

Sparrow Falling

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The Sparrow School

THE WOMAN IN the purple hat picked up the Gladstone bag and scurried from the room. Eveline gave her time to leave, picked up her own Gladstone – the one that actually had the money in it – and walked, not too fast, not too slowly, towards the door. Too fast a walk attracted attention, made people wonder why you were so eager to leave. Too slow left you without enough time to make the door before someone raised the alarm.

Instead of exiting, she slapped the door with her hand, spun around and dropped the bag between her feet. “All right, ladies, who can tell me what that was?”

The handful of girls in the room, perched on hard wooden chairs, looked at the floor, the walls, and their neighbours. Finally one of them, a skinny creature with dark eyes and a forceful nose, put up her hand. “A pigeon drop, Miss Sparrow?”

“Good, Adelita. So where’d I almost come a cropper, then?”

Another girl, almost as skinny and with skin so pale it looked greenish compared to Adelita’s warm gold, said, “Was it the bit where she started to open the bag, Miss?”

“Yes. Good. Doris, in’t it? Right. You got to make sure you’re out of the way, or give ’em a good reason to get out of the way themselves, like I done then, saying I thought I seen a peeler. Now, she goes ahead and opens the bag, what do you do?”

“Run, Miss?” Adelita said.

“No. Why’d that be bad? Anyone?”

“’Cos people’d be looking, Miss,” said another girl.

“S’right. Now, she’s not gonna call the coppers if she thinks about it, because she’s handling stolen goods – six months hard, you can get for that –” Eveline spun around, and raised a finger. “But. You got her on side to start with by *not* letting her think. All right? Anyone who gets took like this, they ain’t the thinking type, generally – so relying on ’em to

think ain't a good idea. So she might yell for a copper first and think later, and then *you've* got six helpful citizens holding you down and *she* realises she'd be better off somewheres else. So, she looks in the bag. What do I do? Anyone?"

There was silence.

"What I do," Eveline said, "is *plan*. Think it through. Think about everything that can happen. Use your brains, my birdlets, that's what you're here for, to learn to use your brains. There's plenty enough people in this world think we're only good enough to use our bodies, being as we're female – but if that was all there was to us, none of us'd be here. Right?" She aimed her finger at the class.

"Right, Miss," the girls replied.

The purple hat poked back through the door, and fell off, to general giggles, revealing a mop of brown curls surrounding a worried expression. "Eveline?"

"All right, Beth?"

"There's someone to see you."

"Who is it?"

"You'd better come." Beth Hastings tended to look distracted whenever she was away from her precious mechanisms, but Eveline could see that she was more anxious than usual.

"All right. Ladies, before next class I want you to come up with what you could do *before* the drop that'll make it all right if she *does* open the bag, right? And three more things that could go wrong, and ways to deal with all of 'em. Now, before you go: what's the rules?"

"Keep it simple, Miss."

"Good. And?"

"Make 'em think it's their idea, Miss."

“Lovely. And?”

“Find out what they want to hear, and tell it to them,”

“Good. And what’s the one we never, ever break?”

“We never rob the people we come from, Miss.”

“Not just the people you come from, Doris. ’Cos not all of us here came from poor, though none of us wants to go back there. *You don’t rob the poor*. You don’t take from them with less than you. I may be training you up to run a con, I may be giving you skills what lots of people don’t think are right nor proper, but any one of you ever uses ’em against the wrong mark, knowing it, then you’re going to answer to me. And I asks *really hard questions*. All right?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“And remember, no chattering to the other girls, I don’t care how curious they gets. Class dismissed, then. You done well today, ladies. Keep it up.”

The girls filed out, and Beth and Eveline walked down the corridor.

“You’re a natural at this, aren’t you?” Beth said.

“Me, a teacher. Who’d have thunk it? All right, Miss Hastings, give us the worst, you look like you swallowed a goose.”

“It’s the grocer’s boy. *Again*. He’s been told not to bring us any more unless we pay him. And this morning it was the butcher’s boy. They won’t give us any more credit, Evvie.”

