

AMELIA MELLOR

THE
GRANDEST
BOOK-
SHOP
IN THE
WORLD





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'Books give the best and greatest thoughts
Of all the good and wise;
Books treasure human knowledge up,
And thus it never dies.'

– E. W. Cole

A CURIOUS VISITOR

Pearl Cole lived in a bookshop.

When most people said that, they meant that they spent so much time at the library, the theatre, or their workplaces that they felt as if they lived there. But for Pearl, this was not the case. She did not spend her life in bookshops in general. She lived in a flat at the top of Cole's Book Arcade, 299 Bourke Street, under the rainbow sign that could be seen from as far away as Parliament House. And although it meant she had to explain herself often, Pearl would not have given up living in a bookshop for any price. For one thing, living in a bookshop allowed her to read lots of interesting books.

For another, it allowed her to read lots of interesting people.

She was reading one now. He was a tall man, leaning on a shelf in the business section. A black walking cane, topped with silver, rested at his side. Pearl held *Treasure Island* up to her face and

watched the stranger over the top of it. He must be some actor or magician, she decided. He must be promoting his show to the public by wearing his costume out and about. She could see no other reason to wear full evening dress – top hat, tailcoat, bow tie, patent leather shoes – at three o'clock on a Saturday. Especially on such a hot afternoon, which made Cole's Book Arcade as bright and stuffy as a greenhouse. Sunshine glared down from the skylight, through the lightwell that cut through the upper floors, and off the mirrored obelisks in the centre of the ground floor, so that every shelf and corner was well illuminated. On the reading chairs, ladies waved their fans at their sweaty faces. The air was stifling inside the Arcade, but outside was worse. The scent of lavender from the Arcade's Perfumery was better than the stink of dust and sweat and horse muck in the street. Reflected rainbows were better than the stinging rays of the sun. The Arcade welcomed everybody, whether they had money to spend or not. *Read For As Long As You Like*, urged the signs at both ends of the Arcade, on every floor. *No One Asked To Buy*.

This customer was making the most of the invitation. His slender fingers flipped the pages of a volume bound in red. Pearl reached into her bag of peppermints. A specialty of the Book Arcade's lolly shop, they turned your breath to a frosty breeze, better than ice cream for cooling off. The confectioner made them by writing spells into the sugar dough while it was still molten flowing liquid. Pearl popped one into her mouth and glanced at the stranger again. Perhaps he didn't feel the heat. People came from all over the world to Victoria, and from all

over Victoria to Cole's Book Arcade. After all, this was 1893: trains and steamships could carry a person to any country in the world these days. He might have been from Ceylon, or Brazil, or Egypt – somewhere that would make late March in Melbourne feel like the first day of spring.

He looked up, saw Pearl staring, and snapped the book shut.

'Afternoon, mademoiselle.' He tipped his hat. 'Just come from Lolly Land, have you?'

His voice was rich and smooth – and Australian, by the sound of it. Intrigued, Pearl put *Treasure Island* down. The peppermints were beginning to stick together in their paper bag, red stripes bleeding out of the wrappers and into each other. 'Would you like one?'

'Shall we trade?' Between his fingers, a liquorice button appeared from the air.

Pearl grinned. 'I knew it.'

'Beg your pardon?'

'You're a stage magician.' The ability itself to do magic wasn't particularly unusual. Many people could do a little. Pearl herself could make a playing card wobble in the air for two seconds, and command a coin to turn over. But this was the equivalent of playing 'Hot Cross Buns' on the piano. A career magician was an expert, a virtuoso, who combined the three magical principles of imagination, conviction and articulation. They had the talent and motivation to practise for years. No two people practised magic in the same way, so it was no good taking lessons; you had to discover your knack on your own. Pearl's father liked to write his enchantments in his office, losing himself inside his head as he

dreamed up new attractions for his splendid Arcade. Her mother liked to join hands with people and chant rhyming spells in the dark.

