ha. Hee hee hee. Elephant’s eggs in a rhubarb tree.’

The man sat and did not speak. Everything about him was poor. His shoes were hard leather and too big and were fastened with a strap, and there were

open splits across the tops, as if they had been slashed. He wore no socks.

Joe shifted to the side, and back. ‘Your face,’ he said. ‘One road, it’s old. The other, it’s not. Straight, it’s all sorts. Same as them knacky postcards change when you look. It’s this blooming eye.’

‘Wellaway.’ The man gazed into the tapering stack above.

‘Who are you?’ said Joe.

‘Who? What?’ said the man. ‘Is there a difference?’

‘Can you not talk sense? What’s your name?’

Outside, the iron ring handle of the door banged on the wood three slow times, sounding through the house.

Joe went to the small window by the door and looked. He saw no one. Only the pony under the tree; and the bleach of heat.

‘There’s nobody there,’ he said.

‘Then no body wishes to come in,’ said the man.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Joe felt the door shake.