“Oh, they will,” Eveline said, grinning, though inside, her stomach tightened.

She managed to charm the grocer’s boy into one more delivery with a combination of a few quid on account, promises, wit and a little light flirtation – she was only a year or so older than he, and he wasn’t used to smart teacher ladies who could turn a friendly insult like a barrow boy. She reassured Beth – who tried to look as though it had worked – and walked slowly out into the grounds, biting her lip.

She'd have to go talk to the butcher. She didn't want the girls going without meat. She'd spent enough time hungry that she knew, after a point, it did nothing to sharpen your wits.

None of us want to go back there.

The trouble was, there were only so many people who could afford to school their daughters who thought it worth the money. Generally, those girls didn't end up in Eveline's 'special' classes, because of the risk they'd let something slip to their parents. The special girls were mainly runaways, street children, survivors by their wits as Eveline herself had been. And still was.

She was teaching these girls the skills she'd learned herself, but she didn't intend they should use them just to get money from marks – it was too risky, for one thing, in all sorts of ways.

Eveline scowled at the bright sunshine which showed up the cracked plaster and rotten window frames all too clearly. She'd had the money to buy the place, but keeping it up, that was another matter.

Still, she had schemes. Eveline Duchen – though it was Sparrow, not Duchen these days – always had schemes. She'd made connection with some old contacts of Ma Pether's, people who kept their ears open, for a price. After months of waiting, interspersed with occasional scraps of worthless information (for which they still expected to be paid – and she had to pay, you didn't risk losing sources like those by stiffing them) – they'd finally found her a business that would suit her purposes.

If everything worked out.

“YOU SEEM TROUBLED, Lady Sparrow.”

“Hey, Liu.”

“You are definitely troubled.” Liu pulled a comically anxious face. “Where is my insult?”

“I don’t insult you *that* much! Here, you’re got up very fancy, what’s going on?” Liu was always a natty dresser, whether in a frock coat and a homburg, or as, today, in deep blue silk with soft black shoes and a little round hat.

“Oh, I have some errands to run for which this is more appropriate dress. But first, I understand that the grocer is causing problems.”

“Oh, you heard that, did you?”

“I can, if you wish, go and speak to him.”

“No, Liu, s’ all right.”

“You think he will not speak to me for fear of some subtle Oriental evil? I do not *have* to look Chinese.”

Liu, being half fox-spirit, had an enviable ability to change his appearance, though he could only keep it up for so long.

“It’s not that, Liu.” Evvie sighed. “You know we have to get some proper money, regular.”

“Proper, regular money? That sounds most dreadfully respectable. I think maybe you are not Eveline at all, but some deceiver, wearing a glamour to fool me.”

“I’m a schoolteacher now, Liu, it don’t come more respectable.”

“I too was, and still on occasion am, a schoolteacher. I should object to being called respectable, however.”

Eveline scowled. “S’ all very well, but I got responsibilities now. It’s not just the girls, it’s Mama. I got to look after her.”

“This is true and most honourable. But must you do it by turning respectable? I shall not know you.”

“I don’t know as I shall know myself. But if I get arrested running some scam, what’s going to happen to them all? Besides, people might start taking an interest. The wrong people. I can’t risk it.”

Liu sighed. “It is all gone, then? The money from the jewels?”

Eveline’s sister Charlotte, who was something between a favourite and a pet at the Emerald Court of Prince Aiden of the Folk, had sent Eveline a gift of jewels – whether out of guilt for her abrupt and rather brutal refusal to return to her family, or meaning to let them know how much better off she was, Eveline wasn’t sure. She tried not to think about Charlotte. It hurt. She knew her mother worried, that the Folk were always capricious and frequently lethal, but Charlotte had made her choice, and didn’t seem to care, so Eveline tried not to care either.

Today the reminder flicked her on the raw, and she snapped, “Yes, it’s gone! You think I forgot, or counted ’em wrong, or something?”

“I would never make such a foolish mistake. When it comes to money your senses are finely attuned.”

