

THE SERIAL GARDEN

The Complete Armitage
Family Stories

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virago

PRELUDE

Once upon a time two people met, fell in love, and got married. Their names were Mr and Mrs Armitage. While they were on their honeymoon, staying at a farm near the Sussex coast, they often spent whole days on the beach, which at that point was reached by a path over a high shingle ridge. The sea was beautifully empty, the weather was beautifully warm, and the beach was beautifully peaceful.

One hot, sleepy afternoon the Armitages had been bathing and were lying on the shingle afterwards, sunning themselves, when Mrs Armitage said,

‘Darling, are you awake?’

Her husband snored, and then said, ‘Eh? Whatsay, darling?’

‘This business of living happily ever after,’ she said rather thoughtfully, ‘it sounds all right but – well – what do we actually do with ourselves all the time?’

‘Oh,’ Mr Armitage said yawning. ‘Spouse I go to the office every day and you look after the house and cook dinner – that sort of thing?’

'I see. You don't think,' she said doubtfully, 'that sounds a little *dull*?'

'Dull? Certainly not.' He went back to sleep again. But his wife turned restlessly onto her stomach and scooped with her fingers among the smooth, rattling brown and yellow and white and grey pebbles, which were all warm and smelled of salt.

Presently she exclaimed, 'Oh!'

'Whassamarrer?' Mr Armitage mumbled.

'I've found a stone with a hole.' She held up her finger with the stone fitting neatly over it – a round white chalk-stone with a hole in the middle.

'Markable,' said her husband without opening his eyes.

'When I was little,' Mrs Armitage said, 'I used to call those wishing-stones.'

'Mmm.'

She rolled onto her back again and admired the white stone fitting so snugly on her finger.

'I wish we'll live in a beautiful house in a beautiful village with a big garden and a field and at least one ghost,' she said sleepily.

'That's Uncle Cuthbert's house,' her husband said. 'He's just left it to me. Meant to tell you.'

'And I wish we'll have two children called Mark and Harriet with cheerful energetic natures who will never mope or sulk or get bored. And I hope lots of interesting and unusual things will happen to them. It would be nice if they had a fairy godmother, for instance,' she went on dreamily.

'Here, hold on!' muttered her husband.

'And a few magic wishes. And a phoenix or something out of the ordinary for a pet.'

'Whoa, wait a minute! Be a bit distracting, wouldn't it, all those things going on? Never know what to expect next! And what would the neighbours think?'

'Bother the neighbours! Well,' she allowed, 'we could have a special day for interesting and unusual things to happen – say, Mondays. But not *always* Mondays, and not *only* Mondays, or that would get a bit dull too.'

'You don't really believe in that stone, do you?' Mr Armitage said anxiously.

'Only half.'

'Well how about taking it off, now, and throwing it in the sea, before you wish for anything else?'

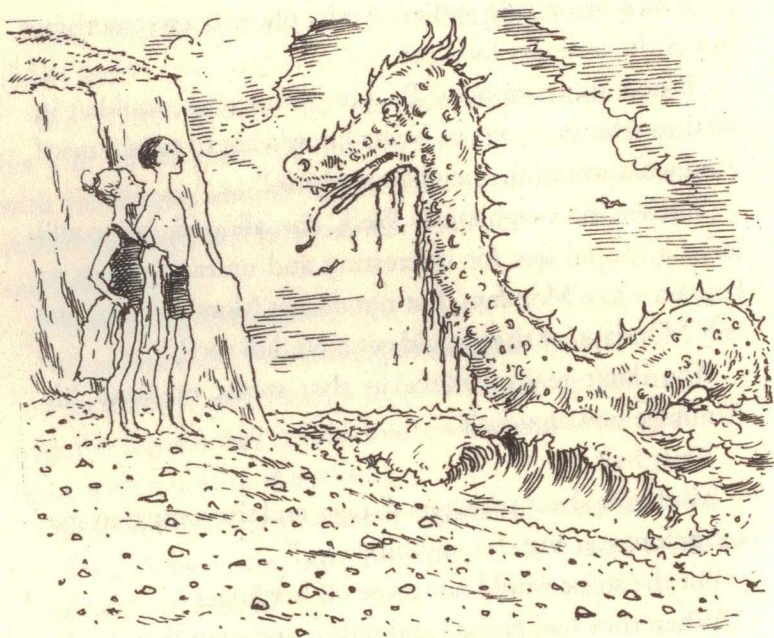
But the stone would not come off her finger.

