

My Family 3 - Spiro

Episode 3

By the following morning Mother had decided that we would hire a car and go out house-hunting on our own. She was convinced that somewhere on the island there lurked a villa with a bathroom. We did not share her belief, but she herded us down to the taxi-rank in the main square. The taxi-drivers, perceiving our innocent appearance, flocked round us like vultures, each trying to out-shout his compatriots. We were not used to the Greek temperament, and to us it looked as though we were in danger of our lives.

'Can't you *do* something, Larry?' Mother squeaked, disentangling herself with difficulty from the grasp of a large driver.

'Tell them you'll report them to the British Consul,' suggested Larry, raising his voice above the noise.

'Don't be silly, dear,' said Mother breathlessly. 'Just explain that we don't understand.'

Margo, simpering, stepped into the breach.

'We English,' she yelled at the gesticulating drivers; 'we don't understand Greek.'

At that moment everyone was startled into silence by a voice that rumbled out above the uproar, a deep, rich, vibrant voice, the sort of voice you would expect a volcano to have.

'Hoy!' roared the voice, 'whys donts yous have someones who can talks your own language?'

Turning, we saw an ancient Dodge parked by the kerb, and behind the wheel sat a short, barrel-bodied individual, with ham-like hands and a great, leathery, scowling face surmounted by a jauntily-tilted peaked cap. He surged out of his car on to the pavement, and waddled across to us. Then he stopped, scowling even more ferociously, and surveyed the group of silent cab-drivers.

'Thems been worrying yous?' he asked Mother.

'No, no,' said Mother untruthfully; 'it was just that we had difficulty in understanding them.'

'Yous wants someones who can talks your own language,' repeated the new arrival; 'thems bastards... if you will excuses the words...would swindles their own mothers. Excuses me a minute and I'll fix them.'

He turned on the drivers a blast of Greek that almost swept them off their feet and herded them back to their cars, then turned to us again.

'Wheres yous wants to gos?' he asked.

'We are looking,' said Mother firmly, 'for a villa with a bathroom. Do you know of one?'

The man brooded, his black eyebrows twisted into a knot of thoughtfulness.

'Bathrooms?' he said. 'Yous wants a bathrooms?'

'None of the ones we have seen so far had them,' said Mother.

'Oh, I knows a villa with a bathrooms,' said the man.

'Will you take us to look at it, please?' asked Mother.

'Sure, I'll takes yous. Gets into the cars.'

We climbed into the spacious car and our driver engaged his gears with a terrifying sound. We shot through the twisted streets, swerving in and out among loaded donkeys, carts, groups of peasant women, and innumerable dogs, our horn honking a deafening warning as the car swooped back and forth across the road like a drunken swallow.

'English always wants bathrooms...I gets a bathrooms in my house...Spiro's my name....they alls calls me Spiro Americano on accounts of I lives in America ... That's where I learnt my goods English...Wents there to makes moneys... Then after eight years I says: 'Spiros,' I says, 'yous makes enough...' sos I comes backs to Greece...brings this car...best ons the islands....no one else gets a car like this....I likes the English....Honest to Gods ifs I wasn't Greek I'd likes to be English.'

We sped down a white road covered in a thick layer of silky dust that rose in a cloud behind us, a road lined with prickly pears. We passed vineyards, olive-groves and great clumps of zebra-striped cane. At last we roared to the top of a hill, and Spiro crammed on his brakes and brought the car to a dust-misted halt.

'Theres you ares,' he said, pointing with a great stubby forefinger; 'that's the villa with the bathrooms, likes you wanted.'

Mother, who had kept her eyes firmly shut throughout the drive, now opened them cautiously and looked. A gentle curve of hillside rose from the glittering sea. Half way up the slope, guarded by a group of tall, slim cypress trees, nestled a strawberry-pink villa, like some exotic fruit lying in the greenery.

The villa was small and square, standing in its tiny garden with an air of pink-faced determination. Its shutters had been faded by the sun to a delicate creamy-green, cracked and bubbled in places. As soon as we saw it, we wanted to live there – it was as though the villa had been standing there waiting for our arrival. We felt we had come home.