“They’ve had to be. We can’t all steal a chicken when we’re hungry.”

Liu stopped, and looked at her, his eyes unreadable. “I thought that stealing was your profession.”

“So?”

“Have you become ashamed, Lady Sparrow? Is the company of a thief something you no longer wish for?”

“Don’t be a goose, I didn’t mean that.”

“Ah, and there is the insult. Good, now the formalities are taken care of. I had come to wish you farewell, but perhaps it is not necessary, as it seems you find my company unpleasant.”

“I do when you keep twisting my words.”

“Then I shall leave, and no longer be here to do so.” Liu bowed, and turned away.

“Where are you going?”

“As I told you, I have errands to run. I will return, however, if you feel you can bear it.”

“Liu...” But he was gone, into the trees that bordered the school grounds, quick and silent as he always was.

Eveline swore. She didn't know what was wrong with Liu lately, he never used to be so touchy. And what was this errand of his? She hoped it wouldn't get him into trouble – but then, he was a slippery one, *and* he was Folk – or at least, half so. He could get himself out of most things easy as winking.

Still, she couldn't help glancing at the woods where he had disappeared.

THE FOLLOWING DAY the butcher came himself. He was a lean, pallid, liverish man, who put Eveline strongly in mind of one of the chickens that hung, head-down and beak-dripping, in his window.

“I wish to speak to the master of the establishment,” he said.

“That'd be me. Or mistress, rather. How can I help you? Eveline said.

“You can help me, young lady, by allowing me to speak to the proper person.”

Eveline choked down a remark about not being proper but being the person he wanted anyway. He didn't seem in the mood for levity. Nor, to be honest, was she – it was just the way her mind worked. “I know it may seem unlikely, Mr Blaitwaite, but I am the proprietor. Our name, the Sparrow School, is on the gate, and I am the Sparrow in question. What was it you wished to speak to me about?”

He glared her up and down, looked beyond her as though hoping to see some reassuring male presence, but encountered only Beth, hovering, and looking at him as though he were a fox and she a rabbit.

Deciding that no more proper authority was about to appear, he waved a piece of paper under Eveline's nose. "I am a patient man, Miss... Sparrow. But my patience is limited, indeed it is, and my bill is now overdue by some weeks. I would appreciate payment at your earliest convenience. That is, I don't intend to leave without it."

"What is the total, Mr Blaithwaite?"

He named a sum. Eveline blinked. "Would you wait here a moment, Mr Blaithwaite?"

"No, Miss Sparrow, I will not. I want my money."

"As you will, Mr Blaithwaite. Miss Hastings?"

"Yes, E... Miss Sparrow?"

"Please bring my cash box from the study."

Beth swallowed. "Yes, Miss Sparrow." She darted off.

"A pleasant day, though unseasonably warm," Eveline said. "It must be hard to keep the meat fresh in this weather."

"My meat is always fresh. But I need to get back to the shop. I hope that young woman will not be long."

"The study is not far, Mr Braithwaite."

"Good."

Eveline thought furiously. She knew to a penny how much there was in the cashbox, and it wasn't nearly enough for the butcher's bill. She could ask Ma Pether for some of her counterfeit coin – Ma always kept some about – but even if she was willing to let on to Ma

how bad things were, that was a half-minute solution at best. The butcher would be back, and with the Peelers at his tail like as not.

Besides, it wasn't as though he'd given short weight or rotten meat – the stuff was good quality.

She put her hand in her pocket and felt the comforting smooth weight of the little jade fox Liu had given her. The thought of selling it hurt, and Liu would be upset – as though he wasn't already – but for all his sense in some things he really didn't seem to understand how badly they needed money, or at least, why she wasn't going the old way about getting it.

There was nothing else left to sell. Even in her thieving days Eveline had never owned any jewellery for more than the length of time it took for Ma Pether to sell it or Evvie herself to want it less than she wanted a bite of bread and sausage.

