

My Family 14 (and final)

The house was humming with activity. The family was preparing for a party.

As always, we had decided to give the party at a moment's notice, and for no other reason than that we suddenly felt like it. Overflowing with the milk of human kindness, the family had invited everyone they could think of, including people they cordially disliked. Everyone threw themselves into the preparations with enthusiasm. Since it was early September we decided to call it a Christmas party, and in order that the whole thing should not be too straightforward, we invited our guests to lunch, as well as to tea and dinner. This meant the preparation of a vast quantity of food, and Mother disappeared into the kitchen and stayed there for hours at a time. Even when she did emerge, her spectacles misted with steam, it was almost impossible to conduct a conversation with her that was not confined exclusively to food.

Our parties, needless to say, never went as we envisaged. We had, over the years, become used to this, which is just as well, for otherwise our Christmas party would have been doomed from the outset, for it was almost completely taken over by the animals.

It was on the morning of the party that things really started to happen. To begin with, Mother discovered that Dodo had chosen this day, of all days, to come into season. One of the peasant girls had to stand outside the backdoor with a broom to repel suitors so that Mother could cook uninterruptedly, but even so there were moments of panic when one of the bolder Romeos found a way into the kitchen via the front of the house.

After breakfast I hurried out to see the goldfish I had recently acquired, and discovered to my horror that two of them had been killed and partially eaten. I had forgotten that both terrapins and the water-snakes were partial to a plump fish occasionally. So I was forced to move the reptiles from the pond into a kerosene tin until I could think of a solution to the problem. When I had cleaned and fed the Magenpies and Alecko, the arrival of the first guests was imminent. I discovered that someone had moved the water-snakes tin into the full glare of the sun; it was obvious that only immediate first-aid could save them. I rushed into the house, filled the bath with nice cool water and placed the snakes tenderly inside; in a few minutes they showed signs of reviving. I left them for a good soak, and sauntered on to the veranda to have a look at the lunch table in the shade of the vine. On what had been a very attractive floral centre-piece perched the Magenpies, reeling gently from side to side. With dismay I surveyed the table. The cutlery was flung about, a layer of butter had been spread over the side plates, and buttery footprints wandered to and fro across the cloth. Pepper and salt decorated the smeared remains of a bowl of chutney. The water-jug had been emptied over everything to give it that final, inimitable Magenpie touch.

There was something decidedly queer about the culprits, swaying rhythmically, uttering tiny chucks of satisfaction to each other. Then I noticed a smashed bottle of beer on the flagstones. The Magenpies were very drunk. I caught them both, and was standing wondering if I could slip them back in

their cage and deny all knowledge of the outrage, when Mother appeared carrying a jug of sauce. The Magenpies and I had to take our medicine. "Really, dear," Mother said plaintively. "Never mind, I suppose they're not really responsible if they're *drunk*."

Putting the Magenpies back in their cage I discovered, as I had feared, that Alecko had escaped as well. I went in search of him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

By this time the first guests had arrived and were drinking on the veranda. I was surprised to see Leslie appear out of the olive-groves with his gun and a bag of snipe. I had forgotten that he had gone out shooting. He disappeared into the house to change, Mother appeared and seated herself on the wall, Dodo at her feet. Her gracious hostess act was somewhat marred by the fact that she kept breaking off her conversation to brandish a large stick at the panting group of dogs gathered in the front garden. Occasionally a snarling fight would flare up among Dodo's boy friends, and the entire family would turn round and bellow 'Shut up' in menacing tones. This made the more nervous of our guests spill their drinks. Mother, with a bright smile, had just steered the conversation back to normal for the third time when all talk was abruptly frozen again by a bellow from inside the house.

"Whatever's the matter with Leslie?" asked Mother.

She was not left long in doubt, for he appeared, clad in nothing but a small towel.

"Gerry," he roared, his face a deep red with rage. "Where's that boy?"

"Now, *now*, dear," said Mother soothingly, "whatever's the matter?"

"Snakes," snarled Leslie, making a wild gesture and then hastily clutching at his slipping towel, "that bloody boy's filled the soddin bath full of bleeding snakes."

"Language, dear, language!" said Mother automatically. "Gerry, you'd better go and take the snakes out of the bath. Put them in a basin or somewhere for the moment."

