

My Family 12– Exit Peter

As the summer drew to a close, I found myself, to my delight, once more without a tutor. Mother had discovered that, as she so delicately put it, Margo and Peter were becoming “too fond of one another.” As the family was unanimous in its disapproval of Peter as a prospective relation by marriage, something obviously had to be done. Leslie’s only contribution to the problem was to suggest shooting Peter, a plan that was, for some reason, greeted derisively. I thought it was a splendid idea, but I was in the minority.

Larry’s suggestion that the happy couple should be sent to live in Athens for a month, in order, as he explained to get it out of their systems, was quashed by Mother on the grounds of immorality.

Eventually Mother dispensed with Peter’s services, he left hurriedly and furtively and we had to cope with a tragic, tearful, and wildly indignant Margo, who, dressed in her most flowing and gloomy clothing for the event, played her part magnificently. Mother soothed and uttered gentle platitudes, Larry gave Margo lectures on free love, and Leslie, for reasons best known to himself, decided to play the part of the outraged brother and kept appearing at intervals, brandishing a revolver and threatening to shoot Peter down like a dog if he set foot in the house again. In the midst of all this Margo, tears trickling effectively down her face, made tragic gestures and told us her life was blighted. Our friend Spiro, who loved a good dramatic situation as well as anyone, spent his time weeping in sympathy with Margo, and posting various friends of his along the docks to make sure that Peter did not attempt to get back on to the island. We all enjoyed ourselves very much.

Just as the thing seemed to be dying a natural death, and Margo was able to eat a whole meal without bursting into tears, she got a note from Peter saying he would return for her.

Margo, rather panic-stricken by the idea, showed the note to Mother, and once more the family leapt with enthusiasm into the farce.

Spiro doubled his guard on the docks, Leslie oiled his guns and practised his shooting on a large card-board figure pinned to the front of the house, Larry went about alternately urging Margo to disguise herself as a peasant and fly to Peter’s arms, or to stop behaving like Camille.

Margo, insulted, locked herself in the attic and refused to see anyone except me, as I was the only member of the family who had not taken sides. She lay there, weeping copiously, and reading a volume of Tennyson; occasionally she would break off to consume a large meal —which I carried up on a tray — with undiminished appetite.

Margo stayed closeted in the attic for a week.

She was eventually brought down from there by a situation which made a fitting climax to the whole affair.

Leslie had discovered that several small items had been vanishing from the family boat, the Sea Cow, and he suspected the fishermen who rowed past

the jetty at night.

He decided that he would give the thieves something to think about, so he attached to his bedroom window three long-barrelled shotguns aiming down the hill at the jetty. By an ingenious arrangement of strings he could fire one barrel after the other without even getting out of bed.

The range was, of course, too far to do any damage, but the whistling of shot through the olive-leaves and the splashing as it pattered into the sea would, he felt, act as a fairly good deterrent.

So carried away was he by his own brilliance that he omitted to mention to anyone that he had constructed his burglar trap.

We had all retired to our rooms and were variously occupied. The house was silent. Outside came the gentle whispering of crickets in the hot night air. Suddenly there came a rapid series of colossal explosions that rocked the house and set all the dogs barking downstairs.

I rushed out on to the landing, where pandemonium reigned: the dogs had rushed upstairs in a body to join in the fun, and were leaping about, yelping excitedly.

Mother, looking wild and distraught, had rushed out of her bedroom in her voluminous nightie, under the impression that Margo had committed suicide. Larry burst angrily from his room to find out what the row was about, and Margo, under the impression that Peter had returned to claim her and was being slaughtered by Leslie, was fumbling at the lock on the attic door and screaming at the top of her voice.

"She's done something silly... she's done something silly...." wailed Mother, making frantic endeavours to get herself free from the dogs, Widdle and Puke, who, thinking this was all a jolly nocturnal romp, had seized the end of her nightie and were tugging at it, growling ferociously.

