

## HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



### 5. The Old Woman Who Lived on the Canal

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In front of the White House with the Green Blinds by the Side of the Road was the Canal; and beyond the Canal the River. They always flowed along side by side, and Marmaduke thought they were like two brothers. The Canal was the older brother, it was always so sure and steady and ready for work. It flowed steadily and evenly and carried the big canal-boats down to the Sea. The River also flowed towards the Sea, but it wasn't at all steady, and never quiet. It was indeed like the younger brother, ever ready for play, although, as a matter of fact, it had been there long before the Canal had been even thought of by the men who built it. But thousands of years couldn't make that River grow old. It was full of frolicsome ripples that gleamed in the sun, and of rapids and waterfalls. Here it would flow swiftly, and there almost stop as if it wanted to fall asleep. And every once in a while it would dart swiftly like small boys or dogs chasing butterflies. Sometimes it would leap over the stones or, at the dam, tumble headlong in sheets of silver.

Little fish and big loved to play in its waters. Of course they swam in the Canal too, but life was lazier there and the fish, like Marmaduke, seemed to prefer the River. There were pickerel and trout and catfish and eels, and in the Spring the great shad would come in from the Sea and journey up to the still cool pools to hatch out their millions of children.

They looked very inviting this morning, the River and the Canal, and Marmaduke decided he would take a stroll. He whistled to Wienerwurst, who was always the best company in the world, and the little dog came leaping and barking and wagging his tail, glad to be alive and about in such lovely weather, and on they went by the side of the Canal.

They went along very slowly, for it is a mistake to walk too fast on a Spring morning—one misses so many things.

Now and then a big fish would leap out of the River, it felt so happy, and in the little harbours under the banks of the Canal the scuttle-bugs went skimming, skimming, like swift little tugboats at play. In the fields on the other side of the road a meadowlark sang; swallows twittered overhead; and in the grass at his feet the dandelions glowed like the round gold shields of a million soldiers. Yes, altogether it was a wonderful day.

Marmaduke picked a great bouquet of the dandelions—for Mother—then he looked up the towpath. He could see the Red Schoolhouse, and, not so far away, the Lock of the Canal. He was very glad it was Saturday. It was far too nice to stay indoors.

Just then he had a great piece of good luck, for a big boat came by, a canal-boat, shaped like a long wooden shoe. It had no sails and no smokestacks, either, so it had no engine to make it go. It was drawn by two mules who walked on shore quite a distance ahead of it. A long thick rope stretched from the collars of the mules to the bow of the boat. A little boy walked behind the mules, yelling to them and now and then poking them with a long pole

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to make them go faster. My, how they pulled and tugged on that rope! They had to, for it was a pretty big load, that boat. And it had a big hole in it laden with black shiny coal—tons and tons of it!

Just behind the coal was a clothes-line with scores of little skirts and pairs of pants on it, and behind that, a little house with many children running in and out of the door. A round fat rosy woman with great big arms was calling to the children to “take care,” and a man stood at the stern with his hand on the tiller. He had a red shirt on and in his mouth a pipe which Marmaduke could smell a long way off.

The little boy waited until the stern came by so he could see the name of the boat. There it was now, painted in big letters, right under the tiller. He spelled it out, first “Mary,” then “Ellen”—“Mary Ellen—” a pretty name, he thought.

The Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe, and the Round Fat Rosy Woman With the Big Arms, and all the children waved their hands to Marmaduke and he waved back, then hurried ahead, Wienerwurst trotting alongside, to catch up with the boy who was driving the mules.

“Llo!” said he to the boy, but the boy paid no attention at all, just “licked up” his mules. But Marmaduke didn’t mind this rudeness. He thought that probably the boy was too busy to be sociable, and he trotted along with the mules and watched their long funny ears go wiggle-waggle when a fly buzzed near them. But they never paused or stopped, no matter what annoyed them, but just tugged and strained in their collars, pulling the long rope that pulled the boat that carried the coal that would make somebody’s fire to cook somebody’s supper some day down by the Sea.

