

MY FAMILY *of* REPTILES



Audrey Noël Hume

MY FAMILY OF REPTILES

The very mention of the word "reptiles" is calculated to send shivers down the spines of many who claim to be animal lovers; but this is the story of a strange family of cold-blooded "untouchables" who found freedom and affection in a human home.

Mrs. Noël Hume has been keeping reptiles for twenty years. Tortoises, terrapins, lizards and alligators lived together in her home the same way that dogs and cats do in thousands of households. This charming and unusual little book is a fascinating record of their behaviour and emotions, of their loves and hates and of their reactions to the human beings with whom they lived so closely.

Foreword by

MAURICE BURTON, D.Sc.

MY FAMILY OF REPTILES

by

AUDREY NOËL HUME

Photographic illustrations by

IVOR NOËL HUME

FREDERICK MULLER LTD
LONDON

FIRST PUBLISHED BY FREDERICK MULLER LTD. IN 1955
PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LTD.
LETCWORTH, HERTS



COPYRIGHT, 1955, AUDREY NOËL HUME

By gracious permission of Her
Majesty Queen Salote, this book
is dedicated to her tortoise

TU'IMALILA

presented by Captain Cook to the
ruler of Tonga in 1774 and the
world's oldest known living animal

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHILE I only wish to make two acknowledgments, my debt to both is beyond description. The first is to Noël, who has always given generously of time and money to my family and who has provided the photographs used in this book. The second, which speaks for itself, is to the many past and present members of my cold-blooded but lovable family.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
FOREWORD	9
1 SMALL BEGINNINGS	11
2 FOUNDER MEMBERS	16
3 FAMILY MATTERS	27
4 WATER BABIES	41
5 THE FIRST GENTLEMAN	50
6 FRESH FIELDS	63
7 THE FAT LADY	74
8 SAVAGE INTERLUDE	82
9 BY ADOPTION	89
THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE	94

ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>facing page</i>
The author with some of the family	16
Willie the hedgehog tries to make friends	16
How and Why are quite a handful	17
Why prepares to face the world	17
Lester leaves Pepys and Neptune to enjoy a swim	32
“Butlin’s ” on a summer afternoon	32
Tigellinus ends his morning walk	33
Fred—too busy for breakfast	33
Ping has the pond to himself	48
Ping grows up	48
Winter gathering	49
Willie still trying to be friends	49
“And so to bed ”	64
Tegus are not to be trifled with	64
Jonathan asks for more	65
Simon and Susan play in the pool	65

FOREWORD

BY MAURICE BURTON, D.Sc.

I AM prepared to go further than most of my fellow-scientists in allowing that animals are not always so dumb as the text-books suggest. All the same, I had never rated tortoises very high. We had a pet tortoise in the garden for some years, and certainly there were occasions when it surpassed my expectations in the tricks it would play. In spite of that, it had always seemed to me that tortoises, even by reptilian standards, could hardly be called lively, certainly not intelligent. My education was taken a step further the first time I had the pleasure of visiting the Noël Humes. It was not so much that they kept tortoises, rather that they lived in a flat inhabited by tortoises. The distinction is important. The tortoises were at home there, and what you saw was not the lethargic shell-backs one ordinarily supposes these animals to be, but a number of individuals, each with its favourite corner in the house, its likes and dislikes, its own personality. Throughout the evening of my visit, as well as on subsequent occasions, I was struck by the way the tortoises had adjusted themselves to their human surroundings. Their actions showed less variety than those of cats and dogs, certainly, and the level of mental attainment was lower. Otherwise there were remarkable similarities.

There are two ways of studying animals. There is the coldly scientific analysis, the so-called objective attitude, and there is the sympathetic approach. The two are not mutually exclusive but complementary. They are both enlightening. Audrey Noël Hume clearly has a sympathy with animals, and with tortoises especially. If she describes her adventures in language which anyone can understand it is not because she is incapable of a scientific appraisal of her subject.

Tortoises may not be everyone's choice for pets although there must be many who include at least one in their private menagerie. There will, however, be many more who will enjoy reading about this unusual company. Not the least among the virtues of this book will be the attention it directs to the notorious ill-treatment so often meted out to these mute uncomplaining beasts. To stimulate a sympathy for the victims of a rough handling is the first step in a necessary reform.

Chapter One

SMALL BEGINNINGS

THIS is not the story of a human being and a number of animals, but of a family whose human members are its least important characters. The animals were gathered together from all parts of the world and have little in common except the fact that they are all cold-blooded creatures. For over five years they have lived in close contact with one another and with two human beings; they have fought and made friends, they have bred and died like any exclusively human family.

The foundation of this strange family occurred over twenty years ago on a warm summer evening when my father brought home an old, battered tortoise which he had bought for sixpence from a street trader. Joey, as he was named, was not intended to be a pet for me but rather a family animal, like the dog or the goldfish. At the time I was particularly interested in horses, but from the first moment that I set eyes on Joey I became a devoted tortoise-lover. As I grew to know more about them, this affection broadened to include all reptiles.

After Joey's arrival I spent every moment that I could escape from school and homework in the garden watching, feeding and caring for him. I felt

more strongly attracted to him than I had ever felt before to any animal. I can remember being teased by my contemporaries for spending so much time upon a tortoise, but I did not envy them their ponies and rabbits. The photographs and drawings of horses which had hitherto adorned my bedroom were taken down and replaced by tortoise pictures and snapshots of Joey. My parents thought that as I was only seven years old this passion would pass when the novelty of the new pet had worn off. Meanwhile Joey grew more and more tame and began to show signs of being able to recognise my voice.

Our friendship came to an abrupt end one sultry August evening when there seemed to be no cool air anywhere. Joey must have felt that it would be intolerable to be asleep in his little wooden house on such a night and he stayed on the lawn until dusk, dozing and idly picking at the grass. High in the tall tree whose branches hid us from neighbouring houses a hungry owl watched the slow-moving tortoise with the cunning of a cat stalking a mouse. At last the moment came when he could watch no longer and with a piercing shriek he dived upon the lawn and imprisoned poor Joey in his talons. With his burden the bird began to rise, but the smooth shell afforded a poor grip for his claws and the unfortunate reptile slid from his grasp.

My parents, who had heard the bird's scream, rushed into the garden in time to see the helpless Joey bouncing down the garage roof on to the concrete path below. My father made a desperate attempt to catch Joey but it was too late, for the first fall on to the roof had broken his neck. From my bedroom in the front of the house I had heard the owl's cry and the

sound of hurrying footsteps, but I reached the garden only in time to see my father holding Joey's smashed little body in his hands. By the light of a torch we buried him in a grave in the rockery and planted a lupin to mark the spot. A lupin still marks the grave of my first reptile friend and the founder of my family.

He was succeeded by a family of seven tortoises bought over a period of two years, mostly for a few pence from street traders. They differed in size and colouring as much as in temperament, and I found great interest in finding out exactly what each one was like. They were named after the seven dwarfs of "Snow White" fame and shared the garden with a guinea-pig who used them as hurdles.

From these tortoises I learned a great deal about the illnesses that beset such animals, and the knowledge I gained during those years has helped me immensely with my second family. At first I used to take patients to veterinary surgeons in the district, but I soon learned by costly experience that few of them knew how to treat such creatures. At the local animal clinics, however, both doctors and nurses took great pains to explain to me exactly how to treat each case and the best medicines to use, and in time I could deal with most situations on my own. I have never ceased to be grateful for their advice, so freely and so clearly given at all times.

Every summer my family achieved fame for a day, even if it was of a purely local character. My school held an annual pet show in aid of various animal welfare societies and there were always four classes in which I could enter my family. Prizes were awarded for those tortoises who in the opinion of the judges

were the largest, the smallest, the fastest and the most attractive. I could always manage to win three of these classes, but none of the seven seemed able to move with speed at the right time. The postal orders given as prizes used to make valuable contributions to the summer lettuce bill which absorbed so much of my pocket-money.

At the outbreak of war my parents decided that we should stay in London, and a few weeks later my family began their hibernation. For this purpose I had always used a large dog kennel, which, when filled with straw and given a well-fitting door, kept them free from damp and frost. The summer of 1939 had not been a very happy one for these creatures, since there had been a great many dull, cold days on which they had eaten very little. In order to survive the cold weather, Mediterranean tortoises have the ability to convert the green food eaten in the summer into fat which can be stored in the body. Then, when the cold becomes intense, the reptiles pass into a type of coma during which they absorb the fat. If insufficient food has been eaten in the summer, the amount of stored fat will not be adequate and the creatures will slowly starve to death. Therefore a bad summer combined with a long winter, as on this occasion, means a high death-rate among hibernating animals. The correct procedure would have been to bring them indoors in the middle of the winter and give them a good feed. Then by gradually lowering the temperature of their surroundings they will return to sleep for the rest of the cold weather.

On the first really warm day of spring I opened the dog kennel to find that only three of the seven

remained alive, and although I took these indoors at once and forcibly fed them with milk and brandy two more died within a week. The remaining one outlived her friends by only six weeks and then she joined the little group under the lupin. I reproached myself for my lack of foresight, but all the reproaches in the world could not bring back my family.

The outbreak of war caused the importation of tortoises to stop, and ten years were to pass before I was to have another one, though I never ceased to wish for that day. In the interval I went away to college and returned to London only a few weeks before my father died. When Noël and I were married some months later, my mother converted the top floor of the house into a flat for us. On the day we moved in I determined that it would not be long before the garden was occupied by tortoises.

Chapter Two

FOUNDER MEMBERS

IT was in the late autumn that Noël and I were married, and by then the tortoise season was over. In one way this was lucky, for I knew that hours of cajoling and persuading lay before me if Noël was to agree to my plans for another family of reptiles. As far as I knew he had never met a tortoise at close quarters except at the London Zoo, so I began by extolling the virtues of my earlier pets. I stressed the fact that, unlike dogs, they needed no exercise on cold evenings and for at least six months of the year they were content to sleep in the garage. Points that were ignored included their passion for juicy plants and the vast size of the greengrocer's bill in the summer. I left interesting books about reptiles lying around the flat and saw to it that we spent an afternoon in the Reptile House of the London Zoo. At last the day came when Noël agreed that, at the earliest possible moment, we should buy *a* tortoise. Of course that was not exactly what I had in mind but at least it was a step in the right direction.

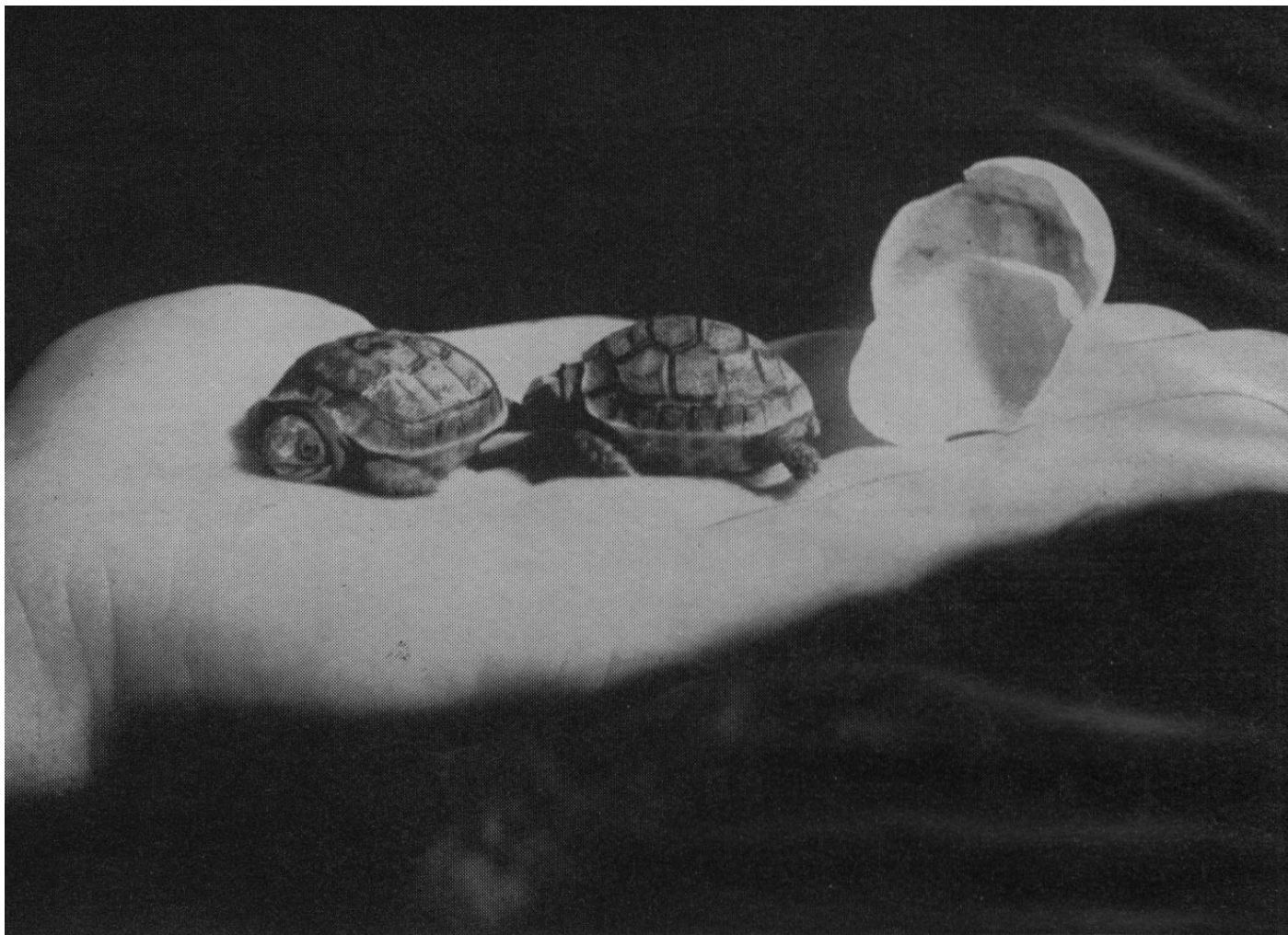
I waited impatiently for the arrival of the first tortoise, but it was not until late in March that I heard that some had been seen in an East London market. At the first opportunity we took an afternoon off from



(Left)
The author
with some of
the family

(Below)
Willie the
hedgehog tries
to make friends





(Above) How and Why are quite a handful (Sunday Graphic)

(Below) Why prepares to face the world (Ray Densham)



work and went in search of our new pet. There on one of the shabby stalls were about fifteen tortoises of various sizes and colourings. Some looked more dead than alive, which was not surprising in view of the icy wind that was sweeping across the bleak market square, but others seemed anxious to show the onlookers that the weather did not matter to them. From this group I selected a drab but bright-eyed tortoise about five inches long whose thin tail pronounced it to be a male. The price, so I was told by the Cockney stall-holder, was "three and a tanner." As I turned to show my choice to Noël, I saw that he had a large he-tortoise in one hand and what appeared to be the identical twin of my tortoise in the other. He announced that we would take them all, and thinking that this was too good to be true I kept quiet. The salesman, hoping that our "bulk buying" might encourage the rest of the crowd, reduced the total price by a shilling and provided a rather dirty cardboard carton into the bargain.

We had to make the most of our free afternoon, and when Noël suggested that he should pay a long-overdue visit to a colleague at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington I agreed to go with him. Into the spacious and dignified hall of that institution I carried my shabby box and decided that it would be best to wait for Noël on the ground floor rather than carry it up several flights of stairs.

