

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

Gallons of Guppies

EVERY afternoon after school Ribsy waited for Henry under a fir tree in the corner of the schoolyard. Four days a week they ran home the shortest way, past the park, up the hill, and through the vacant lot.

On Fridays, however, they walked home the long way round past the Rose City Drugstore, the Supermarket, the Ideal Barber Shop, and the Lucky Dog Pet Shop. At the pet store they stopped while Henry bought two pounds of horsemeat from Mr. Pennycuff.

Henry liked to go to the pet store. The windows were full of puppies and kittens and, just before Easter, rabbits and baby chicks and ducks. Inside there was usually a parrot or monkey and once there had been a deodorized skunk. Henry thought it would be fun to have a skunk following him around, but when he found it cost forty dollars he gave up the idea.

But best of all Henry liked the fish. One side of the store was covered with rows of little tanks. Each aquarium contained green plants that grew under water, snails, and a different kind of tropical fish. Henry always stopped to look into each tank. He liked the dollar-sized black-and-silverstriped angelfish and the inch-long orange moonfish with their velvety fins and tails. He thought the tiny catfish were fun to watch, because they stayed on the bottom of the tanks, rolled their eyes, and used their whisker-like barbels to feel around in the sand for food. Mr. Pennycuff explained that the fish came from all over the world, but most of them came from jungle rivers where the water was warm. That was why they were called tropical fish.

One Friday when Henry went to the pet store he saw a sign that read:

SPECIAL OFFER

1 pair of guppies

fish bowl

1 snail

aquatic plant

package of fish food

ALL FOR 79 CENTS

"Jeepers!" said Henry. "All that for seventy-nine cents!" He looked at the fish in the bowls. Each bowl held one plain silvery-gray fish almost two inches long and one smaller fish with all the colors of the rainbow. "That really is a bargain!"

"It certainly is," agreed Mr. Pennycuff. "Shall I wrap up a pair for you?"

Henry felt around in his pocket. The silver dollar his grandfather had given him was still there. He watched the little rainbow fish chase the silvery fish and decided he had to have a pair of guppies. After all, it was his very own money he was spending. He would keep them on the dresser in his room. They would just stay in his room and swim quietly around in their bowl. He didn't see how his mother could object to two quiet little fish that didn't bark or track in mud or anything.

"I'll take a pair," Henry told Mr. Pennycuff, and watched him fasten waxed paper around the top of the bowl with a rubber band and put it into a bag.

"Now be sure to put the bowl near a heater in cold weather so the fish won't get chilled and catch ick."

"Ick?" said Henry.

"Yes, ick. It's short for *ichthyoplithirius*. When the fish get chilled, they catch ick and are covered with tiny white spots."

"Gosh," said Henry. Maybe there was more to keeping guppies than he thought.

"Oh, don't worry," said Mr. Pennycuff. "They can stand water down to sixty degrees. If it were that cold in the house, you'd have the heat on."

That sounded easy. "How often do I change the water?" asked Henry.

"You shouldn't have to change the water. The snails help keep it clean. Just give the fish a tiny pinch of food once a day. It's only when the fish don't eat all their food or when you have too many fish in a bowl that the water gets dirty." Mr. Pennycuff gave Henry his change.

"I didn't know that," said Henry. "I'm glad you told me. Here, Ribsy." He handed Ribsy his package of horsemeat. The dog took it in his mouth and they left the pet store. "You'll have to carry your meat all the way home today. And don't you stop and try to eat it before we get home, either. It has to last you a few days."

Ribs wagged his tail and trotted on ahead of Henry with his meat. Henry tried to walk without jiggling the package. He didn't want to slosh the guppies any more than he had to. When Ribsy was half a block ahead of Henry, he dropped his package and looked back at Henry. Then he began to tear the paper off the meat.

"Hey! Cut that out!" yelled Henry. He started to run but the water in his fish bowl sloshed and he had to stop.

Just to be safe Ribsy picked up his meat, trotted farther down the sidewalk, and finished tearing off the paper.

"Stop that! You-you-you old dog!" Again Henry tried to run. This time he held the bowl straight out in front of him, but the water still sloshed.

Ribs gobbled part of the meat and then trotted ahead with the rest of it in his mouth. Just as Henry was almost close enough to reach for the meat, Ribsy put on a burst of speed.

"Ribsy! You come here!" The dog ignored Henry. "I'll get you for this!" Henry was really angry now. He set his package of guppies on the sidewalk and ran after his dog. This time Henry caught up with him.