For a long time Marmaduke trotted alongside the boy and the mules, not realizing at all how far he had come. Once or twice he looked back at the “Mary Ellen” and the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe, and the little house on the deck. He wished he could go on board and steer the “Mary Ellen,” and play in that little house, it looked so cute. The Round Fat Rosy Woman was coming out of it now with a pan of water which she threw in the Canal; and the little children were running all over the deck, almost tumbling in the water.

After quite a journey they drew near the Lock, a great place in the Canal like a harbour, with two pairs of gates, as high as a house, at each end, to keep the water in the Lock.

Outside one pair of gates the water was low; outside the others, which were near him, the water was high; and Marmaduke knew well what those great gates would do. The pair at the end where the water was high would open and the canal boat would float in the Lock and rest there for a while like a ship in harbour. Then those gates would shut tight, and the man who tended the Lock would open the gates at the end where the water was low. And the water would rush out and go down, down in the Lock, carrying the boat with it until it was on a level with the low part of the Canal. And the boat at last would float out of the harbour of the Lock and away on its journey to the Sea.

But all this hadn’t happened yet. There was much work to be done before all was ready.

Now the boat had stopped in front of the high pair of gates. The Man With the Red Shirt

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and the Pipe shouted to the boy who drove the mules, without taking the pipe out of his mouth. The great towrope was untied and the mules rested while the man who tended the Lock swung the high gates open with some machinery that creaked in a funny way, and the “Mary Ellen” glided in the harbour of the Lock.

Then the man who tended the Lock went to the gates at the lower end. There were more shouts and those gates opened too. The water rushed out of the Lock into the lower part of the Canal, and down, down, went the boat. And down, down, went the deck and the little house on it, and down, down, went the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe, and the Round Fat Rosy Woman With the Great Arms, and all the children. Marmaduke started to count them. He couldn’t have done that before, they ran around too fast. But now they stood still, watching the water fall and their boat as it sank. Yes, there were thirteen—he counted twice to make sure.

Now the boat had sunk so low that Marmaduke was afraid it would disappear forever, with all the children on it. But there was no danger, for when the water in the Lock was even with the water on the lower side of the Canal it stopped falling, and the “Mary Ellen” stopped, too. At least, there was no danger for the children, but there was for Master Marmaduke, he had leaned over so far, watching that boat go down, down, down.

All-of-a-sudden there was a splash. It was certainly to be expected that one of the thirteen children had fallen in, but no!— It—was—Marmaduke!

Down, down, down, he sank in the gurgly brown water. Then he came up, spluttering and choking.

“Help, help!” he cried.

Then under he went again.

But the Round Fat Rosy Woman had seen him.

“Quick, Hiram!” she shouted to her husband in a voice that sounded like a man’s, “there’s a boy fallen overboard!”

“Where?” asked the man at the tiller, still keeping the pipe in his mouth.

She pointed into the brown water.

“Right there—there’s where he went down.”

Perhaps the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe was so used to having his children fall into the coal, or the Canal, or something, that he didn’t think it was a serious matter, for he came to the side of the “Mary Ellen” very slowly, just as Marmaduke was coming up for the third time.

And that is a very important time, for, they say, if you go down after that you won’t come up ‘til you’re dead. Whether it was true or not, Marmaduke didn’t know, for he had never been drowned before, and no one who had, had ever come back to tell him about it. Anyway, he wasn’t thinking much, only throwing his arms around in the water, trying vainly to keep afloat.

The Round Fat Rosy Woman grew quite excited, as well she might, and she shouted again to the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe:

“Don’t stand there like a wooden Injun in front of a cigar-store. Hustle or the boy’ll

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drown!”