Beth came scuttering down the corridor, somewhat flushed and with her madly curly hair escaping its bun, as it always did in moments of stress. "Here you are," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Hastings." *Ask him to wait a week, and sell the fox? What will I tell Liu? Go to Ma Pether? Which?*

She was still wrestling with it when she opened the cashbox.

There was far more in it than there should be. Eveline managed to control her expression, but it was a near thing. She shot a glance at Beth, who was trying to look innocent and only succeeded in looking pleading.

"I do apologise for the delay, Mr Braithwaite," she said as she counted out the coins.

"Well, I'm sure you do your best," he said. "But perhaps you should hire an accountant." He leaned down, and said, in a conspiratorial whisper, "I'm doing myself down, here, but perhaps you should order less. Girls don't need to eat meat every day, you know, not like boys." He gave an unused-looking smile, tipped his hat, and walked back to his carriage.

“Wish I’d stiffed him now,” Eveline said. “Condescending...”

“I’m sure he meant it kindly.”

“Because he thinks we can’t cope, being *girls*. Trouble is,” she said, closing the cashbox with a sigh, “he’s right, isn’t he? We ain’t coping. And I’ll thank you to tell me where that brass came from, Miss Magician.”

Beth hunched her shoulders. “I had some.”

“Beth...”

“I sold a couple of things. Tools. We needed the money.”

“Beth, you can’t sell your tools! You need ’em!”

“And we need to pay the butcher. So.”

Eveline gave her a fierce hug with the arm that wasn’t holding the cashbox.

“Numbskull. What’re you going to do, tighten bolts with your teeth?”

“I’ll manage,” Beth said, flushing. “We do need money, though, don’t we? Eveline, this scheme of yours... I hope it works.”

“So do I.”

* * *

WHEN EVELINE RETURNED to the house, the post had been delivered. She winced at the sight of what she had already learned to recognise as yet another bill, and shoved it under the others to open when she had the strength.

The next envelope was addressed to Mrs Madeleine Sparrow. Someone was writing to Mama, and under her new name. That probably meant it was safe, but... Eveline thought about going to the kitchen and steaming open the envelope. No-one would question her if they caught her at it, but it would hurt Mama a great deal if she should find out. She ran her thumb over the lush cream stationery. The handwriting was neat and confident. It didn’t have

the look or feel of officialdom about it, but she hadn't a deal of experience with official letters.

On the other hand anyone who knew either Mama or herself under their old name, Duchen, would hardly bother writing first. They'd be bursting the door down with boot and truncheon – or bundling people into a carriage in the dead of night.

She thrust the other letters into her pocket, and went to look for Mama.

MADELEINE WAS IN her workshop. Eveline paused for a moment in the doorway to watch, and to listen.

Mama looked better these days. When she was first rescued from her unjust imprisonment in Bedlam at her brother's hands, she had been pallid, distracted, and slow in her movements, flinching at unexpected sounds and struggling to return to the world from which she had been so long barred. Then she had been seized by Eveline's former nemesis, the government agent Thaddeus Holmforth, and dragged half around the world, witnessing murder and various other unpleasant and disturbing things – though she had proved herself both tougher and a deal more adaptable than might have been expected.

Now, notebook in hand, she hummed along with her instruments, the gleaming, spinning, singing mechanisms of Etheric Science, that subtle and artistic discipline of sound and mood (which had, like the Folk, its lethal aspects).

Madeleine made an adjustment to one of the machines, a small, rosewood box with three dials set in its side and a small brass trumpet protruding from its top. It started to vibrate, and gave out a slow, rising tone, which at first made Eveline smile, and gradually rose to a penetrating whine which made her wince and clap her hands over her ears.

“Oh, dear,” Madeleine said. “*That’s* not right.” She leaned close to peer at the dials, made a note, snapped off the machine with a flick of her wrist, and turned around. “Oh, hello, my love. Did you want me?”

“There’s a letter for you, Mama.”

“A letter? How delightful!” Mama’s face lit as though the sun had shone through the window on her. Mama could be pleased by such small things now. Eveline handed over the envelope, hoping desperately that it was something nice.