Pearl didn't know her style yet, nor if she even had any real aptitude for magic. Though her parents were talented, her brothers were not. Pearl could picture her ideas with brilliant precision, and she had no shortage of belief in herself, but her articulation was still developing. She considered herself excellent at writing – and she was, for a ten-year-old. That wasn't good enough where magic was concerned. She found that the more descriptive she was, the better her results, but her spells still fell short of what she wanted, like her drawings always did. Last week, she had tried her big sister Linda's method, which was to speak to the object of her spell as if it could listen and obey. The aim had been to patch a hole in her sock, so she'd laid it on the floor and told it – in the stern, patient voice Linda used – to return to the way it had been before it was damaged. It had briefly turned into the fluffy head of a cotton flower. She'd scrunched her whole face up with the effort of imagining a sock – then opened her eyes to find a hopeless snarl of unravelled string. Her brothers had laughed at her. She'd been so angry with them and herself that she'd thrown the stupid sock out the window, where a stray cat had run away with it before she could get it back.

So she was somewhat in awe of people who did have a talent for the magical arts, and especially of people who had the motivation to do it for a living.

'Well?' she asked the stranger. 'Aren't you?'

'Aren't I what?'

‘A stage magician.’

‘Young lady,’ said the stranger, extending the liquorice to Pearl, ‘I have never set foot on a stage in my life.’

She knew better than to eat an unknown sweet, especially one from Cole’s Book Arcade. Once, her brother Eddie had given her a raspberry drop that turned her feet into flippers for an hour. She didn’t want to seem rude, though. She let the stranger pick his peppermint, and dropped the liquorice in her lolly bag. ‘Can you show me another trick?’

The peppermint made the man’s breath come out in a cloud. ‘Go and ask the chicken. She’s got a good trick.’

Pearl glanced towards the nearby staircase. The black metal hen was clucking, about to lay a tin egg with a treat inside. Small boys shoved one another, each trying to feed the chicken its next penny. It was impressive, but it wasn’t magic; it was mechanical. Such clever deceptions filled the Book Arcade, sometimes making up for where her father’s magic had failed to work the way he wanted it to. ‘Please, sir? Just one more?’

‘Hasn’t anyone ever told you that children should be seen and not heard?’

‘We say seen and not *hurt*, in my house.’

‘You must have awfully modern parents.’

‘Oh, yes.’ Pearl’s mother and father were both full of bright ideas about how the world would change in the next century, and they liked to hear bright ideas from Pearl and her siblings. Pa said that by the year 2000, everyone would be using telephones, flying machines, and the moving picture lantern. ‘My parents

are very modern. Nearly futuristic.’

‘Futuristic? What a big word.’

Pearl tucked a toffee-coloured curl behind her ear. ‘Just medium, I think. A big word is something like ... *prestidigitator*.’ As she heard herself say it, she was pleased by how well it fit him: the word had more flair, more arrogance, than *magician*.

The prestidigitator chuckled deep in his chest, like the beginnings of a tiger’s growl.

‘Sorry.’ Pearl learned most words by reading, and most pronunciations by trial and error. ‘Is that not how you’re supposed to say it?’

‘Don’t apologise.’ He took a square of paper out of his pocket. ‘You reminded me of something, that’s all.’ He removed his hat, dropped the paper into it, and took up his cane. He tapped the hat three times, and tilted it right side up again. A neat paper statue of a bird dropped into his palm, in its own little black tailcoat.

Pearl grinned. She couldn’t tell how the stranger had done it. His imagination must have been powerful, because the bird was so crisply folded. He gave off conviction like a fire giving off heat. But she hadn’t seen how he articulated the wish to turn the piece of paper into a bird. Was it sleight of hand after all, or was it possible to be so creative and confident that he could change the world just by thinking about it? ‘It’s a willie wagtail!’

‘Quite right.’ He tossed the tiny bird into the air. Just when Pearl thought it would fall, it opened its wings, flitted to the top of the nearest gas lamp, and fanned its tail proudly from side to side. ‘Run along, now, or your mother will go home

without you.’ He opened his book again.

‘She’s already home. In the flat.’ Pearl nodded towards the second floor of the Book Arcade. ‘Mr Cole is my Pa.’

The man had been growing bored. Now, though, he had the look of a raven spying a skink in the grass. ‘Is he really?’ He slid the red book back onto the shelf, without looking at it. ‘Why, then you must be Ruby Cole.’

‘No.’ She looked away. ‘I’m Pearl.’

‘I see,’ said the stranger – and she had the oddest feeling he had known that already. ‘So is Ruby your elder sister, or younger?’

‘Elder.’ But Pearl was older now than Ruby had ever been. She still ached a bit, to think of her sister. They’d been born a year apart, neither of them knowing a world without the other – until all of a sudden, Ruby had dropped out of the world, and it had gone on turning. ‘But she’s not with us anymore.’