I found an empty bench, and as my legs were rather tired I sank to rest upon it. Perhaps that is not the correct word to describe the feeling that resulted from sitting on such a hard object, but at least it was better than standing. With the box resting safely at my feet I opened a newspaper, but hardly had I read a few lines

when I became conscious of a pair of eyes focused in my direction. On the pretext of turning the page I lowered the paper to see a uniformed attendant staring at me with a look that could scarcely be called either friendly or sympathetic. For a moment I wondered whether it was a crime to read a popular newspaper in such a learned establishment or was I perhaps sitting on a bench reserved for VIPs? Then I remembered the box, and to my horror saw that its lid was raised a few inches. Two small tortoises, who must have been standing on the back of their larger companion, had their front legs hanging over the side and were peering intently at the mortal remains of some of their fellow animals!

I felt my cheeks redden and wished that the mosaic floor would open and swallow me up. My wish was not granted, so, as if it was quite natural to bring three live animals into a museum of dead ones, I replaced the offenders in the box. As I sat upright again, I saw with tremendous relief that the attendant was smiling and with a great effort I managed a feeble grin in his direction. After a few minutes, during which I kept a firm grip on the box, Noël appeared at the top of the palatial staircase and I was glad that the time had come to leave.

Once safely in the privacy of our own home, I examined the trio more carefully, only to find that they were not as healthy as I had thought. I was almost sure that they had come into this country late the previous year, and the dealer, finding that the tortoise season was over, had put them to hibernation. They were exceedingly light for their size, and eyes and mouths were in desperate need of attention. I filled a

large wooden box with a blanket, and this, placed beside the coke boiler, made a warm and draught-free home which they seemed to appreciate. Every night and every morning they took it in turn to receive a dose of brandy and milk from an eye-dropper, for all were too weak to take any solid food.

The choice of names for the trio was not easy. Noël gave me the other little tortoise and kept the fat one himself, an arrangement which suited us both. My "twins" were very small, but as the large number of growth rings on their shells indicated that they were merely undersized for their ages, I decided upon Tiny and Tich. The latter was extremely slow in responding to the treatment and after a couple of weeks of careful nursing his fight for life ended in defeat. Tiny, on the other hand, made a rapid recovery and was soon able to turn his attention to lettuce and tomato, while Noël's Maxie soon followed his example. On sunny days they were taken into the garden, but not until May could I begin to think about an outside home for them. This was made from a wooden box, raised off the ground on two bricks and with a small door designed to keep out as many draughts as possible. The roof was covered with a sheet of linoleum while a plastic curtain over the door ensured that rain could not beat in on the sleeping inmates.

Although his small size and drab colouring make Tiny inconspicuous among the more exotic members of my present family, he never allows himself to be thrust into the background. Every morning he is first out of his house into the garden. For this reason I try to make him sleep close to the door. If by some mistake Tiny finds himself at the back of the house he makes sure

that all its occupants know of his predicament when morning comes. In his endeavour to find the door he becomes a mass of thrashing limbs which find their way on to the shells and into the faces of the sleepers. His struggles can be heard from the other end of the garden, and only when there is silence do I know that Tiny has reached the fresh air and that the other tortoises have settled down to enjoy a few more minutes of blissful sleep.

Among my tortoises there have always been a number who refuse to hibernate, which means of course that they have to spend the winter in the flat. Tiny was the first, but not unfortunately the last, of this brigade. These "rebels" and any tortoises kept awake because of illness share the hearth with the tropical reptiles, so that Noël and I only see the fire from a remote distance. Tiny enjoyed four winters indoors, and he caused an enormous amount of trouble to us all.

It was not during the day that he was a nuisance, in fact he seemed to reverse his summer routine and sleep away the daylight hours. Then at eight o'clock in the evening I would hear his hurrying footsteps coming into the lounge to search for food. As no tortoise is allowed to have either food or water in that room, I had to remove a struggling Tiny to the kitchen. There I would set him down before a huge pile of lettuce, but before I could get back to the lounge he would come chasing along behind me. A couple of hours' sleep on the hearth seemed to be his next requirement, but the real trouble did not begin until I got up to go to bed. Then this tiny tortoise would spring to life and make my life unbearable by walking round and round the flat at—for him—a breakneck speed. I would hear

the patter of his long nails on the bedroom floor and then there would be a deafening clatter from the kitchen where he had collided with a bucket or a pile of trays. In the middle of the route march, Tiny would pause long enough to eat some of the lettuce he had rejected earlier, to take a long drink of water and to yawn once or twice simply to tempt me into believing that he was off to bed at last.

Just before midnight I would be driven to distraction by the irritating sound of his shell bumping first against a door, then an electric point and finally against the glass side of the bath. However, there was some relief when I heard the last noise, for then all I had to do was to hurry along the landing and lock the bathroom door, and Tiny was secure for the night. But the footsteps would continue to echo through the sleeping house as he went round and round the room as endlessly as a long-playing record on a turntable. When at last I crept into bed the "tap, tap" would be as regular as ever, but knowing that he was warm and could come to no harm I just put my head under the blankets and hoped that sleep would soon come to both of us.

Then came the winter when I could not endure Tiny's midnight wanderings any longer. Besides keeping Noël and me awake, he was a bad example to the other tortoises in the flat, some of whom were beginning to behave in a similarly infuriating manner. He was perfectly healthy and there seemed no reason—except obstinacy—to prevent his hibernating with the other Mediterranean tortoises. Accordingly he was put into one of the leaf-filled boxes that take up a great deal of room in the garage during the winter months. For a day or so he and his companions pushed at the box,

but at last all was quiet. This worried me at first because of his previous attempts at hibernation, but the lid of the box was still securely tied down, and the air-holes were too small to allow even the skinny Tiny through. I hoped that perhaps he had learned sense and would not disturb our peace until spring came.

My hopes were fulfilled and not until March did I hear the first rustlings in the boxes, but a quick count of the sleepy family showed that Tiny was missing. The most terrible thoughts came crowding into my mind. Had he escaped in the autumn on one of the rare occasions when the garage doors had been left open? Had he then been run over or taken home by children who thought that he was lost? Noël remained calm throughout my panic and suggested that our first task was to move everything out of the garage in case he had merely found a better place to hibernate. The thought of Tiny spending the winter in a damp, draughty corner of the garage was hardly more cheering than my suppositions, but it was the obvious explanation.

I moved bicycles, deck-chairs, rake, hose, flower-pots and watering-can but Tiny was nowhere to be seen. Sleepy spiders and busy black-beetles there were in abundance but not a sign of the wayward tortoise, now the sole survivor of the original trio. My last hope was a large tool chest which filled a whole corner of the garage and beneath which there was a space of about two and a half inches. It took three of us over three-quarters of an hour of heaving and dragging to shift it, but there in the far corner sat Tiny. Enveloped in cobwebs and with his drab colouring transformed into a grey-whiteness, he peered cheekily round at us with eyes as bright as ever. All the worry that he had caused

was forgotten in the joy I felt at seeing him again, and I vowed that, in future, I and the other tortoises would put up with his bad behaviour in the winter. How he had survived days and nights on that icy floor I cannot understand, but the lucky thing is that he did.

One of the reasons that my family has grown to such a large size is my inability to ignore an animal that is sick or injured. There have been several occasions when I have had to buy a creature for whose life there can be no hope in order to give it the peace its tortured body is seeking. Although I hate to play the part of God to an animal, I would rather do this a thousand times than see it suffer needlessly. The empty basket and the vacant tank will cause us anguish of heart, but that emotion cannot compare with the terrible sight of an animal whose body is racked with pain and for whom human hands can do no more.

Knowing something of the terrible treatment that reptiles in general and tortoises and terrapins in particular receive at the hands of Man, both in this country and abroad, I always make a special point of closely inspecting those offered for sale by dealers. One day, while looking at a newly arrived batch of tortoises in a London store, I noticed one of their number sitting dejectedly in a corner of the pen. Her shell was badly cracked in three or four places, and from one of these, near the top of the carapace, an area of congealed blood indicated that the bone had been splintered right through to the flesh. The raw place was covered with soiled sawdust from the pen floor and a large and repulsive blow-fly was circling low over it. The whole spectacle revolted and annoyed me until I could hardly control my temper. Surely one

of the assistants could have been ordered to clean the wound, even if there was no one on the staff whose love of animals prompted them to do it without being asked?

Obviously this tortoise needed a good home, but I was not prepared for the high price that the shop was asking for her. Animal exporters purchase these tortoises from natives at the North African ports for about fourpence a head. The creatures are then resold to firms in this country who ship them in batches of twenty thousand or more. The cost of transport works out at only a few pence per tortoise, so allowing for a reasonable profit by the retailer a price of two or three shillings is a fair one for a medium-sized tortoise. Yet I was asked to pay fifteen shillings for this poor battered creature. Another London store has for some years charged twenty-five shillings for its tortoises, which are often far inferior in health and appearance to those sold for a fraction of that price in street markets and pet shops.

I'm afraid that after hearing the price of this tortoise I demanded to see the manager, who was eventually fetched from the seclusion of his office at the far end of the store. I pointed out the disgraceful state of this tortoise and the equally disgraceful price that was being asked for her. I mentioned the name of an animal welfare society which I thought might be interested in the neglected state of the tortoise. The manager's face reddened, so I thought that this was the moment to offer him six and sixpence for the reptile, and to my joy a deal was made. Had the price of this tortoise been twice as much I would have bought her, but I hoped that by drawing attention to the condition of the

tortoise similar neglect would be avoided with other consignments.

It took me a whole evening to clean up the wounds and to make quite sure that she had no more raw places. A little penicillin ointment where the skin was broken and a couple of doses of one of the sulpha drugs ensured that Mortimer was soon eating and able to join the family in the garden. Today a film of bone has grown over the wound, and although the lady is not beautiful, by tortoise standards, she makes up for this by being extremely friendly and intelligent.

A weekend visit to Eastbourne added another tortoise to my family and at the same time gave me an introduction to another of the many ill-treatments meted out to these creatures by men of all nations. In a pet shop I noticed one tortoise that was having difficulty in moving about the pen that confined her. I picked her up and saw that she had only a raw and bleeding stump in place of a right hind leg. Her shell was as badly cracked as Mortimer's and one eye was only half open. Gladly I paid my half a crown to an assistant who wondered no doubt why I was such a fool as to buy a tortoise with only three legs and a shell that would always be unsightly.

Her unfortunate method of walking, caused by having only three good legs and a stump which she waved pathetically in an attempt to get along, brought this tortoise the nickname of Dot and Carry One, later shortened to Dot. The stump healed fairly quickly and we made her an artificial leg from a pad of cotton wool covered with adhesive plaster attached to her thigh. With this she can walk almost as fast as any of the other tortoises, and whenever the cotton wool becomes

wet or soiled we change it and at the same time inspect the stump for cracks or chafing.

The story of how Dot and thousands of other tortoises came to lose a leg is a sad commentary on the attitude of many native peoples to animals. In her case, North Africa is the place concerned, but I have seen other instances of the same brutality from other parts and incidentally even from this country. The tortoises of North Africa do not live in large groups so that the natives who make a living by selling them to merchants in the seaports rarely catch more than a few at a time. Rather than make a journey into the town with only a dozen or so, the native will tether each one by a string tied around the back leg of the tortoise and attached to a pole. The unfortunate tortoise pulls in a vain attempt to pull itself free and the string turns into a tourniquet. When at last he has sufficient tortoises to warrant a journey to the merchant, the native cuts the string, leaving it knotted around the leg. Eventually gangrene sets in and the leg becomes detached at the joint. However, if these tortoises fall into good hands and blood poisoning can be avoided there is no reason why they should not enjoy life as much as their four-legged brothers and sisters. I hope that I have made Dot understand that all human beings are not as thoughtless as the one who, not very long ago, caused her such suffering.

Chapter Three

FAMILY MATTERS

TWO months after we bought Tiny and his companions, Noël had become a tortoise-lover and my family was firmly established. It numbered three males and two females, so I felt that it would only be fair to buy another she-tortoise to ensure equality of sexes. In preparation for the new arrival another house was installed beside Tiny's residence at the end of the garden.

When we arrived at the same shabby stall that we had visited earlier in the year, there were about thirty tortoises crawling over its wooden top and most of them seemed to be female. I began to wonder what would be the best way to select a suitable candidate, for they all seemed to be in good health and sound condition. Finally I decided to adopt the maxim that beauty is only skin (or should it be shell?) deep and look for a lively intelligent tortoise with plenty of character.

My attention was attracted by a large, fat and wide-eyed she-tortoise whose chief aim in life seemed to be the destruction of a tall pile of glass goldfish bowls. In view of the horrible life that awaits any fish unlucky enough to be kept in one of these torture chambers, I approved whole-heartedly of her actions and decided

at once that she should be the new member of my family.

Just as the pile of fish bowls began to sway like a pendulum, I seized the fat tortoise and handed over half a crown to the stall-owner. Obviously at this price there was no question of a box for her, but under protest she was equipped with a cummerbund of newspaper. As I turned to walk away Noël picked up a smaller but more attractive she-tortoise from the stall and bought her for the same price.

On the way to the bus stop Noël jokingly remarked that he thought that I had made the better choice and, being quite sure that I had, I handed over the fat lady and her paper skirt for inspection. In return I received the little one to hold. The bus came sooner than we had expected, and, hoping that the conductor did not mind reptiles on his bus, we took a couple of seats on the lower deck. Boo (short for Boadicea) sat quietly on my lap and began to study the other passengers with a keen interest. I have since discovered that inquisitiveness is her chief failing, and nothing, whether human, reptile or inanimate, is safe from her inspection.

Before our visit to the market we had decided to call our new pet Mrs. Callaway, after a character in a cowboy film that we had just seen. This name has, of course, to be shortened for common use and she became Mrs. C., the only tortoise in the family to bear this prefix. The choice of names has always been a source of difficulty, to me, for names that sound suitable when the animal is first met rarely seem to fit on closer acquaintance. I have always spurned the conventional Toby in favour of more unusual names. Most of these commemorate either national events

(a Mithras joined the family soon after the discovery of the Roman temple in London), the species of the tortoise concerned (Boxie for a box tortoise) or fellow members of the archæological profession, which, to avoid repercussions, I will not quote!

Mrs. C. did not acquit herself well on the journey back to our laboratory, where she would spend the afternoon before being taken home when we finished work. She thrashed about with back and front legs until the tattered piece of newspaper fluttered to the bus floor. Then for a brief moment she sat perfectly still on Noël's knee. I felt him fidgeting, and finally, with a cry of horror that made every head in the bus turn in our direction, he lifted the tortoise into the air. But it was too late, for there on his dark grey trousers was a brilliant yellow patch. By this time everybody in the bus was sharing my amusement, though not Noël's embarrassment. At the next stop we alighted and walked the rest of the way back with Noël self-consciously holding a newspaper over the patch. Both tortoises made the second part of their journey home in a stout cardboard box!

My mother, when at home, is quite willing to keep a watchful eye on the tortoises from her flat and usually issues a bulletin of behaviour when we return home in the early evening. On one occasion she seemed to be exceedingly frustrated by them and I expected to hear that, in spite of our stout wire fences, all the seedlings had been eaten. But it appeared that it was Mrs. C. who had been disturbing the peace of the household by spending the entire day trying to negotiate the chestnut fencing which divides our garden from the wilderness. Lest I should be accused of unfairness to them, I must

say that their landlord did not approve of the cutting down of any tree, with the result that the area, once a flourishing orchard, was now a miniature forest.

