

## My Family 9

In the last episode, we heard how the family had moved into a larger villa (Larry had invited so many people to stay), and had to go into town to buy furniture as the rented furniture in the villa – the Daffodil-yellow villa – was falling to pieces. They joined in a ceremony for the Feast of St Spiridion. Margo kissed the feet of the mummified saint and went down with a nasty bout of ‘flu.

### Episode 9

While Margo was recovering, the rest of us settled into the villa. In a moment of misguided enthusiasm, Mother engaged the gardener’s wife, Lugaretzia, to work for us in the villa. She was a thin, lugubrious individual, extremely sensitive, and the slightest criticism of her work would make her brown eyes swim with tears. Only one thing in life could bring a smile to Lugaretzia’s gloomy countenance, and that was a discussion of her ailments. Where most people are hypochondriacs as a hobby, Lugaretzia had turned it into a full-time occupation.

Larry took possession of one enormous attic and engaged two carpenters to make bookshelves; Leslie converted the large covered veranda into a shooting gallery, and hung an enormous red flag up outside whenever he was practising; Mother potted absent-mindedly round the vast, subterranean, stone-flagged kitchen, preparing gallons of beef-tea, listening to Lugaretzia’s monologues and worrying about Margo. For Roger and myself, there were fifteen acres of garden to explore, a vast new paradise sloping down to the shallow, tepid sea. Being temporarily without a tutor (for George had left the island) I could spend the whole day out, only returning to the villa for hurried meals.

Throughout the spring and early summer, the villa was filled with an apparently endless stream of Larry’s friends. No sooner had we seen one lot off, and sighed with relief, than another steamer would arrive, and the line of taxis and horse-carriages would hoot and clatter their way up the drive, and the house would be filled once more. Sometimes the fresh load of guests would turn up before we had got rid of the previous group, and the chaos was indescribable; the house and garden would be dotted with poets, authors, artists, and playwrights arguing, painting, drinking, typing, and composing. Far from being the ordinary, charming people that Larry had promised, they all turned out to be the most extraordinary eccentrics who were so highbrow that they had difficulty in understanding one another.

One of the first to arrive was Zatopec, an Armenian poet, with a swooping eagle nose, a shoulder-length mane of silvery hair, and hands bulbous and twisted by arthritis. He arrived wearing an immense, swirling black cloak and a broad-brimmed black hat. His voice shook the house as he swept into it, his arms full of bottles. He talked from morning till night, drinking prodigious quantities of wine, snatching forty winks wherever he happened to be and rarely going to bed at all. In spite of his advanced years he had lost none of

his enthusiasm for the opposite sex, and, while he treated Mother and Margo with a sort of creaking, antique courtesy, no peasant girl for miles was free from his attentions. He would hobble through the olive groves after them, roaring with laughter, shouting endearments, his cloak flapping, his pocket bulging with a bottle of wine. Even Lugaretzia was not safe, and had her bottom pinched while she was sweeping under the sofa. This proved something of a blessing, as it made her forget her ailments for a few days, and blush and giggle kittenishly whenever Zatopec appeared.

The next invasion consisted of three artists, Jonquil, Durant, and Michael. Jonquil looked, and sounded, like a cockney owl with a fringe; Durant was lank and mournful and so nervous that he would almost jump out of his skin if you spoke to him suddenly; Michael was a short, fat little man who looked like a well-boiled prawn with a mop of dark, curly hair. These three had only one thing in common, and that was a desire to get some work done. Jonquil, striding into the house for the first time, made this quite clear to a startled Mother.

'I didn't come for no bleeding 'oliday,' she said severely; 'I came to get some work done, so I'm not interested in picnics and such, see?'

'Oh...er...no, no, of course not,' said Mother guiltily, as though she had been planning vast banquets among the myrtle bushes for Jonquil's benefit.

'Jus' so long as you know,' said Jonquil. 'I didn't want to upset nothing, see? I jus' want to get some work done.'

So she promptly retired to the garden, clad in a bathing costume, and slept peacefully in the sun throughout her stay.

Durant, he informed us, wanted to work too, but first he had to get his nerve back. He was shattered, he told us, quite shattered by his recent experience. While in Italy he had suddenly been seized with the desire to paint a masterpiece. After much thought he decided that an almond orchard in full bloom should give scope to his brush. He spent considerable time and money driving about the countryside in search of the right orchard. At last he found the perfect one. Feverishly he set to work, and by the end of the first day he had the basis down on canvas. After a good night's sleep he awoke refreshed and invigorated, and rushed back to the orchard. On arrival, he was struck dumb with horror, for every tree was gaunt and bare, while the ground was thickly carpeted with pink and white petals. During the night a spring storm had playfully stripped all the orchards in the vicinity of their blossom.

'I vas stricken,' Durant told us, his voice quivering, his eyes filled with tears. 'I swore I would never paint again.....never! But slowly I am recovering my nerves... Some time I vill paint again.'