‘Already grown up and married off?’

Pearl frowned. ‘No, sir. She passed away three years ago.’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I must have been thinking of Ada. Scarlet fever, wasn’t it?’

His brows were raised at an expectant angle. He knew the answers to his own questions, Pearl realised. The thought sent a chill wriggling down her back that had nothing to do with the special peppermints. He didn’t realise that Pearl’s eldest sister, Ada Belinda, went by her middle name – but all the same, he’d found out about her somehow. He wasn’t asking Pearl to gather information, nor to be polite. He had no interest in what she said, but *how* she said it. He was using what he knew about

Pearl's family to see how she would react.

'Yes, it was,' she said, no longer caring whether she sounded rude. The silver-topped cane seemed dishonest, now she could see he didn't have a limp. She glanced about in search of a red jacket – the uniform of the Book Arcade staff. Even a familiar customer would have given her an excuse to leave. But she could only see strangers.

'Well, Miss Cole, it's lovely to meet you,' said the smiling magician. 'What a lucky little girl you are, to live in this beautiful arcade.'

Pearl hated being called *little*. Her sister Ivy, three years younger, was the *little* one in the family. She felt a sort of scrunching in her chest when she remembered she had told him about the flat. It was easy to be friendly in the Book Arcade, and easy to forget that not everyone else was. In England, when Pa was small, strangers used to snatch children off the street to make them sweep chimneys and mine for coal.

'Quite an improvement on that cheap old barrow your father used to push.' The man studied the skylight as he spoke. He gave a slight nod at it, as if approving the design, before he turned back to her. 'I don't suppose you know where I might find him?'

'You know my Pa?'

'Everybody knows the Book King of Melbourne,' said the stranger. 'I have a business proposal for him.'

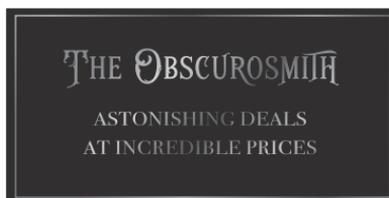
Pearl narrowed her eyes. 'Are you the taxman?' This fellow looked as if he liked taking money from people. Maybe more than money.

He shrugged. 'I collect debts sometimes. But not the sort you're thinking of.' He ran his hand along the cane. Its slender stem was made of lots of little rotating barrels inscribed with silver symbols, a bit like a combination lock. So he did use articulation after all – it was just that his gestures were so subtle and practised that his magic seemed effortless. Pearl had never seen anyone work an enchantment like that before. The stranger showed his palm to her again, revealing a business card between his index and middle fingers. 'Take him that. I might give you another lolly, if you're quick.'

Pearl glanced down at it. It was completely black. 'There's nothing on it.'

'He'll know who I am.'

Important people often called upon Pa at his Arcade. Pearl tucked her lollies in her pocket, stood up, took the card and turned away, heading towards her father's office. As soon as the stranger was out of sight behind the bookshelves, she snuck another look at the card. Silvery letters shimmered on its surface. She tilted it back and forth, reading them by their shine on the matte background.



There was no name, and no address, and when she murmured 'Obscurosmith', it sounded like a hiss.

She suddenly wanted to throw the card away. Or better yet, to hide it. She could slide it into the back of a bookshelf somewhere,

or inside some dreary volume nobody would ever want to read. But no sooner had this impulse struck her than another thought reined it in. The stranger might find out. And Pearl knew, in the same deep-down way she knew to never walk down Brown Alley, that something terrible would happen if he did.

Arriving at her father's office, she knocked on the door.

'Come in.' The voice was distant, distracted. Pearl turned the brass doorknob – one of the Arcade's many modern fixtures – and entered.

Pa's cluttered office, like Pa himself, was both newfangled and quaint. The shelves were lined with gold-embossed leather books, and threadbare cloth books, and crisp card-bound books from the Arcade presses. Beside the antique gas lamp stood the big electric telephone, with its funny talking trumpet and the shrill bells that chattered when a call came in.

Pearl's father sat at the desk, jacket off, sleeves rolled up. He propped his face on one hand and held a pen in the other, but the way he held it told her that his usual creativity had deserted him today. March tended to have that effect on him. The official mourning was over and done, and the black mourning clothes long gone from the Coles' wardrobes, as it was bad luck to keep them too long. But every autumn, the days leading up to the twenty-seventh of March weighed on Pa. He had a pensive nature and he didn't like to leave the Arcade very often, which meant that he had few distractions from his own thoughts. What had once been the season of pears and grapes and the Book Arcade's Easter sales was now the season of missing Ruby.