In her endeavours to force her way through the fence, Mrs. C. had fallen on her back several times, only to be comforted and admonished, but it was all to no avail—she would not rest until she was in the seclusion of that disorder. During the fortnight that had passed since she joined the family she had been no trouble and showed every sign of liking her new home. I wondered whether she was ill, but her clear eyes, her dry nose and her hitherto great appetite gave proof to the contrary. No other tortoise of mine had ever shown such a strong desire to leave the garden, which, apart from the weather, has, I thought, everything that a tortoise could desire. I am afraid that I was rather cross with Mrs. C. that night and she was sent to bed in disgrace.

The next morning was wonderfully sunny, and, by the time that I reached the garden, the doors of the houses had been pushed open. Tiny was half-way through a breakfast of grass and clover while Boo and Mrs. C. lay on the rockery looking as if butter would not melt in their mouths. Confident that nothing could go wrong on such a perfect morning, I left for London. If only I had glanced at a calendar I would not have been so optimistic, for it was Friday the thirteenth.

Soon after lunch I was called to the telephone by a distraught mother, who reported that when she had left the house some three hours before all the family were asleep. On her return, she caught Mrs. C. in the act of kicking earth into a small hole in the ground which Boo was watching with great interest. As it was impossible

for me to leave work for another hour or so, I suggested that the hole should be covered with a sack as soon as the pair moved off and I would deal with the matter on my return. Never did an afternoon pass more slowly. At last I knew why Mrs. C. had tried to get into the seclusion, for she had wanted to hide there the precious eggs which were now lying in that nest in the rockery. Also I knew the truth about the incident on the bus, for the jolting she had received then, and on the way to the market, had brought about the premature laying of one egg on Noël's lap. It is unusual for Mediterranean tortoises to mate in this country and to produce fertile eggs as a result. Most of the baby tortoises that are hatched in this country come from eggs laid by tortoises that have mated in their native home and this was undoubtedly the case with Mrs. C.

I was greatly excited, as, in sixteen years of tortoise-keeping, I had never had the chance to hatch any babies, though I had been presented with the usual number of infertile eggs. At six o'clock that evening Noël and I hurried up the garden, and with the aid of a spoon, a soft brush and pair of bellows we dug four round, white eggs from the damp earth which Mrs. C. had kicked back into the nest. Each egg was lifted out with the greatest care and laid in a shoe box in which we had put warm silver sand, another inch of which was poured over the top of them. With great pride, I carried the "incubator" indoors to lay it on the lower shelf of the cupboard housing the hot-water storage tank. Here the temperature would never fall below 70 degrees F., as, if the eggs were fertile, this would be about the correct heat for hatching. While all this had been going on, Mrs. C. had been cropping the lawn, for her job

was done and she was content to leave the task of hatching the eggs to the sun. Of course, this is impossible in this country, but we hoped that our artificial incubator might do the trick.

For the rest of the summer Mrs. C. behaved admirably. She ate everything that she could lay hands or feet upon; she always took herself to bed at the right time and in the right house. Every time I passed the cupboard I peeped into the shoe box, but the surface of the sand remained as smooth and unruffled as a piece of velvet. In the middle of September the weather turned chilly, and with the great sorrow that I always feel on these occasions I packed the tortoises into cardboard cartons of dry leaves. Of course, Tiny remained awake and was learning to enjoy life in the flat.

At the beginning of October we increased our visits to the "incubator," for, although the normal hatching time for these reptiles is twelve weeks, we had been told of another tortoise family that appeared after only eight weeks had passed. A brand-new vivarium in which any baby tortoises would be safe from draughts was ready, although we dare not hope that it would be needed. One evening in October we were expecting a business friend and his wife to dinner and so there was a great deal to do when I reached home just before six o'clock. Our guests were due at seven-thirty, but by some miracle all was ready some fifteen minutes earlier. I went into the kitchen to take a final look at the oven when I heard Noël calling from the direction of the cupboard. I couldn't imagine what he wanted, but there was such a note of excitement in his voice that I abandoned everything and rushed to join him.

By the light of a torch I saw the smallest tortoise that



(Left)

Lester leaves Pepys and Neptune to enjoy a swim

(Right)

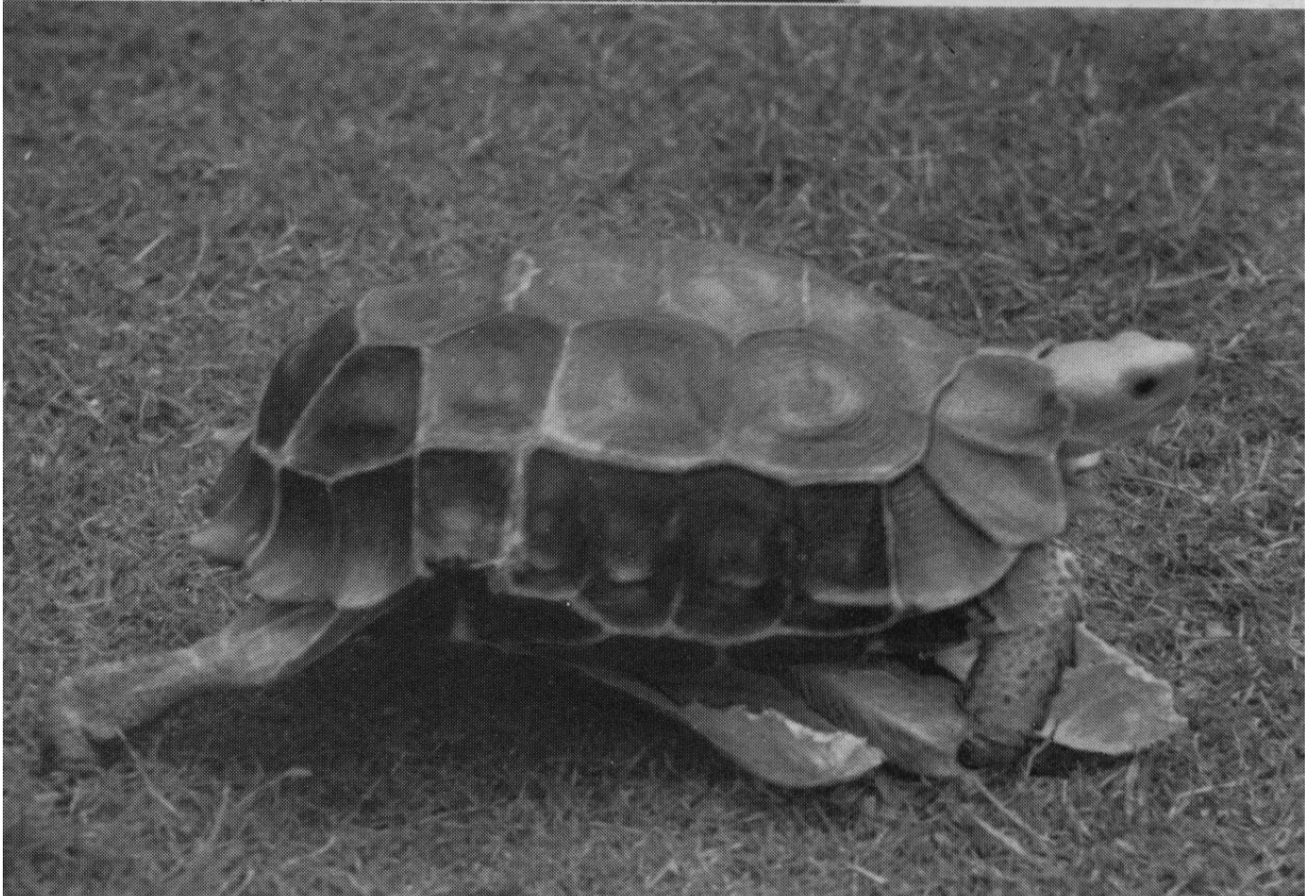
“Butlin’s” on a summer afternoon





(Left)
Tigellinus ends his
morning walk

(Below)
Fred—too busy for
breakfast



I had ever seen crawling across the sand from the halves of its egg. I shall never forget how tiny and helpless he looked and yet how perfect he was in every detail. The first growth ring was already visible on his shell and there were needle-like claws on each foot. Perhaps the most striking thing of all was the clearness and blackness of his eyes, which seemed to be gazing in the most intent way at the new world into which he had come. I could not help feeling angry with Nature for so arranging the life of this creature that from the first moment of life he must be self-supporting.

Before I could collect my thoughts sufficiently to say anything to Noël there was a knock at the door and our guests stood on the step. The rest of that evening will remain in my memory as a nightmare of anxiety and excitement. Somehow I managed to serve dinner between frequent peeps into the vivarium to which we had transferred the baby. Noël persuaded him to take a few drops of water from the end of a drinking straw before the bright eyes closed and the little head sagged forward on to the vivarium floor.

At last (for their visit had seemed an eternity) our friends left and we could settle down and think about a name for our family's youngest member. It seemed incredible that from such a dull-looking egg Nature could produce something so perfect and yet so small, so full of life and yet so frail. We could only wonder "how" and this was to be his name. We drank his health and took one last look at the tiny figure with his lean legs stretched out in all directions.

I was far too excited and worried to sleep very much that night. Seven or eight times between midnight and seven o'clock I tiptoed to the vivarium, but each time

How was sound asleep. I watched anxiously until a slight movement of his head or of a leg showed me that he was alive and then I could return to sleep for a little while. No human baby ever received more attention on its first night on earth.

When morning came, little How awoke and began to explore the new world in which he found himself. I had been told not to worry if he did not eat for the first few days, but to my great joy he accepted some finely chopped lettuce when he was only fifteen hours old. It was difficult to find anything small enough to hold his food and water, but Noël had the good idea of using the metal tops of milk bottles with the sharp edges folded over. In one corner of the vivarium I placed a heap of dried lawn mowings and these served How for food as well as for a supplementary bed when he became tired of the small cardboard box which was his accustomed sleeping place. The floor was specially made from a piece of rubber sheeting to prevent him falling on to his back, as all young tortoises are prone to such accidents.

The morning after How was hatched saw the flat invaded by a bevy of reporters, photographers and curious neighbours, the news having spread with incredible speed. Mrs. C. had to be aroused from her sleep to be photographed beside her baby. At first she seemed to be rather indignant, but the sight of a pile of lettuce changed her mood and for the rest of the day she slept quietly on the hearth. I spent every moment that I could spare from watching How anxiously peering into the "incubator" for the slight rippling of the sand that would show that How's brother (or sister) was alive. Two days passed and I grew more and more

worried. But when I reached the box on the third day, there, on top of the sand, was another egg with a small hole in the side. With the aid of a strong light I could see the baby tortoise kicking with all his might to enlarge the hole through which he would come into our world. After twenty minutes of continuous movement, he managed to thrust a thin hind leg through the cavity. It was quickly withdrawn only to be followed by a front which was left exposed for a longer time.

This routine continued most of the morning, and although the hole became a little larger the baby did not seem to have sufficient strength to break the egg in half. While we had hardly dared to hope that How might not be an only child, we had already chosen a name for another baby, who was to be known as Why. The hatching of a tortoise had never been filmed in this country and we willingly gave a film company specialising in animal films permission to record the event. The cupboard and the landing became a mass of tangled wires, glaring lights and large cameras amid which little Why carried on his fight for life. Gradually I noticed the rests between kicking sessions were getting longer, and it became clear that, if he was not to be seriously weakened, we must hasten the hatching.

With great gentleness Noël lifted the egg into the palm of his hand, and with a pair of eyebrow tweezers he pulled away several pieces of the shell. This encouraged Why to make another effort, and as the film camera whirred he gave one huge heave and the shell split. Now he was free to stagger away across the sand. I lifted him up and laid him in the vivarium beside How, and they slept side by side for the rest of the night.

Before they left the film company asked whether they

might take a few shots of Mrs. C. to complete the sequence. The idea was that she should walk across the lounge to the fireplace where she had spent most of the day. Any tortoise-owner knows that to expect a tortoise to walk in a certain direction at a given moment is asking too much, but I took Mrs. C. to the opposite side of the room, just in case she would oblige. To my great joy (and even greater surprise) she marched straight to the fireplace, and, yawning widely directly at the camera, settled down to enjoy another sleep. I knew that it was the heat of the fire that attracted her, but to the camera-man, who was used to dealing with intractable animals, she was a wonder. He decided to take some more shots of mother and babies, so while she sat on a table Noël held the tiny How in his hand at one side of her. Mrs. C. could not have given a better performance if she had been rehearsed all afternoon. She turned her head to Noël's hand and peered at the baby for a few minutes. Then with the most self-satisfied expression that I have ever seen on the face of any mother, human or animal, she looked straight at the camera. Later she appeared on cinema screens all over the country when these sequences were included in the film *Strange Cargo*, and she even received a little fan mail. When Noël and I published a book about keeping tortoises it was inevitable that such an excellent sitter should pose for the cover photograph, and she can now be seen in bookshops as far away as America and Australia.

When our home was quiet again, we had time to wonder at the miracle that had taken place within its walls. It was a miracle for several reasons; firstly, Mrs. C. was not a young tortoise, and while she might

have produced offspring in her own country she had journeyed thousands of miles to a strange climate while carrying the eggs. The terrible conditions under which she had almost certainly travelled to this country must affect the eggs adversely. Unfortunately, although they had survived these handicaps, How and Why were never strong. How was born without any nostrils, which meant that his mouth must always be open, and Why's legs were too small to bear the full weight of his shell.

Their apparent weaknesses made me all the more determined to give them every chance that money and care could provide to grow up and take their places in the family. Every night I fed them both with pieces of finely chopped lettuce, dandelion or clover, with mashed grape or tomato or with stewed apple or plum. The whole process took over an hour, after which they were put to bed for the night. They had at least two kinds of food in the vivarium, but as I could not be at home to watch them I had to ensure that they fed every day. Powdered cuttlefish and cod liver oil were added to their food in order to provide extra vitamins.

In spite of all my care and allowing them every moment of sunshine that an English winter could offer, their shells remained as soft as putty. I knew that unless I could get these to harden up, soon rickets would set in and my babies would die within a few weeks. Yet both were eating very well and there was a slight increase in weight after the first month. I tried to keep the pair amused by providing various playthings, the most popular of which was a plaster of paris arch, just wide enough to allow them through. For hours they would play "Follow my leader" around and through

it, until both fell asleep in the pile of grass. The vivarium was heated by an electric light bulb, but to rest their little eyes and to simulate natural conditions this was exchanged for a blue-painted one at nine o'clock every night.

How and Why appeared to be very fond of one another and would generally keep together during their explorations of the vivarium. At night they would sleep side by side with their back legs touching, as if to gain confidence from the contact.

Their greatest treat was to be allowed to walk about the carpet, and when the room was very warm and all possible precautions against floor draughts had been taken I used to place them on a rubber mat in front of the fire. For a few moments they would gaze at the flames, but then they set off on a long tour around the chair legs, under the table and then back to the mat for a long sleep in the warmth of the fire.

