

My Family 13

The Magenpies were most indignant at their imprisonment, in spite of the large size of their quarters. Confined as they were, they were able to devote a lot of time to their studies, which consisted of getting a solid grounding in the Greek and English language. Within a very short time they were able to call all members of the family by name. They derived a lot of innocent amusement by shouting 'Go away!' and 'Come here!' in rapid succession, in both Greek and English, to the complete confusion of the dogs.

The Magenpies liked the dogs, although they seized every opportunity to tease them. They were particularly fond of Roger, and he would frequently go and call on them, lying down close to the wire netting, while the Magenpies sat three inches from his nose and talked to him in soft, wheezy chucks, with an occasional raucous guffaw, as though they were telling him dirty jokes. They never attempted to lure him close to the wire so that they could pull his tail, as they frequently did with both Widdle and Puke. On the whole they approved of dogs, but they liked them to look and behave like dogs, so when Dodo made her appearance in our midst, the Magenpies refused to believe she was a dog, and treated her with a sort of rowdy, jeering disdain.

Dodo was a Dandy Dinmont, like a long, fat, hair-covered balloon, with minute bow legs, enormous and protuberant eyes, and long flopping ears. Mother, good-naturedly and unthinkingly, said she would take one of a litter of six puppies from a friend who was at his wits' end trying to find good homes for them. She set off one afternoon to choose her puppy, and rather unwisely, selected a female. Mother drove home in triumph to show the new addition to the family.

'Oh, isn't he *sweet?*' cried Margo.

'Good God! It looks like a sea-slug,' said Leslie.

'Mother! Really!' said Larry, contemplating Dodo with loathing, 'where did you dig up that canine Frankenstein?'

'Oh, but he's *sweet,*' repeated Margo.

'It's not a him, it's a her,' said Mother, regarding her acquisition proudly; 'she's called Dodo.'

'Well, that's two things wrong with it for a start,' said Larry. 'It's a ghastly name for an animal, and to introduce a bitch into the house with those other three lechers about is asking for trouble.'

'It's my dog,' said Mother, 'and I like her, so that's all that matters.'

So Dodo settled in, and almost immediately caused us more trouble than all the other dogs put together. She had a weak hind-leg, and at any time during the day or night her hip joint was liable to come out of its socket, for no apparent reason. Dodo was no stoic, and would greet this catastrophe with a series of piercing shrieks. Strangely, her leg never seemed to worry her when she went out for walks or gambolled with elephantine enthusiasm after a ball. But invariably in the the evening, when the family were all sitting quietly, absorbed in writing, reading, or knitting, Dodo's leg would suddenly leap out of its socket, and she would utter a scream that would make everybody jump and lose control of whatever they were doing. By the time

we had massaged her leg back into place, Dodo would have screamed herself into exhaustion and immediately fall into a deep and peaceful sleep, while we would be so unnerved that we would be unable to concentrate on anything for the rest of the evening.

We soon discovered that Dodo had an extremely limited intelligence. There was only room for one idea at a time in her skull. She decided that Mother belonged to her, and when one afternoon Mother went off into town to do some shopping, Dodo went into mourning and waddled, howling sorrowfully, round the house, occasionally so overcome with grief that her leg would come out of joint. She greeted Mother's return with incredulous joy, but made up her mind from that moment that she would not let Mother out of her sight. She attached herself to Mother with the tenacity of a limpet, never more than a couple of feet away at the most. If Mother had to cross the room, Dodo would accompany her. She even insisted on being present when Mother had a bath, sitting dolefully by the tub and staring at Mother with embarrassing intensity. Any attempts to leave her outside the bathroom door resulted in Dodo howling madly and hurling herself at the door-panels, which almost invariably led to her hip slipping out of its socket.

At first, Dodo was regarded with tolerant scorn by Roger, Widdle and Puke. They were inclined to consider her a boring and useless addition to the household, until they discovered she had one superlative and overwhelmingly delightful characteristic: she came into season with monotonous regularity. Dodo herself displayed an innocence about the facts of life that was rather touching. She seemed not only puzzled but positively scared at her sudden bursts of popularity. It was owing to this Victorian innocence that Dodo fell an easy victim to the lure of Puke's magnificent ginger eyebrows when Mother inadvertently locked them in the drawing-room together while she supervised the making of tea.

