

## THE PARTY

On the morning of the long awaited party I found that because the water-snakes had eaten two of my goldfish, I had put the reptiles into kerosene tins. To my horror I found that someone had moved the tins into the full glare of the sun. The snakes lay on the surface of the water so limp and hot that for a moment I thought they were dead. Mother was in the kitchen, harassed and absent-minded and I asked her if I could temporarily put them in the bath.

“Well, yes, dear, I suppose that would be all right. Make sure everyone’s finished, though, and don’t forget to disinfect it, will you?” she said.

I filled the bath with nice cool water and was relieved to find the snakes showed distinct signs of reviving. I left them for a good soak while I went upstairs to change.

On my return I sauntered out on to the veranda to have a look at the lunch table, which had been put out in the shade of the vine. In the centre of what had been a very attractive floral centre-piece perched my Magpies, reeling gently from side to side. Cold with dismay I surveyed the table. The cutlery was flung about, and buttery footprints wandered to and fro across the cloth. The water-jug had been emptied over everything to give it that final, inimitable Magpie touch

There was something decidedly queer about the culprits, I decided.

Having gazed at me with rapt attention for a moment, one of them walked very unsteadily across the table, a flower in his beak, lost his balance on the edge of the cloth, and fell heavily to the ground. The other one gave a hoarse cluck of amusement, put his head under his wing, and went to sleep. I was mystified by this unusual behaviour. Then I noticed a smashed bottle of beer on the flagstones. It became obvious the Magpies had indulged in a party of their own, and were very drunk. I caught them both quite easily and was wondering if I could slip them back in their cage unobserved when Mother appeared carrying a jug of sauce. I was caught red-handed.

“Really dear, you must be careful about their cage door. You know what they’re like,” Mother said plaintively. “Never mind, it was an accident, and I suppose they’re not really responsible if they’re drunk.” On taking the bleary and incapable Magpies back to their cage I discovered, as I had feared that Alecko my black-backed gull had escaped

as well. I hunted through the garden and all over the house, but he was nowhere to be seen. I decided he must have flown to the sea for a quick swim, and felt relieved he was out of the way.

By this time the first of the guests had arrived, and were drinking on the veranda. I joined them, and was soon deep in a discussion with my friend and fellow naturalist, Theodore. While we were talking, Leslie appeared out of the olive-groves carrying a full bag of snipe and a large hare.

“Ah ha!” said Theodore with relish, as Leslie vaulted over the veranda rail. “Is that your own hare or is it....um... a wig?”

“You pinched that joke,” said Larry accusingly.

“Yes...er...um I’m afraid I did, but it seemed such a perfect opportunity,” explained Theodore.

Leslie disappeared into the house to change and Mother appeared and seated herself on the wall. All conversation was suddenly frozen by a loud bellow as of a minotaur with a toothache.

“Whatever’s the matter with Leslie?” asked Mother.

She was not left long in doubt, for he appeared on the veranda clad only in a small towel.

“Gerry,” he roared, his face a deep red with rage.

“Now, now, dear,” said Mother soothingly, “whatever’s the matter?”

“Snakes,” snarled Leslie, making a wild gesture with his hands to indicate extreme length.

“What are you talking about, dear?”

“That bloody boy’s filled the sodding bath full of bleeding snakes,” said Leslie, making things quite clear.

“Language, dear, language!” said Mother automatically adding absently,

“I do wish you’d put some clothes on, you’ll catch a chill like that.”

“Damn great things like hosepipes....It’s a wonder I wasn’t bitten.”

“Never mind, dear, It’s really my fault. I told him to put them there,” Mother apologized, and then added, feeling that the guests needed some explanation, “They were suffering from sunstroke, poor things.”

“Really, Mother!” exclaimed Larry, “I think that’s carrying things too far.”

“Now don’t you start, dear,” said Mother firmly; “It was Leslie who was bathing with the snakes.”

“Only Saint Francis of Assisi would feel really at home here...” said Larry bitterly.

“Am I going to get a bath or not?” asked Leslie tetchily.

Eventually I borrowed a saucepan from the kitchen and put my water-

snakes in that. They had to my delight recovered completely and hissed vigorously. On returning to the veranda, I was in time to hear Larry holding forth at length to the assembled guests.

“I assure you this house is a death-trap. Every conceivable nook and cranny is stuffed with malignant fauna waiting to pounce. My room’s been torn asunder by magpies and now we have snakes in the bath and huge flocks of albatrosses flapping round the house, making noises like defective plumbing.”

“Larry, dear, you do exaggerate,” said Mother, smiling vaguely at the guests, “I think lunch is ready so shall we all sit down?”

“Well anyway,” said Larry as we moved down the veranda to the table, “that boy’s a menace.... he’s got beasts in his belfry.

The guests were shown to their places, there was a loud scraping as chairs were drawn out, and then everyone sat down and smiled at each other. The next moment two of the guests uttered yells of agony and soared out of their seats, like rockets.

“Oh, dear NOW what’s happened?” asked Mother in agitation.

“Its probably scorpions again,” said Larry, vacating his seat hurriedly.

“Something bit me... bit me in the leg!”

“There you are!” exclaimed Larry, looking round triumphantly.

The only person not frozen with horror at the hidden menace, was Theodore. He poked his head under the table

“Ah ha!” he said interestedly. “It seems to be some sort of ..... er.....BIRD. A large black and white one”.

“It’s that Albatross!” said Larry in excitement.

“No, no,” corrected Theodore, “It’s some species of GULL, I think.”

I gently lifted the end of the tablecloth and Alecko, squatting regally under the table, surveyed me with angry yellow eyes. I stretched out a hand and he clicked his beak savagely.

“For heaven’s sake hurry up the soup’s getting cold,” snapped Larry irritably. “Can’t you tempt the brute with something? What do they eat?”

“All the nice GULLS love a sailor,” observed Theodore with immense satisfaction.

“Oh, Theodore, please!” protested Larry, pained; “not in moments of crisis.”

I succeeded at last in getting a grip on Alecko’s beak, and I hauled him screaming and flapping out from under the table.

I was hot and disheveled by the time I got him back to his cage. I left him there, screaming insults and threats at me and went back to resume my interrupted lunch.

“I remember a dear friend of mine being molested by a large gull once,” said Krafelsky a friend of Larry’s, as he sipped his soup. “My friend told me he had the greatest difficulty beating it off with his umbrella.”

“What he should have done,” Theodore pointed out gravely, “was to point his umbrella at it and shout ‘stand back or I fire.’”

“Whatever for?” inquired Kralefsky, very puzzled.

“The gull would have believed him and flown away in terror. You see, they’re such GULLIBLE creatures,” said Theodore in triumph.

Everybody groaned and the meal continued.