

My Family and Other Animals -- by Gerald Durrell

This is the story of a five-year sojourn that I and my family made on the Greek island of Corfu. To explain some of my family's more curious ways, I feel that I should state that at the time we were in Corfu we were all quite young: Larry, the eldest was 23; Leslie was 19; Margo 18; whilst I was the youngest, being of the tender and impressionable age of 10. We have never been very certain of my mother's age, for the simple reason that she can never remember her date of birth. My mother also insists that I explain that she is a widow for, as she so penetratingly observed, you never know what people might think.

Episode One -- The Migration

July in Bournemouth had been blown out like a candle by a biting wind that ushered in a leaden August sky. A sharp, stinging drizzle fell. It was the sort of weather calculated to try anyone's endurance.

Considered as a group my family was not a very prepossessing sight that afternoon, for the weather had brought with it the usual selection of ills to which we were prone. For me, lying on the floor, labelling my collection of shells, it had brought catarrh, so that I was forced to breathe stertorously through open mouth. For my brother Leslie, it had inflamed the convolutions of his ears so that they bled delicately but persistently. To my sister Margo it had delivered a fresh dappling of acne spots to a face that was already blotched like a red veil. For my mother there was a rich, bubbling cold, and a twinge of rheumatism to season it. Only my eldest brother, Larry, was untouched, but it was sufficient that he was irritated by our failings.

It was Larry, of course, who started it. The rest of us felt too apathetic to think of anything except our own ills. He had become increasingly irritable as the afternoon wore on. At length, glancing moodily round the room, he decided to attack Mother, as being the obvious cause of the trouble.

'Why do we stand this bloody climate?' he asked suddenly, making a gesture towards the rain-distorted window. 'Look at it! And, if it comes to that, look at us.... Margo swollen up like a plate of scarlet porridge....Leslie wandering around with fourteen fathoms of cotton wool in each ear...Gerry sounds as though he's had a cleft palate from birth....And look at you: you're looking more decrepit and hag-ridden every day.'

Mother peered over the top of a large volume entitled *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*.

'Indeed I'm not,' she said indignantly.

'You *are*,' Larry insisted; 'you're beginning to look like an Irish washerwoman....and your family looks like a series of illustrations from a medical encyclopedia.'

Mother could think of no really crushing reply to this, so she contented herself with a glare before retreating once more behind her book.

'What we need is sunshine,' Larry continued; 'don't you agree, Les? ...
...Les...Les!'

Leslie unravelled a large quantity of cotton-wool from one ear.

'What d'you say?' he asked.

'There you are!' said Larry, turning triumphantly to Mother, 'it's become a major operation to hold a conversation with him. I ask you, what a position to be in! One brother can't hear what you say, and the other one can't be understood. Really, it's time something was done. I can't be expected to produce deathless prose in an atmosphere of gloom and eucalyptus.'

'Yes, dear,' said Mother vaguely.

'What we all need,' said Larry, getting into his stride again, 'is sunshine... a country where we can *grow*.'

'Yes, dear, that would be nice,' agreed Mother, not really listening.

'I had a letter from George this morning – he says Corfu's wonderful. Why don't we pack up and go to Greece?'

'Very well, dear, if you like,' said Mother unguardedly.

Where Larry was concerned she was generally very careful not to commit herself.

'When?' asked Larry, rather surprised at this cooperation.

Mother, perceiving that she had made a tactical error, cautiously lowered *Easy Recipes from Rajputana*.

'Well, I think it would be a sensible idea if you were to go on ahead, dear, and arrange things. Then you can write and tell me if it's nice, and we all can follow,' she said cleverly.

Larry gave her a withering look.

'You said *that* when I suggested going to Spain,' he reminded her, 'and I sat for two interminable months in Seville, waiting for you to come out, while you did nothing except write me massive letters about drains and drinking-water, as though I was the Town Clerk or something. No, if we're going to Greece, let's all go together.'

'You do *exaggerate*, Larry,' said Mother plaintively; 'anyway, I can't go just like that. I have to arrange something about this house.'

'Arrange? Arrange what, for heaven's sake? Sell it.'

'I can't do that, dear,' said Mother, shocked.

'Why not?'

'But I've only just bought it.'

'Sell it while it's still untarnished, then.'

'Don't be ridiculous, dear,' said Mother firmly; 'that's quite out of the question. It would be madness.'

So we sold the house and fled from the gloom of the English summer, like a flock of migrating swallows.

We all travelled light, taking with us only what we considered to be the bare essentials of life. When we opened our luggage for Customs inspection, the contents of our bags were a fair indication of character and interests. Thus Margo's luggage contained a multitude of clothes, three books on slimming, and a regiment of small bottles each containing some elixir guaranteed to cure acne. Leslie's case held a couple of roll-top pullovers and a pair of trousers which were wrapped round two revolvers, an air-pistol, a book called *Be Your Own Gunsmith*, and a large bottle of oil that leaked. Larry was accompanied by two trunks of books and a brief-case containing his clothes. Mother's luggage was sensibly divided between clothes and various volumes

on cooking and gardening. I travelled with only those items that I thought necessary to relieve the tedium of a long journey: four books on natural history, a butterfly net, a dog, and a jam-jar full of caterpillars all in imminent danger of turning into chrysalids. Thus, by our standards fully equipped, we left the clammy shores of England.

(France, Switzerland, Italy were passed, leaving only confused memories. The tiny ship throbbed away from the heel of Italy out into the twilit sea, and as we slept in our stuffy cabins we passed the invisible dividing-line and entered the bright, looking-glass world of Greece. At dawn, we awoke restless and went on deck.

And suddenly the sun shifted over the horizon, the mist lifted, and before us lay the island, the mountains as though sleeping beneath a crumpled blanket of brown, the folds stained with the green of olive-groves. Along the shore curved beaches as white as tusks among brilliant gold, red, and white rocks. We rounded the northern cape, and the island sloped gently down, with here and there a finger of black cypress against the sky. The shallow sea in the bays was butterfly blue, and even above the ship's engines we could hear, faintly ringing from the shore, the shrill, triumphant cries of the cicadas.)

End of Episode One