Having lumbered so unexpectedly into our lives, Spiro now took

over complete control of our affairs. It was better, he explained, for him to do things, as everyone knew him, and he would make sure we were not swindled.

'Donts you worrys yourselfs about anythings, Mrs Durrells,' he had scowled; 'leaves everythings to me.'

It was Spiro who, on discovering that our money had not yet arrived from England, subsidized us, and took it upon himself to go and speak severely to the bank manager about his lack of organisation. It was Spiro who paid our hotel bill, who organized a cart to carry our luggage to the villa, and who drove us out there himself, his car piled high with groceries that he had purchased for us.

That he knew everyone on the island, and they they all knew him, we soon discovered was no idle boast. On arrival, two of our cases containing linen and other things had been confiscated by the Customs on the curious grounds that they were merchandise. So, when we moved out to the strawberry-pink villa and the problem of bed-linen arose, Mother told Spiro about our cases languishing in the Customs, and asked his advice.

'Gollys, Mrs Durrells,' he bellowed, his huge face flushing red with wrath; 'whys you never tells me before? Them bastards in the Customs. I'll take you down theres tomorrows and fix them: I knows them alls, and they knows *me*. Leaves everythings to me – I'll fix them.'

The following morning he drove Mother down to the Customs-shed. We all accompanied them, for we did not want to miss the fun.

Spiro rolled into the Customs-house like an angry bear.

'Wheres these peoples things?' he inquired of the plump little Customs man.

'You mean their boxes of merchandise?' asked the official in his best English.

'Whats you thinks I means?'

'They are here,' admitted the official cautiously.

'We've comes to takes them,' scowled Spiro; 'Gets them ready.'

He stalked out of the shed to find someone to help carry the luggage, and when he returned he saw that the Customs man who had taken the keys from Mother was just lifting the lid of one of the cases. Spiro, with a grunt of wrath, surged forward and slammed the lid down on the unfortunate man's fingers.

'Whats fors you open it, you sonofabitch?' he asked, glaring.

The Customs official, waving his pinched hand about, protested wildly that it was his duty to examine the contents.

'Dutys?' said Spiro with fine scorn. 'Whats you means, dutys? Is it

your dutys to attacks innocent foreigners, eh? Treats them like smugglers, eh? That's whats you calls dutys?'

Spiro paused for a moment, breathing deeply, then he picked up a large suitcase in each great hand and walked towards the door. He paused and turned to fire his parting shot.

'I knows you, Christaki, sos don'ts you go talkings about dutys to me. I remembers when you was fined twelve thousand drachmas for dynamitings fish. I won't have any criminal talkings to *me* abouts dutys.'

We rode back from the Customs in triumph, all our luggage intact and unexamined.

'Them bastards thinks they owns the islands,' was Spiro's comment. He seemed quite unaware of the fact that he was acting as though he did.

Once Spiro had taken charge he stuck to us like a burr. Within a few hours he had changed from a taxi-driver to our champion, and within a week he was our guide, philosopher and friend. He became so much a member of the family that very soon there was scarcely a thing we did, or planned to do, in which he was not involved in some way, arranging things we wanted done, telling us how much to pay for things, keeping a watchful eye on us all. Like a great, brown, ugly angel he watched over us tenderly as though we were slightly weak-minded children. Mother he frankly adored, and he would sing her praises in a loud voice wherever we happened to be, to her acute embarrassment.

'You oughts to be carefuls whats you do,' he would tell us, screwing up his face earnestly; 'we donts wants to worrys your mothers.'

'Whatever for, Spiro?' Larry would protest in well-simulated astonishment. 'She's never done anything for us...why should we consider her?'

'Gollys, Master Lorrys, donts *jokes* like that,' Spiro would say in anguish.

'He's quite right, Spiro,' Leslie would say very seriously; 'she's really not much good as a mother, you know.'

'Donts says that, *donts says that*,' Spiro would roar. 'Honest to Gods, if I hads a mother likes yours I'd gos down every mornings and kisses her feets.'

End of ep 3