

Chapter ONE of "Postillion struck by Lightning by Dirk Bogarde

My sister said the birds at the fair weren't canaries at all. They were ordinary sparrows dyed yellow. But I wanted one very badly. Basically because they were birds and I worshipped birds.

To win one you rolled pennies down a slotted thing onto numbers. If you scored thirty or over you got a bird.

Tonight we were going to the fair and I had two shillings and sixpence all in pennies, and tonight I was determined to win a canary.

When we got to the fair we went straight to the canary stall. The lights and the little cages containing the birds were all bobbing and jingling about. People all round the barrier were rolling pennies down the little slotted pieces of wood. In the middle of the stall was a large woman with a big bag round her neck. Every time a penny landed on an unnumbered square she shovelled it into the bag without looking and went on calling "Thirty for a little bird".

I rolled my first three pennies concentrating grimly on the squares with numbers on them. But the pennies rolled down and just wobbled like old bicycle wheels on to the black or white squares and the woman in the middle shovelled them up without a look. The fourth penny tumbled onto a number three and my sister smirked and said "Ten times that and you'd have won. I pushed her so that she fell over and started to whine.

"Behave yourself" said Lally, our nursemaid "or you'll get a thick ear."

My fifth and sixth pennies also rolled onto black and white squares and that was the end of my turn and now I only had two shillings left.

"Why don't you have a go on something else?" suggested Lally

"I'll just have another two tries" I said, and moved round the stall to another place to bring me luck. My first go bought me no luck at all. But on the second go I got a five, a three, a black and a six. Fourteen! Then another six! All I needed now was a magic ten. My last penny wobbled across the board, teetered about for a second that seemed like an hour and finally settled into the magic square, with its edge just over the line.

"Doesn't count" cried the lady "Got to be jam bang in the centre." And she scooped up my penny and hurled it into her bag.

Glumly I pushed my way through the people. Lally called after me something about not getting lost but I was heavy hearted and didn't listen.

Down by the dodgem cars was a rather nasty girl with red hair and glasses called Alice McWhirter. She had made friends with Reg Fluke, who was a boy a lot older than my sister and I and who seemed to take every opportunity to tease and bully us. As I stood looking at the dodgems and wondering whether to forget the bird and spend my last shilling on a ride, I felt Alice McWhirter moving along towards me.

“Hello” she said and smiled.

“Hello” I said politely, but coldly.

“Reg is on number four car” she said “ but I’m saving my money to go on the swings. I’ve got sevenpence so I can have two goes.” She boasted.

“Well I’ve got ONE shilling” I said in a pompous voice “and I’m going to spend it all on rolling pennies. She looked amazed “ONE shilling! What do you want to win?”

“That’s my affair” I said and was just beginning to move away when she grabbed my arm and cried “Look what Reg won at the penny rolling”

And there in her right hand, which had been hidden behind her skirt, was a little wooden cage with a canary fluttering and beating against the wires.

“Isn’t he beautiful” she cried “Reg got it in four rolls”

My heart was thudding, my mouth dry. The thing I most longed for was in the grasp of ghastly Alice Mcwhirter, and horrible Reg had got in four rolls!!

Just then Reg arrived “Showing you me canary is she?” he asked “Cost me four rolls that did, and them dodgems another sixpence, so that’s me not a penny left., and there was I counting on winning one of them coconuts.”

“I’ll give you one shilling for that bird” I suddenly blurted out. Reg’s jaw stuck out in surprise “How much?”

“One shilling” I said very loudly

Reg took the cage and peered into it, then he waved the cage about in front of my nose so that the canary skittered about and a feather fell out. Then suddenly he handed the cage over to me. Quickly I gave him the shilling and then my heart bursting, my face red , the cage pressed close to my chest I shoved and pushed through the people until I got back to my sister and Lally.

They stood around me admiring my prize.

But my sister couldn’t help trying to spoil it by saying “All that yellow it’ll just wash off you know..and then all you’ll have will be an ordinary sparrow.”

This time it was Lally who gave her a push and told her not to be so mean.

I didn’t care what anybody said. My heart was full, thumping with happiness. My brain reeled with all the plans for my canary...first I’d make him a big cage, with perches and a bowl for bathing in; and maybe later a mate; a nest and babies. Oh Lord! What Joy!