Mijbil the Otter

BEFORE YOU READ

Gavin Maxwell lives in a cottage in Camusfearna, in the West Highlands in Scotland. When his dog Jonnie died, Maxwell was too sad to think of keeping a dog again. But life without a pet was lonely... Read what happened then, in Maxwell's own words.

I

EARLY in the New Year of 1956 I travelled to Southern Iraq. By then it had crossed my mind that I should like to keep an otter instead of a dog, and that Camusfearna, ringed by water a stone's throw from its door, would be an eminently suitable spot for this experiment.

When I casually mentioned this to a friend, he as casually replied that I had better get one in the Tigris marshes, for there they were as common as mosquitoes, and were often tamed by the Arabs. We were going to Basra to the Consulate-General to collect and answer our mail from Europe. At the Consulate-General we found that my friend's mail had arrived but that mine had not.

I

I cabled to England, and when, three days later, nothing had happened, I tried to telephone. The call had to be booked twenty-four hours in advance. On the first day the line was out of order; on the second the exchange was closed for a religious holiday. On the third day there was another breakdown. My friend left, and I arranged to meet him in a week's time. Five days later, my mail arrived. I carried it to my bedroom to read, and there, squatting on the floor, were two Arabs; beside them lay a sack that squirmed from time to time. They handed me a note from my friend: "Here is your otter..."

II

With the opening of that sack began a phase of my life that has not yet ended, and may, for all I know, not end before I do. It is, in effect, a thralldom to otters, an otter fixation, that I have since found to be shared by most other people, who have ever owned one.

II

The creature that emerged from this sack on to the spacious tiled floor of the Consulate bedroom resembled most of all a very small, medievally conceived, dragon. From the head to the tip of the tail he was coated with symmetrical pointed scales of mud armour, between whose tips was visible a soft velvet fur like that of a chocolate-brown mole. He shook himself, and I half expected a cloud of dust, but in fact it was not for another month that I managed to remove the last of the mud and see the otter, as it were, in his true colours.

II

Mijbil, as I called the otter, was, in fact, of a race previously unknown to science, and was at length christened by zoologists Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli, or Maxwell’s otter. For the first twentyfour hours Mijbil was neither hostile nor friendly; he was simply aloof and indifferent, choosing to sleep on the floor as far from my bed as possible. The second night Mijbil came on to my bed in the small hours and remained asleep in the crook of my knees until the servant brought tea in the morning, and during the day he began to lose his apathy and take a keen, much too keen, interest in his surroundings.

II

I made a body-belt for him and took him on a lead to the bathroom, where for half an hour he went wild with joy in the water, plunging and rolling in it, shooting up and down the length of the bathtub underwater, and making enough slosh and splash for a hippo. This, I was to learn, is a characteristic of otters; every drop of water must be, so to speak, extended and spread about the place; a bowl must at once be overturned, or, if it will not be overturned, be sat in and sploshed in until it overflows. Water must be kept on the move and made to do things; when static it is wasted and provoking.

II

II

Two days later, Mijbil escaped from my bedroom as I entered it, and I turned to see his tail disappearing round the bend of the corridor that led to the bathroom. By the time I got there he was up on the end of the bathtub and fumbling at the chromium taps with his paws. I watched, amazed; in less than a minute he had turned the tap far enough to produce a trickle of water, and after a moment or two achieved the full flow. (He had been lucky to turn the tap the right way; on later occasions he would sometimes screw it up still tighter, chittering with irritation and disappointment at the tap’s failure to cooperate.)

II

Very soon Mij would follow me without a lead and come to me when I called his name. He spent most of his time in play. He spent hours shuffling a rubber ball round the room like a four-footed soccer player using all four feet to dribble the ball, and he could also throw it, with a powerful flick of the neck, to a surprising height and distance. But the real play of an otter is when he lies on his back and juggles with small objects between his paws. Marbles were Mij’s favourite toys for this pastime: he would lie on his back rolling two or more of them up and down his wide, flat belly without ever dropping one to the floor.