It turned out that this unfortunate experience had taken place two years previously, and Durant had still not recovered from it.

Michael got off to a bad start. Captivated by the colouring of the island, he told us that he would begin work on an immense canvas that would capture the very essence of Corfu. He could hardly wait. It was most unfortunate that the maid had placed on a chair in his room a blanket which I used for horse-riding. In the middle of the night we were awakened by a noise that sounded

like a troop of bloodhounds being slowly strangled. Assembling sleepily in Michael's room we found him wheezing and gasping, the sweat running down his face. While Margo rushed to make tea, Larry to get brandy, and Leslie opened the windows, Mother tenderly covered Michael, now clammy with sweat, with the horse-blanket. To our surprise, in spite of all remedies, he got worse. While he could still speak, we questioned him interestedly about his complaint and its cause.

'Psychological, purely psychological,' said Larry.

'I think he ought to sniff something up....something like ammonia or something,' said Margo. 'It's wonderful if you're going to faint.'

'Well, he's not going to faint,' said Leslie tersely, 'but he probably would if he sniffed ammonia.'

'Yes, dear, it is a bit strong,' said Mother. 'I wonder what could have brought it on... Are you allergic to something, Michael?'

Between gasps Michael informed us that he was only allergic to three things: the pollen of the lilac flowers, cats, and horses. We all peered out of the window, but there was not a lilac tree for miles. We searched the room, but there was no cat hidden anywhere. I indignantly denied Larry's accusation that I had smuggled a horse into the house. It was only when Michael seemed on the verge of death that we noticed the horse-rug, which Mother had tucked carefully under his chin. This incident had such a bad effect on the poor man that he was quite unable to put brush to canvas during his stay; he and Durant lay side by side in deckchairs, recovering their nerve together.

While we were still coping with these three, another guest arrived: Melanie, Countess de Torro. .... Tall, thin, with a face like an ancient horse, crow-black eyebrows, and an enormous cushion of scarlet hair. She had hardly been in the house five minutes before she complained of the heat, and to mother's consternation and my delight, she caught hold of her scarlet hair and removed it, revealing a head as bald as a mushroom top. Seeing Mother's startled gaze, the Countess explained in her harsh, croaking voice. 'I've just recovered from erysipelas,' she said; 'lost all my hair.... Couldn't find eyebrows and wig to match in Milan.... Might get something in Athens.' It was unfortunate that, owing to a slight impediment due to ill-fitting false teeth, the Countess was inclined to mumble, so Mother was under the impression that the disease she had just recovered from was of a much more unladylike character. At the first available opportunity she got Larry into a corner.

'Disgusting!' she said in a vibrant whisper. 'Did you *hear* what she's had? And you call her a friend.'

'Friend?' said Larry in surprise. 'Why, I hardly know her...can't stand the woman; but she's an interesting character and I wanted to study her at close hand.'

'I like that,' said Mother indignantly. 'So you invite that *creature* here and we all catch some revolting disease while you take notes. No, I'm sorry, Larry, but she'll have to go.'

'Don't be silly, Mother,' said Larry irritably; 'you can't catch it....not unless you intend to share a bed with her.'

'Don't be *revolting*,' said Mother, glaring. 'I won't stand that obscene person in this house.'

They argued in whispers for the rest of the day, but Mother was adamant. Eventually Larry suggested asking Theodore to give his opinion on the matter, and to this Mother agreed.

Theodore turned up the next day, and before Mother had a chance to warn him about our hairless guest, Larry had introduced them.

'A doctor?' said the Countess, her eyes gleaming. 'Perhaps you can advise me...I've just had erysipelas.....'

They embarked on a long and technical discussion with enthusiasm, and it was only the most determined efforts on Mother's part that got them away from what she still considered to be an indelicate subject.

'Really,' she said to Larry, 'I do *try* to be broad-minded, but I don't think things like that should be discussed at tea.'

Later Mother got Theodore alone, and the Countess's disease was explained. Mother was then stricken at having misjudged the woman, and was immensely affable to her for the rest of the day, even telling her to take her wig off if she felt the heat.

The dinner that night was colourful and extraordinary. The lamps smoked gently and cast a honey-coloured light over the table, the plates of food steaming gently; the fruit in a polished pile in the centre dish; Lugaretzia hobbling round the table, groaning gently to herself; Theodore's beard twinkling in the lamplight; Leslie manufacturing bread pellets to shoot at a moth; Mother, ladling out the food, smiling vaguely at everyone; under the table Roger's cold nose pressed hard against my knee.

Coffee and wine were served on the balcony. Larry strummed on the guitar and sang an Elizabethan marching song. The sea striped with moonlight gleamed through the olives. In the grape-vine above our heads the geckos crept along the gnarled branches, eagerly watching the drifts of insects that were drawn, like a tide, by the lamplight.

End of episode 9