

After the unfortunate affair of the scorpion, the family had given me a large room on the first floor in which to house my beasts, in the vague hope that this would confine them to one particular portion of the house. This room – which I called my study, and which the rest of the family called the Bug House – smelt pleasantly of ether and methylated spirits. It was here that I kept my natural history books, my diary, microscope, dissecting instruments, nets, collecting bags, and other important items. Large cardboard boxes housed my birds' egg, beetle, butterfly, and dragon-fly collections, while on the shelves above were a fine range of bottles full of methylated spirits in which were preserved such interesting items as a four-legged chicken (a present from Lugaretzia's husband), various lizards and snakes, frog-spawn in different stages of growth, a baby octopus, three half-grown brown rats (a contribution from Roger), and a minute tortoise, newly hatched, that had been unable to survive the winter. The walls were sparsely, but tastefully, decorated with a slab slate containing the fossilized remains of a fish, a photograph of myself shaking hands with a chimpanzee, and a stuffed bat. I had prepared the bat myself, without assistance, and I was extremely proud of the result. Considering how limited my knowledge of taxidermy was, it looked, I thought, extremely *like* a bat, especially if you stood at the other side of the room. With

wings outstretched it glowered down from the wall from its slab of cork. When summer came, however, the bat appeared to feel the heat: it sagged a little, its coat no longer glossy, and a new and mysterious smell started to make itself felt above the ether and methylated spirits. Poor Roger was wrongly accused at first, and it was only later, when the smell had penetrated even to Larry's bedroom, that a thorough investigation traced the odour to my bat. I was surprised and not a little annoyed. Under pressure I was forced to get rid of it. Peter explained that I had not cured it properly, and said that if I could obtain another specimen he would show me the correct procedure. I thanked him profusely, but tactfully suggested that we keep the whole thing a secret; I explained that I felt the family now looked with a suspicious eye on the art of taxidermy, and it would require a lot of tedious persuasion to get them into an agreeable frame of mind.

My efforts to secure another bat were unsuccessful. Armed with a long bamboo I waited for hours in the moon-splashed corridors between the olive trees, but the bats flickered past like quicksilver and vanished before I could use my weapon. But, while waiting in vain for a chance to hit a bat, I saw a number of other night creatures which I would not otherwise have seen. I watched a young fox hopefully digging for beetles in the hillside, scrabbling with slim paws at the earth, and scrunching the insects up hungrily as he unearthed them. Once, five jackals appeared out of the myrtle bushes, paused in surprise at seeing me, and then melted among the trees, like shadows. The nightjars on silent, silky wings would slide as smoothly as

great black swallows along the rows of olives, sweeping across the grass in pursuit of the drunken, whirling crane flies. One night a pair of squirrel dormice appeared in the tree above me, and chased each other in wild exuberance up and down the grove, leaping from branch to branch like acrobats, skittering up and down the tree trunks, their bushy tails like puffs of grey smoke in the moonlight. I was so fascinated by these creatures that I was determined to try to catch one. The best time to search for them was, of course, during the day, when they would be asleep. So, I hunted laboriously through the olive groves for their hideout, but it was a hopeless quest, for every gnarled and twisted trunk was hollow, and each contained half a dozen holes. However, my patience did not go entirely unrewarded, for one day I thrust my arm into a hole, and my fingers closed round something small and soft, something that wiggled as I pulled it out. At first glance my capture appeared to be an outsize bundle of dandelion seeds, furnished with a pair of enormous golden eyes; closer inspection proved it to be a young Scops owl, still clad in his baby down. We regarded each other for a moment, and then the bird, apparently indignant at my ill-mannered laughter at his appearance, dug his tiny claws deeply into my thumb, and I lost my grip on the branch, so that we fell out of the tree together.

I carried the indignant owlet back home in my pocket, and introduced him to the family with a certain trepidation. To my surprise, he was greeted with unqualified approval, and no objection was raised to my keeping him. He took up residence in a basket kept in my study and, after much