When they had pushed and pulled and tugged until her finger was beginning to be a bit sore, Mrs Armitage said, 'We'd better go back to the farm. Mrs Tulliver will get it off with soap, or butter. And you're getting as red as a lobster.'

When they reached the top of the shingle ridge, Mrs Armitage turned round and looked at the wide expanse of peaceful, silky, grey-blue sea.

'It's beautiful,' she sighed, 'very beautiful. But it would be nice to see something come out of it, once in a way. Like the sea-serpent.'

No sooner had she spoken those words than a huge, green, gnarled, shining, horny head came poking out of the sea. It was all covered with weeds and bumps and barnacles, like the bottom of some old, old ship. And it was followed



by miles and miles and *miles* of body, and it stared at them with two pale, oysterish eyes and opened a mouth as large as Wookey Hole.

With great presence of mind Mrs Armitage said, 'Not today, thank you. Sorry you've been troubled. Down, sir! Heel. Go home now, good serpent, I've got nothing for you.'

With a sad, wailing hoot, like a ship's siren, the monster submerged again.

'For heaven's sake!' said Mr Armitage. 'The sooner we get that stone off your finger, the better it will be.'

They walked on quite fast across the four fields between

the beach and the farm. Every now and then Mrs Armitage opened her mouth to speak, and whenever she did so, Mr Armitage kindly but firmly clapped his hand over it to stop her.

Outside the farm they met four-year-old Vicky Tulliver, swinging on the gate and singing one of the songs she was always making up:

*'Two white ducks and
Two white hens
Two white turkeys sitting on a fence—'*

'Do you know where your Mummy is?' Mr Armitage asked.

Vicky stopped singing long enough to say, 'In the kitchen,' so the Armitages went there and Mrs Tulliver gave them a knob of beautiful fresh butter to loosen the stone. But it still wouldn't come off. So they tried soap and water, olive oil, tractor oil, clotted cream, and neat's foot oil. And still the stone would not come off.

'Deary me, what can we try next?' said Mrs Tulliver. 'Your poor finger's all red and swole.'

'Oh, goodness, I wish it would come off,' sighed Mrs Armitage. And then, of course, she felt it loosen its hold at once. And just before she slipped it off, she breathed one last request. 'Dear stone, please don't let me ever be bored with living happily ever after.'

'Well!' said Mrs Tulliver, looking at the stone. 'Did you ever, then! Vicky, you've got the littlest fingers, 'spose you

take and drop that stone in the well, afore it sticks on any other body the same way.'

So Vicky took the white stone and hung it on her tiny forefinger, where it dangled loosely, and she went out to the well singing,

'Two white heifers
Two white goats
Two white sheep an'
Two white shoats
Two white geese an'
Two white ponies
Two white puppies
Two white coneys
Two white ducks an'
Two white hens
Two white turkeys
Sitting on the fence—
Two white kittens
Sitting in the sun
I wish I had 'em
Every one!'

And with that she tossed the white stone in the well.

'Deary me,' said Mrs Tulliver, looking out the kitchen window into the farmyard. 'Snow in July, then?'

But of course it wasn't snow. It was all the white creatures Vicky had wished for, pecking and fluttering and frisking and flapping and mooing. Mr Tulliver was quite astonished

when he came home from haymaking, and as for Vicky, she thought it was her birthday and Easter and Christmas and August Bank Holiday all rolled into one.

But Mr and Mrs Armitage packed their cases and caught a train and went home to Uncle Cuthbert's house, where they settled down to begin living happily ever after.

And they were never, never bored ...