At last How's shell began to harden slightly, a sign which showed that perhaps he might be able to overcome his deformity and grow up into a normal reptile. For this reason I felt in the depths of despair when a few nights later I came home to find little Why dead. Now all my efforts were directed towards strengthening How in the hope that with him things might go differently. I thought that he must be lonely without his little companion and I tried to make up for some of this by spending every possible moment caring for him. He rewarded me with a touching lack of shyness and it was not long before, at the sound of my voice, he would lift up his head and peer this way and that.

When the summer came Noël made him a playpen in

which he could spend warm afternoons on the lawn. He loved this new-found freedom and would stagger across the grass, tugging at a clover leaf here or a daisy there. On the days when it was wet or chilly he went into a new all-glass vivarium which stood on the window-sill, and here with his beloved arch, his heap of grass and his house he lived quite happily. It was impossible to find another tortoise small enough to live with him in the confines of a vivarium but I allowed him to have two friends in the garden pen. Although these tiny tortoises, called Tom and Jerry, were twice How's size, they never pushed or jostled him or took food from his special pile. He seemed to be completely indifferent to them except when they selected his favourite corner for a nap and then he would push them out of the way.

When winter came How took quite happily to his old vivarium and he celebrated his first birthday with a feed of tinned strawberries and grapes. At Christmas he was still eating well and had found a new food in cooked brussels sprouts. I bought a sun-ray lamp to try and give him some of the vitamins that our climate denied him and he used to enjoy his evening session in its warmth. Suddenly in March he refused all food and lost interest in his surroundings. Although I knew in my heart that this was the end, I refused to admit defeat until it came one evening, just eighteen months and one day after he had left the egg.

The next morning when I saw the dark, empty vivarium with its vacant arch, the heap of grass unslept in and the dried-up food which I had omitted to remove the night before I felt that part of my life had ended. Somehow, with an aching heart, I managed to clean

out the vivarium and moved it to the attic where it could not remind me of the twins. Now all I had by which to remember them was a bundle of Press cuttings, a strip of film and Mrs. C., sleeping peacefully on the hearth, oblivious that her babies were now in greener fields with crisper lettuce and riper strawberries.

Chapter Four

WATER BABIES

WHEN my family of tortoises seemed to be well established, I decided to branch out a little and introduce some terrapins into the home, or rather, in the case of the first pair, into the garden. Firstly, however, it was necessary to build a home for them, and Noël and I spent several evenings designing and building a suitable pond and enclosure. The pond, some five feet long and four feet wide, was set in a "garden" of plants and small shrubs, while one area was covered with sand to form a beach in which any egg-laying could take place. The whole was enclosed on two sides by a wire fence about two feet high and on the other two by the garden fence, so I hoped that escapes would be out of the question.

As soon as the cement was dry and the pond had been filled once or twice to ensure that it was clean and watertight, I went out to buy its first occupants. I had already decided that these should be adult European pond tortoises, which, as their name suggests, are found all over Europe from France to Poland. For this reason these reptiles are accustomed to a temperate climate, and, although they hibernate during the winter, they seem to thrive on that crazy mixture of weather known as the English Summer.

I chose adults of this species, as young specimens whose shells are under six inches long fare better if they are taken indoors on summer evenings and are allowed to spend the winter awake in a tank of warmed water.

The European pond tortoise looks, at first sight, very much like a land tortoise, and indeed the two are very closely related, but the former has retained special features to allow it to lead a partially aquatic life. The feet are semi-webbed and the carapace (the rounded top section of the shell) is joined to the plastron (the flat underside) by a ligament and is not the junction of two bony plates as in land tortoises. Both front and hind legs are long and muscular to facilitate swimming, and of course under water the breath can be held for quite a long time. Unlike the land tortoise, the pond tortoise has no growth rings on his shields and his tail is long, thin and pointed. On land his shell and skin look dusty and drab, but once under water the black and yellow pattern sparkles with a brightness that is unbelievable.

The choice of names was not easy in this case, and, as I could not ascertain their sexes with any accuracy, I decided to ignore that point and find pleasant names. Neptune was an obvious choice and this was given to the smaller one of the pair. His companion preferred to observe me and the world at large from the depths of his shell and I thought of Peeps. Then I remembered that Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, was also Secretary to the Navy and keenly interested in nautical matters, so the spelling was changed to Pepys.

It was a perfect summer day when I brought Pepys and Neptune to their new home, and I was glad that it looked its best for their arrival. All my fears that they

would not like our design vanished when for the first hour they dived and swam in the clear water of the pond. In the pet shop they had lived in a tank so small that only one of them could be in the water at once, but now there was ample room for a dozen reptiles both on land and in the water. At last Pepys led the way out of the pond, and, with Neptune following meekly behind, they began to explore the enclosure. They scrambled over the rockery and beach and fought their way through the plants until finally they found the house. This was similar in design to those used by the land tortoises and proved an immediate success. Neptune inspected the interior, but Pepys made his way on to the roof, where he sat and with a look of proud possession surveyed his estate. Since that day the flat roof has been in frequent use for sun-bathing and sometimes on summer evenings they will sit there long after the sun has sunk below the horizon.

Pepys and Neptune had only been in their new home for a couple of weeks when they were asked to share it with another of their kind, who had been found walking along a railway line in North London. Wherever she had intended to go, Lester was soon at home in the enclosure, and the original inhabitants welcomed the stray with more friendliness than I had expected.

It did not take me very long to discover the sexes of the trio, for within a few weeks Neptune's tail was quite an inch shorter and Lester's looked rather mangled at the end. Among pond tortoises and terrapins the biting of the female's tail by the male is an essential feature of courtship and is often accompanied by biting of the hind legs. Obviously Pepys could not

make up his mind which of the ladies to pursue, but I hoped that he might find them both attractive and that my incubator might be needed again.

In the middle of their second summer with me a small hole appeared in one corner of the beach, but, after a great deal of discussion, Noël and I attributed it to rats, as we had seen some in the garden. The following evening, when just before dusk I went on my customary journey around the garden to see that all my family were safely asleep and to close the doors of the houses, Neptune was nowhere to be seen. I looked in the pond, on the beach and finally in the house, where Pepys and Lester were sleeping soundly and dreaming no doubt of juicy earthworms as long as skipping ropes. At last with the aid of a powerful torch I saw her lurking at the rear of the enclosure amid the foxgloves and digging a hole with her long, supple hind legs. Our "rat hole" had simply been her trial hole to see if the soil on the beach was suitable for her nest, and obviously she had decided that it was not good enough. Although I was rather hurt by her attitude, I was delighted that once more there might be the task of rearing some baby reptiles, even if one's chances of success were not good.

After one look, I left the lady to her solitary work and reluctantly went to bed. I awoke very early the next morning and at once hurried up the garden. There was Neptune swimming happily in the pond while her lazy husband still slept in the depths of the house. A circular patch of earth from which leaves and grass struck out in all directions indicated the site of the nest. While Noël kept the lady occupied with some titbits, I removed eight eggs from the hole and transferred them

to the incubator in the cupboard. Unfortunately, although the eggs were fertile, they failed to hatch, but I am still hoping that Pepys and Neptune will give us another chance to rear them a family.

Pepys is very definitely master of the pond and the others respect his position. Although I try to foster democracy by putting all the food in at the same time, he always has the first choice. Their favourite time for a meal is the early evening when the sun has left the enclosure yet before the chill of evening is really apparent. In the wild, pond tortoises feed upon all kinds of small water creatures like tadpoles, water fleas, shrimps and minnows, but in captivity they will eat earthworms with a relish that often outstrips the resources of a garden. My neighbours are always willing to collect any worms that they might find while gardening, but in order to satisfy their appetites I have to make artificial worms from strips of rabbit or whale meat. Lester, however, will only eat genuine worms, so in times of shortage she has to be fed separately with the few that I can hunt down in the compost heap. Although I have never actually caught her in the act, I believe that when she has dealt with my hard-won worms, she will also finish off any meat left by the others.

One summer the trio did not seem to have eaten as well as usual, and rather than risk them dying in hibernation, like my first family, I decided to wake them in the middle of winter. This could easily be done by bringing them indoors, for pond tortoises hibernate just like land tortoises. About Christmas Eve I carried their box into the house and by the evening they were thoroughly awake. The following day, while we enjoyed

turkey and plum pudding in one room, Pepys, Neptune and Lester had a feast of worms and rabbit in the bath. They seemed to love being indoors and soon settled down to a routine of days in the bath and evenings on the lounge hearth. Neptune became especially tame and developed a passion for sitting on my lap, from which vantage point she would survey the room and the antics of the smaller terrapins who spend all the winter in heated tanks. After three weeks I began to wish that they could stay up for the rest of the winter, but as lack of hibernation impairs fertility in many reptiles I knew that it would be better for them to resume their sleep. One night they were put to bed in their box as usual, but instead of being left in the warm bathroom they were brought into our bedroom where plenty of cold air would reach them. By the next morning they were really asleep and could be returned to the garage.

Naturally we do not know as much about Pepys, Neptune and Lester as we do about those terrapins who live in the house all the year round. These are small creatures from tropical areas, who like their tortoise brothers are extremely susceptible to colds and pneumonia. For this reason they are only allowed in the garden on really warm days, but to compensate for this a daily session of sun-ray treatment is provided. Whenever the temperature exceeds 70 degrees F. a wooden pen enclosing an area six feet by four feet is placed on the lawn. A slate in one corner makes a patch of shade, a large photographic tray serves as a bathing pool, while a heap of small rocks placed at one side enables the occupants to climb in and out at will. I call this lido "Butlin's," for, like the famous holiday camps, it has everything that the holiday-making

terrappin could want within the walls. Here six small terrapins and two young tortoises spend the summer afternoons in climbing, swimming, sun-bathing and walking, and it is eight very tired little reptiles that I carry indoors when the sun begins to move away from the lawn.

On similar days the pond tortoises have to share their home with MacTaggert and Pots, two terrapins as odd in appearance as in name. MacTaggert is the most grotesque and yet the most fascinating reptile that I have ever seen and he is also the most friendly. His family, who live in Australia, are known as snake-necked terrapins because their necks may reach a length of four or five inches, almost the same length as their bodies. We call this strange creature MacTaggert after a Scotsman, in the news when he was bought, who claimed to have found the remains of a sea monster on a beach in his native land. He travelled all the way to London to show his find to the British Museum of Natural History. The experts prosaically labelled it "basking shark" and the dispirited naturalist faded from the news muttering: "It's nae a basking shark."

MacTaggert soon made it plain that he enjoyed life in the garden and I allowed him to go out whenever the sun shone. One day I returned home from London to find that he was not in the pond with the pond tortoises, who were impatiently waiting for their supper. A thorough search of the enclosure showed that he was not, as I hoped, merely hiding under a plant or in the house. My spirits sank as every favourite tortoise hiding place in the rest of the garden was searched and either found empty or occupied by a land tortoise. Just below the foot-high board that prevents escapes

via the side gate was a scatter of ash in which I saw several large footprints. I realised with horror that, once over this, MacTaggart could easily have reached the road with its hurrying traffic and swarms of children who would be only too glad to offer this strange creature a home. For over an hour I searched the front garden until at last I saw a flat dusty shell lying half buried in the flower bed. I was so overjoyed at seeing him again that all my anger vanished in a moment. That MacTaggart had not found his freedom quite as attractive as he had hoped I knew from the frightened little face that eventually appeared from the depths of his shell. The wire around the enclosure was strengthened and now MacTaggart stays within its bounds.

By reason of our uncertain climate MacTaggart has to spend much of his life in a tank in the flat during the day, but in the evenings he is allowed the freedom of the floor. He chooses very odd places in which to sit, and among his favourites are inside Noël's shoes and in the lowest shelf of the vegetable rack. I still find it rather frightening to see a head and a seemingly endless neck coming round the edge of a door long before the body and legs appear. He had never been particularly friendly with the other terrapins but prefers to indulge in odd one-sided friendships with the larger tortoises. He follows the current favourite around the flat with a spaniel-like devotion which is quite wasted. Frequently I have to save him from being used as a stepping-stone or pillow by a weighty tortoise, but no sooner do I release him than he hurries off in search of the object of his affections. One evening when he could find no tortoise who would so much as look in his direction, MacTaggart made overtures of friendship to Willie,



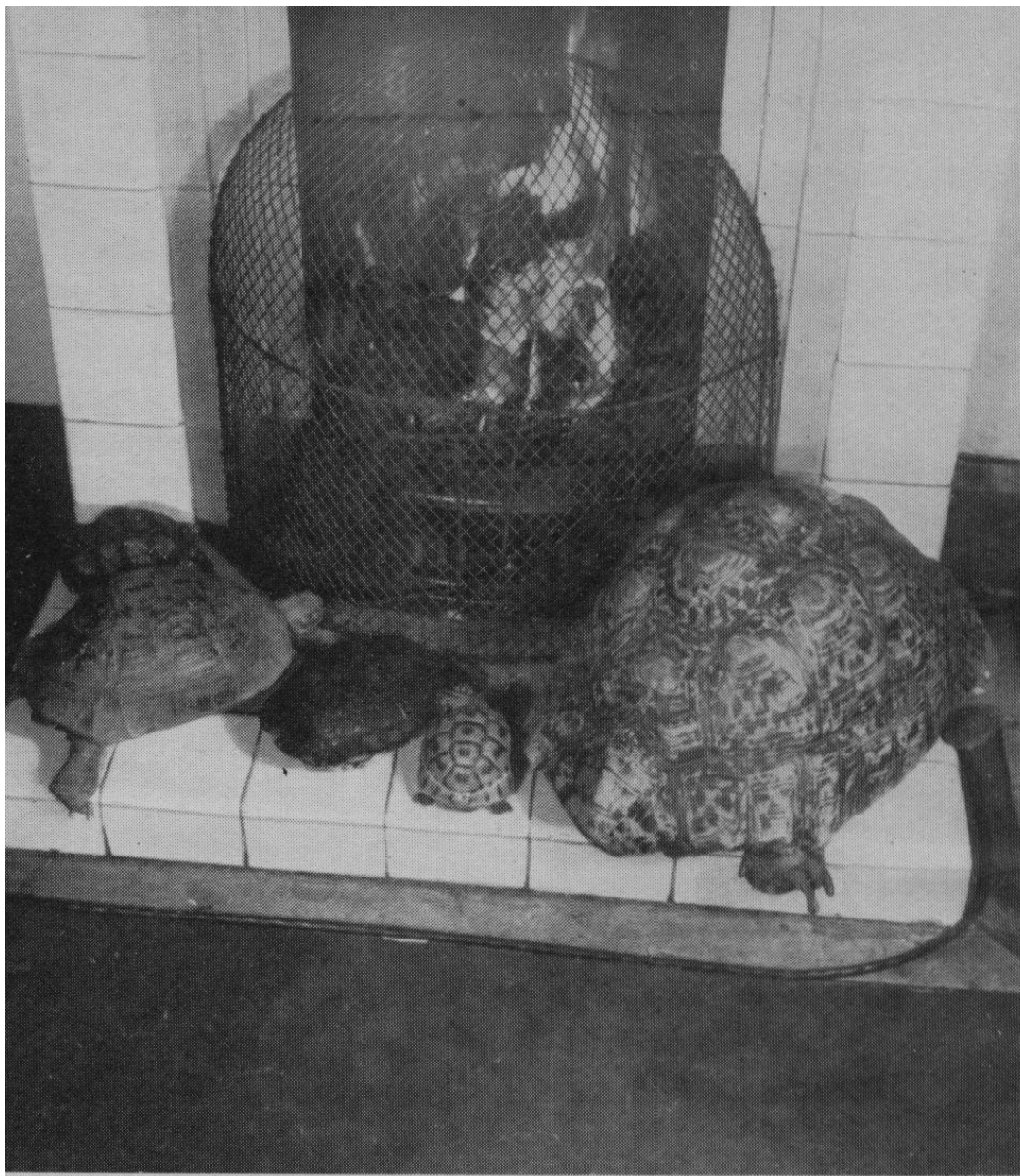
(Left)

