

My Family and Other Animals

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MY BIRTHDAY

As the summer grew hotter and hotter, I suggested that I might be allowed to take the Sea Cow out myself, say once a week, to explore the rockpools along our stretch of coast. Unfortunately, the family were, for a variety of reasons, against this. But just when I had almost given up hope, I was struck with a brilliant idea: my birthday was due fairly soon, and if I dealt with the family skilfully I felt sure I could not only get a boat, but a lot of other equipment as well. I therefore suggested to the family that, instead of letting them choose birthday presents, I might tell them the things which I wanted most. The family, rather taken aback, agreed, and then, somewhat suspiciously, asked me what I wanted. Innocently, I said that I hadn't thought about it much, but that I would work out a list for each person, and they could then choose one or more items on it.

My list took a lot of time and thought to work out, and a considerable amount of applied psychology. Mother, for instance, I knew would buy me everything on her list, so I put down some of the most necessary and expensive equipment: five wooden cases to house my insect collection; two dozen test tubes; five pints of methylated spirits, five pints of formalin and a microscope. Margo's list was a little more difficult, for the items had to be chosen so that they would encourage her to go to her favourite shops. So from her I asked for ten yards of butter muslin, ten yards of white calico, six large packets of pins, two bundles of cotton wool, two pints of ether, a pair of forceps, and two fountain-pen fillers. It was, I realised resignedly, quite useless to ask Larry for anything like formalin or pins, but if my list showed some sort of literary leaning I stood a good chance. Accordingly I made out a formidable sheet covered with the titles, authors' names, publishers, and price of all the natural history books I felt in need of, and put an asterisk against those that would be most gratefully received. Since I had only one request left, I decided to tackle Leslie verbally instead of handing him a list, but I knew I would have to choose my moment with care. I had just helped him to the successful conclusion of some ballistic experiments he was making. While we were thus engaged, I casually asked him what he would like to give me for my birthday.

"Hadn't thought about it," he replied absently, "I don't mind.....anything you like.....you choose."

I said I wanted a boat. Leslie, realising how he had been trapped, said indignantly that a boat was far too large a present for a birthday, and anyway he couldn't afford it. I said since he knew so much about boats, he would be able to build me one. However, if he thought that it would be too difficult....

"Of course it's not difficult," said Leslie, unguardedly, and then added hastily "Well...not terribly difficult. But it's the time. Look wouldn't it be better if I took you out in the Sea Cow twice a week?"

But I was adamant; I wanted a boat and I was quite prepared to wait for it.

"Oh, all right, all right," said Leslie exasperatedly, "I'll build you a boat. But you're to keep well away, you're not to see it until it's finished."

Delightedly I agreed to this condition, and so for the next two weeks Spiro kept turning up with car-loads of planks, and the sounds of sawing and hammering, and blasphemy floated round from the back veranda.

The day before my birthday the entire family made an expedition into the town. Firstly, they wanted to purchase my presents. Secondly the larder had to be stocked up for the forty-five guests we had somehow managed to invite to the party. We returned in the evening, exhausted and irritable, the car piled high with food.

The following morning was full of incident. My presents having been duly inspected and the family thanked, I then went round to the back veranda with Leslie, and there lay my boat. I gazed at it in rapture; it was surely the most perfect boat that anyone had ever had. Gleaming in her coat of new paint she lay there, my steed to the enchanted archipelago. The boat was some seven feet long and almost circular in shape. She reminded me of an earnest dungbeetle, an insect for which I had great affection.

Enthusiastically I suggested launching her at once. Leslie, who was a stickler for procedure, said you couldn't launch a ship without naming her, and had I thought of a name yet? This was a difficult problem, and the whole family were called out to help me solve it.

"Call it the the Ark," suggested Leslie, but I shook my head.

"Arbuckle," suggested Mother vaguely.

But suddenly I had the perfect name: **BOOTLE**, that's what I'd call her.

"I was just about to suggest the **BUMTRINKET**," said Larry.

I turned Larry's suggestion over in my mind; it was certainly an unusual name, but then so was Bootle. They both seemed to conjure up the shape and personality of the boat. After much thought I decided what to do. A

pot of black paint was produced and laboriously, in rather tricky capitals, I traced her name along the side: THE BOOTLE-BUMTRINKET. There it was.

It took the combined efforts of Margo, Peter, Leslie, and Larry to carry the boat down the hill to the jetty, while Mother and I followed with the mast and a bottle of wine with which to do the launching. At last we got the cork from the bottle, and I announced in a clear voice that I christened this ship the Bootle-bumtrinket. Then I slapped her rotund backside with the bottle and they cast her off the jetty with a mighty heave, and she landed on her flat bottom with a report like a cannon, showering sea-water in all directions and then bobbed steadily and confidently on the ripples.

Very early next morning after all the guests had finally gone, I set off with the dogs as company on my first voyage in the Bootle-Bumtrinket. The sea was calm, the sun was shining out of a gentian-blue sky, and there was just the faintest breeze; it was a perfect day.

The joy of having a boat of your own! The feeling of pleasant power as you pulled on the oars and felt the boat surge forward with a quick rustle of water, like someone cutting silk; the sun gently warming your back and making the sea surface flicker with a hundred different colours; the thrill of wending your way through the complex maze of weed-shaggy reefs that glowed just beneath the surface of the sea. Though I spent many days voyaging in the Bootle-Bumtrinket, and had many adventures, there was nothing to compare with that very first voyage.