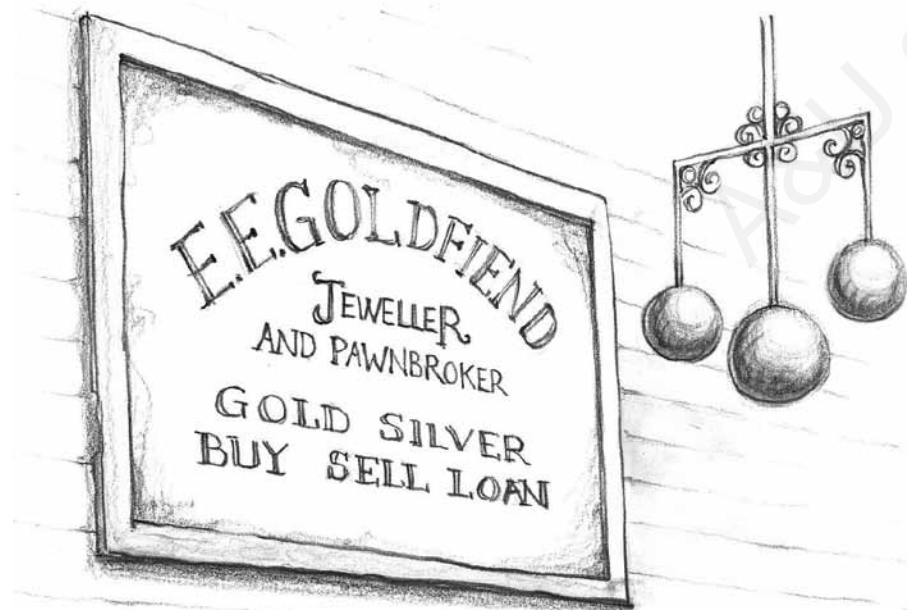


THE LUCK PALACE

‘WASN’T HE BRILLIANT!’ MAY SAID AS SHE and Metropolis headed down Viva Street. The macaw didn’t answer.

‘I thought he was spectacular,’ she continued. ‘I loved every minute of it, not just Shoe but the whole show.’

They reached a rundown-looking shop at the bottom of a two-storey building and Metropolis studied the sign on the wall as if she’d never seen it before.



Mr Edwin Goldfiend looked up from the counter when they arrived. He’d been examining an unusual brooch – rubies in a gold setting – and trying to determine its value. It took a moment for his eyes to refocus.

‘How did it go?’ he asked, blinking.

‘Marvellous, Mr Goldfiend,’ May exclaimed. ‘The boy’s done us proud.’

She swept through to the back of the shop and up the stairs to the Luck Palace.

‘Shoestring’s come up trumps, eh May!’ said Lobe, the doorman. ‘What an act. If only my eyes were as good as my ears. I’d love to have seen it.’

May didn’t need to tell Lobe about the show. He’d heard everything, even though Cadenza Towers was on the other side of the city. Lobe had extraordinary powers of hearing. That’s why he was on the door. He could hear an ant change its mind at fifty paces. And he could hear trouble coming before it even began to brew.

‘What did you think, Metropolis?’ he asked,

‘All right, I suppose,’ the macaw answered. She was peeved that for once Shoestring had been telling the truth. The boy really could walk on air.

‘She’s not in the best of moods.’ May gave Lobe a wink. She went past the gaming room and up the hall to her bedroom. She needed to get changed before the night’s work began.



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THE THING I LIKE ABOUT MY CAGE IS ITS gold-rimmed mirror. It's oval in shape and it frames my face beautifully. The *Macoa macaurus fabulosa*, also known as the Fabulous Macaw, is a magnificent bird and I'm proud to admit I'm a member of that species!

'Metropolis, stop looking at yourself. We should be in the gaming room by now.'

We had just arrived home and I was settling in, admiring my splendid reflection, when May spoke. I turned my head, not to look at May, Queen of Hearts, but to check out my other profile. When you're as perfect as I am it's hard to decide which side is best.

'What do you think, May? The left or the right?'

She ignored me. 'Shoestring was amazing tonight,' she said. 'I want to give him a present, a little something to wish him luck in his new career.'

I cocked my head, marvelling at my eyebrow feathers, which are a unique feature of the Fabulous Macaw.

'What would you suggest?' May asked.

I dragged myself away from the mirror and looked around our room. There were ornaments on the mantelpiece and objects of value wherever you looked. Everything in the Luck Palace had come from somewhere else. The furnishings had once graced the great houses of Cadenza and the lamp next to May's bed used to belong to a count who was so wealthy he probably hadn't even noticed it was gone.

A lot of the stuff had been stolen by Shoestring. He was May's nephew, or she called him that. She'd actually won him in a card game when he was a baby. He was the best thief in town.

'Give him the lamp,' I told May.

She sucked on her pipe. 'Metropolis, don't be difficult. He needs something small.'

