

For Emile,
remembering with great fondness those long hot summers
when you were very young and you would ask me again
and again to tell you another "Gaston story",
lots of love, Dad.
M.R.

For my dad.
V.S.



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either
the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously.

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THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES OF GASTON LE DOG

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CHAPTER 1

In which I tell you about the lovely life I used to live and a desperate urge I had to go somewhere else.

I'm a dog who's done some amazing things in my time, you know. I'm Gaston le Dog.

Years ago, here in France, I lived in that barn over there. I was happy in there and I had good friends. Down on the ground there were the Mice. We'd have fun chasing each other all over the place. Up in the roof, there was Bat, clinging on to the tiles. And then, one summer, House Martin arrived. She made her nest out of mud, flying in and out of that open stone window you can see there. The Mice – we call them Souris. Bat – we call him Chauve-Souris – a bald mouse! Fancy that! The Mice thought that was very funny. House Martin, well, we call her Hironnelle de Fenêtre, but usually just Hironnelle.

Hironnelle was my best friend here. She was so kind and caring. You see I don't like flies – mouches. I don't like the way they come buzzing round my eyes and mouth. Lovely Hironnelle would say, "Don't worry, Gaston, I will swoop to and fro near you and I will catch those flies and they won't bother you any more."

That was nice of her, don't you think?

Sometimes, wasps – guêpes – flew in, and I didn't like them either. They didn't mean me any harm but if by mistake I bumped into one of them, they'd get angry and try to sting me. I don't like that. I don't like that at all.

Again, lovely Hironnelle would say, "Don't worry Gaston, I will swoop down and catch the wasps and they won't bother you any more."



Ha! That was good of her as well.

And once or twice, and this is the worst, hornets – frelons – would fly in. For some reason, my barn was on a route that hornets liked. Late at night, I'd hear a far-off rumble, sounding something like an old aeroplane, getting nearer and nearer. Then into the barn a hornet flew till it hit a beam. At that, it would start to chew the beam! Really! You could hear the sound as it nibbled away: *pikk-pikk-pikk*.



But sometimes the hornet missed the beam and hit me instead! Now, I don't know if you know, but hornets have a big, bad sting, and one thing you don't want to do to a hornet is make it cross. For one, it might hurt. For another, a hornet is so clever that when it gets cross, it makes a kind of perfume that, when other hornets smell it, they come flying over to see what's bothering the



first hornet. If you're not careful, you can have a whole host of them on to you. Some nights, I was worried that as I dozed off, a hornet would fly in through the open window and hit me.

But my lovely Hironnelle, she said, "Don't you worry about hornets, Gaston! While you're asleep, I'm wide awake on a beam, keeping an eye out. I'll swoop across when a hornet gets in. My shadow is enough to send it away. You won't be bothered by it ever again."

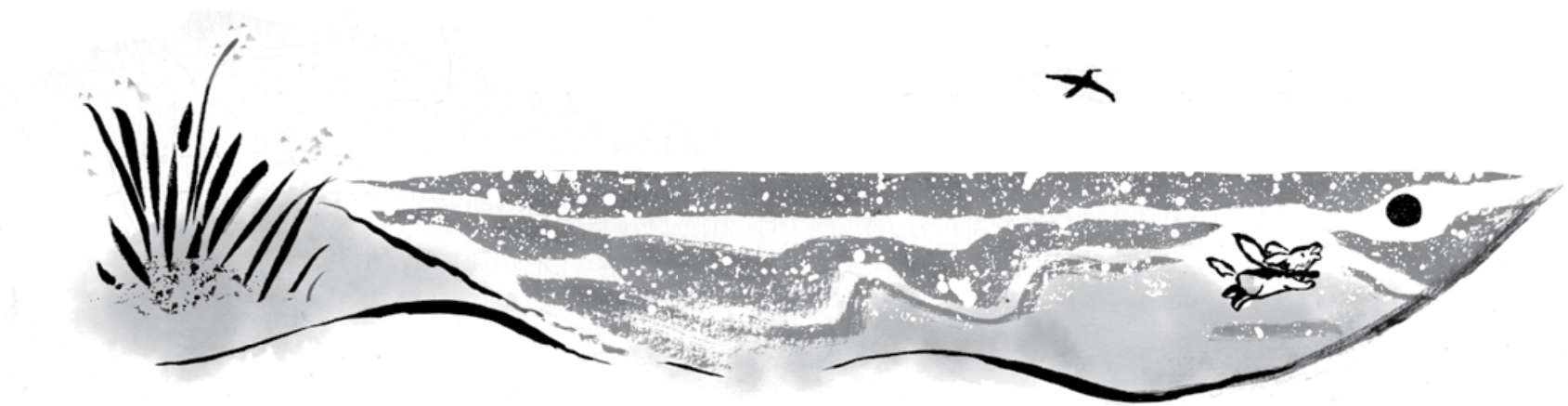
You see how she was? Just as I said, so kind.