Ping has the pond to himself

(Below)

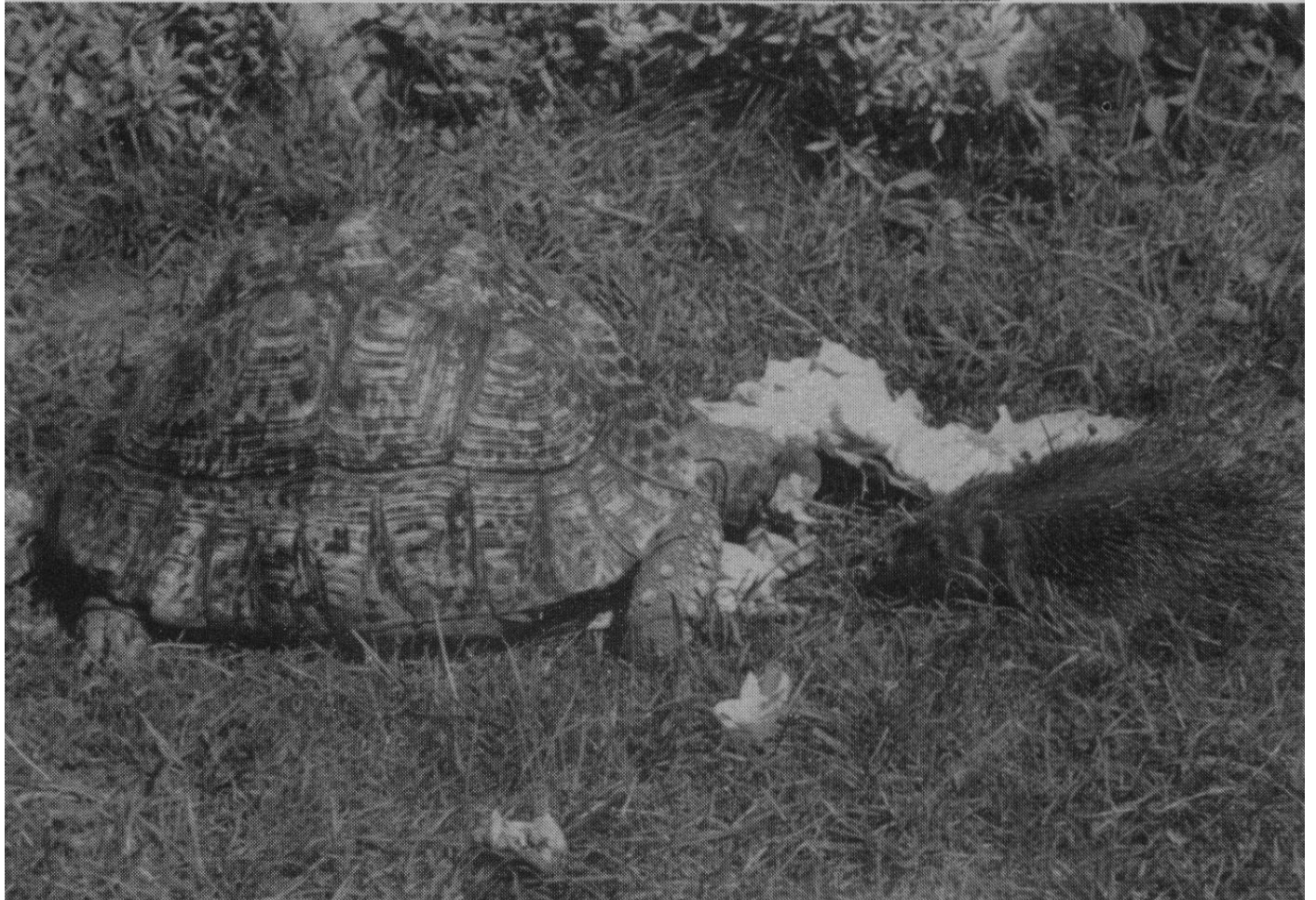
Ping grows up





(Left)
Winter gathering

(Below)
Willie still trying
to be friends



my pet hedgehog, who comes indoors whenever she likes, but she simply curled up into a ball.

His companion is a quieter but more colourful terrapin who bears the uncomplimentary name of Pots. This is not wholly the result of her unorthodox behaviour but is also due to the vacant perpetual smile with which she has been endowed. Her zoological name is the Amboina box tortoise, and her family inhabit the muddy streams and paddy fields of Siam, the East Indies and Burma. Their most remarkable feature is the horizontal striping of the head with bands of dull yellow and olive green which is continued right through the eye.

When not in the tank with MacTaggart, she loves to sit beneath a pile of magazines in a cupboard or just under the bed where she is safe from passing feet. I have never seen a more gentle reptile and if picked up she will sit patiently in my hand until she is returned to the floor. MacTaggart responds to similar treatment by fighting and scratching and waving his long neck in a threatening manner.

Although Amboina box tortoises are generally considered to be good and keen swimmers, Pots sinks like a stone when placed in the garden pond. On one occasion when she was pushed into it by MacTaggart I had to come to her rescue, but could not do so before she was thoroughly frightened. In the tank she is able to sit on the bottom and still keep her head out of the water, but she seems much happier on dry land. I believe that, provided that there is no danger to its health, every animal in captivity should do what he or she enjoys and not what the owner thinks that they should enjoy. For this reason I indulge her passion for behaving like a tortoise whenever that is possible.

Chapter Five

THE FIRST GENTLEMAN

IN the same way that it is rarely possible for parents to regard each one of their children with the same amount of love, so animal-lovers usually have one pet who has first place in their affections. This differentiation is generally brought about by the animal needing greater care or by his being able to return in some measure the love bestowed upon him by the human being. For the latter reason Tigellinus is the "first gentleman" of my family, although he is far from being either its most beautiful or its best-behaved member.

Although all tortoises are poorly equipped to express their emotions, there is no doubt that Tigellinus is as faithful to me as any dog or cat. He will seek my company in preference to that of all the other tortoises, and only when I am out will he look for other human beings. When I am writing he sits under my table or at my side. When I sit in the lounge he is under my chair, and if the door of the bathroom is left open he will stay beside me while I bathe.

Five years ago I caught chicken-pox and when at last the tedious quarantine was over we decided to celebrate by a gala shopping day in London and a visit to a theatre in the evening. Our route to lunch lay past one of the many exclusive pet shops that are to be found

in the West End. My pocket does not usually run to buying anything from this kind of shop, whose animals are rarely better than those from small and less expensive dealers. On this occasion I felt that there could be no harm in looking, for after all one could hardly take an animal to a theatre or even on a shopping expedition in crowded London.

The shop walls were lined with tanks of mouthing goldfish, pathetic little terrapins and arrogant lizards, but in one corner in a wire cage usually occupied by plump guinea-pigs or sleek white mice sat a wonderful tortoise. He was three times the size of the ordinary tortoise, his head and legs were covered with bright orange scales and his shell was the rich colour of mahogany. Two wet streaks down his cheeks seemed to proclaim his unhappiness and there was a sorrowful, spaniel-like expression in his two brown eyes, yet there was also an air of dignity about this strange tortoise who seemed to need a human friend.

I knew that this tortoise had to join my family whatever the cost in money or trouble, but first there were several problems to be solved. He was no ordinary tortoise and the price was bound to be high. Then there was the terrible thought that he might have been sold already and was merely waiting to be collected by his new owner. While Noël and I stood in front of his cage in silence, both wondering and both hoping that the other wanted to have him, this strange reptile stretched out this long orange neck towards us and uttered a most pitiful cry. We turned to ask the proprietor the price, which seemed more suitable to a pedigree Pekinese than to an old and battered tortoise—even if he could make peculiar noises.

The money for lunch, for the new curtains, for the theatre and even some of the housekeeping allowance went into the pile of notes that changed hands. Our new pet was extracted none too gently from his cage and thrust into a dirty cardboard carton which proclaimed itself to contain so many boxes of "Fiz," the wonder soap powder, whose smell still clung to every corner. A piece of string was rapidly tied around the sagging sides and we found ourselves outside the shop with only a few shillings in our pockets and a supremely unmanageable parcel. Thoughts of the lunch and the theatre vanished in the joy of our purchase, for here, I sensed, was a tortoise who would need a great deal of mothering, which I would love to give him.

The journey home seemed endless to me but I am afraid that it was far more distressing to the inmate of that foul-smelling carton. I was not surprised that, once in the train with the box firmly on my lap, he made strenuous efforts to escape. At first there came violent scratchings and the carton seemed to bulge in all directions at the same time. This did not seem to be at all successful, for the scratchings were abandoned in favour of giant heaves and indignant splutters. Finally the carton was still but from inside came the same heart-rending cry of despair that we had heard in the shop and then there was silence for the rest of the journey.

Once in the seclusion of the kitchen I lifted this beautiful tortoise from the depths of his pungent prison and placed him gently on the floor. He blinked once or twice, stretched his neck out until it seemed that he must fall out of his shell and gave a yawn that would do credit to a hippopotamus. As food often helps an animal to lose much of his shyness in strange

surroundings, I knelt on the floor and held out half a tomato towards him. Instead of making a cautious grab from a safe distance, as most creatures would have done, this strange tortoise walked a few paces until he could reach the tomato with ease and then devoured it in two bites. Another tomato went the same way before he pushed me aside and walked off to explore the other rooms, and only then could we settle down to a much needed lunch. About an hour later I found him asleep on the hearth with two other tortoises and I knew that he was well on the way to becoming one of the family.

It was obvious that such a magnificent tortoise must have an imposing name but it must also be one that would shorten satisfactorily for everyday use. We tried various English ones of the Sebastian and Marmaduke variety but they did not sound right. The newspapers were, at this time, full of gossip about the film of the book *Quo Vadis?*, and it was here that we found the perfect name—Tigellinus, the commander of Nero's bodyguard. The name rolled beautifully off the tongue and could be pleasantly shortened to Tiggy.

Of Tiggy's life before that day I could discover very little. The owner of the pet shop grudgingly gave the information that he had bought him and a West African tortoise from a private collector. We had seen the other tortoise in the shop but his larger and more attractive companion had stolen the limelight. I knew that Tiggy was a Brazilian giant tortoise whose family live both in the hot steamy forests around the Amazon river and in the West Indies. In both places they provide the native population with a valuable ingredient for the stew-pot.

After Tiggy had been with me for a few days I began to wonder whether it had been cruel of me to separate him from the other tortoise with whom he had lived before. Naturally I had no money at that moment but I resolved that as soon as pay day came round I would buy his friend. When at last that day came I found that this tortoise, who was similar in size to an ordinary tortoise, had been placed in the shop window. Here he was attracting a great deal of attention, but being rather shy only the tip of his nose indicated that this was not an empty shell but a living tortoise.

When I announced that I wanted to buy the tortoise in the window the proprietor made no secret of his relief to be rid at last of this strange pair. Another evil-smelling carton served as a travelling box, but my new pet made no sound or movement on the long journey home. In fact until I lifted him out on to the floor I had never seen his face or the full length of his legs. When at last he appeared I had a most pleasant surprise. He looked up at me with the bluest eyes that I have seen, and whereas those of most tortoises are round in shape these were shaped like human eyes. For some inexplicable reason the newcomer was to be known as Fred, though I once made an attempt to change this to a more dignified name. Like Tiggy, he was first given a meal of lettuce and tomato, after which I decided to play the fairy godmother and reunite him with his former companion. The latter was enjoying a deep sleep on the hearth and I gently laid Fred by his side. The effect on both tortoises was hardly what I had imagined or desired. Tiggy woke up and began to push Fred away from the fire, which was something that he had not dared to do to any of the rest of the family.

Fred in return reared up on his thin, scraggy legs and began to butt Tiggy from the back. The other tortoises awoke from dreams of limitless lettuce fields and quickly decided to leave the contestants to fight it out on their own. My grand gesture was as effective as a damp squib, for it was obvious that Tiggy and Fred were, and had always been, mortal enemies.

This was only the first of many such fights and they have never learned to live together in peace. I feed them in different rooms at different times but whenever they meet the sparks fly. Most of the battles are fought out on winter evenings, for they meet only rarely in the summer, when Fred likes to be in the garden while Tiggy prefers to be indoors.

One particular bout will always remain in my memory. It was caused by Tiggy's favourite party trick of taking a long drink of water and then blowing it out again through his nostrils. He is able to do this because, unlike most tortoises, his family are equipped with two sacs at the base of their necks in which food and water can be temporarily stored. When these are full of water Tiggy sets off in search of something or someone at which he can discharge it in two fine jets which can have a range of over two feet. In the winter the coal fire is the usual recipient of the water, but there have been other targets, including the walls, my legs and a pile of books. However, on the night in question Tiggy had no sooner filled up at his drinking bowl in the kitchen when Fred appeared in the doorway to see whether his supper was ready. The moment that Tiggy saw his enemy he expelled all the water and Fred was caught in the downpour. For a moment neither of them moved and then in a flash Fred reared up to his full

height, stuck his head out at an aggressive angle and charged the triumphant Tiggy. Round the kitchen, down the landing and into the bathroom they went with Tiggy running on his knees and Fred strutting behind and butting the retreating foe like an enraged goat. They circled the bathroom, came back down the landing and took a wide sweep around the kitchen. On his way out of this room Tiggy had a slight start on Fred and instead of charging straight down the landing he turned sharply into the room on the right and hurried behind its door. Fred paused in the kitchen doorway and looked for his enemy, and then, ignoring the dark room on the right, marched back to the bathroom. By the time that he had realised that Tiggy was not there the latter was enjoying a warm beside the lounge fire and I kept them apart for the rest of that evening.

Tiggy's winter routine is leisurely in the extreme. Only the arrival of a new tortoise or a chance to have his photograph taken will disturb it seriously. The central-heating pipes which pass under its floor make our bathroom the warmest place in the house at nights and it is here that Tiggy sleeps. His bed was designed and made by Noël so that it might exclude draughts and yet still give him ample room for sleeping any way round that may enter his head. It has a small roof about eight inches wide which allows him to have half his shell under it if, and when, he sleeps in it in the correct way. On the floor he has a piece of blanket under which I put a hot-water bottle on frosty nights. He himself is swathed in a rainbow blanket which I knitted specially for him from scraps of wool donated by friends and relations, with whom he has always been a great favourite. Tortoises from tropical climates cannot

undergo a successful hibernation so eight or nine of my family live in the flat in the winter. Each has a bed and a blanket similar to Tiggy's and they, too, get a hot-water bottle when it is really cold. To wrap a tortoise in a blanket, to give it a bed of its own and a hot-water bottle may seem like pampering, but these reptiles are living in a completely foreign climate and one in which pneumonia offers a constant threat to their lives.

