My Family 5

Episode 5 – The Rose-Beetle Man

During our trips of exploration, Roger and I came to know a great number of people in various parts of the surrounding countryside. One of the most weird and fascinating characters was the Rose-beetle Man. I first saw him on a high, lonely road leading to one of the remote mountain villages. I could hear him before I could see him, for he was playing a rippling tune on a shepherd's pipe. As he rounded the corner both Roger and I stopped and stared in amazement.

He had a sharp, fox-like face with large, slanting eyes of such a dark brown that they appeared black. He was short and slight, his dress was fantastic, and on his head was a shapeless hat with a very wide, floppy brim speckled with dust, wine-stains and cigarette burns. In the band was stuck a fluttering forest of feathers. His shirt was frayed and grey with sweat,and round the neck dangled an enormous cravat of startling blue satin. His coat had patches of different hues here and there, and the pockets bulged, the contents almost spilling out. His trousers, patched like his coat, drooped over scarlet leather shoes with upturned toes decorated with a large black and white pompom. He carried on his back bamboo cages full of pigeons and young chickens and several mysterious sacks. With one hand he held his shepherd's 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, all flying round his hat with desperate, deep buzzings, trying to escape from the thread tied firmly round their waists.

When he saw us the Rose-beetle Man doffed his ridiculous hat and swept us a low bow. Roger was so overcome by this that he let out a volley of surprised barks. The man smiled at us, and waggled his long, bony fingers at me. I politely bade him good day. He gave another courtly bow. I asked what the rose-beetles were for, and why he had them tied with cotton. He took one of the lengths of cotton and whirled it rapidly round his head. Immediately the insect started on its planet-like circling of his hat, and he beamed at me. Pointing up at the sky, he stretched his arms out and banked and swooped across the road. Aeroplane, any fool could see that. I suddenly realise that he must be dumb.

Then he pointed to the beetles, held his hand out to denote

children, and whirled the beetles round his head so that they all started to buzz peevishly.
Exhausted by his explanation, he sat down and played a short tune on his flute. Presently he stuffed it into his bulging pocket, gazed at me reflectively for a moment and then swung a small sack off his shoulder, and, to my delight and astonishment, tumbled half a dozen tortoises into the road. Their shells had been polished with oil till they shone, and he had managed to decorate their front legs with little red bows. The one that 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, its eyes were bright and its walk was as alert as any tortoise's could be. I convinced myself that the family would greet its arrival with tremendous enthusiasm, even, perhaps, congratulating me on finding such an elegant specimen. I asked the 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. He closed his eyes in horror at the thought, and held up nine fingers; I held up three. 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 Man held up six fingers. I held up five. Roger yawned loudly, thoroughly bored by this silent bargaining. The Man picked up the reptile and showed me 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 was the most natural thing in the world. Excited by owning this new pet, I wanted to get home as quickly as possible, so I said goodbye, thanked him, and hurried off.
The new arrival was duly christened Achilles, and turned out to be a most intelligent and lovable beast. At first he was tethered by a leg in the garden, but as he grew tamer we let him go where he pleased. He learned his name, and we had only to call out and he would appear, his head and neck stretched out eagerly. He loved being fed, and would squat regally in the sun while we held out grapes for him. He loved them as much as Roger did, so there was always great rivalry. Achilles would sit mumbling the grapes in his mouth, the juice running down his chin, and Roger would lie nearby, watching with agonized eyes, his mouth drooling saliva. If I didn't

keep an eye on him, Roger would creep up to Achilles and lick his front vigorously to get the grape-juice that the reptile had dribbled down himself. Achilles, affronted at such a liberty, would snap at Roger's nose, and when the licks became too overpowering, he would retreat into his shell with an indignant wheeze. But the fruit he liked best were wild strawberries. He would become positively hysterical at the sight of them, lumbering to and fro, craning his head to see if you were going to give him any, gazing at you pleadingly with his tiny boot-button eyes.

As well as a passion for strawberries, Achilles developed a passion for human company. If you were lying on a rug, sun-bathing, he would be convinced that you were lying on the ground simply in order to provide him with amusement. He would choose a portion of your anatomy on which to practise mountaineering. Suddenly to have the sharp claws of a tortoise embedded in your thigh as he tries to lever himself on to your stomach is not conducive to relaxation. If you shook him off and moved the rug it would only give you temporary respite, for he would circle the garden till he found you again. After many complaints and threats from the family, I had to lock him up whenever we lay in the garden.
Then one day the gate was left open and Achilles was nowhere to be found. The family, who up till then had spent most of their time openly making threats against his life, wandered about the olive groves, shouting 'Achilles…strawberries, Achilles….strawberries.'
At length we found him. He had fallen into a disused well, and was to our regret quite dead. Even Leslie's attempts at artificial respiration, and Margo's suggestion of forcing strawberries down his throat (to give him, she explained, something to live for) failed to get any response. So, mournfully and solemnly, his corpse was buried in the garden under a small strawberry plant (Mother's suggestion). A short funeral address, written and read in a trembling voice by Larry, made the occasion a memorable one. It was only marred by Roger, who, in spite of all my protests, insisted on wagging his tail throughout the burial service.
For some time, the Rose-beetle Man would turn up at the villa fairly regularly with some new addition to my menagerie: a frog perhaps, or a sparrow with a broken leg. One afternoon Mother and I, in a fit of extravagant sentimentalism, bought up his entire stock of rose-beetles, and when he had left, let them all go in the garden. For days the villa was full of rose-beetles, crawling on the beds, lurking in the bathroom, banging against the lights at night, and falling like emeralds into our laps.

Scarcely had we settled into the Strawberry-pink Villa before Mother decided that I was running wild, and that it was necessary for me to have some sort of education. As usual when a problem arose, the entire family flung itself with enthusiasm into the task of solving it.

'What we want,' said Mother,'is someone who can teach Gerry and encourage him in his interests.'

'He appears to have only one interest,' said Larry bitterly, 'and that's this awful urge to fill things with animal life. I don't think he ought to be encouraged in *that.* Life is fraught with danger as it is… I went to light a cigarette only this morning and a damn' great bumble-bee flew out of the matchbox.'

'It was a grasshopper with me,' said Leslie gloomily.

'Yes, I think that sort of thing ought to be stopped,' said Margo. 'I found the *most revolting* jar of wriggling things on the dressing-table, of all places.'

'He doesn't mean any harm, poor little chap,' said Mother pacifically; 'he's so interested in all these things.'

'I wouldn't mind being attacked by bumble-bees if it *led* anywhere,' Larry pointed out. 'But it's just a phase…he'll grow out of it.'

'He's been in this phase from the age of two,' said Mother, 'and he's showing no signs of growing out of it.'

'Well, if you insist on stuffing him full of useless information, I suppose George would have a shot at teaching him,' said Larry.

'*That's* a brainwave,' said Mother delightedly. 'Will you go over and see him? I think the sooner he starts the better.'

Listening with interest, not unmixed with indignation, I wondered vaguely who George was. But I forgot about the imminent danger of being educated, and went off with Roger to hunt for glow-worms in the sprawling brambles.

End of episode 5