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argument, he was christened Ulysses. From the first he showed that he was a bird of great strength of character, and not to be trifled with. Although he would have fitted comfortably into a teacup, he showed no fear and would unhesitatingly attack anything and everyone, regardless of size. As we all had to share the room, I felt it would be a good idea if he and Roger got on intimate terms, so, as soon as the owl had settled down, I performed the introductions by placing Ulysses on the floor, and telling Roger to approach and make friends. Roger had become very philosophical about having to make friends with the various creatures that I adopted, and he took the appearance of an owl in his stride. Wagging his tail briskly, in an ingratiating manner, he approached Ulysses, who squatted on the floor with anything but a friendly expression on his face. He watched Roger's approach in an unwinking stare of ferocity. Roger's advance became less confident. Ulysses continued to glare as though trying to hypnotize the dog. Roger stopped, his ears drooped, his tail wagging only feebly, and he glanced at me for inspiration. I ordered him sternly to continue his overtures of friendship. Roger looked nervously at the owl, and then with great nonchalance walked round him, in an effort to approach him from the back. Ulysses, however, let his head revolve too, and kept his eyes still fixed on the dog. Roger, never having met a creature that could look behind itself without turning round, seemed a trifle nonplussed. After a moment's thought he decided to try the skittish, let's-all-have-a-jolly-game approach. He lay down on his stomach, put his head between his paws, and crept slowly

towards the bird, whining gently and wagging his tail with abandon. Ulysses continued to look as though he were stuffed. Roger, still progressing on his stomach, managed to get quite close, but then he made a fatal mistake. He pushed his woolly face forward and sniffed loudly and interestedly at the bird. Now Ulysses would stand a lot, but he was not going to be sniffed at by a mountainous dog covered with black curls. He decided that he would have to show this ungainly and wingless beast exactly where he got off. He lowered his eyelids, clicked his beak, hopped up into the air, and landed squarely on the dog's muzzle, burying his razor-sharp claws in the black nose. Roger, with a stricken yelp, shook the bird off and retired beneath the table; no amount of coaxing would get him to come out until Ulysses was safely back in his basket.

When Ulysses grew older he lost his baby down and developed the fine ash-grey, rust-red, and black plumage of his kind, with the pale breast handsomely marked with Maltese crosses in black. He also developed long ear-tufts, which he would raise in indignation when you attempted to take liberties with him. As he was now far too old to be kept in a basket, and strongly opposed to the idea of a cage, I was forced to give him the run of the study. He performed his flying lessons between the table and the doorhandle, and, as soon as he had mastered the art, chose the pelmet above the window as his home, and would spend the day sleeping up there, eyes closed, looking exactly like an olive stump. If you spoke to him he would open his eyes a fraction, raise his ear-tufts, and elongate his whole body, so that he looked like some weird,

emaciated Chinese idol. If he was feeling particularly affectionate he would click his beak at you, or, as a great concession, fly down and give you a hurried peck on the ear.

As the sun sank and the geckos started to scuttle about the shadowy walls of the house, Ulysses would wake up. He would yawn delicately, stretch his wings, clean his tail, and then shiver violently so that all his feathers stood out like the petals of a wind-blown chrysanthemum. With great nonchalance he would regurgitate a pellet of undigested food on to the newspaper spread below for this, and other, purposes. Having prepared himself for the night's work, he would utter an experimental 'tywhoo?' to make sure his voice was in trim, and then launch himself on soft wings, to drift round the room as silently as a flake of ash and land on my shoulder. For a short time he would sit there, nibbling my ear, and then he would give himself another shake, put sentiment to one side, and become businesslike. He would fly on to the windowsill and give another questioning 'tywhoo?', staring at me with his honey-coloured eyes. This was the signal that he wanted the shutters opened. As soon as I threw them back he would float out through the window, to be silhouetted for a moment against the moon before diving into the dark olives. A moment later a loud challenging 'Tywhoo! Tywhoo!' would ring out, the warning that Ulysses was about to start his hunting.

The length of time Ulysses spent on his hunts varied; sometimes he would swoop back into the room after only an hour, and on other occasions he would be out all night.

But, wherever he went, he never failed to come back to the house between nine and ten for his supper. If there was no light in my study, he would fly down and peer through the drawing-room window to see if I was there. If I was not there, he would fly up the side of the house again to land on my bedroom windowsill and tap briskly on the shutters, until I opened them and served him with his saucer of mince, or chopped chicken's heart, or whatever delicacy was on the menu that day. When the last gory morsel had been swallowed he would give a soft, hiccoughing chirrup, sit meditating for a moment, and then fly off over the moon-bright treetops.