Tiggy usually remains asleep until we have finished breakfast and then, with many heaves of the blanket and a few kicks at the hot-water bottle, he turns around to take his first bleary-eyed look at the world. He seems to sense the days on which I go to London, and on these occasions walks with a slow deliberate step into the lounge and, after a quick glance at the empty grate, settles down under my chair. Without a coal fire this room is too cold for him and so, to the accompaniment of splutters and whines, he is removed to a warmer if less attractive spot. The cupboard which contains the hot-water storage cylinder for the whole house is placed at right angles to the bathroom and if both doors are opened at the same time it is possible to make one large room. It is here that Tiggy and the other tortoises sleep away the winter days, huddled close to the tank and each wrapped in his or her own blanket. Tiggy spends much of the day talking to himself in a series of mews and explosive noises that can be heard most clearly in my mother's flat below. On rare occasions he passes the time by attacking Fred and then the crash of shells and angry hissing disturbs the other sleepers.

As soon as I return in the evening, Tiggy comes to

life with a suddenness that is quite alarming and hurries into the lounge to ensure that he gets the best seat by its coal fire. While we are having dinner he lies fully stretched out in the firelight and purrs and coos with contentment. His evening routine is not as settled as his day one and it depends largely upon our movements. Sometimes he sits on the hearth all evening while on other occasions I have to nurse him for an hour or so. On rare occasions he will sit on Noël's lap and watch the television, but only a boxing programme has managed to hold his interest for any length of time. Visitors to the flat bring out the worst in him and he shows off like a spoilt child. This takes the form of an obstacle race around the lounge in which he climbs through the bars of the chairs, tries to squeeze under a coffee table and, when unsuccessful, bears it on his back for several yards, and finally spends quite a time trying to climb into a glass-fronted bookcase. After the third time round I begin to get rather tired of Tigellinus and take him off to bed in the bathroom. By this time he too is angry and begins to work it off by trying to break his lovely wooden bed. The roof has been nailed on innumerable times, and now, when we hear the sound of splintering wood, Noël automatically reaches for a hammer. The bed-breaking routine is also used if he thinks he is not being taken notice of in the mornings or whenever a new animal comes into the family. The first night that Willie, the hedgehog, came into the flat, Tiggy spent the whole evening in this way and no amount of mothering would calm him down.

In the summer Tiggy spends most of the day in the front bedroom, where he can sit under the edge of the bed with only his neck in the sun. On days when the

temperature exceeds 70 degrees F. I insist that he takes an early morning stroll in the garden. This requires that he should be put at the top of the garden and allowed to take a quick walk along the path, down three steps and over the doorstep into my mother's lounge. In the doorway he pauses to plan the rest of the day. He could sit under a chair in her room and hear her moving about; he can sit under a table in the hall where he can see or, more important, be seen by any visitors, or, thirdly, he might take up his position in front of a full-length mirror in her bedroom and admire himself for the rest of the day. No woman was ever as vain as Tiggy on these days as he turns his head from side to side and coos with delight at what he sees.

On chilly days or when my mother is not at home I insist that Tiggy remains upstairs with the other tortoises. He thinks that I am just being unkind doing this, but he could easily catch pneumonia by sitting in a draught if there was nobody to look after him. In order to show me that he was not going to stand for this kind of treatment he taught himself the remarkable feat of safely descending a flight of eighteen stairs. The first time that he accomplished it my mother returned from shopping to find a proud tortoise sitting in the hall. Since then he has done it several times in front of us, but, owing to its obvious dangers, a little barrier has been put across the stairs.

The method of descending that Tiggy uses for this adventure is extremely ingenious and shows a remarkable amount of common sense and foresight. He edges his strong front legs over the top stair and when they are firmly planted on the one beneath he transfers his weight on to them. With a moment's pause to pluck

up courage he launches himself into space and slides down the first group of four stairs to the bend. Another pause, this time for breath, and the whole process is repeated to the next turn and once again to bring him to the hall floor.

Feeding Tiggy is a long and difficulty business. His favourite food is a banana, preferably one that is turning black and smelling very strongly. The actual feeding is a long and elaborate ritual which demands my full attention. I have to sit on the floor beside him, and to begin with he will refuse the banana by shaking his head violently from side to side. After a few minutes of this he will open his mouth while shaking and then I have to ram a piece of the fruit inside. This he savours on his tongue and eventually swallows with a loud gulp. This process is repeated until he is shown the empty skin, whereupon he goes to find a drink. Occasionally he throws a temperament and will not take food from me, usually when I have stopped him from doing something which he enjoyed or have been too busy in the evening to take a great deal of notice of him. I find that then he will take the banana from Noël and am sure that it is done merely to spite me. Apart from the terrible cramp and sticky fingers that result from this method of feeding an adult tortoise who could easily feed himself but won't, the worst part is the time he chooses for his meals. This is never before ten-thirty at night and sometimes it is midnight before he will have anything.

Tiggy's other particular interests in the matter of food are rather beyond my pocket except on the rare occasions when I make a profit on the housekeeping. Fresh pineapple and water melon make him as excited

as a small child at his first party, and he can hardly wait for me to cut it up into manageable pieces. This disappears down his pink throat with a rapidity that should choke him but luckily never does.

Yet, lest I should suggest that Tiggy is only interested in his true diet of fruit, I must mention two other cravings which I am only too happy to indulge. The first came to light one day when he decided to sample the dinner of a visiting dog. He tried the meat first, but it seemed to be very distasteful and he went to great pains to spit out every tiny scrap. He then took a mouthful of meal and here was a very different story. For nearly an hour he sat and ate steadily and with obvious delight. Now no day is complete without a session at his bowl of meal, but he is very self-conscious about this. If I or anyone else should venture into the room while he is thus engaged he will leave it at once and no amount of persuasion can induce him to resume.

Apart from Fred, Tiggy has no enemies among the tortoises and only once have I seen him show anger towards them, and then luckily I was at hand to prevent any harm. Jenny, a baby gopher tortoise from America who is so small that she will almost fit into a match-box, was having her daily exercise period in the warm bathroom. Tiggy was taking a leisurely drink of water from his bowl, and in a pause between draughts Jenny climbed into it. For a moment he was too surprised to do anything except glare in her direction, while she, with all the characteristic impudence of young creatures, stared back. When he saw that she was not afraid of him, he bent forward to nose her out of the bowl, but just as he touched her my hand came between

them and I whisked the young adventurer back into the safety of her own vivarium.

While Tiggy dislikes Fred with a violent and healthy hatred, he is extremely spiteful to any of the terrapins that he happens to meet about the flat. He takes large and, I'm afraid, very accurate, bites at any leg or tail that is exposed. Then when the terrified reptile withdraws all its extremities he gnaws the shell until a sharp tap on the top of his shell indicates that we have noticed and disapproved of this kind of behaviour.

Tiggy's love-life is at the present time a very sad story. In spite of promises by various dealers and animal collectors we have been unable to find a suitable wife for him. On the chance that she might be the right size, we ordered a female of the same species from a dealer in South America, but when she arrived she was a mere babe, hardly more than one-third Tiggy's size. This does not make the slightest difference to the ardour with which he courts her on every possible occasion. He rubs his head along the ground immediately in front of her and nuzzles her front legs, but unless I am at hand this simply means that she is pushed several yards along the floor. When she is in a group of similarly sized and coloured tortoises of other species he will see her at once and will scatter the others in an attempt to reach her. I know that on the day that Mrs. Tigellinus arrives to join the family he will be overjoyed and I hope that one day I may see my "first gentleman" teaching his children how to go down stairs in safety.

Chapter Six

FRESH FIELDS

ONE chilly afternoon Noël and I set out to do our Christmas shopping with a wallet full of money and a long list of possible presents for impossible acquaintances and relations. This kind of shopping always seems to take so much longer than the selection of gifts for that small circle of friends with whom one has interests and tastes in common. After the first hour had passed all that we had acquired was a rather lurid jigsaw puzzle and two pairs of aching feet, and it was with the greatest relief that we stopped to have a cup of tea. Morally and physically we felt very low, when I suddenly remembered the presence of a pet shop only a few streets away. Feeling rather like two children playing truant, we hurried towards its lighted windows and crowds of spectators.

High on my list of desirable pets have always been sea-horses, and on that winter afternoon, for a brief moment, I thought that my dream was coming true. In a large tank in the centre of the pet shop window seven or eight of these delightful creatures were gently gliding up and down, while three more were anchored by their tails to a piece of water-weed. As I gazed at them, Noël reminded me that it would be impossible for us to add these to the family, for they were marine

creatures who needed salt water, which we could not provide.

I was feeling rather depressed at his words when another tank attracted my attention, for in it were a number of baby Mississippi alligators. The greenish-black bodies and tails of those in the water glistened in comparison with the lazy ones who sat musing on the rocks. Most of them were between six and eight inches long, but already they could display innumerable needle-like teeth.

There seemed to be no problems in having a pair of alligators in the family, for an empty tank with its heater and thermostatic control was sitting at home and could be brought into action at a moment's notice. Provided we did no more shopping that afternoon we had sufficient money, and we had already learned a little about the care and feeding of such animals. Noël had been just as attracted to them as I had, and without hesitation we went into the shop. It was very difficult to select a pair from the struggling mass, who all seemed eager to be bought. At last our choice fell upon a fat little alligator with a spotlessly white tummy and a small slight companion who was, however, far more lively.

We hurried home with our precious pair in a box, and without informing my mother of its contents went straight into our flat. I was not quite sure how she would take the news that two alligators were sleeping in the flat above hers. We therefore decided to wait until they were safely in the tank before introducing her, and this plan proved most successful. Although she always regarded them with a certain degree of caution, their reception was far better than we had dared to hope.

(Right)
“ And so to bed ”

(Below)
Tegus are not to be
trifled with





(Left)
Jonathan asks for more

(Below)
Simon and Susan play
in the pool



Lack of space in the flat made it necessary for Ping and Pong, as they were christened, to have their tank in the lounge. This ensured that they soon became used to human beings, and the sight of one of us entering the room would send them into a flurry of excitement which was in no way associated with food. Half their tank was filled with three or four inches of water while the rest was occupied by flat rocks on which they could bask in the rays of their "sun"—an electric light bulb in the hood of the tank.

Their home was immediately opposite the television set and Ping and Pong soon became regular viewers. I'm sure that many performers would have been deeply gratified to see the intentness with which some of their work was received, although there were some items that even they could not bear. Musical programmes were number one on their list of hates; they would rather play about on the rocks, especially during vocal items. Plays and discussions, especially those of a noisy kind, pleased them best, and then two pairs of bright eyes would peer down two long noses pressed hard against the glass. When really excited they would utter a series of hoarse barks which could drown the talking, but I had only to raise my voice for all to be quiet once more.

Ping was the dominant animal both physically and mentally, and I soon discovered that if Pong was to get adequate food they must be fed separately. There was never any actual fighting on this score, but Ping would simply block Pong's way to the food until it had been ruined by immersion in the warm water of the tank. Although I understand that zoos do not generally feed their reptiles more than twice a week, I always feed each animal once every day in the week and twice daily

when I am home at weekends. Ping and Pong's diet of whalemeat, horsemeat and rabbit meat meant that their tank had to be emptied every day and refilled with clean water. While I was doing this they took their daily exercise on the carpet. It was fascinating to see these attractive animals playing around the chair legs and sitting on the hearth among the tortoises, but with a shudder one realised that it would not be many years before they must be kept behind bars. Still, at the moment, they were perfectly tame and could be handled without fear of being bitten by the ever-growing teeth or lashed by the muscular tail.

It was only when Ping and Pong took their daily swim in the bath that the full importance of this heavy tail could be seen. The feet, though slightly webbed, are hardly used in swimming, for just one wriggle from the tail would send them the whole length of the bath in a second. While visitors were always delighted to see Ping and Pong either in the bath or in their tank they never seemed to like these babies to be loose and no amount of reassurance on our part would alter their opinions.

Ping and Pong seemed to enjoy the few days on which it was warm enough for them to share the garden home of Pepys and Neptune, the pond tortoises. After a good swim in the pond they would climb out and lie beside the other inhabitants, who regarded them with curiosity rather than fear. I noticed, however, that the terrapins were careful to avoid being in the water with them.

After nine months Ping was over eighteen inches long and little Pong had doubled his size, which considering the amount of food they consumed was not surprising. Although I was naturally pleased to see

them in such good health, I realised that every meal brought us nearer to the parting of the ways. Once they reached a length of over two feet, the tank would be too small and they would begin to lose their friendliness. I kept them another three months and they sat around the Christmas fire with all the rest of the family, but then I knew that I must make arrangements for their future in which I could not be included. The bitterness of parting was softened by the knowledge that they had been offered a home at the London Zoo, where they would be well looked after and I could see them as often as I liked.

I fed them for the last time with a very heavy heart, knowing that in twelve hours' time they would no longer be Ping and Pong but simply two more animals in the Zoo's catalogue. I realised how selfish I was being to wish that they could stay, for not only could the Zoo give them more room than I could ever hope to, but they would once more be among their own kind.

The next morning I said a sorrowful good-bye to them in the privacy of the lounge before I laid them in a specially prepared travelling box lined with damp moss. The London fog made the day echo my mood, and with only the minimum of conversation Noël and I made our way through a deserted Zoo to the Reptile House. There we were most hospitably received by the staff and we lifted Ping and Pong out to be introduced. Only then did we learn that our pets were not alligators but caimen, who should be treated with great respect from an early age. I like to think that Ping and Pong had sensed that we would not harm them, for they had never made any attempt to nip us during the many times they were handled.

It was decided to separate the pair owing to the four-inch difference in their lengths, and, while Ping went to a tank of similarly sized caimen, Pong joined the community of smaller caimen and crocodiles. During the first night with the latter she was violently attacked by a crocodile, and, although I know that every effort was made to save her life, the wounds turned septic and proved fatal. Ping continued to thrive and is now over four feet in length. Although he no longer numbers human beings among his friends, I never go to the Reptile House without visiting his enclosure. I wonder if he remembers those winter evenings by the fireside or the hot summer days when he played so happily in the garden pond? But, alas, his staring eyes register nothing except supreme boredom.

About the same time that we bought Ping and Pong, a herpetologist friend asked us whether we could give a home to a pair of giant-eyed lizards whose present owner was going abroad. Of course, we agreed and one evening a large vivarium containing Samson and Delilah was left at our house. For the first time we really saw what we had taken on so readily. We were not disappointed in our new pets, for they were in appearance two of the most delightful creatures that I have ever seen, and their characters were equally praiseworthy. Their skin was a wonderful beadwork pattern of blue, turquoise and green and their eyes were a deep, rich brown. Samson was about ten inches long while Delilah although an inch shorter was more plump.

We set up their vivarium at the opposite corner of the lounge to Ping and Pong's tank and furnished it with a stout branch for climbing and claw sharpening, a house built from a cardboard box, a pile of dead

leaves and two plastic bowls for eating and drinking. The drinking bowl was hardly ever used for this purpose, but both lizards loved to sit in it for hours on end. They lived together very peacefully on the whole, but all their disagreements arose over who should sit in the bowl at a particular moment. I tried to solve the problem by adding another bowl of water, but they simply ignored it and continued to squabble over the original one. Naturally only part of either one would fit actually into the bowl, so this crude bathing was usually done in two or more stages.

While the plump Delilah would eat anything from grapes to sausage, Samson was terribly fussy over his food. The only things he ever seemed to enjoy were mealworms or the few flies he could catch for himself. When I offered him something else he would sniff disdainfully at the proffered morsel and then begin a frantic search for a mealworm. Delilah's favourite foods were apples, pears and horsemeat, but once I caught her sampling an iced cake from the bottom shelf of the tea trolley and thereafter she was not allowed to be loose at our mealtimes.