Then he seemed to wake up, for he ran to the gunwale of the boat, and he jumped over with his shoes and all his clothes on. And, strange to say, he still kept that pipe in his mouth. However, that didn't matter so very much, for he grabbed Marmaduke by the collar with one hand and swam towards the “Mary Ellen” with the other. The woman threw a rope over the side; he grasped it with his free hand, and the woman drew them up—she certainly was strong—and in the shake of a little jiffy they were standing on board, safe but dripping a thousand little rivers from their clothes on the deck. The man didn't seem to mind that a bit, but was quite disturbed to find that his pipe had gone out.

“Come, Mother,” said he to the Round Fat Rosy Woman, “get us some dry duds and a match.”

And quick as a wink she hustled them into the little house which they called a cabin, and gave Marmaduke a pair of blue overalls and a little blue jumper which belonged to one of the thirteen children. Of course, she found the right size, with so many to choose from. His own clothes, she hung on the line, with all the little pairs of pants and the skirts, to dry in the breeze.

Then she put the kettle on the cook stove and in another jiffy she was pouring out the tea.

“M—m—m—m,” said Marmaduke. He meant to say,— “Make mine ‘cambric,’ please,” for he knew his mother wouldn't have wanted him to take regular tea, but his Forty White Horses galloped so he couldn't make himself heard.

“There, little boy,” said the Round Fat Rosy Woman, “don't talk. Just wrap yourself in this blanket and drink this down, and you'll feel better.”

It did taste good even if it was strong, and it warmed him all the way down under the blue jumper, and the Forty White Horses stopped their galloping, and while the men were hitching the mules up again, and the “Mary Ellen” was drifting through the lower pair of gates out of the Lock, he fell fast asleep.

He must have slept for a whole lot of jiffies. When he woke up at last, he looked around, wondering where he could be, the place looked so strange and so different from his room at home. Then he remembered,—he was far from home, in the little cabin of the “Mary Ellen.” It was a cosy place, with all the little beds for the children around the cabin. And these beds were not like the ones he usually slept in. They were little shelves on the wall, two rows of them, one row above the other. It was funny, he thought, to sleep on a shelf, but that was what the thirteen children had to do. He was lying on a shelf himself just then, wrapped in a blanket.

The Round Fat Rosy Woman was bending over the stove. It was a jolly little stove, round and fat and rosy like herself, and it poked its pipe through the house just above his head. In the pot upon it, the potatoes were boiling, boiling away, and the little chips of bacon were curling up in the pan.

Outside, he could see all the little skirts and the little pairs of pants, dancing gaily in the wind. He could hear the children who owned those skirts and pairs of pants running all

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over the boat. The patter of their feet sounded like raindrops on the deck above him.

They seemed to be forever getting into trouble, those thirteen children, and the Round Fat Rosy Woman was forever running to the door of the little house and shouting to one or the other.

“Take care, Maintop!” she would call to one boy as she pulled him back from falling into the Canal.

“Ho there, Bowsprit!” she would yell to another, as she fished him out of the coal.

They were certainly a great care, those children, and all at once Marmaduke decided he knew who their mother must be. The boat was shaped just like a huge shoe and she surely had so many children she didn’t know what to do. Yes, she must be the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, only the shoe must have grown into a canal boat.

He wondered about the funny names she called them.

“Are those their real names?” he asked, as he lay on his little shelf.

“Yes,” she said, “my husband out there with the pipe was a sailor once, on the deep blue sea. But he had to give it up after he was married, ‘cause he couldn’t take his family on a ship. We had a lot of trouble finding names for the children started to call ‘em Mary and Daniel and such, but the names ran out. So, seeing my husband was so fond of the sea, we decided to call ‘em after the parts of a ship, not a canal boat, but the sailing ships that go out to sea—that is, all but Squall.

“Now that’s Jib there, driving the mules, and that’s Bowsprit—the one all black from the coal. Cutwater’s the girl leaning over the stern; Maintop, the one with the three pigtales; and Mizzen, the towhead playing with your dog.”

“And what are the names of the rest?” Marmaduke asked, thinking all this very interesting.

