



Little Else

Little Else lived with her grandmother at the bottom of Stony Gully. Times were tough. It hadn't rained for years. There was nothing in the garden except one small cabbage and a stick of celery. Little Else and her grandmother were so poor they only had dinner once a week. They were so thin they had to walk over the same ground twice to throw a shadow.



One day, a man came to the door of their hut. He had large muscles and a handlebar moustache.

‘Sam Strong’s the name,’ he said. ‘I’m looking for spare children. Short ones, tall ones, thin ones, small ones. Any kind will do. Ma will sort them out. She’s looking for apprentices for her bush circus.’

Grandma looked doubtful.

‘There’s no spare children here, Mr Strong,’ she said.

‘Who’s Ma?’ Little Else asked.

‘Ma Calico. She’ll feed you and train you up. You’ll travel all over the country.’

‘Will I get paid?’ asked Little Else.

‘In gold nuggets,’ said Sam Strong.

‘Done!’ said Little Else.

‘No,’ said Grandma.



Little Else owned nothing in this world except a bent horseshoe nail and a lump of fool’s gold left to her by her grandfather. She wrapped the fool’s gold in a rabbit skin and tied it up with string. Then she kissed her grandmother goodbye.

‘I’ll be back, Gran,’ she promised.

Grandma hugged her tight and looked over Sam Strong’s shoulder. He had a pony waiting outside with a boy on it.

Little Else hopped on.

‘Are you spare?’ she asked the boy.

‘No, just hungry,’ he said. ‘I’m going to make money to send home to my family. And I’m going to be a famous performer.’

‘Really?’ Little Else said. ‘What doing?’

‘Maybe high wire...’ the boy replied.

‘My name is Joe.’

Little Else thought she wouldn’t mind being famous too. She looked over her shoulder and waved to her grandmother.

Sam Strong walked down the rutted track that led from Little Else's hut to the rest of the world. The pony followed, her long mane almost touching the ground.

'Nice horse,' said Little Else. 'What's her name?'

'Martini,' Sam replied. 'She's one of Ma's best circus ponies.'

'I might be a famous circus rider,' Little Else said.

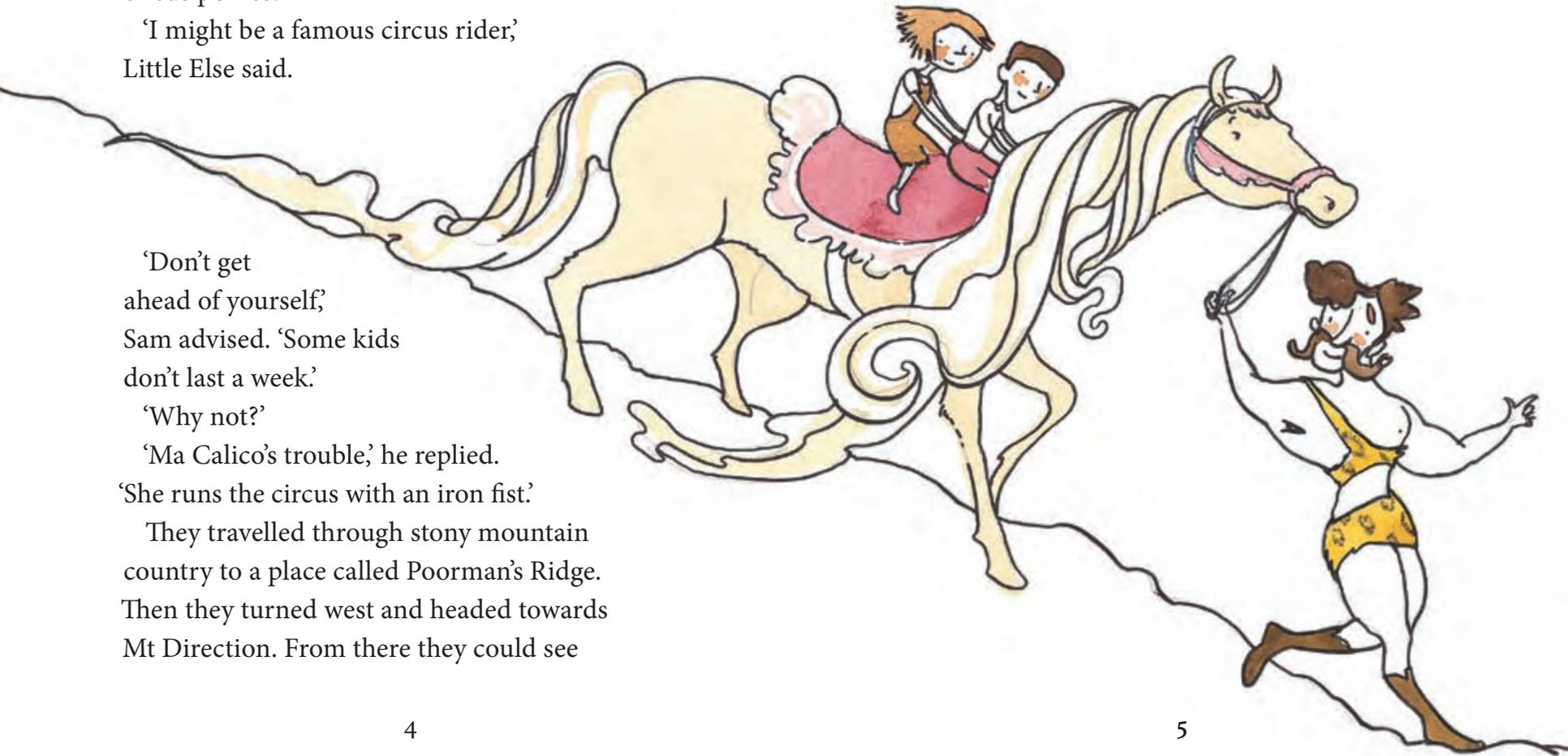
'Don't get ahead of yourself,' Sam advised. 'Some kids don't last a week.'

