Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Incredible Luck of Alfie Pluck

Written by

Jamie Rix

Published by

Orion Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE



If ever a boy needed some luck it was Alfie Pluck.

His ears stuck out like jug handles, his hair resembled a coconut and looked like the barber had employed a beaver to gnaw its way around the edges, and he was very short for an eleven-year-old. Instead of having parents, he had two greedy aunts, Hecate and Mohana, who had taken him into their dingy yellow house, brought him up at great personal expense, and never let him forget it. Their sacrifices came at a cost, which they extracted mercilessly.

At the age of two, having just taken his first faltering steps, they sent him off to the shops on his own to buy fish and chips for their supper. At the age of three, the second his hands were big enough for oven gloves, they set him to work in the kitchen baking their beloved Squashed-Fly biscuits. At the age of four, when he was old enough to feel guilty, they blamed him for robbing them of their beauty. It was only because of looking after him that they had lost their glow and never married.

From then on they gave him the full-time job of Household Drudge, which involved a little bit of housework and an awful lot of making his aunts look beautiful again.

They taught him how to pluck hairs out of their legs with a pair of pliers, clean out their ears with newspaper and vinegar and shave off their corns with a cheese-grater.

And because Alfie had never known any other way of life, he stayed where he was and did as he was told. It never crossed his mind to run away, because his aunts had told him what would happen if he did. On the common there lived a pack of werefoxes, supernatural creatures of the night that could read the thoughts of bad children. They would infiltrate his dreams, learn of his plans to escape, snatch him as he left the house and eat him.

And so it was, on this particular day, that Alfie was hungry and there was no money for food, because his aunts had spent their last few pennies on a mud-bath pack.

'The cupboard is bare, boy!' hissed Mohana. 'Stop wearing out the hinges opening and closing that wretched larder door.' The two overweight aunts, dressed in their favourite pink frills, and looking like two ugly-fruits at a plum wedding, were sitting at the table flicking through a stack of well-thumbed wedding magazines.

'If you're hungry and want money to eat, go out and earn it,' snarled Hecate. 'You're eleven years old. What's wrong with you?'

'And while you're out there,' sneered Mohana, prodding Alfie towards the front door with her long, sharp fingernails, 'buy something lovely for us too!'

Alfie was glad to get out of the house. Outside the confines of 13 Mire Road he could pretend he was free. Thrusting his hands into the pockets of his shorts, he wandered slowly down to the High Street. A discarded copy of yesterday's *Daily Sneer* was poking out of the bin outside Chango's

Chicken Shack. There was a picture of a bald man on the front cover and a headline that caught his eye.

THE DAILY SNEER Tuesday April 11th

IT'S YOUR CLUCKY DAY!

[By Entertainment Correspondent – Lily Quick]

Dr Leviticus Shard arrives in London today to the type of welcome usually reserved for pop stars. He claims to have discovered the elusive Luck Gene and in the process created the luckiest chicken in the world.

'It's only a matter of time,' he says excitedly, 'before Luck in a Bottle is on sale in every high street in the land!'

He is due to demonstrate his bonkers discovery outside the posh-as-peas Dorchester Hotel in swanky Park Lane. Hen is it all happening? At 12.30pm tomorrow. The nearest tube is La-Di-Da Central. Chick it out!

Luck in a Bottle! The very idea made Alfie smile. If he had even the tiniest shred of luck in his bones, he'd look back at his aunt's house now and see a runaway bulldozer ploughing through the front door, razing the building to the ground and flattening everyone inside! He retraced his steps and peered round the corner, but no such luck. Still, Park Lane would be a good place to earn some money. There was bound to be a crowd, and where there were people there was business.

Park Lane was a six-lane carriageway in the heart of London's Mayfair. The idea of a Luck Gene had clearly captured the public's imagination, because the road was busy. Alfie positioned himself at the traffic lights opposite the Dorchester Hotel with a sponge and bucket that he'd 'borrowed' from a breakfasting window cleaner. Alfie was nothing if not inventive. From here he could not only ambush sitting-duck motorists and wash their windscreens whether they liked it or not, but he could also watch Dr Shard's historic demonstration at the same time.