Smoothing his hand down his beard, he dropped the pen and looked up. He must have been expecting one of the staff, for he lit up at once. 'If it isn't our Pearl!'

'Hello, Pa.' She closed the door. 'How is your writing?'

'A little slow today.' Spread across his desk, she could see a letter, some gardening books, and a collection of nursery rhymes, which he often rewrote as newspaper advertisements for the bookshop. The desk was cluttered, but not chaotic. Like the rest of the Arcade, it was organised – although the system of that organisation might be known only to Pa. He lifted a notebook from one of the piles and read a line aloud. 'Why does the ocean roar?'

He often tested his material on his children. Pearl thought about it for a moment. 'Because the lobsters pinch it on the bottom?'

It could be hard to tell when Mr Cole was smiling, because of his long brown beard and moustache. You had to pay attention to his cheeks, his eyes, his gentle voice – but he was smiling now. 'Too rude to print, but it *is* a better joke ...' He crossed something out. 'What else can they pinch?'

'Nose,' said Pearl. 'Hand. Foot. Toe.'

'Toe!' Pa dipped his pen in the inkwell. '*Pinch ... its*, let's say ... *undertow*.' He jabbed the page with an emphatic full stop. 'What have you got there, Pearligig?'

'Oh.' For a moment, she had forgotten the stranger and his strange card. She glanced at the door, as if he might be standing behind her. 'There's somebody here to see you ...'

Pa must have noticed her hesitation, because he sat up with

a furrowed brow. 'Not another Holy Joe complaining about the rainbows, is it?'

That still happened sometimes. Pa could champion any noble cause. He could delight the public in a hundred wonderful ways. He could abstain from and condemn every vice from smoking to racism – it made no difference to some people. They couldn't stand the idea that anyone could think of the Book Arcade when they saw a rainbow, instead of thinking of Noah's Ark and the flood. Of course, rainbows could remind a well-read person of anything: leprechauns, poems, lorikeets, crystal chandeliers, soap bubbles, old paintings *and* the Bible *and* Cole's Book Arcade. Pearl saw no reason why all these ideas ought not to coexist in an educated head.

But the only thing the Obscurosmith had in common with Pa's critics was that, like a vicar, he wore black. And pious people, in Pearl's experience, did not have *astounding deals at incredible prices*.

'He said he's here with a business position,' she said, handing over the card. 'He said he remembers when all you had was a book wheelbarrow.'

'Business proposition,' Pa corrected her. 'What kind of business?'

'He didn't say ... but ...' She wanted to tell her father the rest of it, all at once. The eager look in the stranger's eye when she'd said she was a Cole. The odd, unkind way he spoke about Ruby. The peculiar length of his legs, like a shadow at sunset. That deep-down squirming Brown Alley feeling, which wouldn't go away. But she didn't know where to begin, or how to explain her unease without sounding babyish.

‘Aha.’ Pa had figured out the trick of tilting the black card to make the letters shine. ‘*That’s* new ...’

‘Shall I tell him to come back another time?’

‘What? No, I’ll see him.’ He stood up and attempted to tidy the desk. ‘Tell him I’ll be ... just ... a minute ...’

Pearl went to the door. Resisting the urge to bolt it, she turned the handle and glanced at the business section. The Obscurosmith was gone. She gave a small sigh of relief.

‘Thank you, Miss Cole.’

She whirled around. He was leaning on the wall behind her, all careless elegance. ‘You followed me!’

‘So?’

It was the kind of thing Pearl herself would have said to annoy her brothers. She stared at him, mouth half-open. He was a grown man, he was in her *house*, and he was teasing her as if he were a child himself. What was he hoping to achieve?

‘Pa will be out in a minute,’ she said, and strode away, trying to look as if she was too busy for mysterious strangers.

The sense of being followed stuck to her like a spider’s web. She climbed the stairs to the first floor and looked over the railing at the door to her father’s office. It was shut, and gave away nothing. Atop the nearest obelisk, the paper wagtail stopped preening itself, and fixed her with its small white eyes.

Despite the heat, she shivered. This wasn’t Brown Alley foreboding anymore – the nervous feeling that warned her of trouble. It was the sense that she had made a wrong turn somewhere, and was deep in trouble already.