

## My Family.....Episode 2

Last week, in episode 1, we heard how the Durrell family –Larry, intending to be a great writer, aged 23; Leslie 19; Margo 18; and Gerry 10 -- with their mother, a widow of unspecified age (she could never remember her date of birth), fled from a wet cold summer in Bournemouth to live in Corfu. We left them on the boat approaching the beautiful island.

### Corfu (The Unsuspected Isle)

We threaded our way out of the noise and confusion of the Customs shed into the brilliant sunshine on the quay. Larry walked swiftly, with head thrown back and an expression of regal disdain on his face. Behind him strolled Leslie, short, stocky, with an air of quiet belligerence, and then Margo, trailing yards of muslin and scent. Mother, looking like a tiny, harrassed missionary in an uprising, was dragged unwillingly to the nearest lamp-post by my dog, Roger, and was forced to stand there, staring into space, while he relieved pent-up feelings that had accumulated in his kennel. Larry chose two magnificently dilapidated horse-drawn cabs, had the luggage installed in one, and seated himself in the second. Then he looked round irritably. 'Well?' he asked. 'What are we waiting for?' 'We're waiting for Mother,' explained Leslie. 'Roger's found a lamp-post.' 'Dear God!' said Larry, and then hoisted himself upright in the cab and bellowed, 'Come on, Mother, come on. Can't the dog wait?' 'Coming, dear,' called Mother passively and untruthfully, for Roger showed no signs of quitting the post. 'That dog's been a damned nuisance all the way,' said Larry. 'Don't be so impatient,' said Margo indignantly; 'the dog can't help it ... and anyway, we had to wait an hour in Naples for you.' 'My stomach was out of order,' explained Larry coldly. 'Well, presumably his stomach's out of order,' said Margo triumphantly.

At this moment Mother arrived, slightly dishevelled, and we had to turn our attentions to the task of getting Roger into the cab. He had never been in such a vehicle, and treated it with suspicion.

Eventually we had to lift him bodily and hurl him inside, yelping frantically, and then pile in breathlessly after him and hold him down. The horse, frightened by this activity, broke into a shambling trot, and we ended in a tangled heap on the floor of the cab with Roger moaning loudly underneath us.

'What an entry,' said Larry bitterly. 'I had hoped to give an impression of gracious majesty, and this is what happens ... we arrive in town like a troupe of medieval tumblers.'

'Don't keep on, dear,' Mother said soothingly, straightening her hat; 'we'll soon be at the hotel.'

So our cab clopped and jingled its way into the town, while we sat on the horsehair seats and tried to muster the appearance of gracious majesty Larry required. Roger, wrapped in Leslie's powerful grasp, lolled his head over the side of the vehicle and rolled his eyes as though at his last gasp. Then we rattled past an alley-way in which four scruffy mongrels were lying in the sun. Roger stiffened, glared at them and let forth a torrent of deep barks. The mongrels, galvanized into activity, sped after the cab, yapping vociferously. It took two people to restrain the raving Roger, while the rest of us leaned out and made wild gestures with magazines and books at the pursuing horde. This only had the effect of exciting them still further, and at each alley-way we passed their numbers increased, until by the time we were rolling down the main thoroughfare of the town there were some twenty-four dogs swirling about our wheels, almost hysterical with anger.

'Why doesn't somebody do something?' asked Larry, raising his voice above the uproar.

'Why don't you do something?' snapped Leslie, who was locked in combat with Roger.

Larry promptly rose to his feet, snatched the whip from our astonished driver's hand, made a wild swipe at the herd of dogs, missed them, and caught Leslie across the back of the neck.

'What the hell d'you think you're playing at?' Leslie snarled, twisting a scarlet and angry face towards Larry.

'Accident,' explained Larry airily. 'I'm out of practice .... It's so long since I used a horse-whip.'

'Well, watch what you're bloody well doing,' said Leslie loudly and belligerently.

'Now, now, dear, it was an accident,' said Mother.

Larry took another swipe at the dogs and knocked off Mother's hat.

'You're more trouble than the dogs,' said Margo.