First, though, he deserved a little rest. At home, time off was a luxury that Hecate and Mohana forbade, so sitting outside in the sunshine was a rare pleasure. He laid the newspaper out on the pavement, sat down on top of an article about the first British Space Mission, and closed his eyes.





GOING TO THE DOG STAR!

[By Science Correspondent – Tessa Tube)

The British Space Programme hit another glitch today when the Microwave Oven on board the Shuttle *Relentless* blew up, leaving the astronauts without any means of re-heating their food. Luckily, Mission Control, from its top secret headquarters in the O2 Centre (formerly The Millennium Dome) has the answer. If the astronauts can force themselves to swallow the packets of dried food, drink a pint of water and jump up and down for ten minutes the food will naturally rehydrate in their stomachs and deliver all the nutrients they need.

Mmmm. Yummy!

This is another embarrassment for the Prime Minister, Marjorie Lentless, who has pushed through this first British moon mission with money that critics say could have been better spent on hospitals, schools and jobs. Since its launch three days ago, the mission has been dogged by bad luck, losing an engine because of some nesting fieldmice, orbiting the wrong way round the earth because an engineer had installed the vidiscreen upside down, and setting a course for Saturn after the Planet Recognition System mistook it for the moon.

Alfie woke with a start to find that he had been swallowed up by a large crowd. He jumped to his feet and pushed through a forest of people to the edge of the road where he was surprised to see that the traffic was still flowing freely. The police normally stopped cars for major events.

'Not this time,' explained a know-it-all in the crowd. 'Apparently the traffic is a crucial part of the doctor's demonstration.'

As Alfie watched the posse of journalists and photographers who had assembled in front of The Dorchester, he saw a black limousine cruise to a halt and the Prime Minister, a lady with a brisk step and a helmet of cement-coloured hair, step out. She was accompanied by her newly appointed Minister for Good News, the natty, if slightly nervous, Cecil de Blouson. The Prime Minister waved to the crowd, who booed her enthusiastically. Then a second car arrived and Alfie recognised Dr Shard, who was ejected from the vehicle carrying a cage containing his lucky chicken.

On the other side of the road, with cars flashing past his nose, Alfie crossed his arms and waited for history to be made.



The Prime Minister kicked off proceedings with what Alfie understood to be a typical politician's speech. She made it *sound* as if she was only concerned about everybody else, whereas in fact she was only concerned about herself

'Ladies and gentlemen,' she said. 'It's impossible for me to know each and every one of you individually, but I feel as if I do. *Your* pain is *my* pain, and *my* success at the

general election will be *your* success too. Now I know that you are all fed up with this nasty recession that has gobbled up your money and smashed your dreams to smithereens. I know how you're feeling, because I feel the same. That is why we are all here today, isn't it? Hoping that a little bit of this chicken's luck will rub off on us. I certainly am. Like you, I want things to be better too. And it's because of my sensitivity to your needs that this country's future, as we approach a General Election, is safe in my hands.'

'Is that why you've wasted millions of taxpayers' money sending a rocket to the moon?' shouted a female voice from the crowd.

'Oh dear,' muttered the Minister for Good News. 'There's going to be a riot.'

The Prime Minister tipped her head to one side and pulled her face into a serious frown.

'Let me answer the lady by asking her a question,' she said, turning defence into attack. 'Why are we here today? I'll tell you why. Because Dr Shard *believed*. He believed that there was something better out there and he didn't stop until he'd found it. The same applies to my moon mission. It is a glorious adventure that will one day prove that I was right to do everything I did.'

Meanwhile, Dr Shard was not a young man and the chicken in the cage under his arm was getting heavy.

'Can we hurry up, please?' he said out loud. Even Alfie heard it from across the street.

Clearly irritated, the Prime Minister turned back to the crowd and announced rather briskly,

'We are here today to celebrate the greatest breakthrough in science since the discovery of the genome. Dr Leviticus

Shard has isolated Gene 1684327, otherwise known as the Luck Gene. Dr Shard.'

As the doctor stepped forward, the woman in the crowd shouted out a second question that had the Prime Minister clambering back to the microphone.

'I'd have thought that dispensing good luck on the streets would be a handy tool for the most unpopular Prime Minister in living memory, wouldn't you?'

'Who are you?' snapped Mrs Lentless.

'Lily Quick from the *Daily Sneer*.'