During the day they lived in their large vivarium, but one day Samson discovered how to open the door at the top and he escaped on to the floor. When I came home there was a black lizard behind the fire-screen and a network of sooty footprints all over the carpet. Luckily, unlike most large lizards, neither of them enjoyed climbing on the furniture or curtains, which was also fortunate, for Noël's hobby is collecting antique glass!

Like Ping and Pong, the lizards were allowed to spend every evening loose about the flat and only cold rooms

were barred to them. Their chief pastime at such times was to play hide and seek among the volumes in a large open bookcase, and sometimes they would pass two or three hours in this way. Samson would allow Delilah to chase him and they would scramble from book to book with the greatest agility until he tired, when they would run to the hearth and lie fully extended in the warmth of the fire.

On the whole they took little notice of the tortoises except for an occasional peep into someone's shell. The tortoises were neither alarmed by nor interested in their antics, and only once was there any ill-feeling. Mortimer, who had been kept from hibernation because of an eye infection, was lying on the hearth. Delilah had become bored with the usual game, and Samson, with plenty of spare energy, was passing the time by running round and round the room and over the animals on the hearth. He clambered over Mortimer three or four times and on each occasion the tortoise woke up with a splutter of indignation. As the long tail was dragged across him for the fifth time, Mortimer could stand it no longer and, with a quick thrust of the head, he seized it firmly. For a moment he held on while Samson with a look of fury swung round to see who had dared to do such a thing. Remembering that discretion is the better part of valour, Mortimer let go and the furious Samson flicked his tail clear. For the rest of that evening Samson sat on Noël's lap while the triumphant Mortimer slept in peace.

When winter came we decided to let Samson and Delilah hibernate indoors, and so the vivarium, filled with dry leaves, was moved into the bedroom, which is the coldest part of the house. The only space available

for hibernating lizards was the top of the large wardrobe, and once the couple were safely covered Noël lifted the vivarium into position. For five months there was only the occasional rustle as one of them turned in his or her sleep, and we were glad to know that no harm had come to them.

March came and with it the first weak sunshine, but all remained quiet in the bedroom until the first days of April. One Sunday morning I awoke to find the sunlight streaming into the room and from the vivarium I heard the rustle of leaves. Still hardly awake, I glanced at the top of the wardrobe and saw four bright eyes peering down at Noël and me. It was so good to see them again and to have the vivarium back in its old place. The branch, the house and the water-pot were replaced, and, after a good run round the flat, Samson and Delilah were returned to their home.

What had happened to them during those long winter months I shall never know or understand, but for some inexplicable reason they now hated the vivarium. When left in it during the day they would become almost frantic in their efforts to escape. We gave them every possible moment of freedom both in the flat and in the garden, but it was easy to see that these times did not compensate for the hours spent in the vivarium. I began to dread going home at nights to find them angry and frightened, and one evening we reluctantly decided that as it was not possible for us to give them a life without using a vivarium they must go where this could be done. If they stayed with us permanent harm, either mental or physical, might come to them, and I could never have forgiven myself for not parting with them while there was still time. The

ideal place for them seemed to be an outside reptilary, but we had not sufficient space in the garden.

But the London Zoo had just such a perfect home and we were delighted to find that Samson and Delilah would be welcomed into it. So one sad day we let them loose on the island reptilary and wished them good luck in their new life. Every time I go to the Zoo I try to find them, but only once did I see Samson sunning himself on a rock and looking dirtier but much happier than he did during those last few weeks with us. I hoped that Delilah was not far away.

The tank that had housed Ping and Pong did not remain empty for long, but this time I determined to have small reptiles so that there need be no sad partings through lack of space. After a great deal of thought I chose newts, who would be cheap to buy, would feed well on the small water-creatures that I could easily obtain from a nearby stream, and who, except in frosty weather, would add little to our already large fuel bills. The tank furnishings needed little alteration, but I added a cave made of an old flower-pot into which they could retreat if the room lights became too bright or the television programmes too dull.

To begin with I bought six newts, but being rather ambitious I hoped that these were just the fore-runners of a mixed group of several species, for the tank would easily hold treble that number. My first group were smooth newts (I think that this is a kinder description than common newts) and they were attractive little animals. Although they were all the same species there was considerable variation in coloration, ranging from olive green and brown to yellow and orange. They were all adult newts, from

three to four inches in length. Three bore crests upon their backs, indicating that they were males, and the other three being slightly duller in colouring were obviously females.

One day a friend of my grandmother's came to visit my mother for a few days, and, although she was nearly ninety, she insisted on being personally introduced to each one of my family. As she was unable to climb stairs, the newts were omitted from this ceremony and were not mentioned in the conversation.

Early the following morning my mother was awakened by her guest moving about in the next room. She found a distracted old lady with a torch in her hand who explained that, while lying in bed, she had seen a "piece of black tape" on the floor, but when she had grasped it the "tape" jumped out of her hand. The incident did not appear to have frightened the visitor at all, but she was terribly worried lest she should have hurt the creature by handling it.

I found the "piece of tape" under a table and she was soon back in the tank with her fellow-newts. In order to reach the lower flat, she had scaled the two-foot-high side of the tank, climbed down the stand on to the floor, squeezed under three doors and negotiated a flight of stairs, but she seemed none the worse for the journey. I realised that it would be kinder to let such agile creatures have their freedom, and they were taken to found a colony near a small secluded pond on Wimbledon Common.

Chapter Seven

THE FAT LADY

WHILE Tiggy's personality makes him the undoubted "first gentleman" of my family, Lady Jane, by reason of her greater size and consequently greater ability to make her presence felt, is the premier lady. My love of animals has at various times brought me into contact with zoological collectors who have often brought me back tortoises and terrapins. Therefore I was not surprised one day to receive a letter from one of them saying that he had a pair of leopard tortoises and that I could have one or both if I liked. He had captured them during a visit to Kenya and they had been flown home shortly afterwards. Although my spirits were rather dampened by the price he was asking, I knew that he had a reputation for good animals and that it was only a fraction of the shop price for such tortoises.

The leopard tortoise is so called from the black markings on its yellow shell, which closely resemble those on a leopard's skin. The species can be found all over the scrubland areas of that part of East Africa which lies between Ethiopia and the Transvaal. Like the Brazilian giant tortoise, it is a frequent ingredient of native stew-pots, and its eggs are also regarded as both tasty and nutritious. The length of shell of a

fully grown tortoise of this kind may be over two feet, and weights of over sixty pounds have been recorded by some zoologists. The carapace is extremely highly domed, making the tortoise appear larger than its measurements would suggest.

When I first saw the pair found by this collector I knew at once which one would be the latest member of my family. The price and lack of space at home made it impossible for me to have them both, though I would have preferred to do so. There was a considerable difference in size, the female being about thirteen inches long and the male only about the size of a large Mediterranean tortoise. Knowing that this species cannot hibernate and that the chosen pet would have to be indoors during the winter, Noël had instructed me to purchase the smaller of the two as he could not come to help in the choice. However, I wanted the female as she was by far the better specimen and I decided to risk a reprimand and take the larger. Apart from a slight gap in her lower jaw, she was in perfect condition and I have never seen such a fat tortoise. Indeed her body was so fat that she could not get her legs and head completely into her shell.

The deal was concluded, and now came the problem of taking her to my laboratory for the afternoon and on to home in the evening. It was a fairly mild day for December and I had taken an old jacket of Noël's to wrap round my purchase. When first I picked her up everything was all right and I set off at a good pace. To my horror she seemed to become heavier and heavier with every step, and her weight, which I had been assured was only twenty-eight pounds, seemed like twenty-eight tons. Somehow I struggled to a bus stop,

and as there was no transport in sight I placed my burden on the pavement. To my dismay she stumped off into the road and there was nothing for it but to hold her till the bus came.

Never have I been more thankful to see a bus, and with legs and arms aching I sat down with the lady on my lap. Apart from making a playful attempt to bite the conductor's fingers when he tried to make friends, she behaved quite well and seemed to like looking out of the window. At last the moment came when I knew that I must leave the bus and carry her the last half-mile or so to the laboratory. I can still remember the nightmare of that walk through crowded London streets. City business men stared, office girls giggled and one wit asked if I was having turtle soup for supper. I did not bother to correct his ideas of cookery, for my one wish was to put the creature down. Tired and feeling that my arms would never work again, I reached the comparative seclusion of the building and laid her in front of the fire. The lettuce which I had bought the previous day disappeared in a moment and I began to see why she was so fat. For the rest of the day she was a source of attraction for the whole of the staff and they spoilt her completely. Every few minutes someone would arrive with an offering of lettuce or tomatoes, while one person even offered her a peach. By the time five o'clock came she was even heavier and I felt less and less like carrying her home.

Contrary to my expectations she behaved admirably in the Underground, but the sight of such a large tortoise on my lap seemed to arouse some interest among the rush-hour crowds. During the forty-five-minute journey she looked her fellow travellers over and did not seem

to mind them staring back at her. She obligingly showed them just how long her neck was and proved her good health by extending a brilliant red tongue. The noise did not appear to worry her at all, although she could never have been on a train before.

As it was December, Lady Jane (the title is rarely used) began her life in captivity in the flat, but she settled down very rapidly with the rest of the family. She spent her first evening sitting beside Tiggy on the hearth while Noël made her a bed and I knitted a huge blanket. For the first few days she wandered around the flat looking at everything and everybody and eating anything she could find in addition to her regular rations. Then one chilly day she did not wake up as usual but continued to sleep in her bed for the next four days. This was the beginning of her winter routine, which she has kept up in the really cold weather ever since. During her days of sleep she will turn round and stretch her limbs, but although her bed is in that most noisy of all rooms, the bathroom, she will not get up. Then on the fifth evening—we do not know how she tells the passing of time—we return home to find her waiting rather impatiently for her supper. She eats a couple of lettuce and about half a pound of tomatoes and then strides off into the lounge to find the coal fire. When we retire for the night she is wrapped in her blanket and, with a hot-water bottle on the top of her shell, she settles down quite happily in her bed.

But it is in the summer that Jane really enjoys life. In Africa she had been accustomed to almost perpetual sunshine and therefore, on the all too rare occasions when we have a sunny day, she makes the most of it. While I and the rest of the family hurry off to seek the

shade, she lies in the middle of the lawn with her head and legs fully extended. Her appetite increases rapidly—and so do my greengrocer's bills, for she often eats six lettuce in a day. Luckily I can substitute pea-pods, cabbage and runner beans when these are easier to obtain.

The first two months of Jane's life passed without incident, for she slept most of the time. One Saturday evening, which happened to be her "awake" day, she came into the lounge where Noël and I were watching one of George Cansdale's animal programmes. She sat on the hearth with her hind legs dangling on to the carpet and went to sleep. Suddenly I saw her stretch and a white egg rolled on to the carpet just a few inches from Noël's feet. For a moment I was too surprised to move, but then I rushed for the "incubator." Though it turned out to be infertile, Jane must surely be the only tortoise in the world to lay an egg on the hearth. But little did we know that Jane's eggs were to be a source of trouble to us for some time to come.

For the next few days I kept a watchful eye on Jane, just in case she should be tempted to lay again, but she continued to eat and sleep as before. After another month she began to wake up more frequently, for now it was March and temperatures were getting higher. During the day she would stay in her bed but almost every evening she would come out for food and a sleep in front of the fire.

One evening while sitting on the hearth Jane began to make violent kicking actions with her hind legs and I realised that these were exactly the movements used by tortoises when digging the nest for their eggs. When a tortoise is going to lay infertile eggs she will not bother

to make a nest of any kind, though nobody can explain how she senses that these eggs are in fact infertile. With this second-sight in mind, I held the highest hopes for Jane's eggs if only she could be induced to lay them. The weather was far too cold for her to go into the garden, so the garden would have to come to her in the shape of a large tray of earth and sand. This was placed in the bathroom and Jane climbed into it—and fell asleep! As soon as she came into the lounge and on to the hearth she would begin “digging,” and very soon the carpet showed signs of her activity.

I knew that tortoises can die from being egg-bound for a long time so I set out to discover whether there was any means of hastening the laying. There did not seem to be a herpetologist in the country who knew from first-hand experience about egg-bound tortoises, but the London Zoo advised an enema of olive oil. This may sound a simple matter but in fact it took three people over two hours to achieve only a moderate degree of success. Every time we went within a few feet of Jane she tucked her tail away and lashed out with her back legs. At length when the three of us, the bathroom and of course Jane were covered in oil, a little of the dose was administered and Jane went off to “dig” in the lounge for the rest of the day.

After another week the thermometer showed a temperature of over 60 degrees F., and, hoping to see an end to her distress, I took Jane into the garden for the first time. Now instead of tearing holes in the carpet she dug holes all over the garden and in the lawn. It looked as if we had a mole for a pet and not a tortoise. At last, in the first week in May, I came home one night

to find her laying in a deep hole in the rockery, three months after the first egg had appeared.

Jane has never been afraid of either of us and she took no notice when we went to watch the laying at close quarters or even when Noël brought out his camera and tripod. Lest the eggs should be chilled by the heavy rain that was falling Noël held his hand under her tail to catch each egg in turn and they were hastily transferred to the "incubator." I lifted the first three from the nest and placed them with the others, making a total clutch of nine. Then we allowed her to fill in the nest in the natural way before taking her indoors for a well-deserved supper of lettuce and tomatoes.

One afternoon some nine weeks later I found a single egg of a similar size lying on the garden. No attempt had been made to bury it and so I guessed that it must be infertile. When I picked it up I saw that it had a large hole in one side, and presumably the supply of shell had been exhausted before the egg was complete.

Nobody seemed able to say with any certainty exactly how long Jane's clutch of eggs would take to hatch if all went well. They were laid in May so by the following Christmas I knew that all hope of baby leopard tortoises had gone. One evening I opened the eggs only to find that four of them contained almost fully-formed tortoises which for some reason had been denied the gift of life. Perhaps the temperature in the "incubator" had risen too high or possibly the eggs had been jolted, but one fact was all too clear—there would be no babies in the vivarium. I was bitterly disappointed and sorry, too, that all Jane's discomfort had been in vain.

Each winter since then Jane has been laying infertile

eggs at regular intervals. One morning when I went to tuck her blanket more closely around her back an egg rolled out. On another occasion she came into the kitchen while we were having breakfast and placed an egg in front of the cooker. Yet another was left on the landing to form a death-trap for busy people.

Chapter Eight

SAVAGE INTERLUDE

ON one of our frequent visits to the pet shop owned by a personal friend we were introduced to another fascinating branch of the reptile family. In a large cage sat the largest and most brightly coloured lizard that I have ever seen outside a zoo. He was a black-pointed teguexin, a giant lizard from South America—and giant he certainly was. From the tip of his pointed tail to the end of his blunt nose must have measured at least two feet. Yet in spite of his large size and rather formidable appearance this beautiful creature was as gentle as a spaniel. I stroked his head and ran my finger down his smooth skin, which was delicately patterned in gold and black. We tactfully inquired whether he was for sale and were very disappointed to hear that he was being sent to a herpetologist in Yorkshire. Our friend added that if we were interested he would try to get another tegu of the same kind sent from South America, and we left the shop planning names and accommodation for such a pet.