'Do be careful, dear,' said Mother, clutching her hat; 'you might hurt someone. I should put the whip down.'

At that moment the cab shambled to a halt outside a doorway over which hung a board with Pension Suisse inscribed on it. The dogs, feeling that they were at last going to get to grips with this effeminate black canine who rode in cabs, surrounded us in a solid, panting wedge. The door of the hotel opened and an ancient bewhiskered porter appeared and stood staring glassily at the turmoil in the street. The difficulties of getting Roger out of the cab and into the hotel were considerable, for he was a heavy dog, and it took the combined efforts of the family to lift, carry, and restrain him. Larry had by now forgotten his majestic pose and was rather enjoying himself. He leapt down and danced about the pavement with the whip, cleaving a path through the dogs, along which Leslie, Margo, Mother and I hurried, bearing the struggling, snarling Roger. We staggered into the hall, and the porter slammed the front door and leant against it, his moustache quivering. The manager came forward, eyeing us with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. Mother faced him, hat on one side of her head, clutching in one hand my jam-jar of caterpillars.

'Ah!' she said, smiling sweetly, as though our arrival had been the most normal thing in the world. 'Our name's Durrell. I believe you've got some rooms booked for us?'

'Yes, madame,' said the manager, edging round the still grumbling Roger; 'they are on the first floor ....four rooms and a balcony.'

'How nice,' beamed Mother; 'then I think we'll go straight up and have a little rest before lunch.'

And with considerable majestic graciousness she led her family upstairs.

It was unfortunate for Mother's peace of mind that the Pension Suisse happened to be situated in the road leading to the local cemetery. As we sat on our small balcony overhanging the street an apparently endless succession of funerals passed beneath us. The inhabitants of Corfu obviously believed that the best part of a bereavement was the funeral, for each seemed more ornate than the last. Cabs decorated with yards of purple and black crepe were drawn by horses so enveloped in plumes and canopies that it was a wonder they could move. Six or seven of these cabs, containing the mourners, preceded the coffin itself – this so large and lush that it looked more like an enormous birthday cake. Some were white, with purple, black-and-scarlet, and deep blue decorations; others were gleaming black with complicated filigrees of gold and silver twining abundantly over them. I had never seen anything so

colourful and attractive. I hung over the balcony rail watching, absorbed and fascinated.

As each funeral passed, and the sounds of mourning and the clapping of hooves died away in the distance, Mother became more and more agitated.

'I'm sure it's an epidemic,' she exclaimed at last, peering down nervously into the street.

'Nonsense, Mother; don't fuss,' said Larry airily.

'But, dear, so many of them....it's unnatural.'

'There's nothing unnatural about dying....people do it all the time.'

'Yes, but they don't die like flies unless there's something wrong.

I'm sure it's something to do with the drains. I think we ought to find out. Can't you ring up the health authorities, Larry?'

'There probably aren't any health authorities here,' Larry pointed out, 'and even if there were, I doubt if they'd tell me.'

'Well,' Mother said with determination, 'there's nothing for it. We'll have to move. We must get out of the town. We must find a house in the country at once.'

The next morning we started on our house-hunt, accompanied by Mr Beeler, the hotel guide. He was a fat little man with sweat-polished jowls. He was quite sprightly when we set off, but then he did not know what was in store for him. No one who has not been house-hunting with my mother can possibly imagine it. We drove around the island in a cloud of dust while Mr Beeler showed us villa after villa in a bewildering selection of sizes, colours, and situations, and Mother shook her head firmly at them all. At last we had contemplated the tenth and final villa on Mr Beeler's list, and Mother had shaken her head once again. Brokenly Mr Beeler seated himself on the stairs and mopped his face with his handkerchief.

'Madame Durrell,' he said at last, 'I have shown you every villa I know, yet you do not want any. Madame, what is it you require? What is the matter with these villas?'

Mother regarded him with astonishment.

'Didn't you notice?' she asked. 'None of them had a bathroom.'

Mr Beeler stared at Mother with bulging eyes.

'But Madame,' he wailed in genuine anguish, 'what for you want a bathroom?.....Have you not got the sea?'

We returned in silence to the hotel.

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