I wanted to do kind things for her too, but it's not easy thinking of kind things for a house martin. In the end, she said that the kindest thing I could do was sleep near her house, because it brought the flies near by. And there was nothing she liked more than having flies to eat.



So, we got along well. Life was good.

But then – I don't know what it was. Call it a question, if you like. Or call it a voice in my ear, perhaps.



Let me explain. You see, many, many years earlier I had once been to the seaside. I remembered there was a beautiful beach; a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful beach, with yellowy-white sand that stretched for miles beside a beautiful blue sea. And there were sand-dunes, little hills of sand at the side of the beach, where I scampered up and down, running and chasing. I loved that. Someone was throwing a ball, and I chased after it, with my fast young legs, fetching and carrying, again and again.

It was so lovely that there was this moment, in the barn, when it suddenly came to me: I want to see that beach again. I want to see that beautiful blue sea again. It was as if the beach and the sea were calling to me ... calling to me ... calling to me.

Sometimes, I would come out of the barn, come into this field, up that little slope and sniff the air – *sniff, sniff, sniff* – and I would smell the sea. Or I thought I could. I would breathe it in and I could see the sea in my mind, and remember that delicious day on the beach and the dunes from long, long ago.

And I wanted to go back. I started to want to go back more than anything else in the world.

But how could I leave my lovely friend, Hironnelle?

I started to make up a speech I could give to her, to explain what I wanted to do.

“The thing is, Hironnelle,” I would say to myself, “I have to follow my nose. I can feel the seaside calling me. Every day I get a tiny, tiny whiff of the salt water and picture the gulls circling in the sky, the blue waves topped with little white curls, the hot yellow sand, the curving sand-dunes and me chasing along... It’s like a heaven that I just have to see. And the thing is, Hironnelle,” I would say, “I won’t be gone long. I promise, I promise, I promise. It can’t be far. I’ll hurry along – because as you know, I can hurry if I want to. I’ll spend a few minutes there and then come hurrying back. And everything will be just as it was.”

I practised this speech in my mind. Over and over again, till I was sure that I knew it off by heart. Then one night, just before I settled down in the corner of the barn,

I said it. The whole speech, just as I had learned it.

She listened and listened and listened. All the way through. Then she said, "Very well. I can see, Gaston, this matters to you more than anything else in the whole world. If you don't go, it will eat you up: you will become sad. And then sadder and sadder, till you won't even be able to get up in the morning. And if I said, 'No, don't go, don't leave me', you would blame me. You would say that I had stopped you doing the one thing you wanted to do most. You have to go. To tell you the truth, I know what it feels like to be far, far from home and..."

But I'm very sorry to say, I interrupted her and I blurted out, "That's so kind. Thank you." And I didn't ever hear what she was going to say. Instead I dived in with, "But how will you manage for flies?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that," she said. "I get about. I can always find flies. As I swoop and swerve about, I find flies. I'll be all right, believe me. Swooping and swerving..."

"Very well," I said. And I felt good that she was so sure that everything would be fine for her. I straightened myself out and said, "I will go first thing in the morning. I wouldn't be surprised if I was back by the evening. Or perhaps by the next day."

"Yes, mmm, yes," Hironnelle said in a voice that sounded just a bit doubtful. That "mmm". I heard it in my head over and over again.



CHAPTER 2

In which I tell you about who I met at the beginning of my journey.

In the morning, the very, very, very early morning, while it was still just a bit dark, while the sun wasn't even ready to peep over the end of the field and the air was fresh, I got up to go in search of the beach.

I put my head out of the barn, and everything smelled new.

"Goodbye, dear Hironnelle," I whispered.

"Goodbye, dear Gaston," she said. "See you soon."

"Yes indeed," I said. "I'll be back soon."

And I trotted out the door and into the field. I glanced back over my shoulder. For a moment I wondered whether I really should go. What if something bad happened to Hironnelle, and I wasn't there to help? But the sea was calling me and I put my head and my nose in front of me and got going.