To tell you the truth I had no time for Shoestring. Before he came I had May to myself. Well, almost to myself. Ace was around; we'd put him on as a dealer as soon as we moved into the Luck Palace. When May decided to marry him I didn't object. We needed a skilled croupier and he was good with the cards.

Both May and Ace were pleased with the turn Shoestring's life had recently taken. He was out of the gang and heading in a new direction. Ace had gone with him to keep an eye on him.

'Give him your brooch.' I said it to annoy her.

It was the brooch that held her turban in place, a piece that Mr Goldfiend in the hock shop downstairs could easily have sold a hundred times over, but May had taken a shine to it. She'd acquired it back in the old days before she even owned the Luck Palace. Mr Goldfiend said it had once belonged to a queen. When she put it on she got her name – May, Queen of Hearts. Ace called her that and it stuck. The brooch was special to her.

'I've got a better idea,' she said with a wink.

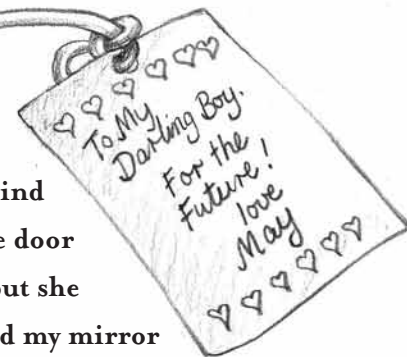
May was a big woman but her hands were small and quick as lightning. Her mind was quick, too. I should have slammed the door of my cage and locked it from the inside but she was too fast for me. In a flash she snatched my mirror and put it on her dressing table, where she polished it with a silk handkerchief.

‘Small enough to slip into his pocket,’ she said. ‘Just the thing!’

Her laughter echoed in the hallway and it must have reached the card parlour because soon everyone was poking their heads through the door to see what the joke was about: Lobe, Ruby the waitress, the kitchen staff, and half a dozen boys from the gang. May’s laughter must have carried all the way downstairs to the shop because even Mr Goldfiend appeared, his eyes watering behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

May sent one of her boys off to deliver the mirror. I wasn’t amused. My feathers were ruffled and my beak was out of joint.

The night had got off to a bad start.



‘COME ON, METROPOLIS. I CAN’T BE WAITING all night,’ May said.

‘I’m not coming.’ Metropolis closed the door of her cage and turned the key.

May went to the gaming room without her. She looked out over the tables. The place was already crowded. Ruby was rushing back and forth to the kitchen, trying to keep up with the orders. The Ditto Twins were doing a number on top of the piano but there was so much noise she could barely hear the clicking of their tap shoes. The barman looked harassed. He signalled to one of the card-sharps for help but he was ignored.

An argument broke out at a table near the back. ‘You cheated, you dirty rat. I’m going to punch your lights out!’

May glided across the room towards the offenders.

‘Gentlemen, mind your manners,’ she said as she picked two men up by the scruffs of their necks. ‘This is a respectable establishment.’

‘Respectable, my armpit,’ one of them yelled, then he fell silent as May carried him towards the door, which Lobe held open in readiness. She paused briefly to taste a piece of cake that Ruby offered from the end of a knife.

‘Cookie wants to know if she was too heavy-handed with the cherry brandy,’ Ruby said. ‘What do you think?’

‘Delicious!’ May declared, then she threw both men out the door.

WHEN I'M IN A GOOD MOOD I THINK OF THE Luck Palace as a great wooden galleon, a pirate ship with May as its captain. I perch on her shoulder as she moves across the deck. We are sailing the open ocean and the stakes are high. If she joins a game I make it my business to study the hands of her opponents, especially newcomers who have no idea of my abilities. I conceal myself in one of the potted palms that have been positioned behind the players, or I flap up to the chandelier and hang there, sometimes upside down, which can cause even the best card player to lose concentration. Then I hop back to May's shoulder and whisper in her ear. At such times she will smile to herself before raising her bet, challenging the company to do likewise. She always wins.

But that night I was not in a good mood. So I stayed in my cage and put my head under my wing, trying to block out the noise from the gaming room – the hum of conversation, occasional bursts of laughter and the endless rattling of dice. I didn't even say goodnight to myself. How could I, when my mirror was gone?

THE TOWER OF DIAMONDS

'YOU CAN FEEL IT BUT YOU CAN'T SEE IT.' Shoestring passed his rope around the crowd of admirers and looked across the garden. Franko had stacked the chairs against the wall and people were dancing on the lawn. KidGlovz had done some packing and returned to join the party. He was playing his accordion. When Shoe caught his eye Kid pulled the bellows out wide and pretended to stagger under the weight of the instrument. Shoestring laughed. The show was over but many guests had stayed on to enjoy the evening. Grimwade and Franko were serving refreshments.

Sylvie had the top room at Cadenza Towers, the room with the balcony. She leaned over the railing and called down.

'Lovegrove says you boys have to come in. We're leaving at first light.'

She left the balcony and went back into her room. Lovegrove was laying out her things on the bed. Sylvie began