Months passed and we began to forget our friend's promise when one evening he telephoned to say that he thought we would find a visit to his shop rewarding.

We abandoned all plans in favour of such a visit the following evening.

When we arrived there the shop had been closed to the public and on its floor were four fine tegus, and we were invited to make our choice. Selecting healthy reptiles is never easy, for there are a great many factors to be taken into account. All lizards, and indeed most reptiles, slough or cast their skins at least once a year, and while doing this they invariably go off all food for a few days. The creature becomes extremely lethargic and needs special care if it is not to catch pneumonia. With this in mind we selected the tegu whose skin was considerably brighter than the rest, for this seemed to indicate that he (or she) had recently sloughed. This tegu also appeared to be the plumpest and took a lively interest in his surroundings.

Francis travelled in a canvas bag, and on our arrival home was without difficulty transferred to a large vivarium. This was equipped with a heater consisting of an electric light bulb fixed into a flower-pot which was safely anchored to the floor. We added a large tree branch for climbing and claw sharpening, a bowl of water, a house into which he could retire when tired of company, and an enamel feeding-plate. Thinking that perhaps he felt strange in his new home or that the bus journey might have frightened him I put a few scraps of raw meat and some mealworms on the plate as a gesture of friendship. But throughout the evening he sat and stared out of the vivarium and steadfastly ignored our attempts to make friends. When we departed for work the following morning he had not left his house, but in the evening we could see from the many footprints in the sand that he had been on the move.

As soon as we had finished dinner Noël prepared to lift him out of the vivarium in order that he might take some exercise around the flat. Although Francis was six inches shorter than the first tegu that we had seen, he was too large to be permanently confined in a vivarium. Also we wanted him to get used to us and to visitors to the flat as soon as possible.

The moment that Noël's hands raised Francis a few inches off the vivarium floor he came to life with a vengeance. In a flash he changed from a placid and even shy creature into a spitting and scratching devil. All the tegus have poorly developed front legs, but they are amply compensated by the power and size of the hind pair. These are equipped with half-inch claws, five on each foot, and Francis was no exception. He drew them down Noël's forearm in no uncertain manner while at the same time his tail lashed about in all directions. The vicious mouth opened and shut, but luckily its activity was all in vain. For the first moment of this attack Noël was caught off his guard, but then his grip tightened and he placed the thrashing monster on the floor. But Francis was no longer a monster but the placid animal of the vivarium, as he sat and looked around at the tortoises on the hearth. For the rest of the evening, while Noël nursed stinging cuts, our tegu ambled in and out of the furniture and even tried to climb into the coal bucket. He allowed the tortoises to walk over his lovely tail without the slightest attempt to harm them.

When the time came for us to go to bed, I wondered what fresh horrors he would devise for the return to the vivarium. Noël did not put on any gloves for this job, as we did not want Francis to see that we were frightened

or even bothered by his antics, but, to put it mildly, the whole affair had been rather disturbing. The return journey to the vivarium was exactly like the first trip with thrashing limbs, waving tail and snapping jaws and it was with the greatest relief that I replaced the top of the vivarium and left this savage creature to his supper. We attributed this first evening's performance to strangeness and fear on the part of Francis and consoled ourselves with the thought that he would soon get to know and trust us. Alas, every night he behaved in exactly the same way and Noël had to wear a thick pair of leather gloves in order to handle him at all.

In spite of all his activity Francis would accept no solid food either in the vivarium or when loose in the flat. After a few days Noël telephoned the friend at the pet shop for some advice and it was suggested that we should give this tiresome pet a beaten raw egg. With the egg ration at one each a week and no hens in our back garden I did not find this advice very practical until I found a butcher who could provide ducks' eggs at eightpence each. This proved to be just what Francis had been waiting for, and, as my housekeeping bills mounted, he ate an egg every night. Then one evening he refused the egg and so we went back to the raw meat and mealworms, but with no success.

One Saturday afternoon we became really worried, for although Francis had been with us nearly six weeks all he had eaten in that time was eight ducks' eggs. We decided to give him one more chance to have an egg and Noël carried him into the bathroom where he could eat in peace and quietness. Some twenty minutes later I opened the door to see what was going on, but there he

sat with the untouched saucer of egg before him. Noël went downstairs to phone the friend again, while I began to prepare tea for guests who were due to arrive very shortly. The only advice that Noël received was "not to worry" and "carry on with both diets," so he went back to try and hand feed Francis. But the bathroom was empty although its windows were firmly shut and the door had been locked all the time. The bath is enclosed so Francis could not have hidden either behind or underneath it and he was too large to go down the plug-hole. The only way of escape seemed to be through a small hole where the pipes of the pedestal basin disappeared under the floor, and it was apparent that Francis had vanished with them.

The only way of recovering him was to take up some of the floor boards but this also meant lifting the linoleum which covered them. This was irritating, to put it mildly, for I was particularly anxious to impress our guests with the tameness and orderliness of my family. However, after an eternity of pulling and levering the first board of the bathroom floor came up and it was comparatively simple to lift two or three more. Then Noël lay flat on the floor and shone a torch into the dusty cavity below. Far away to the left, beneath the lounge floor, he saw the very tip of Francis's tail. It was obvious that we could not reach him from the bathroom, so the lounge carpet had to be rolled up, and after a little discussion we selected a board which we thought would be just above the escapee's head. Reptiles of most kinds are blinded and to a certain extent mesmerised by strong light, so I went back into the bathroom to attract Francis's attention with a torch while Noël levered up the chosen board. The plan

worked and Francis emerged firmly clasped in Noël's hand, still scratching and fighting but covered in dust and plaster from head to tail.

For another week we tried everything to make this formidable reptile eat but at the best he would only take a few mouthfuls of egg. One evening when he was being returned to the vivarium after his usual small feed I noticed a small cut on his leg, doubtless the result of some accident that had occurred in the course of his travels. Protected by his leather gloves, Noël managed to hold the patient while I dabbed the wound well with a swab of friar's balsam to prevent festering. But Francis resented this help and he spat the whole of his supper of raw egg into my face. For a moment I was too surprised to move, but once Noël had the miscreant safely behind glass we had a good laugh while an irate Francis glared at us from the entrance to his house.

One morning the reason for his lack of appetite was made obvious by little pieces of transparent skin which lay about the vivarium. Francis had not sloughed before we had bought him but now, within a few days, he would have a sleek and shining coat and would begin to eat normally. Unfortunately while Francis could change his coat, he could not alter his character or temper and the ugly scenes continued night after night.

Eventually, though we had grown very fond of Francis in a defensive kind of way, we decided that he would be happier in a home where he did not need to be handled and where perhaps he might be with others of his own kind. Our friend agreed to take him back

and try to find a more suitable home for him, and with great sorrow Francis was laid once more in the canvas bag and taken back to the pet shop. We were disappointed and depressed at our failure to win his confidence, but I hope that where we failed his new owner succeeded.

Chapter Nine

BY ADOPTION

THE hatching of How and Why, though by no means a unique event, brought my family a great deal of publicity in newspapers and magazines. In the years that followed Noël gave several talks about caring for tortoises in "Woman's Hour" and in "Children's Hour," which produced hundreds of letters from tortoise-keepers in every part of the country. Many of these letters were from people seeking advice about an ailing pet, while others wrote to tell us about the favourite food or pastime of their well-beloved tortoise. We replied to each one of these letters, with the result that we now have a large number of friends with whom we regularly exchange tortoise news and anecdotes.

Some of the letters were more tragic and told of a pet who needed a new home. Often his present owner was ill and unable to look after him or perhaps the garden of a new house could not be made escape-proof. I knew just how much heartache and unselfishness lay behind these letters and that made me more keen to help. Far too many tortoises are just turned out by owners who tire of them and are too lazy and selfish to find their pet a new home. On one occasion a tortoise and a guinea-pig were found in a tiny cardboard box in

Regent's Park, where they had passed a frosty night. It was no wonder that the poor tortoise was dead by the following evening, and one can only wish that his former owner will in future ignore the lure of pet shops.

As far as the size of the garden and my time have allowed I have never refused to take an unwanted tortoise. When after a dozen "adoptions" I found that the limit had been reached I began a policy of housing such creatures until I could find them a good home with a genuine tortoise-lover. This was always done with the knowledge and consent of the former owner.

Most people wrote first to ask me whether I would have their pet, but one man took a chance and arrived on the doorstep after a journey from the far side of London with his two tortoises in a box. On another occasion I was asked to go to a house in the same road and retrieve one of "my" tortoises which had gone to sleep under a neighbour's compost heap. However, a quick roll-call of my family showed that they were already complete, but Timothy was allowed to join it on the spot. I found another tortoise wandering in an adjoining road on the way to London one morning, and as a widespread canvass of the surrounding houses threw no light on his past he too was adopted.

Other adoptions were made from greater distances. Jonathan belonged to a lady in Norfolk, who, through having to move, found it impossible to stop her pet wandering away. One evening when I returned home a stout carton stood in the hall and I knew that the latest adoption had arrived. I gently opened the lid and from the middle of the most wonderful packing of grass and buttercups an inquiring head was raised towards me.

Jonathan settled down at once and is the least troublesome of all my "ordinary" tortoises. He has the most serene brown eyes that I have ever seen on a tortoise and they perfectly reflect his character. He is quiet, gentle and patient and never interferes with any of the others. Noël and I have, however, only to go on to the lawn to start him hurrying towards us, head raised so high that it would seem to be on the point of pulling his body from the shell. From that moment he follows us incessantly until we either sit down or go indoors again. Jonathan demands very little in exchange for this display of devotion—merely the chance to nibble a finger for a few minutes. I can offer no explanation for this curious habit, for it is not done with the intention of hurting but seems to be a gesture of friendship.

Jonathan's favourite foods are apples and buttercups, and his former owner still sends him parcels of these at the appropriate time of the year. He only takes red apples, which he prefers to be grated complete in their skins and piled in a heap before him. Unlike most tortoises, he only has two meals a day and rarely eats between them, except on the warm days when we take our tea into the garden. Then Jonathan never fails to join us for his special treat—a sweet biscuit soaked in milk. I do not encourage any of my family to eat bread, biscuits or cake regularly as some owners do, but consider it to be an occasional treat.

The most remarkable creatures that I have adopted are Simon and Susan, a pair of American elegant terrapins. This species are imported into this country as hatchlings and the ignorance of their owners and the rigours of our climate usually cause their deaths within a very short time. Such creatures need heated

tanks and a special diet if they are to resist the particular form of rickets which is responsible for most of the deaths. Susan is sixteen years old but her long life can only be due to the devotion of her former owner and the unceasing efforts she made during the first few years of life.

Not only did these attractive reptiles have to contend with the difficulties common to these terrapins, but they came to England only a few weeks before the last war broke out. They lived in the centre of London, on the top floor of a large old house, and their owner saw that it would be necessary to make arrangements for their safety in the event of air raids. So instead of sleeping in their tank these tiny terrapins were made to pass the nights in a box lined with a pillow, blankets and hot-water bottle in which they could quickly be carried to the cellar. Rather than abide by the usual diet of raw meat and fish, it was decided in addition to offer them other foods which were particularly rich in the calcium they needed for survival. Cheese, yoghurt, shrimps were given regularly and, as the years passed, Simon and Susan grew stronger. They still did not absorb sufficient calcium to allow their shell growth to keep pace with that of their bodies, with the result that their limbs are disproportionately large. This gives them rather an unbalanced appearance, but in all other respects they are perfect and a wonderful testimony to the care that had been lavished upon them.

The sad day came when it was no longer possible for them to stay in that home, and in the hope that I could give them a little of the love to which they were used I agreed to take them. This was a terrible responsibility, and when after a year with me Simon died I was

very distressed. But I had done my best to give him a good home and he seemed to have been very happy sharing the life and food of my terrapins. Now that Susan is alone I try to give her more personal attention, and she likes to spend part of the evening sitting on my lap. In the summer she goes into "Butlin's" and spends most of the time flopping in and out of its bathing pool. In the winter she becomes a leading "firewatcher" and if there is no room on the hearth she will perch quite happily on the shell of one of the larger tortoises.

Whenever I make an adoption I always tell the former owner that if ever they should be able to have their pet back I would never stand in their way. Yet I know that while I should rejoice to see them home once more, it would be a great wrench for me to part with them, so greatly have I grown to love the adopted members of my family.

THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

THIS has been a little of the story of the first twenty years of an animal family. It has known the births and the deaths, the partings and the returnings, the quarrels and the friendship of any human family. There have been times when illness threatened its existence and then I felt that I had failed them. There have been tragic accidents and times of good luck. There was the miracle of the hatching of little How and Why and the good fortune which led me to Tigellinus. The sadness of empty tanks and spare places in the houses has been overwhelmed by the happy sight of my family enjoying warm summer days in the garden. The occasions when Noël and I have carried one of them up the garden for the last time and laid him beneath the plants he loved can be forgotten in the pleasure of seeing plump legs and shiny shells littering the hearth on a winter evening.

I shall feel happy if the future of my family holds no more terrors than its past and I hope to add to it many more cold-blooded yet warm-hearted creatures.

ANIMAL LEGENDS

By MAURICE BURTON D.Sc.

Legends must have some foundation. Here the author examines some long-established animal legends in the light of modern knowledge, especially of animal behaviour, and seeks to assess the value of random or casual observation as scientific evidence. Thus: What truth is there in the persistent stories of rats combining to carry away eggs, of foxes getting rid of fleas, of bats getting into the hair? Does a hedgehog really carry away apples on its spines and if so, why does it do it? Scientists do not accept these stories—often to the exasperation of the layman who claims to have witnessed them. It could be that the observed facts are correct and the interpretation wrong. What is the origin of the “Abominable Snowman’s” mysterious footprints? Do animals bury their dead, rescue their comrades, carry out “compassionate killings”? In this fascinating book Dr. Burton, a well known authority on animal behaviour, discusses these and many other little-known facets of animals life.

Large Crown 8vo

Illustrated

15/- net

SOLD FOR A FARTHING

by

CLARE KIPPS

Some Press Opinions

"This book will be sold by the hundred thousand. The photographs are astonishing in themselves and a wonderful witness of the love that extends to all creatures great and small."—WALTER DE LA MARE.

"This is a sparrow of a book. . . . Many a reader, now and for a long time hence, will probably echo the opinions of Mr. Walter de la Mare, whose encouragement led to its writing: 'It is all but unique'."—

SIR JOHN SQUIRE.

"A little masterpiece."—JOHN O'LONDON'S WEEKLY.

"I have enjoyed reading it, and I am sure that a wide public will share that enjoyment."—DR. JULIAN HUXLEY.

"Charming story . . . will interest the student of animal behaviour as well as the mere lover of birds."—MANCHESTER GUARDIAN.

"I was enchanted by the fascinating life story of this famous little feathered foundling."—PATIENCE STRONG.

"Mrs. Kipps has written a most unusual and charming little book."—TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

"Entirely fascinating and contains much of scientific interest."—
TIMES WEEKLY REVIEW.

"Should become a classic among animal stories."—CHURCH TIMES.

"Mrs. Kipps has written a most charming biography and her careful record of his life and ways is of the greatest interest to students of animal behaviour."—THE LISTENER.

"The story of a remarkable bird and its owner's remarkable achievement."—FIELD.

"A rare and precious parable."—GODFREY WINN.

"May be read and re-read with increasing enjoyment."—TRUTH.