I borrowed a saucepan from the kitchen and put my watersnakes in that. They had, to my delight, recovered completely, and hissed vigorously when I removed them from the bath. On returning to the veranda I heard Larry holding forth to the assembled guests.

"I assure you the house is a death-trap. Every nook and cranny is stuffed with malignant faunae waiting to pounce. A simple, innocuous action like lighting a cigarette is fraught with danger. First, I was attacked by a scorpion. Then my room was torn asunder by magpies. Now we have snakes in the bath and huge flocks of albatrosses flapping round the house."

"Larry, dear, you do *exaggerate*," said Mother, smiling vaguely at the guests. "Anyway, we've talked quite enough about animals; I think lunch is ready, so shall we all sit down?"

The guests were shown their places, everyone sat down and smiled at each other. The next moment two of the guests uttered yells of agony and soared out of their seats like rockets.

"Oh, dear, *now* what's happened?" asked Mother in agitation.

"Something bit me...bit me in the leg!"

"There you are!" exclaimed Larry triumphantly. "You'll probably find a brace of bears under there."

The only guest not frozen with horror was Theodore, and he gravely bent

down, lifted the cloth and poked his head under the table.

"Ah ha!" he said interestedly. "It seems to be some sort of ...*bird*. A large black and white one."

"Don't move...keep still, unless you want your leg taken off at the knee!"

Larry informed the company.

As a statement calculated to quell alarm it left a lot to be desired. Everybody vacated the table.

From beneath the cloth Alecko gave a long, menacing yarp. I gently lifted the edge of the cloth, and he surveyed me with angry yellow eyes. He was obviously in no mood to be trifled with. I explained that he would take a little while to catch.

"Well, for heaven's sake hurry up; the soup's getting cold," snapped Larry.

I succeeded at last in getting a grip on Alecko's beak, and hauled him out screaming and flapping. I left him in his cage screaming insults and threats at me, and went back to resume my interrupted lunch.

The glasses clinked, knives and forks clattered, delicacy after delicacy made its appearance. The guests showed unanimous approval and Mother smiled deprecatingly.

Lunch over, there was siesta on the veranda. A few of the more energetic of us got Spiro to drive us down for a swim, and we lolled in the sea until it was time to return for tea, another of Mother's gastronomic triumphs. Afterwards we lay about in little groups as the tide of green twilight deepened the shade beneath the vine.

Inside the rooms glowed with lamplight. Glasses started to titter and chime, corks popped. The guests livened up and the talk mounted into a crescendo. Bored with the party, and unable to attract Mother's attention, Dodo decided to pay a visit to the garden by herself. She waddled out into the moonlight, to be confronted by a pack of bristling, belligerent dogs, who obviously had the worst possible designs on her. With a yell of fright she fled back into the house as quickly as her short, fat little legs would permit. She galloped into the crowded drawing room, screaming for help, and hot on her heels came the panting, snarling wave of dogs. Roger, Puke and Widdle, who had slipped off to the kitchen for a snack, returned with all speed and were horrified. If anyone was going to seduce Dodo, they felt, it was going to be one of them, not some scrawny village pariah. They hurled themselves with gusto upon Dodo's pursuers, and in a moment the room was a mass of fighting dogs, and leaping hysterical guests trying to avoid being bitten.

"It's wolves!" yelled Larry, leaping nimbly on to a chair.

"Keep calm!" bellowed Leslie, as he hurled a cushion at the nearest knot of struggling dogs. As it landed it was seized by five angry mouths and torn asunder. A whirling cloud of feathers gushed up into the air.

"Stop them! They're killing each other," shrilled Margo, and seizing a soda syphon she sprayed dogs and guests with complete impartiality.

"Water is said to be good for dog fights," mused Theodore, and as if to test this he poured his glass of wine over a passing dog.

Spiro surged out to the kitchen and returned with a kerosene tin of water in his ham-like hands.

"Watch outs," he roared; "I'll fixes the bastards."

The guests fled in all directions, but they were not quick enough. The mass of water broke like a tidal wave over the room. It had the most startling and

instantaneous effect on the dogs. Frightened by the boom and swish of the water, they let go of each other and fled into the night, leaving behind a scene of carnage that was breathtaking, like a hen-roost that had been hit by a cyclone.