III

The days passed peacefully at Basra, but I dreaded the prospect of transporting Mij to England, and to Camusfearna. The British airline to London would not fly animals, so I booked a flight to Paris on another airline, and from there to London. The airline insisted that Mij should be packed into a box not more than eighteen inches square, to be carried on the floor at my feet. I had a box made, and an hour before we started, I put Mij into the box so that he would become accustomed to it, and left for a hurried meal.

III

When I returned, there was an appalling spectacle. There was complete silence from the box, but from its airholes and chinks around the lid, blood had trickled and dried. I whipped off the lock and tore open the lid, and Mij, exhausted and bloodspattered, whimpered and caught at my leg. He had torn the lining of the box to shreds; when I removed the last of it so that there were no cutting edges left, it was just ten minutes until the time of the flight, and the airport was five miles distant. I put the miserable Mij back into the box, holding down the lid with my hand.

III

I sat in the back of the car with the box beside me as the driver tore through the streets of Basra like a ricochetting bullet. The aircraft was waiting to take off; I was rushed through to it by infuriated officials. Luckily, the seat booked for me was at the extreme front. I covered the floor around my feet with newspapers, rang for the air hostess, and gave her a parcel of fish (for Mij) to keep in a cool place. I took her into my confidence about the events of the last half hour. I have retained the most profound admiration for that air hostess; she was the very queen of her kind. She suggested that I might prefer to have my pet on my knee, and I could have kissed her hand in the depth of my gratitude. But, not knowing otters, I was quite unprepared for what followed.

III

III

Mij was out of the box in a flash. He disappeared at high speed down the aircraft. There were squawks and shrieks, and a woman stood up on her seat screaming out, “A rat! A rat!” I caught sight of Mij’s tail disappearing beneath the legs of a portly whiteturbaned Indian. Diving for it, I missed, but found my face covered in curry. “Perhaps,” said the air hostess with the most charming smile, “it would be better if you resumed your seat, and I will find the animal and bring it to you.”

III

I returned to my seat. I was craning my neck trying to follow the hunt when suddenly I heard from my feet a distressed chitter of recognition and welcome, and Mij bounded on to my knee and began to nuzzle my face and my neck.

IV

After an eventful journey, Maxwell and his otter reach London, where he has a flat.

