

My Family 10

Larry's multitude of eccentric writer and artist friends, invited to stay, caused the move to the larger Daffodil-yellow villa, with its collapsing furniture and Lugaretzia, the hypochondriac maid, always complaining about her ailments. Gerry observed the goings-on of the weird grown-ups in the last chapter, but in this one he gets back to what really matters – the wildlife that obsesses him.

Episode 10

The crumbling wall that surrounded the sunken garden alongside the house was a rich hunting ground for me. The inhabitants of the wall were a mixed lot, and they were divided into day and night workers, the hunters and the hunted. The shyest and most self-effacing of the wall community were the most dangerous. Slide a knife-blade carefully under a piece of loose plaster and lever it gently away from the brick, and there, crouching beneath it, would be a little black scorpion an inch long, looking as though he were made out of polished chocolate, with a flattened oval body, neat crooked legs, enormous clab-like claws, and the tail like a string of brown beads ending in a sting like a rose-thorn.

I grew very fond of these scorpions. I found them to be pleasant, unassuming creatures with, on the whole, the most charming habits. By crouching under the wall at night with a torch, I managed to catch brief glimpses of the scorpions' wonderful courtship dances. I saw them standing, claws clasped, their bodies raised to the skies, their tails lovingly entwined; waltzing slowly in circles among the moss cushions, claw in claw. But almost as soon as I switched on the torch the partners would stop, pause for a moment, and then turn round and walk firmly away, claw in claw, side by side. They were definitely beasts that believed in keeping themselves to themselves. If I could have kept a colony in captivity I would probably have been able to see the whole of the courtship, but the family had forbidden scorpions in the house, despite my arguments in favour of them.

Then one day I found a fat female scorpion, wearing what appeared to be a pale fawn fur coat. Closer inspection proved that this strange garment was made up of a mass of tiny babies clinging to the mother's back. I was enraptured, and made up my mind to smuggle them into the house and up to my bedroom, so that I might watch them grow up. With infinite care I manoeuvred mother and family into a matchbox, and hurried to the villa. It was unfortunate that just as I entered lunch should be served; however, I placed the matchbox carefully on the mantelpiece in the drawing room, made my way to the dining room and joined the family for the meal. Dawdling over my food, feeding Roger surreptitiously under the table, I completely forgot about my exciting new captures. At last Larry, having finished, fetched the cigarettes from the drawing-room, put one in his mouth and picked up the matchbox he had brought. Oblivious of my impending doom, I watched him as, still talking, he opened the matchbox.

Now I maintain to this day that the female scorpion meant no harm. She was

agitated and a trifle annoyed at being shut up in a matchbox for so long, and so she seized the first opportunity to escape. She hoisted herself out of the box, her babies clinging on desperately, and scuttled on to the back of Larry's hand. There, not certain what to do next, she paused, her sting curved up at the ready. Larry, feeling her claws, glanced down to see what it was.

He uttered a roar of fright that made Lugaretzia drop a plate and brought Roger out from beneath the table, barking wildly. With a flick of his hand he sent the unfortunate scorpion flying down the table, and she landed midway between Margo and Leslie, scattering babies like confetti. Enraged at this treatment, the creature sped towards Leslie, her sting quivering with emotion. Leslie leapt up, overturning his chair, and flicked desperately with his napkin, sending the scorpion rolling across the tablecloth towards Margo, who let out a scream that any railway engine would have been proud to produce. Mother, bewildered by this sudden change from peace to chaos, put on her glasses to see what was causing the pandemonium, and at that moment Margo, in an attempt to stop the scorpion's advance, hurled a glass of water at it. The shower missed it completely, but successfully drenched Mother, who lost her breath and sat gasping at the end of the table, unable even to protest. The scorpion had now gone to ground under Leslie's plate, while her babies swarmed wildly all over the table. Roger, mystified by the panic, but determined to do his share, ran round and round the room, barking hysterically.

'It's that bloody boy again....'bellowed Larry.

'Look out! Look out! They're coming!' screamed Margo.

'Don't panic,' roared Leslie, 'hit 'em with a book.'

'What on earth's the *matter* with you all?' Mother kept imploring, mopping her glasses.

'It's that bloody boy....he'll kill the lot of us...Look at the table...knee-deep in scorpions....'

'Quick...quick...do something..Look out, look out!'

'Stop screeching and get a book, for God's sake....You're worse than the dog...Shut *up*, Roger...'

'But *how* did the scorpions get on the table, dear?'

'That bloody boy...Every matchbox in the house is a deathtrap.....'

'Look out, it's coming towards me...Quick, quick, do something.....'

'Hit it with your knife...*your knife*..... Go on, hit it...'

Since no one had bothered to explain things to him, Roger was under the mistaken impression that the family were being attacked, and that it was his duty to defend them. As Lugaretzia was the only stranger in the room, he came to the logical conclusion that she must be the responsible party, so he bit her in the ankle. This did not help matters very much.

