

My Family 8

The family have been living in Corfu for half a year. They left a wet Bournemouth in August, and have been in Corfu from hot late summer, through the winter and into the following spring, living in the Rose-pink Villa found for them by Spiro.

Episode 8

As soon as we had settled down and started to enjoy the island, Larry, with characteristic generosity, wrote to all his friends and asked them to come out and stay. The fact that the villa was only just big enough to house the family apparently had not occurred to him.

'I've asked a few people out for a week or so,' he said casually to Mother one morning.

'That will be nice, dear,' said Mother unthinkingly.

'I thought it would do us good to have some intelligent and stimulating company around. We don't want to stagnate.'

'I hope they're not too *highbrow*, dear,' said Mother.

'Good Lord, Mother, of course they're *not*; just extremely charming, ordinary people. I don't know why you've got this phobia about people being highbrow.'

'I don't like the highbrow ones,' said Mother plaintively. 'I can't talk about poetry and things. But they always seem to imagine, just because I'm your mother, that I should be able to discuss literature at great length. And they always come and ask me silly questions just when I'm in the middle of cooking.'

'I don't ask you to discuss art with them,' said Larry testily, 'but I think you might try and conceal your revolting taste in literature. I fill the house with good books, and I find your bedside table simply groaning under the weight of cookery books, gardening books, and the most lurid-looking mystery stories. I can't think where you get hold of these things.'

'They're very good,' said Mother defensively. 'I borrowed them from Theodore. Well, you'd better let the Pension Suisse know when your friends are coming.'

'What for?' asked Larry.

'So they can reserve the rooms,' said Mother, surprised.

'But I've invited them to stay here.'

'Larry! You haven't! Really, you are most *thoughtless*. Where are they going to *sleep*?'

'If Margo and Les sleep on the veranda, that gives you two rooms;

you and Gerry could move into the drawing room, and that leaves those rooms free.'

'We can't all camp all over the place like gypsies. There simply isn't room. You'll have to write and put them off.'

'I can't,' said Larry, 'they're on their way. I didn't know you were going to treat it as if it were a major catastrophe. There's quite a simple solution to the whole business. Since the villa isn't big enough, let's move to one that is.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Whoever heard of moving into a larger house because you've invited friends to stay?'

'It seems a perfectly sensible solution to me.'

'How many have you invited?' asked Mother.

'Oh, just a few...if you budget for seven or eight I should think that would cover it.'

'You mean, including ourselves?'

'No, I mean as well as the family.'

'But it's absurd. Even if we did move into a villa large enough to house thirteen people, what are we going to do with the extra space when they've gone?'

'Invite some more people,' said Larry, astonished that Mother should not have thought of this for herself.

Mother glared at him, her spectacles askew.

'We are *not* moving to another villa,' she said firmly. 'I've made up my mind about that.'

She straightened her spectacles, and strutted off towards the kitchen, registering determination in every inch.

The new villa was enormous, a tall, square Venetian mansion with faded daffodil yellow walls. It stood on a hill overlooking the sea and the dark, eroded hills of Albania. It was our friend Spiro, of course who had found the place, and who organised our move with the minimum of fuss and maximum of efficiency. Within three days of seeing the villa for the first time the long wooden carts were trailing in a dusty procession along the roads, piled high with our possessions, and on the fourth day we were installed.

The furniture (which we had rented with the villa) was a fantastic collection of Victorian relics that had been locked in the rooms for the past twenty years. They crouched everywhere, ugly, impractical, creaking hideously to each other, and shedding bits of themselves with loud cracks like musket-shots, accompanied by clouds of dust if you walked past them too heavily. The first evening the leg came off the dining-room table, cascading the food

on to the floor. Some days later Larry sat down on an immense and solid-looking chair, only to have the back disappear in a cloud of acrid dust. When Mother went to open a wardrobe the size of a cottage and the entire door came away in her hand, she decided that something must be done.

"There's nothing for it," she said "we'll have to buy some new furniture. Really, these guests of Larry's are going to be the most expensive we've ever had."

The next morning Spiro drove Mother, Margo, and myself into Corfu town to buy furniture. We noticed that the town was more crowded, more boisterous than usual. After we had finished bargaining with the furniture dealer we were jostled and nudged as we struggled to get back to the place where we had left the car.

"I think there must be something going on," said Margo observantly. "Maybe it's a fiesta or something interesting."

"I don't care what it is, as long as we get back to the car," said Mother. But we were swept along, in the opposite direction to the car and eventually pushed out to join a vast crowd assembled in the main square of the town. I asked an elderly woman near me what was happening.

"It's Saint Spiridion," she explained. "Today we may enter the church and kiss his feet."