The Prime Minister smiled as if that explained the rudeness.

'Well, Lily Quick, popularity is not something I care about.'

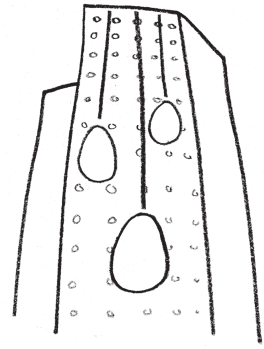
Alfie knew a liar when he saw one. The PM continued, 'I do care, however, about everyone in the world having good luck, because that's the sort of person I am.'

'Nobody believes that, Prime Minister. Ever since the Shuttle *Relentless* started malfunctioning like an elephant's rollerskate your name has become synonymous with an expensive flop. You're bottom of the polls and careering towards the biggest election defeat in modern history.'

The Minister for Good News decided this was the right time to step between his incandescent boss and the microphone.

'The Prime Minister is not here to discuss the election,' he said. 'This is a good news story.' At which point somebody threw an egg which splattered all over the Prime Minister's coat.

Dr Shard lurched forward and dropped his caged chicken on the ground.



'I can't hold this any longer,' he grumbled irritably, taking control of the microphone as the PM attempted to wipe her coat. 'Anyway, we're here to listen to *me* not *her*. All my life I've been telling people like Marjorie Lentless that if I could harness the power of luck the world would be a better place, and all my life people like Marjorie Lentless have been telling me that I'm mad.'

Alfie could see why. With clumps of long black hair flapping above his ears like a raven's wings, cracked spectacles and over-expressive arms, Dr Shard did indeed look a little unhinged. Pockets of the crowd started to laugh at him.

'You won't be laughing at me when you see what I've created,' he shouted. 'You'll be sick with jealousy when I'm the richest man in the world!'

'Get on with it!' cried a lone distant voice.

Alfie thought the doctor was going to jump into the crowd and sort them out one by one. Fortunately a security guard stepped forward to restrain him. The doctor shook his arms free, smoothed down his wings of hair and took a deep, calming breath.

'Five years ago,' he proclaimed, 'I took one hundred hens' eggs to the top of a tall building and dropped them off the roof into the street. One egg survived the fall. I called it my Lucky Egg and hatched it into a Lucky Hen, who laid another hundred eggs, which I took to the top of the same building and dropped over the edge. This



time *three* Lucky Eggs survived. So I hatched three Lucky Hens who laid another hundred eggs and *eight* survived, and so on and so on. Eventually, every egg survived the fall and I had one hundred Lucky Hens!

'Unfortunately, that night, a fox broke into the hen house and ate ninety-nine of them. At first I was distraught, but then I realised that the fox had done me a favour, because it had got rid of the impostors. There was only ever *one* Lucky Hen and now I had found it.'

As Dr Shard bent to pick up the cage, the crowd held its breath in expectation. Alfie's head was telling him that this mad doctor was a cheap fraud, but in his heart he wanted him to be right.

Imagine a world with luck on tap. Lucky Alfie wouldn't have to be a Household Drudge any more. He could unchain his three-legged dog, Bandit, from the hut in the garden and they could run away. He could take his chances on the street, unafraid of werefoxes, and do whatever it took to get by. He could sell ice creams. And when he was rich and famous he would find himself a proper family, who ate supper together, went on holidays and owned a dishwasher.

An ear-piercing squawk broke Alfie's reverie and snapped his attention back to the stage.

'Meet Henrietta,' announced Dr Shard, opening the door of the cage.

Alfie leaned forward with the rest of the expectant crowd as the doctor grabbed Henrietta by her feet and dragged her out. He swung his arm around his head. 'This is what luck looks like,' he shouted excitedly. As he released his grip on the screeching bird, it tumbled into the air, flapped

its useless wings and landed untidily on the road in the middle of the traffic.

Instinctively Alfie moved forward to save it.

'Don't!' cried the doctor. 'The hen will not be harmed!'

That was hard to believe, but even so the chicken appeared unmoved by the clamour around it; the screeching tyres, the choking exhaust pipes, the horns and general commotion of cars and people panicking. It just walked calmly towards the other side of the road, stopping occasionally to peck at a dead fly on the tarmac. And, miraculously, the cars didn't hit it. They swerved and braked, but the hen, it seemed, was surrounded by an invisible force field of luck.

