

## Alternative Episode 11 My Family– Birthday, Boat, and Widdle and Puke

With the summer came Peter to tutor me, a tall, handsome young man, fresh from Oxford, with decided ideas about education which I found rather trying to begin with. At first the lessons were painful to an extreme: interminable wrestling with fractions and percentages, geological strata and warm currents, nouns, verbs, and adverbs. But as the sunshine worked its magic on Peter, he discovered that the effects of warm currents could be explained much more easily while swimming along the coast, while the simplest way of teaching me English was to allow me to write something each day which he would correct. Diffidently, I suggested that I wrote a book, and Peter, not being able to think of any reason why I should *not*, agreed. So every morning I spent a happy hour adding another chapter to my epic, a stirring tale of a voyage round the world with the family, during which we captured every conceivable kind of fauna in the most unlikely traps. While I was at work on my masterpiece, breaking off for discussions with Roger on the finer points of the plot, Peter and Margo would take a stroll in the sunken garden to look at the flowers. To my surprise, they had both suddenly become very botanically minded. In this way the mornings passed very pleasantly for all concerned. Occasionally, in the early days, Peter suffered from sudden spasms of conscience, my epic would be relegated to a drawer, and we would pore over mathematical problems. But as the summer days grew longer, and Margo's interest in gardening became more sustained, these irritating periods became less frequent.

As the summer grew hotter and hotter, I was tortured by the thought of all the wonderful animal life in the limpid pools of the offshore islets waiting to be caught. I was unable to do anything about it, simply because I had no boat of my own. Then I was struck with a brilliant idea: my birthday was due, and if I dealt with the family skilfully 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 my presents, I might tell them the things which I wanted most.

My list took a lot of time and thought to work out, and a considerable amount of applied psychology. Mother I knew would buy me everything on her list, so I put down some of the most necessary and expensive equipment : five wooden cases, glass-topped, cork lined, for my insect collection; two dozen test tubes; five pints of methylated spirits, five pints of formalin, and a microscope.

Margo's items had to be chosen so that they would encourage her to go to her favourite shops. So I asked for ten yards of butter muslin, ten yards of white calico, two bundles of cotton wool, two pints of ether, a pair of forceps, and two fountain pen fillers.

It was 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.

Since I had only one request left, I decided to tackle Leslie verbally, but I had to wait some days for what I considered to be a propitious moment. I had just helped him to the successful conclusion of some ballistic experiment he was making, which involved tying an ancient muzzle-loader to a tree and firing it by means of a long string attached to the trigger. At the fourth attempt, the barrel burst and bits of metal whined in all directions. Leslie was delighted, and while he was examining with evident satisfaction a contorted piece of metal, I casually asked him what he would like to give me for my birthday.

'I don't mind,' he replied absently, '...anything you like...you choose.'

I said I wanted a boat. Leslie, realizing how he had been trapped, said indignantly that a boat was far too large a present, and anyway he couldn't afford it. I said I didn't expect him to buy me one. I had thought he would be able to build me one. However, if he thought that would be too difficult...

'Of course it's not difficult,' said Leslie, exasperatedly. 'All right, all right, I'll build you a boat. But I'm not having you hanging round while I do it, understand? You're not to see it till it's finished.'

For the next two weeks Spiro kept turning up with car-loads of planks, and the sounds of sawing, hammering, and blasphemy floated round from the back veranda. Everywhere he walked, Leslie left a trail of sawdust.

The day before my birthday, the entire family made an expedition into town. Firstly, to purchase my presents. Secondly, the larder had to be stocked up. We had agreed that we would not invite a lot of people to the party; ten guests, carefully selected, a small but distinguished gathering of the people we liked best. Each member of the family then proceeded to ask ten people. Unfortunately they didn't all invite the same ten. So Mother, on the eve of the party, suddenly discovered we were going to have not ten guests but forty-five.

The following morning, my presents having been duly inspected and the family thanked, I went round to the back veranda with Leslie, and there lay my boat. I gazed at it rapturously; it was surely the most perfect boat that anyone had ever had.

It was some seven feet long, and almost circular in shape. Leslie explained hurriedly – in case I thought the shape was due to defective craftsmanship – that the reason was that the planks had been too short for the frame, an explanation that I found perfectly satisfactory, the sort of irritating thing that could have happened to anyone. I said stoutly that I thought it was a lovely shape for a boat. She was somehow comforting in her circular solidarity. She reminded me of a dungbeetle, an insect for which I had great affection. Leslie, pleased at my evident delight, said deprecatingly that he had been forced to make her flat-bottomed, since, for a variety of technical reasons, this was the safest. I said that I liked flat-bottomed boats the best, because it was possible to put jars of specimens on the floor without risk of them upsetting.

Enthusiastically I suggested launching her at once. Leslie said you couldn't launch a ship without naming her, and had I thought of a name yet? The whole family were called out to help me solve this problem.

'Why not call it the *Jolly Roger*?' suggested Margo.

I rejected this scornfully; I explained that I wanted a sort of *fat* name to go with the boat's personality

'*Arbuckle*,' suggested Mother.

The boat simply didn't look like an *Arbuckle*.

'Call it the *Ark*,' said Leslie, but I shook my head.

Suddenly I had it: *Bootle*, that's what I'd call her.

'Very nice, dear,' approved Mother.

'I was just about to suggest the *Bumtrinket*,' said Larry.

'Larry, dear!' Mother reproved. 'Don't teach the boy things like that.'

I turned Larry's suggestion over in my mind; it was certainly an unusual name, but then so was *Bootle*. After much thought I decided what to do. A pot of black paint was produced and in rather tricky capitals, I traced her name along the side: THE BOOTLE-BUMTRINKET. In order to ease Mother's mind I had to promise that I would only refer to the boat as the *Bootle* in conversation with strangers.