I was only a few paces away from the barn when I heard a scratchy, crinkly noise in the grass.

"Hey Gaston," a voice said, "is that you?"

"It's me," I said. "Gaston le Dog. Who's that?"

"Me!" said the voice in a snorty, snuffly way.

I looked down and I could see it was Hérission le Hedgehog.

He snorted again.

"Did you just burp?" I said.



"No," said Hérission. "Well, yes."

"I thought so," I said. "It's OK, I don't mind."

"Where are you going?" Hérission asked. "You're not usually up at this time."

"I'm going to the beach," I said.

Hérission snorted again.

"Did you just burp again?"

"No!" he said. He sounded cross this time. "I did not. I snorted. It's what I do. I snort. But it was my way of saying, 'The beach? The beach? How do you think you're going to get to the beach? And what do you want to go there for anyway? Aren't you just fine where you are in your barn with your mates Bat, the Mice, Hironnelle? The beach is miles away, isn't it?'"

"Did your snorty noise mean all that?" I said.

"Yep," said Hérission.

"Well," I said, "it's just something that I have to do. Call it hunting my dream. But hey, I can't hang about here talking to you or I'll never get going. I want to get to the beach and back today, so I can get back to the barn and my dear friend Hironnelle."

"The beach, you say," said Hérission. "La plage."

He said the word in a lovely, spongy sort of a way, that made it sound all the more beautiful. *La plage*. It soothed me just to hear it.

"Yes!" I said. "I told you!"

"Won't you be... Won't you be a bit lonely?" Hérission said.

I paused for a moment. I hadn't thought about that. Here I was whooshing off in a rush, and being lonely just hadn't crossed my mind.

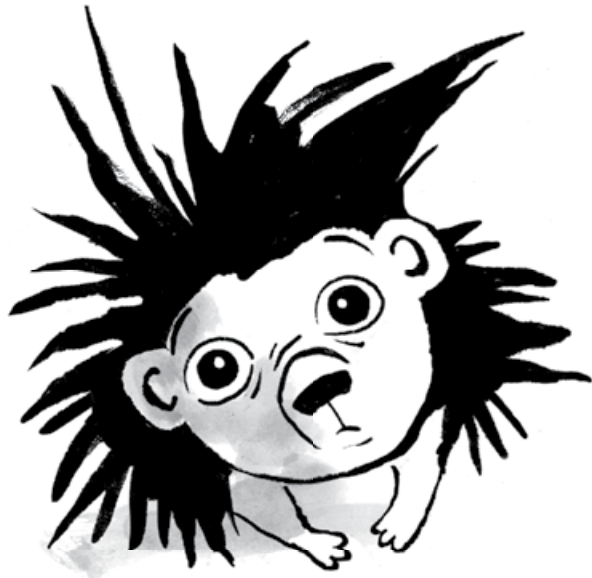
"I don't suppose so," I said. "I mean, I don't know if I suppose so."

"Well," said Hérission, "I don't want to go on any kind of

long journey. And I certainly don't want to go to some old beach, full of sand. But if you thought you might get a bit lonely on the way, I wouldn't mind, you know, giving you a bit of company. If you wanted. If you like."

I looked at Hérissou. Hérissou looked at me. I looked at his little legs and I thought of them running along beside me. I was just about to say, "It might be far" or "I'm not sure that you'll be able to keep up", when I looked into his eyes and I saw something.

Do you know what he was saying? He was actually begging me to take him with me. He couldn't say that he really, really, really wanted to come, because mostly he just snuffled and snorted. But I could see it.



"Do you know what?" I said. "It would be great if you came to the beach with me. As we walk along, we can sing songs and look out for things. Are you good at looking out for things?"

"Oh, I'm terrific at looking out for things," said Hérissou in a very excited voice. "And when they're dangerous things, I roll up in a ball, with all my spikes pointing outwards, and the dangerous things just give up and go away."

"Oh," I said, "that's very useful because we might meet some dangerous things. If they're really dangerous they might stop us from getting to the beach."

"Like what?" asked Hérissou.

"Hornets," I said straightaway.

"Oh yes. Them," said Hérissou. "Frelons. Don't worry, Gaston. I'll deal with them."

I felt really very good when I heard that. I was glad that I had thought that it was a good idea to bring Hérissou along with me. (Or did he think that?)

"Very well, Hérissou, allons-y, let's go!"

And Hérissou made his snuffly, snorty noise, got his little legs pumping away underneath him, *patter, patter, patter*, and off we went.