If Alfie could choose one Christmas present (not that he would be allowed to, because his aunts believed that giving presents to children only encouraged pleasure, which in turn begat idleness) an invisible force field of luck would be top of his list.



Suddenly, behind Alfie, there was a surge in the crowd as people struggled for a better view. He was shoved in the back and, along with several other spectators, pushed forward into the road in front of a yellow London taxi. The cab swerved and flashed past Alfie, mere inches from

his nose. It was so close he could see every crease in the driver's face, which was framed by a lank mop of straight black hair. Wide, staring eyes were fixed in horror on a spot in front of his bonnet.

The cab caught the Lucky Hen a glancing blow with its bumper. The chicken was hurled into the air like an exploding feather-football and landed with a grateful thud in Alfie's outstretched arms.

The world seemed to trip into slow-motion.



Alfie heard a cry go up from the stage.

'Seize that boy!' It was Dr Shard. 'SEIZE THAT BOY!'

But a crowd is a big, unwieldy beast and takes a moment to respond. Individual faces, shocked and confused, turned to look at him, but as a group they did nothing. 'FIND SOME ICE!' came the desperate voice from the stage. 'KEEP THAT DEAD HEN COLD TILL I CAN CUT OUT ITS BRAIN.'

But the hen wasn't dead. Alfie could feel it stirring in his arms. The blow from the taxi had merely stunned it. Clearly, it wasn't a Lucky Hen for nothing.

Now the frozen world suddenly came flooding back. As Henrietta squirmed, the crowd began to take an interest. Eyes swivelled towards Alfie. He was holding in his hand what every man, woman and child desired and if he didn't get out of there fast every man, woman and child would try to take it from him. He shoved the chicken inside his jacket and ran, dodging outstretched arms that poked out of the crowd like knitting needles from a ball of wool. The last thing he heard as he plunged into Hyde Park was a

scream from Dr Shard that echoed through the trees.

'DON'T YOU DARE EAT IT!'

Up until then that thought had not occurred to Alfie. Now he couldn't get it out of his head. Eat the chicken? Consume the Luck Gene? Why not? He was both hungry and unlucky, which made him the perfect candidate. Why not kill two birds with one stone, so to speak?

But first he had to get away. Behind him a few gung-ho members of the crowd had started to give chase. Alfie didn't stop to count heads. In their haste to catch up with him they stampeded over the stage, trampling Dr Shard. But Alfie knew all the backstreets and alleyways and he was not going to be easy to catch . . . especially now he had the lucky chicken.



Back in Park Lane, while Dr Shard was peeled off the pavement and rolled onto a stretcher like a piece of puff pastry, the Prime Minister drummed her fingers on the clasp of her shiny handbag.

'Get me that microphone,' she hissed at her Minister for Good News. 'Stop those people and get me that microphone.' She had the look of a rabid dog – wild staring eyes, flecks of foam splashed across her bottom lip. In the past she had been flawless at coping with pressure, but since the onset of this election her legendary 'common touch' was sorely missing.

'Wait!' she yelled into the microphone. Her voice had the impact of a gunshot. It ricocheted around Hyde Park Corner, silenced the birds in St James's Park and turned heads in the crowd. Having created an audience

she twisted the muscles in her face until her mouth looked sad. 'I have let you down,' she trembled, allowing her voice to crack with a semblance of sorrow. 'I promised you a luckier life and now I can't deliver . . .' Of course pretending that she had made a mistake was just another politician's trick, so that she could put things right with her next sentence. 'But I *will*!' she cried suddenly. 'Today I make this pledge. I shall regain the Luck Gene for you, the people. Give me your vote and I will find this snotty-nosed urchin, track him down to whichever rat-hole he lives in and bring that chicken out alive.' The Minister for Good News leant forward with a word of caution.

'What if he's eaten it?' he whispered.

'And if he has already eaten it,' she continued without pausing for breath, 'I will use whatever surgical techniques are considered appropriate to extract the Luck Gene from his body.'

If anyone could manipulate a crowd into doing what it didn't know it wanted to do, it was Marjorie Lentless. The people applauded and cheered like a mob at a public execution.