To everyone's surprise (including Dodo's) a puppy was born of this union, a strange blob of a creature with its mother's figure and its father's unusual liver-and-white markings. Suddenly to become a mother Dodo found very demoralizing, and she almost had a nervous breakdown, torn between the desire to stay in one spot with her puppy, and the urge to keep as close to Mother as possible. Eventually she decided to compromise, so she followed Mother round and carried the puppy in her mouth, the unfortunate baby hanging by its head, its body swinging to and fro.

'If this goes on that puppy'll grow into a giraffe,' observed Leslie.

'I know, poor little thing,' said Mother. 'But what can I *do*? She picks it up if I only light a cigarette.'

'Simplest thing would be to drown it,' said Larry. 'It's going to grow into the most horrifying animal anyway. Look at its parents.'

'No, indeed you won't drown it!' exclaimed Mother indignantly. 'I shall think of something.'

The solution to the problem that Mother eventually thought of was to hire the maid's youngest daughter to carry the puppy for Dodo. Mother pattered from room to room like some Eastern potentate, Dodo pattering at her heels, and young Sophia bringing up the end of the line, tongue protruding and eyes squinting with the effort, bearing in her arms a large cushion on which reposed Dodo's strange offspring. When Mother was in one spot for any length of time Sophia would place the cushion on the ground, and Dodo

would surge on to it and sigh deeply. As soon as Mother was ready to go to another part of the house, Dodo would get up, shake herself, and take up her position, while Sophia lifted the cushion aloft. Mother would peer over her spectacles to make sure the column was ready, give a little nod, and they would wind their way off to the next job.

Below the villa, the sea curved into the coast in a great, almost landlocked bay, and on the flat land along its edges lay the intricate pattern of narrow waterways that had once been salt pans in the Venetian days. This was one of my favourite areas for hunting in, for the tiny waterways and the lush undergrowth harboured a multitude of creatures. One afternoon, with a male water-snake triumphantly clasped in my left hand, I sat up in a canal, gasping and spluttering under a layer of mud, and found to my surprise that the audience of dogs had been enlarged by the silent arrival of a man who was watching me with a mixture of interest and amusement.

He was short and stocky. His large blue eyes had a pleasant, humorous twinkle. I did not recognise him, and supposed him to be a fisherman from some village further down the coast.

'Your health,' he said in a rich deep voice.

I returned his greeting, and busied myself with getting the snake into the basket. The hardening carapace of grey mud on my thigh decided me that I must go to the sea and wash before returning home. More out of politeness than anything I asked the man where he was going.

'Down to my boat,' he said, gesturing with his cigarette.

I said I was making for the sea too.

'I will walk with you,' he said. 'I have a basket of cockles in my boat; you may have some of those if you like.'

As we walked I asked if he was a fisherman, and where he came from.

'My home is here,' he replied, 'but I am now at Vido.'

This reply puzzled me, for Vido was a tiny islet off the town of Corfu, and as far as I knew it had no one on it but convicts and warders, for it was the local prison island. I pointed this out.

'That's right,' he agreed, stooping to pat Roger. 'I am a convict.'

I said I presumed he'd just been let out.

'No, no, worse luck,' he smiled. 'I have another two years to do. But I'm a good prisoner. Any like me, those they feel they can trust, are allowed to make boats and sail home for the weekend.'

Once the thing was explained it never occurred to me that the procedure was unusual. I knew one wasn't allowed home for the weekend from an English prison, but this was Corfu, and in Corfu anything could happen. I was bursting with curiosity to know what his crime had been, and I was just phrasing a tactful inquiry when we reached the boat, and there was something that drove all other thoughts from my head. In the stern, tethered by one yellow leg, sat an immense black-backed gull. I stepped forward eagerly and stretched out my hand.

'Be careful...he is a bully, that one!' said the man urgently.

I had already placed my hand on the bird's back and was gently running my fingers over the silken feathering. The dark iris of the bird's eyed contracted with surprise, but taken aback by my audacity, he did nothing.

'Spiridion!' said the man in amazement, 'he's never let anyone else touch him

without biting.'

I scratched the bird's neck gently; the gull's head drooped and his yellow eyes became dreamy. I asked the man how he had managed to catch such a magnificent bird.

'I sailed over to Albania in the spring and I found him in a nest. He was small then, and fluffy as a lamb.'

I asked the man if he could get a baby gull for me the following spring.

'You want one?' he said in surprise. 'Well, have him if you want him.'

I could hardly believe my ears. For someone to possess such a wonderful creature and to offer him as a gift was incredible.