Since he had proved himself an able fighter, Ulysses became fairly friendly towards Roger, and if we were going down for a late evening swim I could sometimes prevail upon him to honour us with his company. He would ride on Roger's back, clinging tight to the black wool; if, as occasionally happened, Roger forgot his passenger and went too fast, or skittishly jumped over a stone, Ulysses's eye would blaze, his wings flap in a frantic effort to keep his balance, and he would click his beak loudly and indignantly until I reprimanded Roger for his carelessness. On the shore Ulysses would perch on my shorts and shirt, while Roger and I gambolled in the warm, shallow water. Ulysses would watch our antics with round and faintly disapproving eyes, sitting up as straight as a guardsman. Now and then he would leave his post to skim out over us, click his beak, and return to shore, but whether he did this in alarm for our safety or in order to join in our game, I could never decide. Sometimes, if we took too long over

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the swim, he would get bored, and fly up the hill to the garden, crying ‘Tywhoo!’ in farewell.

In the summer, when the moon was full, the family took to bathing at night, for during the day the sun was so fierce that the sea became too hot to be refreshing. As soon as the moon had risen we would make our way down through the trees to the creaking wooden jetty, and clamber into the *Sea Cow*. With Larry and Peter on one oar, Margo and Leslie on the other, and Roger and myself in the bows to act as look-outs, we would drift down the coast for half a mile or so to where there was a small bay with a lip of white sand and a few carefully arranged boulders, smooth, and still sun-warm, ideal for sitting on. We would anchor the *Sea Cow* in deep water and then dive over the side to gambol and plunge, and set the moonlight shaking across the waters of the bay. When tired, we swam languidly to the shore and lay on the warm rocks, gazing up into the star-freckled sky. Generally after half an hour or so I would get bored with the conversation, and slip back into the water and swim slowly out across the bay, to lie on my back, cushioned by the warm sea, gazing up at the moon. One night, while I was thus occupied, I discovered that our bay was used by other creatures as well.

Lying spreadeagled in the silky water, gazing into the sky, only moving my hands and feet slightly to keep afloat, I was looking at the Milky Way stretched like a chiffon scarf across the sky and wondering how many stars it contained. I could hear the voices of the others, laughing and talking on the beach, echoing over the water, and by lifting my head I could see their position on the shore by the pulsing lights of their

cigarettes. Drifting there, relaxed and dreamy, I was suddenly startled to hear, quite close to me, a clop and gurgle of water, followed by a long, deep sigh, and a series of gentle ripples rocked me up and down. Hastily I righted myself and trod water, looking to see how far from the beach I had drifted. To my alarm I found that not only was I some considerable distance from the shore, but from the *Sea Cow* as well, and I was not at all sure what sort of creature it was swimming around in the dark waters beneath me. I could hear the others laughing on the shore at some joke or other, and I saw someone flip a cigarette-end high into the sky like a red star that curved over and extinguished itself at the rim of the sea. I was feeling more and more uncomfortable, and I was just about to call for assistance when, some twenty feet away from me, the sea seemed to part with a gentle swish and gurgle, a gleaming back appeared, gave a deep, satisfied sigh, and sank below the surface again. I had hardly time to recognize it as a porpoise before I found I was right in the midst of them. They rose all around me, sighing luxuriously, their black backs shining as they humped in the moonlight. There must have been about eight of them, and one rose so close that I could have swum forward three strokes and touched his ebony head. Heaving and sighing heavily, they played across the bay, and I swam with them, watching fascinated as they rose to the surface, crumpling the water, breathed deeply, and then dived beneath the surface again, leaving only an expanding hoop of foam to mark the spot. Presently, as if obeying a signal, they turned and headed out of the bay towards the distant coast of Albania, and I trod water and watched them go, swimming up the white chain of

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moonlight, backs agleam as they rose and plunged with heavy ecstasy in the water as warm as fresh milk. Behind them they left a trail of great bubbles that rocked and shone briefly like miniature moons before vanishing under the ripples.

After this we often met the porpoises when we went moonlight bathing, and one evening they put on an illuminated show for our benefit, aided by one of the most attractive insects that inhabited the island. We had discovered that in the hot months of the year the sea became full of phosphorescence. When there was moonlight this was not so noticeable – a faint greenish flicker round the bows of the boat, a brief flash as someone dived into the water. We found that the best time for the phosphorescence was when there was no moon at all. Another illuminated inhabitant of the summer months was the firefly. These slender brown beetles would fly as soon as it got dark, floating through the olive groves by the score, their tails flashing on and off, giving a light that was greenish-white, not golden-green, as the sea was. Again, however, the fireflies were at their best when there was no bright moonlight to detract from their lights. Strangely enough, we would never have seen the porpoises, the fireflies, and the phosphorescence acting together if it had not been for Mother's bathing costume.