



0754CH06



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## I Want Something in a Cage

- ☆ Mr Purcell owns a pet shop.
- ☆ There is constant noise of screeching and twittering in the shop, but Mr Purcell is happily unaware of it.
- ☆ One cold morning, a strange customer calls.

MR PURCELL did not believe in ghosts. Nevertheless, the man who bought the two doves, and his strange act immediately thereafter, left him with a distinct sense of the uncanny. As though, behind his departed customer, there had lingered the musty smell of an abandoned, haunted house.

Mr Purcell was a small, fussy man; red cheeks and a tight, melon stomach. Large glasses magnified his eyes so as to give him the appearance of a wise and genial owl. He owned a pet shop. He sold cats and dogs and monkeys; he dealt in fish food and bird seed, prescribed remedies for ailing canaries, and displayed on his shelves long rows of ornate and gilded cages. He considered himself something of a professional man.

A constant stir of movement pervaded his shop; whispered twitters, sly rustling; squeals, cheeps, and sudden squeaks. Small feet scampered in frantic circles —

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**uncanny:** unusual    **magnified:** made to appear big    **canary:** a small, bright yellow bird noted for its singing

frightened, bewildered, blindly seeking. Across the shelves pulsed this endless flicker of life. But the customers who came in said, "Aren't they cute? Look at that little cage! They're sweet." And Mr Purcell himself would smile and briskly rub his hands and emphatically shake his head.

Each morning, when the routine of opening his shop was completed, it was the proprietor's custom to perch on a high stool, behind the counter, unfold his morning paper, and digest the day's news. As he read he would smirk, frown, reflectively purse his lips, knowingly lift his eyebrows, nod in grave agreement. He read everything, even advice to the lovelorn and the detailed columns of advertisements.

It was a rough day. A strong wind blew against the high, plate-glass windows. Smoke filmed the wintry city and the



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**perch:** sit **digest:** read and understand fully

air was grey with a thick frost. Having completed his usual tasks, Mr Purcell again mounted the high stool, and unfolded his morning paper. He adjusted his glasses, and glanced at the day's headlines. Chirping and squeaking and mewing vibrated all around him; yet Mr Purcell heard it no more than he would have heard the monotonous ticking of a familiar clock.

There was a bell over the door that jingled whenever a customer entered. This morning, however, for the first time Mr Purcell could recall, it failed to ring. Simply he glanced up, and there was the stranger, standing just inside the door, as if he had materialised out of thin air.

The storekeeper slid off his stool. From the first instant he knew instinctively, unreasonably, that the man hated him; but out of habit he rubbed his hands briskly together, smiled and nodded.

"Good morning," he beamed. "What can I do for you?"

### Comprehension Check

1. Write 'True' or 'False' against each of following statements.
  - (i) Mr Purcell sold birds, cats, dogs and monkeys. \_\_\_\_\_
  - (ii) He was very concerned about the well-being of the birds and animals in his shop. \_\_\_\_\_
  - (iii) He was impressed by the customer who bought the two doves. \_\_\_\_\_
  - (iv) He was a successful shopowner, though insensitive and cold as a person. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why is Mr Purcell compared to an owl?
3. From the third paragraph pick out
  - (i) words associated with cries of birds,
  - (ii) words associated with noise,
  - (iii) words suggestive of confusion and fear.

4. "...Mr Purcell heard it no more than he would have heard the monotonous ticking of a familiar clock." (Read para beginning with "It was a rough day...")

- (i) What does 'it' refer to?
- (ii) Why does Mr Purcell not hear 'it' clearly?

- ☆ The customer wants something that has wings.
- ☆ He spends his ten years' earning on a pair of birds.
- ☆ What he does after buying the birds is the strangest act Mr Purcell has ever seen.

The man's shiny shoes squeaked forward. His suit was cheap, ill-fitting but obviously new. He had a shuttling glance and close-cropped hair. Ignoring Purcell for the moment, he rolled his gaze around the shadowy shop.

"A nasty morning," volunteered the shopkeeper. He clasped both hands across his melon-like stomach, and smiled importantly. "I see by the paper we're in for a cold spell. Now what was it you wanted?"

