

My Family 4

So we were installed in the villa, and we each adapted ourselves to our surroundings in our respective ways. Margo, merely by donning a microscopic swim-suit and sun-bathing in the olive groves, had collected an ardent band of handsome peasant youths who appeared like magic from an apparently deserted landscape whenever a bee flew too near her or her deck-chair needed moving. Mother felt forced to point out that she thought this sun-bathing was rather *unwise*.

'After all, dear, that costume doesn't cover an awful lot, does it?' she pointed out.

'Oh, Mother, don't be so old-fashioned,' Margo said impatiently.

'After all, you only die once.'

This remark was as baffling as it was true, and successfully silenced Mother.

It had taken three husky peasant boys half an hour's sweating and panting to get Larry's trunks into the villa, while Larry bustled round them, directing operations. Larry spent a happy day unpacking, and the room was so full of books that it was almost impossible to get in or out. Larry would spend the whole day in there with his typewriter, only emerging dreamily for meals. On the second morning he appeared in a highly irritable frame of mind, for a peasant had tethered his donkey just over the hedge. At regular intervals the beast would let forth a prolonged and lugubrious bray.

'I ask you! Isn't it laughable that future generations should be deprived of my work simply because some idiot has tied that stinking beast of burden near my window?' Larry asked.

'Yes, dear,' said Mother; 'why don't you move it if it disturbs you?'

'My dear Mother, I can't be expected to spend my time chasing donkeys about the olive groves. I threw a pamphlet on Christian Science at it; what more do you expect me to do?'

'The poor thing's tied up. You can't expect it to untie itself,' said Margo.

'There should be a law against parking those loathsome beasts anywhere near a house. Can't one of you go and move it?'

'Why should we? It's not disturbing us,' said Leslie.'

'That's the trouble with this family,' said Larry bitterly: 'no give and take, no consideration for others.'

'*You* don't have much consideration for others,' said Margo.

'It's all your fault, Mother,' said Larry austerely; 'you shouldn't have brought us up to be so selfish.'

'I like that!' exclaimed Mother. 'I never did anything of the sort!' 'Well, we didn't get as selfish as this without *some* guidance,' said Larry.

In the end, Mother and I unhitched the donkey and moved it farther down the hill.

Leslie meanwhile had unpacked his revolvers and startled us all with an apparently endless series of explosions while he fired at an old tin can from his bedroom window. After a particularly deafening morning, Larry erupted from his room and said he could not be expected to work if the villa was going to be rocked to its foundations every five minutes. Leslie, aggrieved, said that he had to practise. Larry said it didn't sound like practice, more like the Indian Mutiny. Mother suggested that Leslie practise with an empty revolver. Leslie spent half an hour explaining why this was impossible. At length he reluctantly took his tin farther away from the house where the noise was slightly muffled but just as unexpected.

In between keeping a watchful eye on us all, Mother was settling down in her own way. The house was redolent with the scent of herbs and the sharp tang of garlic and onions, and the kitchen was full of a bubbling selection of pots, among which she moved, spectacles askew, muttering to herself. When she could drag herself away from the kitchen, she would drift happily about the garden, reluctantly pruning and cutting, enthusiastically weeding and planting.

For myself, the garden held sufficient interest; together Roger and I learnt some surprising things. Roger found that it was unwise to smell hornets, and that the chickens that leapt suddenly from the fuschia hedge, squawking wildly as they fled, were unlawful prey, however desirable.

This doll's-house garden was a magic land, a forest of flowers through which roamed creatures I had never seen before: tiny, crab-like spiders that scuttled sideways when disturbed; Carpenter bees, like furry, electric-blue bears, growling fatly and busily; Humming-bird hawk-moths, sleek and neat, whipping up and down the paths with a fussy efficiency. As an accompaniment to all this activity there came from the olive-groves outside the fuschia hedge the incessant shimmering cries of the cicadas.

At first I was so bewildered by this profusion of life on our very doorstep that I could only move about the garden in a daze, constantly having my attention distracted by the flights of brilliant butterflies that drifted over the hedge. Gradually, as I became more used to the bustle of insect life, I found I could concentrate more. I

would spend hours lying on my stomach watching the private lives of the creatures around me, while Roger sat nearby, a look of resignation on his face.

I came to know the peasant girls who passed the garden every morning and evening. Riding side-saddle on their slouching, drooping-eared donkeys, in the mornings they would smile and shout greetings, and in the evenings they would lean over the hedge, and smiling, hold out gifts for me – a bunch of amber grapes still sun-warmed, figs black as tar striped with pink where they had burst their seams with ripeness, or a giant water-melon with an inside like pink ice. As the days passed, I came gradually to understand them. What had at first been a confused babble became a series of recognizable separate sounds. Then, suddenly, these took on meaning, and slowly I started to use them myself, then took my newly acquired words and strung them into ungrammatical and stumbling sentences. Our neighbours were delighted, as though I had conferred some delicate compliment by trying to learn their language. They would lean over the hedge, their faces screwed up with concentration, as I groped my way through a simple remark, and when I had successfully concluded, they would beam at me and clap their hands. By degrees I learnt their names, who was related to whom. I learnt where their cottages were among the olive groves, and should Roger and I pass that way the entire family would tumble out to greet us, to bring a chair, so that I might sit under their vine and eat some fruit with them.

Gradually the magic of the island settled over us as gently as pollen. Each day had a tranquillity, a timelessness about it, so that you wished it would never end. But then the dark skin of night would peel off and there would be a fresh day waiting for us, glossy and colourful as a child's transfer and with the same tinge of unreality.

In the morning, when I woke, the bedroom shutters were luminous and barred with gold from the rising sun. We ate breakfast out in the garden, under the small tangerine trees. By the end of the meal we started to tell each other what we intended to do, why we intended to do it, and then argue as to whether each had made a wise decision. I never joined in these discussions, for I knew perfectly well what I intended to do, and would concentrate on finishing my food as rapidly as possible.

'*Must* you gulp and slush your food like that?' Larry would inquire in a pained voice.

'Eat it slowly, dear,' Mother would murmur; 'there's no hurry.'

No hurry? With Roger waiting at the garden gate, an alert black shape, watching for me with eager brown eyes. No hurry, with the island waiting to be explored? I could hardly expect the family to understand, however, so I would slow down until I felt that their attention had been attracted elsewhere, and then stuff my mouth again.

Finishing at last, I would slip from the table, fetch my match-boxes and my butterfly net, the garden gate would creak open and clang shut, and Roger would be off through the olive groves, his deep bark welcoming the new day.

He was the perfect companion for an adventure, affectionate, brave, intelligent, and full of good-humoured tolerance for my eccentricities. If I slipped when climbing a bank, Roger appeared suddenly, gave a snort that sounded like suppressed laughter, a quick look over, a rapid lick of commiseration, shook himself, sneezed, and gave me his lop-sided grin. If I found something that interested me – an ant's nest, a caterpillar, a spider wrapping up a fly – Roger sat down and waited until I had finished examining it. If he thought I was taking too long, he shifted nearer, gave a gentle, whiny yawn, and then sighed deeply and started to wag his tail. If the matter was of no great importance, we would move on, but if it was something absorbing, I had only to frown at him and he would realize it was going to be a long job. His ears would droop, his tail slow down and stop, and he would slouch off to the nearest bush and fling himself down in the shade, giving me a martyred look as he did so.