IV

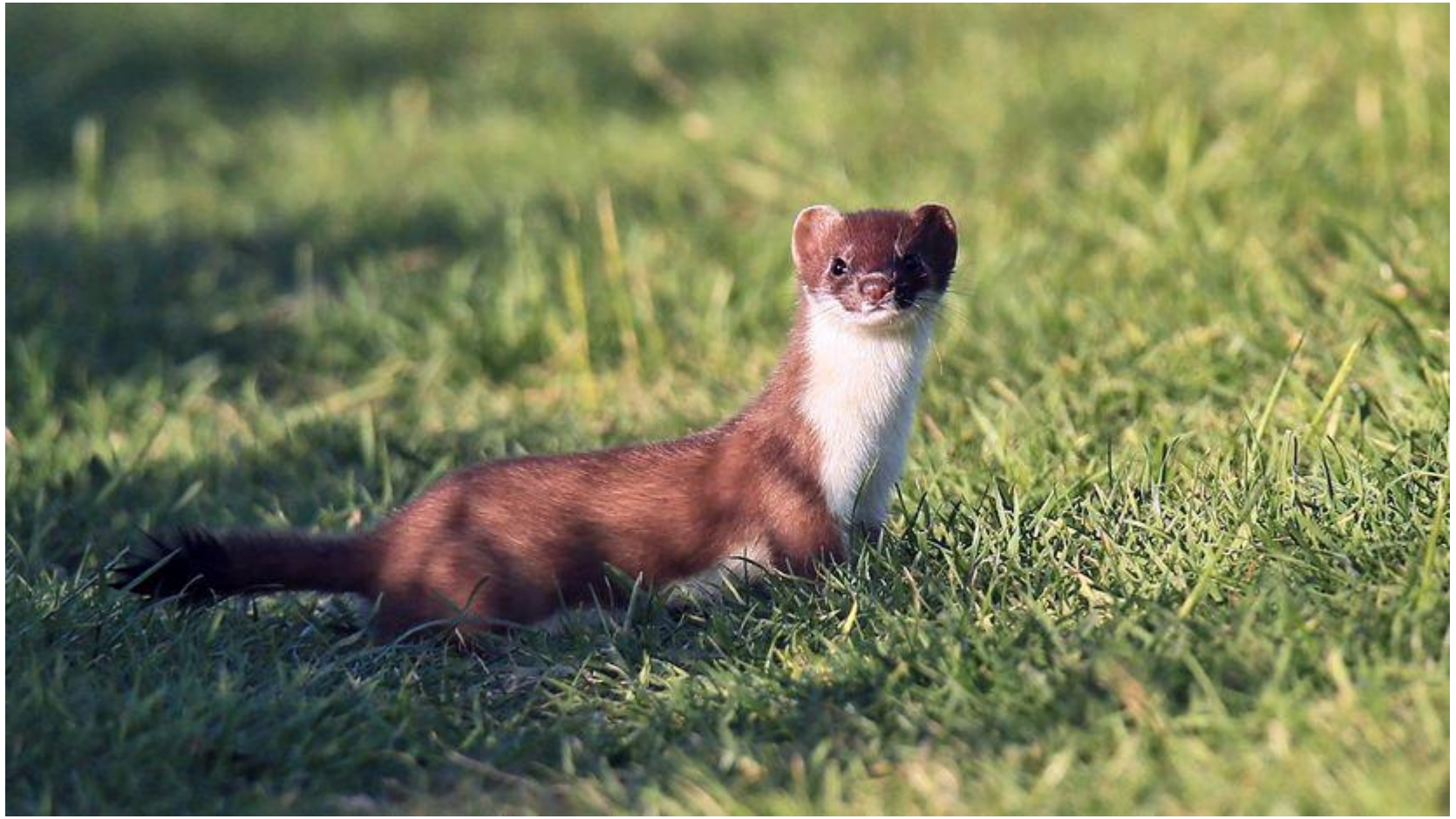
Mij and I remained in London for nearly a month. He would play for hours with a selection of toys, ping-pong balls, marbles, rubber fruit, and a terrapin shell that I had brought back from his native marshes. With the ping-pong ball he invented a game of his own which could keep him engrossed for up to half an hour at a time. A suitcase that I had taken to Iraq had become damaged on the journey home, so that the lid, when closed, remained at a slope from one end to the other. Mij discovered that if he placed the ball on the high end it would run down the length of the suitcase. He would dash around to the other end to ambush its arrival, hide from it, crouching, to spring up and take it by surprise, grab it and trot off with it to the high end once more.

IV

Outside the house I exercised him on a lead, precisely as if he had been a dog. Mij quickly developed certain compulsive habits on these walks in the London streets, like the rituals of children who on their way to and from school must place their feet squarely on the centre of each paving block; must touch every seventh upright of the iron railings, or pass to the outside of every second lamp post. Opposite to my flat was a single-storied primary school, along whose frontage ran a low wall some two feet high. On his way home, but never on his way out, Mij would tug me to this wall, jump on to it, and gallop the full length of its thirty yards, to the hopeless distraction both of pupils and of staff within.

IV

It is not, I suppose, in any way strange that the average Londoner should not recognise an otter, but the variety of guesses as to what kind of animal this might be came as a surprise to me. Otters belong to a comparatively small group of animals called Mustellines, shared by the badger, mongoose, weasel, stoat, mink and others. I faced a continuous barrage of conjectural questions that sprayed all the Mustellines but the otter; more random guesses hit on ‘a baby seal’ and ‘a squirrel.’ ‘Is that a walrus, mister?’ reduced me to giggles, and outside a dog show I heard ‘a hippo’. A beaver, a bear cub, a leopard — one, apparently, that had changed its spots — and a ‘brontosaur’; Mij was anything but an otter.



IV

But the question for which I awarded the highest score came from a labourer digging a hole in the street. I was still far from him when he laid down his tool, put his hands on his hips, and began to stare. As I drew nearer I saw his expression of surprise and affront, as though he would have me know that he was not one upon whom to play jokes. I came abreast of him; he spat, glared, and then growled out, “Here, Mister — what is that supposed to be?”

Thank You