

Chapter TWO of "Postillion struck by Lightning" by Dirk Bogarde

The canary I'd won at the fair wasn't very well.

Although I'd made a proper cage with proper perches for it to sit on, and a seed tray and a water pot and things, it just seemed frightened all the time. All day long it just fluttered up to the top of the cage, banged its head, came fluttering down again and then lay gasping at the bottom of the cage. Also a lot of its feathers were coming out, and where the yellow ones had been, brownish ones came back. After a time the poor little bird was looking a bit mouldy. Lally said the reason for all this was that it was a linnet and not a canary at all.

"A poor little wild linnet that's what it is" she said one evening when we were all sitting round the kitchen table after supper "I reckon those fair people just trap them, dip them in yellow dye, and then pass them off as prize canaries." And then she said "I think you should let it go. I mean how would you like to be cooped up in a little cage like that?"

I understood what she meant. All the holidays my sister and I were free to roam around the countryside, doing exactly what we wanted... instead of doing that how horrible it would be to be locked up in a cage.

"Tel you what" Lally said "If you let him go, I'll see if we can get you a real canary. That is, IF we goes up to Twickenham to stay with Mrs Jane."

I sat there and had a think. Next to home I liked nowhere better than Lally's mother, Mrs Jane's home in Twickenham.

"When would we go to Twickenham?" I asked.

"We could maybe go for two weeks in September if your Mum and Dad say "yes" Lally replied.

"All right I'll let my bird go tomorrow morning." I promised.

Very early next morning we took the cage out into the garden and I opened the door. The little bird just skittered about. Lally told us to come away and leave it alone. Which we did. When we turned round it had gone! Just like that. Just vanished leaving nothing behind, just a few crumbly feathers.

I felt really miserable. I had been so proud of it and I had really tried to make it happy. But of course it was better to let it go because it would never have got tame. Wild birds are never happy in cages.

My sister didn't make me feel any better by saying "Lally will forget her promise about getting you a real canary, you wait and see."

I went into the house and spoke to Lally "You won't forget, will you Lally. You will remember you said you'd try and get me a real canary, won't you?"

Lally could be very difficult at times like this because all she replied was “If you remind me, I shall forget.”

It was awful... I MUSEN'T remind her but she MIGHT forget.

However the next day I cheered up because our Mother and Father said it was all right for Lally to take us to see Mrs Jane in Twickenham in September.

September seemed to take a long time coming, but finally it did and off we went to Twickenham. We had a lovely time with Mrs Jane and Lally. Every day we seemed to do something different. The only problem was there was never any mention of “Canaries”. I didn't know what to do.

“I told you “ said my sister “She's forgotten.”

Then one evening when Lally was sewing buttons on one of my shirts she suddenly said: “Mother the boy here wants a canary bird . He won one at the fair, remember, but it was a wild bird so we let it go. I promised him a real canary.” My heart leapt. She HAD remembered. Now all I had to do was pray.

Mrs Jane seemed to take for ever to reply but finally she said “Well I did hear tell that Bert Batt had hatched some canary chicks a couple of weeks back. I'll go ask him tomorrow if theres any left without homes.”

When we were washing our hands for lunch I whispered the news to my sister. She seemed really pleased and excited. Sometimes she can be quite nice.

The next day Mrs Jane went off to see Bert Batt. When she came back she wouldn't say anything until she'd had her tea, made us do the washing up, and finally sat herself down with her knitting. Then finally she said “Well Bert Batt has got some chicks left from this years hatchlings. But he wants five shillings apiece for them.”

My sister covered her face with her hands and cried “Oh! Oh! He's only got one shilling and four coppers left.” She seemed to think it was funny. At that moment I really hated her.

Then there was a great silence that seemed to go for ever...all you could hear was the click click of Mrs Jane's knitting.

Then Lally said “I suppose he could do odd jobs about the place to earn a bit for his canary, couldn't he mother?”

“Well” said Mrs Jane “that garden shed does need a good clean out, and there's weeding to be done in the vegetable garden...I daresay we could keep him busy , and pay him threepence an hour, if he likes.”

“Oh yes please” I said “Can I start now”

“Tomorrow will we soon enough” said Mrs Jane

I started work the next morning, carting all the sacks and boxes and bits and pieces out of the shed. Then when I'd given it a good sweep I put them all back again very tidily. Then there was the vegetable garden and all the weeds to be got rid of, and after that I washed eighty flower pots and cleaned them carefully.

All the rest of that week I worked away. It was very tiring, but I kept reminding myself that if I worked really hard I might get that five shillings, and then get that canary. Finally on the last day of our stay I had the right amount of money. Five whole shillings.

We all set off to Bert Batt's House.. He took us into some sheds at the bottom of his garden. The sheds were full of cages, row upon row of them, filled with birds of all kinds.

I selected a canary, bright yellow with pink legs who seemed to be very cheerful and singing a lot.

"Good choice" said Mr Batt "But you sure you goin' to look after him proper,? Otherwise I'm not going to let you have him."

"I promise" I said "I'll feed him twice a day, give him clean water, a piece of apple and a bit of lettuce."

"Good" said Mr Batt "But there's one thing you've forgotten. If you can remember what it is you can have him."

I racked my brains..then I remembered. "I know" I said "he'd like a piece of cuttlefish."

"That's right" said Mr Batt. "Good boy."

The bird was mine.

Walking back, holding the little travelling cage with my real canary was almost more than I could bear. I was so happy I daren't speak. All I wanted to do was get home, take him up to my room and just gaze at my beautiful little bird in silence.