Henry grabbed one end of the meat and pulled. Ribsy, growling deep in his throat, hung onto the other end and pulled. The dog had a better grip on the meat because he could sink his teeth into it. Henry found that raw meat was cold and slippery.

"You let go that meat!"

Ribsy growled more fiercely. He sounded as if he meant it. The harder Henry pulled, the louder Ribsy growled.

Henry was sure Ribsy wouldn't really bite him, but just the same he knew it was not a good idea to annoy any animal when it was eating. Anyway, he couldn't stand there all afternoon playing tug-of-war with a piece of horsemeat. His guppies might get cold.

"All right, you old dog! Go ahead and eat it and see if I care. You'll just have to eat canned dog food the rest of the week." He went back to his guppies while Ribsy wolfed the rest of the meat, licked his chops, and then, with his stomach bulging, followed slowly at Henry's heels the rest of the way home.

When they reached Henry's house on Klickitat Street, Henry opened the door and yelled, "Hey, Mom! Come and see what I bought with the silver dollar Grandpa gave me."

"I'm afraid to look," answered his mother from the kitchen. "What is it this time?" "Fish."

"Fish?" Mrs. Huggins sounded surprised. "Did you want me to cook it for dinner?"

Henry carried his package into the kitchen. "No, Mom, you don't understand. Not dead fish. Live fish swimming around in a bowl of water. They're called guppies."

"Guppies?"

"Yes. Just two little fish. I'll keep them on my dresser and they won't be any trouble at all. They were on sale at the pet shop. They were a bargain. See, Mom?" Henry gently lifted the fish bowl out of the bag.

Mrs. Huggins put down the potato she was peeling. "Why, Henry, what pretty little fish."

"I thought you'd like them." Henry was pleased.

His mother bent closer to the fish bowl. "But, Henry, what are those little dark things in the water?"

"What little dark things?" Henry looked closer.

"Why, they're baby fish," Mrs. Huggins exclaimed. "There must be fifteen or twenty."

"Baby guppies!" Henry was delighted. "Look, Mom, did you ever see such teeny-weeny little fish? Golly, they're so little just about all you can see are their eyes and their tails."

Mrs. Huggins sighed. "Henry, I'm afraid they won't be teeny-weeny little fish very long. They'll grow and then what are you going to do with them?"

"I don't know. I'll ask Dad." Henry was worried. "Maybe he knows about baby guppies."

But when Mr. Huggins came home from work, Henry was disappointed to learn that he knew nothing about little guppies. "Why don't you get a book about guppies from the library?" he suggested.

Mrs. Huggins said there would be time before dinner, so Henry found his library card and he and Ribsby ran all the way to the library.

"Hello, Henry," said the lady in the boys and girls' room at the library. "Have you come for another book about gienats and orges?"

This was a joke between the librarian and Henry. When Henry had first started reading fairy tales by himself he returned a book and asked for another about gienats and orges. He felt a little silly about it now, although he secretly thought gienats and orges sounded better than giants and ogres.

"No, I want a book about guppies," Henry answered. "I have some baby guppies and I don't know how to take care of them."

The librarian found a book on hobbies with a chapter on fish, but it did not tell much about guppies. "Just a minute, Henry," she said. "Maybe there is something in the adult room." She returned with a thick book about tropical fish. It was full of colored pictures. "I'm sure this will help you," she said, "but I'm afraid it's too hard for you to read. I'll let you take it out on your card if you think your mother and father will help you with it."

"Sure, my dad will help me."

The librarian stamped the book on his card and Henry, proud to have a grown-up book stamped on his library card, ran home with it.

After dinner Mr. Huggins sat down to read the fish book while Henry went to his room to watch his guppies. This time he counted thirty-eight babies. After a while his father came in with the book in his hand. "This is a mighty interesting book, Henry, but you're going to need some more fish bowls. According to this book you can't keep so many fish in one bowl."

"But, Dad, where will I get more bowls?" "Maybe we can find something in the basement." So Henry and his father rummaged through the basement until they found a gallon jar Mrs. Huggins used for making dill pickles.

"This should do," said Mr. Huggins. They carried it upstairs and washed it. Mr. Huggins filled it with hot water and carried it into Henry's room. "Now when the water cools we can move some of the little guppies. They can't live in cold water right out of the faucet. They need water that has stood or hot water that has cooled. While it's cooling, we can make a net." He found a piece of wire and bent it into a circle. Mrs. Huggins took an old stocking and sewed it to the wire to make a little fish net.

Henry and his father took turns catching the tiny fish with the net and moving them into the pickle jar. Henry was surprised that such small fish could swim so fast.