"It's the limit..... You can't even sleep in peace.....This family's driving me mad"..... bellowed Larry.

"Don't hurt him.... leave him alone....you cowards," came Margo's voice, shrill and tearful, as she scrabbled wildly in an attempt to get the attic door opened. "Burglars.....Keep calm....it's only burglars," yelled Leslie, opening his bedroom door.

"She's still alive.....she's still alive.... Get these dogs away....."

"You brutes...how dare you shoot him?...Let me out, let me out..."

"Stop fussing; it's only burglars ..."

"Animals and explosions all day, and then bloody great twelve gun salutes in the middle of the night.....It's carrying eccentricity too far...."

Eventually Mother struggled up to the attic, trailing Widdle and Puke from the hem of her night attire, and, white and shaking, threw open the door to find an equally white and shaking Margo.

After a lot of confusion we discovered what had happened, and what each of us had thought. Mother, trembling with shock, reprimanded Leslie severely.

"You mustn't do things like that dear," she pointed out.

"It's really stupid. If you're going to fire your guns off at least let us know."

"Yes," said Larry bitterly, "just give us a bit of warning, will you? Shout 'Timber,' or something of the sort."

"I don't see how I can be expected to take burglars by surprise if I've got to shout out warnings to you all," said Leslie aggrievedly.

"I'm damned if I see why we should be taken by surprise too," said Larry.

"Well, ring a bell or something, dear. Only please don't do that again....it's made me feel quite queer."

But the episode got Margo out of the attic, which, as Mother said, was one mercy.

It was not long before I received the unwelcome news that yet another tutor had been found for me. This time it was a person named Kralfesky, descended from an intricate tangle of nationalities but predominantly English. I set off for town to my first lesson in the gloomiest possible frame of mind. I decided immediately that Kralfesky was not a human being at all, but a gnome who had disguised himself as one by donning an antiquated but very dapper suit. He had a large, egg-shaped head tilted back against a smoothly rounded hump-back; his large eyes had a fixed, faraway look as though he were just waking out of a trance.

'Come in, my dear boy, do come in,' he fluted, bobbing like a courting sparrow, ushering me into a small, sparsely furnished room.

'Your mother tells me you have a great love of natural history. I am by way of being an aviculturist, albeit an amateur. Half an hour or so with the feathered creatures will, I venture to think, do us no harm before we start work.'

He led the way up a creaking staircase to the top of the house, produced an immense bunch of keys, and drew open a heavy green baize door. It was as though he had opened the gates of Paradise at the top of his house. The attic was vast, the walls lined from floor to ceiling with big airy cages containing dozens of fluttering, chirruping birds. Kralfesky seized a large watering-can from the table and danced nimbly from cage to cage, filling water-pots.

'I wonder if you would care to assist?' he asked. 'If you hold the watering-can...so...I will hold out the pots to be filled...We shall accomplish this in no time at all.' Eventually the watering was done, and he led me round the room, giving me an account of each bird's history, its ancestors, and what he hoped to do with it. Suddenly a loud, tremulous ringing sound appeared to emanate from somewhere inside Kralfesky's stomach.

'By Jove!' he exclaimed in horror. He drew out his watch from his waistcoat, depressed a tiny lever and the ringing sound ceased. I was a little disappointed that the noise should have such a commonplace source; to have a tutor whose insides chimed at intervals would, I felt, have added greatly to the charm of the lessons.

'By Jove!' he repeated faintly, 'twelve o'clock already....winged time indeed...Dear me, and you leave at half past, don't you? Well, we cannot, I feel, achieve any scholastic advancement in half an hour. Therefore, I suggest we go into the garden below and pick some groundsel for the birds.' So we went into the garden, until Spiro's car honked its way down the street like a wounded duck.

When I got home the family asked me how I liked my new tutor. Without going into details, I said that I found him very nice, and that I was sure we should become firm friends. To the query as to what we had studied, I replied with a certain amount of honesty that the morning had been devoted to

ornithology and botany. The family seemed satisfied.