The man stared closely at Mr Purcell, as though just now aware of his presence. He said, "I want something in a cage."

"Something in a cage?" Mr Purcell was a bit confused, "You mean—some sort of pet?"

"I mean what I said," snapped the man. "Something in a cage. Something that is small."

"I see," hastened the storekeeper, not at all certain that he did. His eyes narrowed gravely and he pursed his lips. "Now let me think. A white rat, perhaps? I have some very nice white rats."

"No," said the man. "Not rats. Something with wings. Something that flies."

"A bird!" exclaimed Mr Purcell.



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**shuttling glance:** constantly looking to and fro    **snapped:** said angrily



"A bird's all right." The customer pointed suddenly to a suspended cage which contained two snowy birds. "Doves? How much for those?"

"Five-fifty," came the prompt answer. "And a very reasonable price. They are a fine pair."

"Five-fifty?" The man was obviously crestfallen. He hesitantly produced a five dollar bill. "I'd like to have these birds. But this is all I've got. Just five dollars."

Mentally, Mr Purcell made a quick calculation, which told him that at a fifty cent reduction he could still reap a tidy profit. He smiled magnanimously.

"My dear man, if you want them that badly, you can certainly have them for five dollars."

"I'll take them." He laid his five dollars on the counter. Mr Purcell tottered on tiptoe, unhooked the cage, and handed it to his customer. The man cocked his head to one side, listening to the constant chittering, the rushing scurry of the shop. "That noise," he blurted. "Doesn't it get you?"

"Noise? What noise?" Mr Purcell looked surprised. He could hear nothing unusual.

The customer glared. "I mean all this caged stuff. Drives you crazy, doesn't it?"

Mr Purcell drew back. Either the man was insane, or drunk. He said hastily, "Yes, yes. Certainly, I guess so."

"Listen." The staring eyes came closer. "How long d'you think it took me to make the five dollars?"

The merchant wanted to order him out of the shop. But, oddly enough, he couldn't. He heard himself dutifully asking, "Why—why, how long did it take you?"

The other laughed. "Ten years—at hard labour. Ten years to earn five dollars. Fifty cents a year."

It was best, Purcell decided, to humour him. "My, my; ten years. That's certainly a long time. Now..."

**snowy:** white    **crestfallen:** disappointed    **magnanimously:** generously (He smiled a broad smile.)    **tottered:** moved unsteadily



“They give you five dollars,” laughed the man, “and a cheap suit, and tell you not to get caught again.”

Mr Purcell mopped his sweating brow. “Now, about the care and feeding of your doves. I would advise...”

“Bah!” The man swung around, and stalked abruptly from the store. Purcell sighed with sudden relief. He waddled to the window and stared out. Just outside, his peculiar customer had halted. He was holding the cage shoulder-high, staring at his purchase. Then, opening the cage, he reached inside and drew out one of the doves. He tossed it into the air. He drew out the second and tossed it after the first. They rose like windblown balls of fluff and were lost in the smoky grey of the wintry city. For an instant the liberator’s silent and lifted gaze watched after them. Then he dropped the cage. He shoved both hands deep in his



**mopped:** wiped



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trouser pockets, hunched down his head and shuffled away. The merchant's brow was puckered with perplexity. So desperately had the man desired the doves that he had let him have them at a reduced price. And immediately he had turned them loose. "Now why," Mr Purcell muttered, "did he do that?" He felt vaguely insulted.

L.E. GREEVE

## Comprehension Check

1. Do you think the atmosphere of Mr Purcell's shop was cheerful or depressing? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Describe the stranger who came to the pet shop. What did he want?
3. (i) The man insisted on buying the doves because he was fond of birds. Do you agree?  
(ii) How had he earned the five dollars he had?
4. Was the customer interested in the care and feeding of the doves he had bought? If not, why not?

## Exercises

*Discuss the following topics in groups.*

1. Why, in your opinion, did the man set the doves free?
2. Why did it make Mr Purcell feel "vaguely insulted"?