The next day and every day after that Henry looked at his guppies the first thing in the

morning. When he came home from school he looked at his guppies before he went into the kitchen for something to eat. His fish grew and grew. As the weeks passed the big guppies had more little guppies. The little guppies grew up to be big guppies and had little guppies of their own. Henry had hundreds of guppies. He couldn't find any more pickle jars so he started using his mother's quart fruit jars. He couldn't keep many fish in a quart of water.

Henry had jars on his dresser. He had them on the table by his bed. He put jars on the floor all around the edge of his room. When he had one row of jars all the way around the floor, he started another row.

"Goodness, Henry," his mother said, "pretty soon you won't be able to walk in here."

"If you keep all your guppies," said his father, "by the end of the year you'll have over a million fish in your bedroom!"

"Golly!" said Henry. "A million fish in my bedroom!" Wouldn't that be something to tell the kids at school!

Henry was glad when summer vacation started. It took him so long to feed his fish that he no longer had time to play with the other children on Klickitat Street. He spent all his allowance on fish food, snails, and plants for his jars. He slept with his windows shut if he thought the nights were going to be cold. He wasn't going to have his fish getting sick if he could help it.

All day long the boys and girls in the neighborhood rang the doorbell and asked to see Henry's fish.

Finally his mother said, "Henry, this can't go on. You must get rid of some of those fish. You'll have to give them to your friends."

Henry liked each fish so much he couldn't decide which one he liked best. They were all so lively, swimming around in their fruit jars. Henry didn't see how he could part with any of them, but now that he was on the third row of jars around his room, he decided to try. He started asking his friends in the neighborhood if they would like to have some fish.

Scooter didn't think he had time to take care of fish. He delivered the *Shopping News* two days a week.

Mary Jane said her mother wouldn't let her have any fish. Mary Jane's mother was very particular.

Robert said he would rather come over and look at Henry's fish than take care of guppies of his own.

Finally Beezus said she would take one fish. Beezus' real name was Beatrice, but her little sister Ramona called her Beezus and now everyone else did too. Beezus and Ramona already had a cat, three white rats, and a turtle, so one fish wouldn't make much difference. It took Henry a long time to decide which guppy to give her.

Then one morning Mrs. Huggins came home from the Supermarket with three lugs of apricots in the back seat of the car. When Henry helped her carry them into the house, she said,

"Henry, run down to the basement and bring up about twenty quart jars. These apricots are so ripe I want to start canning them right away."

Henry went down to the basement. He did not come back with twenty quart jars. He came back with four. "These are all I could find, Mom," he said.

"Oh, dear, and one of them has a crack." Mrs. Huggins looked at the three lugs of apricots. Then she looked at Henry. "Henry," she said, and he knew from the way she said it she meant whatever she was going to say, "go to your room and bring me seventeen quart jars. And don't bring me any jars with guppies in them, either."

"Yes, Mom," said Henry in a meek voice. He went into his room and looked at the jars of guppies. He guessed he did have too many fish. But they were such nice fish! He got down on his hands and knees to look at his pets.

"Henry!" his mother called. "I am starting to pit the apricots. You'll have to hurry!"

"O.K." Henry took his net and started catching the smallest guppies. The only thing he could do was to move them in with the other fish. He hated to do it, because the fish book said they shouldn't be crowded. When the guppies were moved, he carried the jars into the kitchen and poured the water down the sink.

"I'm sorry, Henry," his mother said, "but after all, I did tell you some time ago that you couldn't go on putting guppies in fruit jars."

"I know, Mom. I guess I'll have to think of something else." It took Henry the rest of the morning to feed his fish. He had to put the tiniest pinch of the finest fish food into each jar. He could hear Robert and Beezus playing cowboy in the vacant lot. Ribsy trotted into his room, watched him a few minutes, and then went outdoors. Henry began to wish he were outdoors, too, but he couldn't let his little fish go hungry.

Late that afternoon Mrs. Huggins drove downtown to pick up Henry's father after work. When they returned, Henry saw his father carrying more lugs of apricots into the kitchen. He had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

It came.

"Henry," his mother said, "I am afraid I'll have to ask you for some more fruit jars." Henry sighed. "I guess I'll have to double them up some more." He started to go to his room and then turned back. "Say, Mom, are you going to can anything besides apricots this year?"

"Yes, tomatoes and pears. And I thought we might go out to Mount Hood and pick huckleberries. You like huckleberry pie during the winter, don't you?"