One afternoon, in an olive grove with the dogs after a hectic lizard hunt, I acquired two new pets. A magpie's nest, like a great basket of carefully interwoven sticks, a deep cup of mud and rootlets at its heart, contained four babies. After some thought, I decided to take two and leave the other pair for the mother. This struck me as quite fair, and I did not see how the mother could possibly object. On being shown the new additions to the menagerie Widdle and Puke immediately decided that they must be edible, and tried to find out if their conclusion was correct. After I had reprimanded them, I showed the birds to Roger. He sniffed at them in his usual way, and then retreated hastily when the babies shot their heads up on long, scrawny necks, red mouths gaping wide, and wheezed lustily.

When I reached the villa and found the family, holding out the babies in my cupped hands, I inquired if anyone could think of a suitable name for them. But the family was not in a helpful mood.

'Fancy taking them away from their mother, poor little things,' said Margo.

'I hope they're old enough to eat, dear,' said Mother.

'Not *more* animals?' asked Larry with distaste.

'You'll have to watch out they don't steal,' said Leslie. 'Awful thieves, magpies.'

'*Whats* you calls them?' asked Spiro, scowling.

'Magpies, Spiro, magpies,' said Mother, enunciating slowly and clearly.

Spiro turned this new addition to his English vocabulary over in his mind.

'Magenpies,' he said at last, 'magenpies, eh?'

'Magpies, Spiro,' corrected Margo.

'That's what I says,' said Spiro indignantly, 'magenpies.'

So from that moment they became known simply as the Magenpies.

All went well until they learnt to fly. Having mastered their wings, they quickly mapped out the villa and then were all set for banditry.

Of the bedrooms they knew that the only one in which they were assured of a warm welcome was mine. Before they had even touched down on Larry's window-sill they would be greeted with such roars of rage, followed by a shower of missiles, that they would be forced to flap rapidly away to the safety of the magnolia tree. They could not understand Larry's attitude at all; they decided that – since he made such a fuss – it must be that he had something to hide, and that it was their duty to find out what it was. They waited patiently until one afternoon Larry went off for a swim and left his window open.

I did not discover what the Magenpies had been up to until Larry came back. When he opened the door of his room he uttered a moan like a soul in torment.

The Magenpies had been through the room as thoroughly as any Secret Service agent. Piles of manuscript paper lay scattered about the floor, most of them with an attractive pattern of holes punched in them. The typewriter had its ribbon coiling out of its interior, its keys bespattered with droppings. The Magenpies, obviously suspecting Larry of being a drug smuggler, had scattered the contents of a tin of bicarbonate of soda along a line of books, so that they looked like a snow covered mountain range. The table, the floor, the manuscript, the bed, were decorated with artistic and unusual footprints in

green and red ink. It seemed as though each bird had overturned his favourite colour and walked in it.

'This is the last straw,' said Larry in a shaking voice. 'Do something about those birds. You will have to either get rid of them or lock them up, otherwise I shall tear them wing from wing.'

The rest of the family assembled to find out the trouble.

'Good heavens, dear. What *have* you been doing?' asked Mother.

'Must be the Magenpies,' said Leslie, with relish.

'They've made an awful mess of your papers,' observed Margo.

Larry stared at her for a moment, breathing deeply.

'What a masterly understatement,' he said at last. 'How I envy you your ability to be inarticulate in the face of Fate.'

Larry looked so murderous that I decided it would probably be safer if the Magenpies were removed from danger, so I lured them into my bedroom with the aid of a raw egg, and locked them up while I considered the best thing to do. It was obvious that they would have to go into a cage of sorts, but I did not feel that I could cope with building a really large aviary by myself. It was useless asking the family to help me, so I decided that I would have to inveigle Mr Kralefsky into the constructional work. How fortunate that he was my tutor.