Madeleine opened it neatly with the edge of one of her dozens of screwdrivers, and drew out the single sheet within. “Oh, dear, I really *do* need spectacles, how thoroughly lowering.”

“Don’t worry, Mama, we’ll get you some nice ones.” *Even if I do have to steal them*, Eveline thought. “Do you want me to read it for you?”

“No, no, I think I can manage.” Madeleine walked over to the window and held the letter close to her face. “Dear Madame, etc. etc... oh!”

“What is it? Mama?”

“Octavius Thring! He saw my work at the scientific exhibition in Bristol, and wants to meet me, and look at the rest of the mechanisms! And talk about Etherics!” Mama’s face positively glowed.

“Octavius *Thring*? Who’s he when he’s at home?”

“He says he’s an enthusiastic amateur – a ‘dabbler in the sciences’ – and thinks my work is fascinating!”

“What’s he want?”

“Why, to talk. I could perform a demonstration – though a subject would be useful – several subjects – would you object if I asked some of the girls? Oh, I must finish the Halciphon...”

“Mama!”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Why would it not be? Just to have someone to discuss... your friend Beth is a dear girl, and an excellent engineer, but she really isn't at home with Etherics. From his letter it's plain Mr Thring has more than an amateur's understanding. It would be so good to talk to someone, to clarify some thoughts. I don't see the harm in that.”

“It's just... Mama, I don't wish to upset you, but I was thinking of Uncle James. What if this *Thring* person should be the same? What if he tries to steal your ideas?”

“Oh, well, I have applied for patents, you know. It does take forever, of course, but one or two have come through already.”

“And what if he finds out about... everything?” Even here, Eveline was reluctant to mention Holmforth, or Shanghai, out loud.

Madeleine frowned, sat on the bench, and held out her hands to her daughter.

“Eveline. Come sit with me.”

Eveline went.

“My love,” Madeleine said, “I know you mean to look after me. But it is not a daughter's place to have to look after her mother, you know; not unless I should become helpless, and I'm not quite there yet.”

“I didn't mean...”

“I know you didn't. But you must allow me to make my own decision in this. It was hard enough to send the instruments off to the exhibition without attending myself; there were a number of people there I should very much like to have spoken to. Besides, they are mine, and I am proud of them. And yes, I know it would have been a risk, but now I consider

it, the likelihood of one of the staff from the asylum attending such a thing and recognising me is very small.”

“You’re right, Mama, I know. And it’s not as though you ever did anything wrong, after all. You were put away under false pretences.”

“Well, quite.”

“But if someone found you, they’d find me. And my case is different. It’s not the asylum authorities who’d be looking for me, it’s the government. Not the proper public government, neither – though they’re bad enough – but a bit of the government that hardly anyone knows about. They don’t have to follow the same rules.” She’d been about to say more – to mention bundlings away in the middle of the night – but Mama had had enough to trouble her, and Eveline had no wish to add to it.

“But my dear, both those vile men are gone, and there’s been no sign that anyone else knew the slightest thing about it.”

“One of ’em’s gone,” Eveline said, forgetting in her agitation to keep up the careful language she tried to use with her mother – drawing-room language, as she thought of it. “The other – who knows?” Sometimes she almost felt sorry for Holmforth, the government agent who had recruited her, and who had been turned into a hare when he tried to cross the borders of the Crepuscular, where the Folk lived. For all she knew, he was still running mindlessly about the swamps outside Shanghai. Then she remembered that he had threatened her mother, and any pity died a swift and merciless death. Besides, she didn’t even know if the transformation was permanent. What if Holmforth came back to himself? He’d be naked, alone, and probably confused – but she’d bet pounds to pennies he’d still be vengeful. She’d seen his capacity for that first hand.

“If we are careful, and remain on the right side of the law,” Madeleine said, “I see no reason why anyone should come looking for you.”

“I am trying, Mama.”

“I know you are, my dear.”

“I still don’t know about this Thring sort, though. I mean, what do you know about him?”