Henry certainly did like huckleberry pie. He liked it any time of year. He went to his room and moved more of his guppies. Tomatoes, pears, and huckleberries. He could see that his mother would need all her fruit jars before the summer was over. That would leave him his original bowl and the gallon pickle jar.

"Hey, Mom," he yelled. "Are you going to make dill pickles, too?"

"Yes, Henry."

There went the pickle jar. By the end of the summer Henry would have to move the hundreds of fish he had now, and goodness knows how many more, back into the bowl. There would be so many fish there wouldn't be room for any water.

That settled it. Henry decided he would have to get rid of all his guppies. He hated to do it, but if he kept even two he would soon be right back where he was now. It would be nice to have time to play outdoors again. Henry made up his mind to take every one of his fish back to the Lucky Dog Pet Shop. Maybe Mr. Pennycuff could have another sale.

Henry was chasing a guppy with the net when his father came into the room. He told his father what he planned to do. "I sure hate to do it," he mourned, "but I can't keep a million guppies in my bedroom." He looked sorrowfully at his fish.

"I know, Henry. I hate to see the fish go, too, but they're getting out of hand. I'll tell you what to do. Catch all the guppies and put them into the pickle jar. It won't hurt them to be crowded for a little while. Right after supper I'll run you down to the pet shop in the car."

Henry sadly packed up his fish, and after supper he and his father and Ribsby got into the car and drove to the pet shop. Ribsby liked to ride in the car.

"I brought you a lot of guppies," Henry said to Mr. Pennycuff. "I hope you can use them."

"Use them!" exclaimed Mr. Pennycuff. "I certainly can. I haven't had a guppy in this store since the sale. Let's see them."

While Henry unwrapped his pickle jar, his father looked at the tanks of tropical fish along the wall.

"I should say you do have a lot of guppies," said Mr. Pennycuff. "Nice healthy ones, too. You must have taken good care of them." He held the jar up to the light and looked at it closely. It seethed with gray guppies, rainbow guppies, and baby guppies of all sizes, swimming round and round. "Hmmm. Let's see. We-e-ell." Mr. Pennycuff continued to stare at the fish.

Henry couldn't understand why he was muttering to himself that way. He had given Mr. Pennycuff the guppies and now he wished he would return the pickle jar so he could go.

"Well, now," said Mr. Pennycuff, "I guess these fish are worth about seven dollars. I can't give it to you in money, but you can pick out seven dollars' worth of anything in the store you want."

Seven dollars! Henry was astounded. Seven dollars' worth of anything in the pet shop! He was rich! He had been so busy thinking about getting rid of the guppies that it had not occurred to him they might be worth something to Mr. Pennycuff.

"Hey, Dad! Did you hear that? Seven dollars!" Henry shouted.

"I certainly did. You'd better start looking around."

"Take anything you want, sonny. Dog collars, kittens, bird seed. Anything."

Henry tried to decide what he would like. Ribsby had a collar and leash and a dish, so he didn't

need anything. He looked at the kittens. The sign read, "Kittens. One dollar each." They were cute, but Henry decided he didn't want seven dollars' worth of kittens. Ribsy would chase them.

"You don't have any skunks on sale for seven dollars?" he asked hopefully.

"No, I haven't had any skunks for a long time." "I'm glad to hear that," said Mr. Huggins. Henry looked at the tropical fish. Then he looked all around the store and came back to the tropical fish again. He stopped to watch a little catfish busily digging in the sand. Suddenly Henry knew that the only thing in the store he really wanted was more fish.

"Could I keep a catfish in my fish bowl?" he asked Mr. Pennycuff.

"No, sonny, they have to be kept in warm water. They need an electric heater and a thermostat in the water to keep the water the right temperature." He held up two long glass tubes. One looked as if it were filled with sand and the other with wires. "See, this is what I mean. They fit into the comers of an aquarium like this and keep the water warm all the time." He fitted them into the corner of a little tank on a table.

"How much does that cost?"

"The tank is three dollars and the heater and thermostat come to four. That makes seven dollars."

Henry was disappointed. "I wouldn't have any money left for a catfish and the only thing I really want is more fish."

"You know, Henry, I hoped you'd say that," answered his father. "I hated to see those guppies go as much as you did. If you buy the tank and heater and thermostat, I'll buy the fish."

"Gee, Dad, that's swell! Let's get a little catfish!" Then Henry thought of something. "Do catfish have as many babies as guppies?" he asked Mr. Pennycuff.

"Oh my, no. Catfish rarely have babies when they're kept in tanks. They mostly have them when they live outdoors in ponds and rivers."

"Swell!" said Henry. "That's the kind of fish we want. Won't Mom be surprised!"