“Oh!” she replied. “I’ll have to stop and think, there’s so many of them. Now there’s Bul’ark and Gunnel—they’re pretty stout; the twins, Anchor and Chain; Squall, the crybaby; Block, the fattest of all; Topmast, the tallest and thinnest; and Stern, the littlest. He came last, so we named him that, seeing it’s the last part of a ship.

“Now, let me think—have I got ‘em all?” and she counted on her fingers,—“Jib, Bowsprit, Cutwater, Maintop, Mizzen, Bul’ark, Gunnel, Anchor, Chain, Block, Squall, Topmast, and Stern. Yes, that surely makes thirteen, doesn’t it? I’m always proud when I can remember ‘em.”

By this time the potatoes and the bacon and coffee seemed about ready, so she went out on deck, and Marmaduke slid off his little shelf bed and followed her to see where she was going. On deck was a great bar of iron with another beside it. She took up one bar of iron and with it struck the other—twelve times. The blows sounded way out over the Canal and over the fields and far away, like a mighty fire-alarm, and all the children, that is all but Jib, who was driving the mules and would get his dinner later, came running into the cabin.

A great clatter of tin plates and knives and forks there was, and very nice did those potatoes and that bacon taste.

And it didn’t take long for them to finish that meal, either. Then they went out on deck.

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The mules were pulling and pulling, and the boat was sailing on and on towards the Sea. They passed by so many places—lots of houses and lots of farms, the Red Schoolhouse and Reddy Toms' house, and Sammy Soapstone's, and the funny place where Fatty lived, and the pigs, fat like himself, ran all over the yard.

Fatty and Sammy were playing on the shore at that very moment. He waved to them and they waved back, but they didn't know they were waving to their old playmate Marmaduke, he was so mixed up with all the children of the woman who lived on the canal boat that looked just like a shoe. How Sammy and Sophy and Fatty would have envied him if they had only known it was he sailing away to the Sea!

But he never arrived there, after all—at least he didn't on that voyage. For, you see, after he had had a wonderful time, running all over the deck with the thirteen children, and looking down into the big hole where they kept the shiny coal, and exploring the little house on the deck, the Round Fat Rosy Woman and her Husband With the Red Shirt and the Pipe had a talk together.

"We must send him back home," said she, "or his folks'll be scared out of their wits."

The man took a few puffs on his pipe, which always seemed to help him in thinking, then replied,

"We might let him off at the Landing it's up the towpath a piece. We kin find someone to give him a lift."

"That's the best plan," she agreed, "there's the Ruralfree'livery now."

And she pointed to the shore where the horse and wagon of the postman were coming up the road.

"What ho, Hi! Heave to!" she called, raising her hands to her mouth and shouting through them just like a man, "here's a passenger for you, first class."

"Mr. Ruralfree'liv'ry" shook his whip at them, then hollered "Whoa!" and stopped the old horse; and Jib hollered "Whoa!" and stopped his mules, right at the Landing.

Then Marmaduke said "Goodbye." It took him some time, for there was the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe; and the Round Fat Rosy Woman; and Jib, Bowsprit, Cutwater, Mizzen, Maintop, Bul'ark, Gunnel, Anchor, Chain, Block, Squall, Topmast, and Stern; the "Mary Ellen"; and the mules, to say "Goodbye" to. Just before he went ashore the Round Fat Rosy Woman gave him his clothes back, for they were all dry by that time, and she stuffed something in his pocket besides. And what do you think it was? A toy anchor and chain that would just fit the "White Swan," the ship the Toyman had made him.

So he rode home with Mr. Ruralfree'liv'ry and all his sacks of mail. But he kept turning his head for a long while to watch the Man With the Red Shirt and the Pipe, and the Round Fat Rosy Woman, and the Thirteen Children, and all the little pairs of pants that seemed to be waving farewell to him. But soon the "Mary Ellen" drifted out of sight. She was a good boat, the "Mary Ellen."

He almost felt like crying, for he would have liked to have gone on that voyage to see the rest of the world. But, after all, he had seen a great deal of it, and he had that anchor and chain.