“I know that he is interested and enthusiastic and wrote me a most courteous letter. In that last particular alone, he is entirely unlike my unlamented brother. Also, he has inventions of his own, ‘mere dabbings’, he calls them, that he should like me to take a look at. So he is capable of coming up with his own ideas, too. Now, you must have a class, do you not?” Madeleine stood up, still holding Eveline’s hands in hers. She was the taller – in Bedlam at least the food had been adequate. Eveline was still making up her growth after years of deprivation. This slight difference allowed Madeleine to look down at Eveline with fond reproach. “My daughter the schoolteacher,” she said. “This is far better than your... other life, Eveline. When I think of how you lived...”

“I know, Mama.” She kissed her mother on the cheek and left her to her mechanisms.

It might be a better life, with less chance of getting transported or chucked in Newgate, but it didn’t *pay*. Not enough, not when you couldn’t resist bringing home a girl you spotted with a neat line in pickpocketing or patter, who would be an asset if you could only put her to use, but who hadn’t a copper penny to put towards the fees.

She didn’t dare risk bringing the law down on them, no. But there were reasons the girls learned how to pick a mark, run a con, break a window, and slide out with the swag without raising an eyebrow. There were reasons they learned what she could remember from her brief time at the Britannia School, being taught the elements of espionage.

She had schemes, she had plans, and she had ambitions. And she had an interview tomorrow, which, if she could be bold enough and lucky enough, might be the beginning of better times.

“EVVIE!” A LARGE, leather-waistcoated figure strode towards her, a pipe clamped in one corner of her mouth, trailing blue smoke down the corridor behind her.

“Ma, *please* can you smoke that foul thing outside?” Eveline said,

“You got proper finical since you set up this place,” Ma Pether grumbled, but she opened a window, knocked out the pipe on the frame, and pointed its chewed mouthpiece at Eveline. “Those girls are doing all right. You’ve got an eye for ’em, just like me.”

“Told you so.”

“Ah, you did. But, Evvie my birdlet, what’re you planning to do with ’em? They’ll get restless. They already are. And that can only lead to trouble.”

“Who’s getting restless? What’ve they done?”

“I caught that Doris – she may look like butter wouldn’t melt, but she’s a proper bobbish mort, that one,” Ma Pether’s admiration was unmistakeable. “I caught her trying to get into *my* room! Mine!”

Bobbish? Eveline thought. *Bloody daft, if she thought she could put one over on Ma P and get away with it. Brave, but daft.*

“What did you do?”

“Don’t look like that. I didn’t whack her, I know you don’t hold with it – though I was tempted. I told her I’d be peaching on her to you.” Ma gave her a look.

It was a challenge. Evvie knew it. Ma might have been talking about retiring from playing Fagin to a houseful of girls for as long as Evvie had known her, she might have

shown every sign of gratitude for her new role, but she'd ruled her particular roost a long time, and thought she knew how it should be done.

"I'll deal with her."

"Hmm."

"I've said I will, and I will. And you're right, it's time they were put to work. I'm off about something for us tomorrow."

"What do you mean you're off about something?"

"Like I said. I'm sniffing something out, and that's all I'm saying. You're the one told me never spread a secret, Ma."

"True enough. But I hope you know what you're about."

"Yes, Ma. Honestly, you and Liu... you'll drive me distracted between you!"

"Yes, well, that boy's another thing. I don't hold with it."

"Don't hold with *what*, exactly?"

"Now don't you take me up so sharp, Evvie Duch... Evvie *Sparrow*. You know exactly what I mean. Boys is trouble."

"Liu is *not* trouble. He risked his neck for me, remember?"

"I got nothing against him personal. He seems a decent enough sort – but when all's said and done, you keep a fox in a henhouse you're going to get ruffled feathers."

"He hasn't been *ruffling any feathers*, if you mean what I think you mean, Ma."

"And you'd know that, would you?"

"Yes, I would."

"Well, you know your own business best, I'm sure," Ma said, "but don't say I didn't warn you. It's the cart you don't think's moving as runs you down."