Saint Spiridion was the patron saint of the island. His mummified body was enshrined in a silver coffin in the church, and once a year he was carried in procession round the town. He was very powerful, and could grant requests, cure illness, and do a number of other wonderful things for you if he happened to be in the right mood when asked. The islanders worshipped him, and every second male on the island was called Spiro in his honour. Today was a special day; apparently they would open the coffin and allow the faithful to kiss the slippered feet of the mummy, and make any request they cared to.

A multi-coloured wedge of humanity moved slowly towards the dark door of the church, and we were swept along with it, wedged like pebbles in a larva-flow. By now Margo had been pushed well ahead of me, while Mother was equally far behind. I was caught firmly between five fat peasant women, who pressed on me like cushions and exuded sweat and garlic, while Mother was hopelessly entangled between two enormous Albanian shepherds. Steadily, firmly, we were pushed up the steps and into the church. Inside, it was dark as a well, lit only by a bed of candles that bloomed like yellow crocuses along one wall. A bearded tall-hatted priest clad in black robes flapped like a crow in the gloom, making

the crowd form into a single line that filed down the church, past the great silver coffin, and out through another door into the street. The coffin was standing upright, looking like a silver chrysalis, and at its lower end a portion had been removed so that the saint's feet, clad in the richly-embroidered slippers, peeped out. As each person reached the coffin he bent, kissed the feet, and murmured a prayer. It became evident that, whether we wanted to or not, we were going to kiss Saint Spiridion's feet. I looked back and saw Mother making frantic efforts to get to my side, but the Albanian bodyguard would not give an inch, and she struggled ineffectually. Presently she caught my eye and started to grimace and point at the coffin, shaking her head vigorously. I was greatly puzzled by this, and so were the two Albanians, who were watching her with undisguised suspicion. I think they came to the conclusion that Mother was about to have a fit, and with some justification, for she was scarlet in the face, and her grimaces were getting wilder and wilder. At last in desperation, she threw caution to the winds and hissed at me over the heads of the crowd:

"Tell Margo... NOT to kiss.... kiss the air....kiss the air."

I turned to deliver Mother's message to Margo, but it was too late; there she was, crouched over the slippered feet, kissing them with an enthusiasm that enchanted and greatly surprised the crowd. When it came to my turn I obeyed Mother's instructions, kissing loudly and with a considerable show of reverence a point some six inches above the mummy's left foot. Then I was pushed along and disgorged through the church door and out into the street, where the crowd was breaking up into little groups, laughing and chattering. Margo was waiting on the steps, looking extremely self-satisfied. The next moment Mother appeared, shot from the door by the brawny shoulders of her shepherds. She staggered wildly down the steps and joined us.

"Those shepherds," she exclaimed faintly. "So ill-mannered.... the smell nearly killed me a mixture of incense and garlic ...How do they manage to smell like that?"

"Oh, well," said Margo cheerfully. "It'll have been worth it if Saint Spiridion answers my request."

"A most insanitary procedure," said Mother, "more likely to spread disease than cure it. I dread to think what we would have caught if we'd REALLY kissed his feet."

"But I kissed his feet," said Margo, surprised.

"Margo! You didn't!"

"Well, everyone else was doing it."

"And after I expressly told you NOT to."

“You never told me not to....”

I interrupted and explained that I had been too late with Mother’s warning.

“After all those people have been slobbering over those slippers, you have to go and kiss them.”

“I was only doing what the others did.”

“I can’t think what on earth possessed you to DO such a thing.”

“Well, I thought he might cure my acne.”

“Acne!” said Mother scornfully. “You’ll be lucky if you don’t catch something to go with the acne.”

The next day Margo went down with a severe attack of influenza, and Saint Spiridion’s prestige with Mother reached rock bottom. Spiro was sent racing into the town for a doctor, and he returned bringing a little dumpy man with patent-leather hair, a faint wisp of moustache, and boot-button eyes behind great horn-rimmed spectacles.

This was Doctor Androuchelli. He was a charming man, with a bedside manner that was quite unique.

“Po-po-po,” he said, strutting into the bedroom and regarding Margo with scorn, “po-po-po!” Remarkably unintelligent you have been, no? Kissing the Saint’s feet! Po-po-po-po-po! Nearly you might have caught some bugs unpleasant. You are lucky; she is influenza. Now you will do as I tell you, or I will rinse my hands of you. And please do not increase my work with such stupidity. If you kiss another saint’s feet in the future I will not come to cure you. ...Po-po-po ... such a thing to do.”

So while Margo languished in bed for three weeks, with Androuchelli po-po-ing over her every two or three days, the rest of the family settled into our new Daffodil-yellow villa and tried in vain to console Mother.

End of Episode 8