The matter of the name being settled, we set about the task of launching her. It took the combined efforts of Margo, Peter, Leslie, and Larry to carry the boat down the hill to the jetty. Mother and I followed with the mast and a small bottle of wine with which to do the launching properly.

I slapped the boat's rotund backside with the bottle, with the unhappy result that half a pint of white wine splashed over Larry's head.

'Look out, look out,' he remonstrated. 'Which one of us are you supposed to be launching?'

At last they cast off the *Bootle-Bumtrinket* with a mighty heave, and she landed on her flat bottom and bobbed steadily and confidently on the ripples. She had the faintest suggestion of a list to starboard, but I generously attributed this to the wine and not to Leslie's workmanship.

'Now!' said Leslie. 'Let's get the mast in ....Margo, you hold her nose....Peter, if you'll get into the stern, Larry and I will hand you the mast...all you have to do is stick it in that socket.'

'This mast looks a bit long to me, Les,' said Larry, eyeing it critically.

'Nonsense! It'll be fine when it's in,' retorted Leslie. 'Are you ready, Peter?'

Peter nodded, braced himself, clasped the mast firmly and plunged it into the socket. The *Bootle-Bumtrinket*, with a speed remarkable for a craft of her circumference, turned turtle. Peter, clad in his one decent suit in honour of my birthday, disappeared with scarcely a splash.

'He'll drown! He'll drown!' screamed Margo, who always tended to look on the dark side in a crisis.

'Nonsense! It's not deep enough,' said Leslie.

'I told you that mast was too long,' said Larry unctuously.

'It *isn't* too long,' Leslie snapped irritably; 'that fool didn't set it right.'

'Don't you dare call him a fool,' said Margo.

'You can't fit a twenty-foot mast on to a thing like a wash-tub and expect it to keep upright,' said Larry.

'It's easy enough to criticize... just because that fool...'

'Don't you call him a fool.....How dare you?'

'Now, now, don't argue about it, dears,' said Mother peaceably.

'Thank God! He's come up,' said Margo in fervent tones as the bedraggled and spluttering Peter rose to the surface.

We hauled him out, and Margo hurried him up to the house to try to get his suit dry before the party. Leslie, armed with a massive manual on yacht

construction and a tape measure, went down to salvage the boat. For the rest of the morning he kept sawing bits off the mast until she eventually floated upright, but by then the mast was only about three feet high. Leslie was very puzzled, but he promised to fit a new one as soon as he'd worked out the correct specification. The *Bootle-Bumtrinket* floated at the end of the jetty looking like an overweight Manx cat.

The first party guest to arrive was Theodore, clasping in one hand a neatly wrapped parcel. I was delighted to find that it contained a fat volume entitled *Life in Ponds and Streams*. More and more guests arrived, and with them came more presents. Most of these were, from my point of view, useless, as they could not be adapted for natural history work. The best of the presents were, in my view, two puppies brought by a peasant family I knew who lived not far away. One puppy was liver and white, with large ginger eyebrows, and the other was coal black with large ginger eyebrows. As they were presents, the family had, of course, to accept them. Roger viewed them with suspicion and interest, so in order that they should all get acquainted I locked them in the dining-room with a large plate of party delicacies between them. When the flood of guests grew so large that we had to slide back the doors and let some of them into the dining-room, we found Roger seated gloomily on the floor, the two puppies gambolling round him, and the room was decorated in a fashion that left us in no doubt that the new additions had both eaten and drunk to their hearts' content. Larry's suggestion that they be called Widdle and Puke was greeted with disgust by Mother, but the names stuck and Widdle and Puke they remained.

Still the guests came, overflowing the drawing-room into the dining-room, and out of the french windows on to the veranda. The wine flowed, the air was blue with cigarette smoke. Mother, smiling in a rather forced and distraught manner, was wedged between the English padre, who was looking with increasing disapproval at the revelry, and the Belgian consul, who was chattering away in her ear and twirling his moustache. Larry, out on the veranda, was endeavouring to teach a group of Greeks some of the finer English limericks. Puke and Widdle had gone to sleep in someone's hat. Doctor Androuchelli arrived and apologized to Mother for being late. 'It was my wife, madame; she has just been delivered of a baby,' he said with pride.

'Oh, congratulations, doctor,' said Mother; 'we must drink to them.'

Spiro, exhausted from dancing, was sitting on the sofa nearby, fanning himself.

'Whats?' he roared at Androuchelli. 'You gets another babys?'

'Yes, Spiro, a boy,' said Androuchelli, beaming.

'How manys you gets now?' asked Spiro.

'Six, only six,' said the doctor in surprise. 'Why?'

'You oughts to be ashames of yourself,' said Spiro in disgust. 'Six...Gollys! Carrying on like cats and dogses.'

'But I like children,' protested Androuchelli.

'When I gots married I asks my wifes how many she wants,' said Spiro in a loud voice, 'and she says twos, so I gives her twos and then I gets her sewed ups. Six childrens.....Honest to Gods, you makes me wants to throws... cats and dogses.'

At this point the English padre decided that he would, most reluctantly, have to leave, as he had a long day ahead of him tomorrow. Mother and I saw him out, and when we returned Androuchelli and Spiro had joined the dancers.

The sea was dawn-calm, and the eastern horizon flushed with pink when we stood yawning at the front door and the last carriage clopped its way down the drive. As I lay in bed with Roger across my feet, a puppy on each side of me, I thought that taken all round, it had been an extremely good birthday.

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