**Chapter 1**

**The Filling-station**

The caravan was our house and our home. It was a real old gipsy wagon with big wheels and fine patterns painted all over it in yellow and red and blue. My father said it was at least a hundred and fifty years old. The wooden spokes in the wheels were beginning to rot, my father had propped it up underneath with bricks. There was only one room in the caravan and it wasn’t much bigger than a fair-sized modern bathroom. It was a narrow room, the shape of the caravan itself, and against the back wall were two bunk beds, one above the other. The top one was my father’s, the bottom one mine. Although we had electric lights in the workshop, we were not allowed to have them in the caravan. The electricity people said it was unsafe to put wires into something as old and rickety as that.

So we got our heat and light in much the same way as the gipsies had done years ago. There was a wood-burning stove with a chimney that went up through the roof, and this kept us warm in winter. There was a paraffin burner on which to boil a kettle or cook a stew, and there was a paraffin lamp hanging from the ceiling. When I needed a bath, my father would heat a kettle of water and pour it into a basin.

For furniture, we had two chairs and a small table, and those, apart from a tiny chest of drawers, were all the home comforts we possessed. They were all we needed.

The lavatory was a funny little wooden hut standing in the field some way behind the caravan. It was fine in summertime, but I can tell you that sitting out there on a snowy day in winter was like sitting in a fridge.

Immediately behind the caravan was an old apple tree. It bore lovely apples that ripened in the middle of September and you could go on picking them for the next four or five weeks. Some of the boughs of the tree hung right over the caravan and when the wind blew the apples down in the night they often landed on our roof. I would hear them going thump . . . thump . . . thump . . . above my head as I lay in my bunk, but those noises never frightened me because I knew exactly what was making them.