Mother, clasping Dodo in her arms, surveyed the room.

"Leslie, dear, go and get some towels so that we can dry ourselves. Let's all go out on to the veranda, shall we? I'm so sorry this happened; it's Dodo, you see; she's very *interesting* to the dogs at the moment."

Eventually the party was dried, the feathers plucked off them, their glasses were filled and they were installed on the veranda under the moonlit shadows of the vine leaves. The sky looked as black and soft as mole-skin. The magnolia tree loomed over the house, its branches full of white blooms like a hundred reflections of the moon, and the thick, sweet scent was an enchantment luring you out into the mysterious, moonlit countryside.

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With a gentlemanly honesty which I found hard to forgive, Mr Kralefsky had informed Mother that he had taught me as much as he was able; the time had come, he thought, for me to go somewhere like England or Switzerland to finish my education. In desperation I argued against any such idea; I said I *liked* being half-educated; you were so much more *surprised* at everything when you were ignorant. But Mother was adamant. We were to return to England and decide where I was to continue my studies. To quell the mutterings of rebellion in the family she told us that we should look upon it merely as a holiday. We should soon be back again in Corfu.

So our boxes, bags and trunks were packed, cages were made for birds and tortoises, and the dogs looked uncomfortable in their new collars. Last walks were taken, the last tearful goodbyes exchanged, and then the cars, piled high, moved slowly down the drive.

Our mountain of possessions was arranged in the Customs shed. The Customs officer wilted slightly at the sight, the mound crowned with a cage from which the Magenpies peered malevolently.

"Theese your?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes, all mine," twittered Mother.

"Hoff yew any noo clooes?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't quite catch..."

"Hoff you any noo clooes ....*any noo clooes?*"

Mother smiled with desperate charm.

"I'm sorry I can't quite....."

The Customs man fixed her with an angry eye.

"Madame," he said ominously, "do yew spik English?"

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Mother, "yes, a *little*."

She was saved by the timely arrival of Spiro. He soothed Mother, calmed the Customs man, explained that we had not had any new clothes for years, and had the luggage shifted outside on to the quay before anyone could draw breath. Then he borrowed the Customs man's chalk and marked all the baggage himself.

In the brilliant white sunlight stood Theodore and Kralefsky, who had come to see us off.

"Well, I won't say goodbye but only *au revoir*," mumbled Theodore, shaking hands precisely with each of us. "I hope we shall have you back with

us....um...*very soon.*"

"Goodbye, goodbye," fluted Kralefsky, bobbing from one person to the other.

"We shall so look forward to your return. By Jove, yes!"

Spiro shook each of us silently by the hand, and then stood staring at us, his face screwed up into the familiar scowl.

"Wells, I'll say good-byes," he began and his voice broke, great fat tears running down his furrowed cheeks.

"Honest to Gods, I didn't means to cry," he sobbed, "but it's just likes saying goodsbye to my own peoples. I feels you belongs to me."

The tender had to wait while we comforted him. Then as it drew away across the dark blue water, our three friends stood out against the multi-coloured background, Theodore neat and erect, his stick raised in grave salute; Kralefsky waving extravagantly; Spiro alternately wiping his eyes with his handkerchief and waving to us. The ship drew across the sea, and Corfu sank shimmering into the pearly heat haze on the horizon. A black depression settled on us, which lasted all the way to England. The grimy train scuttled up from Brindisi towards Switzerland, and we sat in silence, not wishing to talk. Above our heads, on the rack, the finches sang in their cages, the Magenpies chucked and hammered with their beaks, and Alecko gave a mournful yarp at intervals. Around our feet the dogs lay snoring. At the Swiss frontier our passports were examined by a disgracefully efficient frontier official. He handed them back to Mother, together with a small slip of paper, bowed unsmilingly, and left us to our gloom. Some moments later Mother glanced at the form the official had filled in, and as she read it, she stiffened.

"Just look what he's put," she exclaimed indignantly, "*impertinent* man."

Larry stared at the little form and snorted.

"Well, that's the penalty you pay for leaving Corfu," he pointed out.

On the little card, in the column headed *Description of Passengers* had been written, in neat capitals: One travelling Circus and Staff.

"What a thing to write," said Mother, still simmering, "really, some people are *peculiar.*"

The train rattled towards England.

The End