'Why not?'

'Ma Calico's trouble,' he replied. 'She runs the circus with an iron fist.'

They travelled through stony mountain country to a place called Poorman's Ridge. Then they turned west and headed towards Mt Direction. From there they could see

the plains. Little Else had never been so far from home. As they wound their way down the mountain she tried to take note so she could remember the way back, but there were so many twists and turns she soon lost track.



Ma Calico

Ma Calico was waiting for them in front of the tent. She was wide as a wagon. She held a stockwhip in one hand and a string bag full of cannonballs in the other. She wore a patch over her left eye.



Little Else knew at once that she had made a mistake. 'But a deal's a deal,' she told herself.

'I'll be fed and trained and paid in gold nuggets.'

'About time!' Ma Calico bellowed.

'Where are the rest of the kids?'

'These are all I could find,'

Sam said.

Ma hurled several cannonballs at his head. He caught them easily and began juggling.

'Fix that rigging,' she yelled to the tent-hands. 'Fill the ring with sawdust.'

'One more on top,' she called to a pyramid of practising acrobats.

'What's that python doing out!' she bellowed. 'Annie! Princess Annaconda!' A little girl scuttled out of the tent. 'Get Tiny away before he spooks Martini!'

Ma Calico twirled the stockwhip above her head. 'What do you think of my tent?' she asked.

Little Else was almost too frightened to speak. 'Very nice,' she whispered.

Ma laughed. 'I made it from the sails of an old ship,' she said. 'Righto. Let's get cracking!'

She took them out the back and fed them up on mutton stew. Then she led them into the ring and their training began immediately.

'Hup!' she yelled and pointed to Martini.

Little Else and Joe looked at each other, then jumped on. They felt safer there than on the ground. Martini cantered around the ring. Little Else felt giddy.

'Now stand up,' yelled Ma. 'One at a time.'



Little Else took a deep breath. She held onto Joe's shoulders and slid her feet up under her. Martini's back was broad and she kept a steady pace. Little Else slowly straightened her knees. It wasn't as hard as she expected. She was light as a feather and she'd always had good balance. The giddy feeling passed.

'Next!' Ma cracked her whip.

It was harder for Joe. He was at the front and he didn't have anyone to hang onto. He wobbled but his legs were strong. Martini slowed down to help him and he, too, managed to stand up.

Ma stroked her chin. 'Promising,' she said. 'But you'll both have to work hard. Now jump off.' They did as she asked. 'Now on again. Hup!' They ran beside Martini and tried to leap up onto her back. Joe scrambled on but Little Else tumbled into the sawdust. 'You're useless as a pirate's handbag,' Ma ranted. 'Leave the ring, girlie. You've got no talent!'

But Little Else did have talent. She had a very special talent.

‘Martini,’ she whispered. The pony stopped immediately and came to her. ‘Is Ma Calico always like this?’

‘Usually worse,’ Martini whispered.

Just then, a small man with baggy trousers came into the tent.

‘Ma, the Air-Vaulters have broken their tightrope,’ he said.

‘Tough,’ snapped Ma.

‘Tell them to tie a knot in it.’

‘You’d better come,’
said the man.

‘Keep practising,’
Ma muttered to the
children as she left.
‘If you haven’t got it
right by the time
I come back you’re
out of the circus.’

Martini put
her muzzle to
Little Else’s ear.



‘Joe, she says to grab a handful of mane and lean into her shoulder when we jump on,’ said Little Else. ‘That will make it easier.’

The two of them practised all afternoon. Ma returned much later.

‘I can’t be buying new tightropes every day,’ she told them. ‘So I used one of the Air-Vaulters as a joiner. He’ll be up there all night. See what happens when you don’t get your act together!’

Little Else and Joe showed Ma Calico their progress.

‘Not bad,’ she said. ‘Tomorrow handstands. The next day backflips. Now you can go to bed. You’ll sleep with the horses. Annie will show you where to go.’

‘Is your name Annie or Princess Annaconda?’ Little Else asked, as the girl led them from the ring.

‘Both,’ she said. ‘I’m Madame Lolla’s snake-charming assistant.’ The girl had a sad look and a little snake tattoo on her cheek. ‘You’ll get a name, too, if you’re any good,’ she said.

She led them past wagons with painted signs. Alfonso the Rubberman. Jason the Human Javelin. The Arabian Tumblers. The Perilous Air-Vaulters. Madame Lolla the Snake Dancer.

‘Have you been here long?’ Joe asked.

‘As long as I can remember,’ Annie sighed. ‘My family sold me to the circus. That’s what Ma said.’

‘I bet that’s not true,’ said Little Else.

Princess Annaconda stopped and turned around. ‘What?’

‘Well, why would they do that?’

Little Else asked.

Annie shrugged and looked bewildered. ‘I don’t know. I’ve grown up with Auntie Lolla. She looks after me. The snakes are my family now. And if you two stay I’ll have some more friends.’ She gave a little smile and the snake on her cheek danced. ‘Here’s where you sleep,’ she said. ‘Fill a bag with straw to make a mattress.’