'I like him,' said the man meditatively, 'but he eats more than I can catch, and he is such a wicked one that he bites everybody. I've tried letting him go but he keeps coming back. So if you're sure you want him you can have him.'

It was like being offered an angel. In my excitement I never stopped to wonder how the family would greet a bird the size of a goose with a beak like a razor. The man untied the string, lifted the gull, and handed him to me.

'He knows his name,' he remarked, 'I call him Alecko. He'll come when you call. You'll be wanting some fish for him. I'm going out tomorrow, about eight. If you'd like to come we can catch a good lot for him.'

I said that would be fine, and the man leant against the boat to push it off. I suddenly remembered something. I asked what his name was, and why he was in prison. He smiled charmingly over his shoulder.

'My name's Kosti Panopoulos. I killed my wife.'

The boat slid into the water; Kosti scrambled in and took up the oars.

'Your health,' he called. 'Until tomorrow.'

The walk home took some time. Alecko seemed to grow heavier and heavier. I stamped into the drawing room and put him on the floor. He stood in the middle of the room and trumpeted furiously.

'What on earth's that?' gasped Mother.

'What an enormous bird!' exclaimed Margo. 'What is it, an eagle?'

My family's lack of ornithological knowledge had always been a source of annoyance to me.

'It's a gull,' said Leslie; 'what a whacking great thing!'

'Nonsense,' said Larry; 'it's an albatross.'

Alecko padded a few paces towards Larry and yarped at him.

'Call him off,' Larry commanded. 'Gerry, get the damn thing under control; it's attacking me.'

'Just stand still. He won't hurt you,' advised Leslie.

'It's all very well for you; you're behind me.'

'Don't shout so, dear, you'll frighten it.'

Alecko snapped his beak two or three times with a sound like a whip-crack.

'Listen to it!' exclaimed Larry. 'Gnashing its teeth!'

At this moment Dodo, who always took a little while to catch up with events, noticed Alecko for the first time. Breathing heavily, she waddled forward and sniffed him. Alecko's beak flashed out, and if Dodo had not turned her head at that moment – in response to my cry of alarm – her nose would have been neatly sliced off; as it was she received a glancing blow that surprised her so much that her leg leapt out of joint. She threw back her head and let forth a piercing yell. Alecko did his best to out-scream her, and flapped his wings so vigorously that he blew out the nearest lamp.

Mother and Margo massaged Dodo back to silence, and Alecko sat and watched the operation with interest. He clicked his beak sharply, decorated the floor lavishly, and wagged his tail with the swagger of one who had done something clever.

'How nice!' said Larry. 'Now we're expected to wade about the house waist deep in guano.'

'Hadn't you better take him outside, dear?' suggested Mother. 'Where are you going to keep him?'

I said I had thought of dividing Magenpies' cage. Mother said this was a very good idea. Until his cage was ready I tethered him on the veranda, warning each member of the family in turn as to his whereabouts.

'Where did you get him?' asked Leslie as we sat over dinner.

I explained about my meeting with Kostj and how he had given me the bird.

'Who is this man, anyway?' asked Larry.

Without thinking I said he was a convict.

'A *convict*?' quavered Mother.

I explained about Kostj being allowed home for the weekends. I added that he and I were going fishing the next morning.

'I don't know whether it's very wise, dear,' Mother said doubtfully. 'I don't like the idea. You never know what he's done.'

Indignantly, I said I knew perfectly well what he'd done. He killed his wife.

'A *murderer*?' said Mother aghast. 'But what's he doing wandering round the countryside?'

'You get three years for murder here,' explained Leslie, 'and five years if you're caught dynamiting fish.'

'I think it shows a nice sense of the importance of things,' said Larry.

'Whitebait before women.'

After an hour's pleading I finally got Mother to agree that I should go fishing with Kostj, providing that Leslie came down and had a look at him first. When we returned with enough food to keep Alecko occupied for a couple of days, I asked my friend to come up to the villa, so that Mother could inspect him for herself.

'He seems such a nice man,' Mother said, when Kostj had taken his leave; 'he doesn't look a bit like a murderer.'

'You simply can't judge by physical appearance,' Larry pointed out; 'you can only tell by a person's actions. I could have told you he was a murderer at once.'

'How, dear?' asked Mother, very intrigued.

'Elementary,' said Larry with a deprecating sigh. 'No one but a murderer would have thought of giving Gerry that albatross.'

End of Episode 13