

My Family and Other Animals

THE ROSE-BEETLE MAN

One of the most weird and fascinating characters I met during those first days in Corfu was the Rose-beetle Man.

He had a fairy-tale air about him that was impossible to resist, and I used to look forward eagerly to my infrequent meetings with him.

I first saw him on a high, lonely road leading to one of the remote mountain villages. I could hear him long before I could see him, for he was playing a rippling tune on a shepherd's pipe, breaking off now and then to sing a few words in a curious, nasal voice.

As he rounded the corner both Roger my dog and I stopped and stared at him in amazement.

He had a sharp, fox-like face with large, slanting eyes of such a dark brown that they appeared black. They had a weird, vacant look about them, and a sort of bloom such as one finds on a plum, a pearly covering almost like a cataract. He was short and slight, with a thinness about his wrists and neck that argued a lack of food.

His dress was fantastic, and on his head was a shapeless hat with a very wide, floppy brim. It had once been bottle-green, but was now speckled and smeared with dust, wine-stains, and cigarette-burns. In the band were stuck a fluttering forest of feathers: cock-feathers, hoopoe-feathers, owl-feathers, the wing of a kingfisher, the claw of a hawk, and a large dirty white feather that may have come from a swan.

His shirt was worn and frayed, grey with sweat, and round the neck dangled an enormous cravat of the most startling blue satin. His coat was dark and shapeless, with patches of different hues here and there; on the sleeve a bit of white cloth with a design of rosebuds; on the shoulder a triangular patch of wine-red and white spots.

The pockets of this garment bulged, the contents almost spilling out: combs, balloons, little highly coloured pictures of the saints, olive-wood carvings of snakes, camels, dogs and horses, cheap mirrors, a riot of handkerchiefs, and long twisted rolls of bread decorated with seeds.

His trousers, patched like his coat, drooped over a pair of scarlet, leather shoes with upturned toes decorated with a large black-and-white pompon.

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This extraordinary character carried on his back bamboo cages full of pigeons and young chickens, several mysterious sacks, and a large bunch of fresh green leeks.

With one hand he held his pipe to his mouth, and in the other, a number of lengths of cotton, to each of which was tied an almond-size rose-beetle, glittering golden green in the sun, all of them flying round his hat with desperate, deep buzzings, trying to escape from the thread tied firmly round their waists.

Occasionally, tired of circling round and round without success, one of the beetles would settle for a moment on his hat, before launching itself off once more on its endless merry-go-round.

When he saw us the Rose-beetle Man stopped, gave a very exaggerated start, doffed his ridiculous hat, and swept us a low bow.

Roger was so overcome by this unlooked-for attention that he let out a volley of surprised barks.

The man smiled at us, put on his hat again, raised his hands, and waggled his long, bony fingers at me.

Amused and rather startled by this apparition, I politely bade him good day.

He gave another courtly bow. I asked him if he had been to some fiesta.

He nodded his head vigorously, raised his pipe to his lips and played a lilting little tune on it, pranced a few steps in the dust of the road, and then stopped and jerked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing back the way he had come.

He smiled, patted his pockets, and rubbed his forefinger and thumb together in the Greek way of expressing money.

I suddenly realised that he must be dumb. So, standing in the middle of the road, I carried on a conversation with him and he replied with a varied and very clever pantomime.

I asked what the rose-beetles were for, and why he had them tied with pieces of cotton. He held his hand out to denote small boys, took one of the lengths of cotton from which a beetle hung, and whirled it rapidly round his head.

Immediately the insect came to life and started on its planet-like circling of his hat, and he beamed at me.

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Pointing up at the sky, he stretched his arms out and gave a deep nasal buzzing, while he banked and swooped across the road.

Aeroplanes, any fool could see that. Then he pointed to the beetles, held out his hand to denote children, and whirled his stock of beetles round his head so that they all started to buzz peevishly.

Exhausted by his explanation, he sat down by the edge of the road, played a short tune on his flute, breaking off to sing in his curious nasal voice. They were not articulate words he used, but a series of strange gruntings and tenor squeaks, that appeared to be formed at the back of his throat and expelled through his nose.

He produced them, however, with such verve and such wonderful facial expressions that you were convinced the curious sounds really meant something.

Presently he stuffed his flute into his bulging pocket, gazed at me reflectively for a moment and then swung a small sack off his shoulder, undid it, and to my delight and astonishment, tumbled half a dozen tortoises into the dusty road.

Their shells had been polished with oil until they shone, and by some means or other he had managed to decorate their front legs with little red bows.

Slowly and ponderously they unpacked their heads and legs from their gleaming shells and set off down the road, doggedly and without enthusiasm.

I watched them, fascinated; the one that particularly took my fancy was quite a small one with a shell about the size of a tea-cup. It seemed more sprightly than the others, and its shell was a paler colour – chestnut, caramel and amber. Its eyes were bright and its walk was as alert as any tortoise's could be. I sat contemplating it for a long time.

I convinced myself that the family would greet its arrival at the villa with tremendous enthusiasm, even, perhaps, congratulating me on finding such an elegant specimen.

The fact that I had no money on me did not worry me in the slightest, for I would simply tell the man to call at the villa for payment next day. It never occurred to me that he might not trust me. The fact that I was English was sufficient, for the islanders had a love and respect for the

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Englishman out of all proportion to his worth. They would trust an Englishman where they would not trust each other.

I asked the Rose-beetle Man the price of the little tortoise. He held up both hands, fingers spread out.

However, I hadn't watched the peasants transacting business for nothing. I shook my head firmly and held up two fingers, unconsciously imitating the man. He closed his eyes in horror at the thought, and held up nine fingers; I held up three; he shook his head, and after some thought held up six fingers; I, in return, shook my head and held up five.

The Rose-beetle Man shook his head, and sighed deeply and sorrowfully, so we sat in silence and stared at the tortoises crawling heavily and uncertainly about the road, with the curious graceless determination of babies.

Presently the Rose-beetle Man indicated the little tortoise and held up six fingers again. I shook my head and held up five.

Roger yawned loudly; he was thoroughly bored by his silent bargaining. The Rose-beetle Man picked up the reptile and showed me in pantomime how smooth and lovely its shell was, how erect its head, how pointed its nails. I remained implacable. He shrugged, handed me the tortoise, and held up five fingers.

Then I told him I had no money, and that he would have to come the next day to the villa, and he nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Excited by owning this new pet, I wanted to get back home as quickly as possible in order to show it to everyone, so I said goodbye, thanked him, and hurried off along the road. When I reached the place where I had to cut down through the olive-groves, I stopped and examined my acquisition carefully.

He was undoubtedly the finest tortoise I had ever seen, and worth, in my opinion, at least twice what I had paid for him. I patted his scaly head with my finger and placed him carefully in my pocket. Before diving down the hillside I glanced back. The Rose-beetle Man was still in the same place on the road, but he was doing a little jig, prancing and swaying, his flute warbling, while in the road at his feet the tortoises ambled to and fro, dimly and heavily.