By the time a certain amount of order had been restored, all the baby scorpions had hidden themselves under various plates and bits of cutlery. Eventually, after impassioned pleas on my part, backed up by Mother, Leslie's suggestion that the whole lot be slaughtered was quashed. While the family, still simmering with rage and fright, retired to the drawing-room, I spent half an hour rounding up the babies, picking them up in a teaspoon, and returning

them to their mother's back. Then I carried them outside on a saucer and, with the utmost reluctance, released them on the garden wall. Roger and I went and spent the afternoon on the hillside, for I felt it would be prudent to allow the family to have a siesta before seeing them again.

The results of this incident were numerous. Larry developed a phobia about matchboxes and opened them with the utmost caution, a handkerchief wrapped round his hand. Lugaretzia limped round the house, her ankle enveloped in yards of bandage, for weeks after the bite had healed, and came round every morning, with the tea, to show us how the scabs were getting on.

But the worst repercussion of the whole affair was that Mother decided I was running wild again, and that it was time I received a little more education. While the problem of finding a full-time tutor was being solved, she was determined that my French, at least, should be kept in trim. So arrangements were made, and every morning Spiro would drive me into town for my lesson with the Belgian consul.

He was a sweet little man, whose most striking attribute was a magnificent three-pointed beard and carefully waxed moustache. He took his job rather seriously, and was always dressed as though on the verge of rushing off to some important official function, in a black cutaway coat, striped trousers, fawn spats over brightly polished shoes, an immense cravat like a silk waterfall, and a tall and gleaming top hat.

The first morning, the consul sat me down at a table, produced a battered edition of *Le Petit Larousse*, and placed it in front of me open at page one. I started down the list of words beginning with A. I had hardly stumbled through the first three, when he uttered a suppressed exclamation, tore open a cupboard and pulled out an air-rifle. He crept to the window, took aim, and fired. When he turned, there were tears in his eyes. It was a week before I found out the reason; cats. There were hundreds of them in the town, breeding unchecked, uncared for, and most were in a frightful state. The consul was a great cat-lover, and the sight of these starving, sore-ridden felines was too much for his sensitive nature.

'I cannot feed zem all,' he explained, 'so I like to make zem happiness by zooting zem. Zey are bezzer so, buz iz make me feel so zad.' So my lessons in French were continuously interrupted while the consul leapt to the window to send yet another cat to a happier hunting ground.

For some inexplicable reason the consul was under the impression that Mother could speak French. If she had the good fortune, while shopping in town, to notice his top hat bobbing through the crowd, she would hastily retreat into the nearest shop and buy things she had no use for, until the danger was past. Occasionally, however, the consul would appear suddenly and take her by surprise. He would advance smiling and bow almost double before her, while clasping her reluctantly offered hand and pressing it passionately into his beard. Then they would stand in the middle of the street, occasionally being forced apart by a passing donkey, while the consul swamped Mother under a flood of French, apparently unaware of the blank expression on Mother's face. Now and then he would punctuate his speech with a questioning '*n'est-ce pas, madame?*' and this was Mother's cue. Summoning up all her courage, she would display her complete mastery over

the French tongue.

'*Oui, oui*' she would exclaim, smiling nervously, and add, in case it had sounded rather unenthusiastic, 'OUI, OUI.'

This satisfied the consul, and I'm sure he never realized that this was the only French word that Mother knew. But it was nerve-wracking for her, and we had only to hiss 'Look out, Mother, the consul's coming,' to set her tearing down the street at a lady-like walk that was dangerously near to a gallop.

In some ways my French lessons were good for me. I did not learn any French, it's true, but by the end of the morning I was so bored that my afternoon sorties into the surrounding country were made with double the normal enthusiasm. And then there was Thursday to look forward to. It was on Thursdays that Theodore and I went out together. Loaded down with collecting boxes and nets, we wended our way through the olives, Roger galloping ahead of us. Theodore had an apparently inexhaustible fund of knowledge about everything, but imparted it with a sort of meticulous diffidence that made you feel he was not teaching you something new, but reminding you of something you were already aware of, but which had slipped your mind.

Towards evening, our jars, bottles, and tubes full of strange and exciting forms of life, we would turn for home, Roger trotting ahead, his tongue flapping. Theodore and I, hot, dusty, and tired, would stride along singing a song that Theodore had taught me. It had a rousing tune that gave new life to tired feet, and Theodore's baritone and my shrill treble would ring out gaily through the gloomy trees;

'There was an old man who lived in Jerusalem,
 Glory Halleluiah, Hi-ero-jerum.
 He wore a top hat and he looked very sprucelum,
 Glory Halleluiah, Hi-ero-jerum.
 Skinnermer rinki doodle dum, skinnermer rinki doodle dum,
 Glory Halleluiah, Hi-ero-jerum.....'

End of Episode 10