

My Family --- Episode 7

Gerry has spent his first winter on the island of Corfu, having rather eccentric lessons with George, and happy Thursday teas with Theodore, the eminent zoologist who has so much to discuss with him about the wildlife of the island.

Episode 7

With March came the spring, and the island was flower-filled, scented, and a-flutter with new leaves. Waxy yellow crocuses appeared in great clusters, grape-hyacinths lifted buds like magenta sugar-drops. Even the ancient olives decked themselves in clusters of minute creamy flowers, modest and yet decorative, as became their great age. It was no half-hearted spring, this: the whole island vibrated with it as though a great, ringing chord had been struck. Everyone and everything heard it and responded.

Spring affected the family in a variety of ways. Larry bought himself a guitar and a large barrel of strong red wine. He interspersed his bouts of work by singing Elizabethan love-songs, with frequent pauses for refreshment. This would soon induce a mood of melancholy, and the love-songs would become more doleful, and Larry would inform whichever member of the family happened to be present, that Spring, for him, did not mean the beginning of a new year but the death of the old one.

One evening the rest of us had gone out and left Mother and Larry alone together. Larry had spent the evening singing more and more dismally, working them both into a fit of acute depression. They attempted to alleviate this state with the aid of wine, but this had the reverse effect. When we returned, we were startled to be greeted by Mother, standing at the door of the villa with a hurricane lantern. She informed us with lady-like precision and dignity that she wished to be buried under the rose-bushes. The novelty of this lay in her choosing such an accessible place for her remains. Mother spent a lot of her spare time choosing places to be buried in, but generally in the most remote areas, where one would drop exhausted by the wayside long before reaching the grave.

When left undisturbed by Larry, however, Spring for Mother meant an endless array of fresh vegetables with which to experiment. There streamed from the kitchen a tremendous number of new

dishes, each richer and more exotic than the last. Larry began to suffer from dyspepsia. Scorning the simple remedy of eating less, he procured an immense tin of bicarbonate of soda, and would solemnly take a dose after every meal.

'Why do you *eat* so much if it upsets you, dear?' Mother asked.

'It would be an insult to your cooking to eat less,' Larry replied unctuously.

'You're getting terribly fat,' said Margo; 'it's very bad for you.'

'Nonsense!' said Larry in alarm. 'I'm not getting fat, Mother, am I?'

'You look as though you've put on a little weight,' Mother admitted.

'It's your fault,' Larry said. 'You will keep tempting me with these delicacies. You're driving me to ulcers. I shall have to go on a diet. What's a good diet, Margo?'

'Well,' said Margo with enthusiasm, 'you could try the orange-juice and salad one. There's the milk and raw vegetable one.....or there's the boiled fish and brown bread one...I haven't tried it yet.'

'Dear God!' exclaimed Larry, genuinely shocked, 'are those diets? I'm not going to do it if it means bushels of raw fruit and vegetables. You will all have to resign yourselves to the fact that I shall be taken from you at an early age, suffering from fatty degeneration of the heart.'

At the next meal he took the precaution of a large dose of bicarbonate beforehand, and then protested bitterly that the food tasted queer.

Margo was always badly affected by spring. Her personal appearance now became almost an obsession. Piles of clothes filled her bedroom. Singing shrilly and untunefully she would drift about the villa, carrying piles of flimsy underwear or bottles of scent. She would seize every opportunity to dive into the bathroom, and once in there was as hard to dislodge as a limpet from a rock. Eventually she would emerge, and drift from the house to sunbathe or swim. It was during one of these excursions to the sea that she met an over-goodlooking young Turk. It was, of course, Spiro who discovered it. He watched over Margo's welfare with the earnest concern of a St Bernard. He cornered Mother in the kitchen one morning, sighed deeply, and broke the news to her. 'I'm very sorrys to haves to tells you this, Mrs Durrells,' he rumbled sorrowfully, 'buts I thinks you oughts to knows. It's Missy Margo.'

'What about her?' asked Mother.

Spiro glanced round uneasily.

'Dos you knows shes meetings a *man*?' he inquired in a vibrant whisper.

'A man? Oh....er...yes, I did know,' said Mother, lying valiantly.

'But did you know he's a *Turk*?' Spiro questioned in tones of blood-curdling ferocity.

'A Turk?' said Mother vaguely. 'No, I didn't know. What's wrong with that?'

Spiro looked horrified.

'Gollys, Mrs Durrells, whats wrongs with it? I wouldn't trust a *Turk* with any girls. He'll cut her throats, that's what he'll do. Honest to Gods, its not safe, Missy Margo swimmings with hims.'

'All right, Spiro,' said Mother soothingly, 'I'll speak to Margo.'

'Buts donts you worrys... if he dids anything to Missy Margo I'd fix the bastard,' Spiro assured her earnestly.

Mother mentioned the matter to Margo, in a slightly less bloodcurdling manner than Spiro's, and suggested that the young Turk be brought to tea. Delighted, Margo went off to fetch him, while Mother hastily made a cake, and warned the rest of us to be on our best behaviour. The Turk turned out to be a tall young man, with meticulously waved hair and a flashy smile that managed to convey the minimum of humour with the maximum of condescension. He pressed Mother's hand to his lips as though he were conferring an honour on her, and scattered the largesse of his smile for the rest of us. Mother, feeling the hackles of the family rising, threw herself desperately into the breach.

'Lovely having you.....do have a scone...' she said, smiling with dazzling charm and handing him a piece of cake.

There was a pause.

'He's on holiday here,' announced Margo suddenly, as though it were something unique.

'Really?' said Larry waspishly. 'Amazing!'

'I had a holiday once,' said Leslie indistinctly through a mouthful of cake.

Mother glared at them.

'Sugar?' she inquired fruitily. 'Sugar in your tea?'

We all sat and watched Mother pouring out the tea and searching her mind desperately for a topic of conversation.

At length the Turk turned to Larry.

'You write, I believe?' he said with complete lack of interest.

Larry's eyes glittered. Mother, seeing the danger signs, rushed in quickly.

'Yes,yes,' she smiled, 'he writes away, day after day. Always tapping at the typewriter.'

'I always feel that I could write superbly if I tried,' remarked the Turk.

'Really?' said Mother. 'Yes, well, it's a gift, I suppose, like so many things.'

'He swims well,' said Margo, 'and he goes out terribly far.'

'I have no fear,' said the Turk modestly. 'I am a superb swimmer, so I have no fear. When I ride the horse, I have no fear, for I ride superbly. I can sail the boat magnificently in the typhoon without fear.'

He sipped his tea delicately, regarding our awestruck faces with approval.

'You see,' he went on, in case we had missed the point, 'you see, I am not a fearful man.'

The next day Margo received a note from the Turk asking her if she would accompany him to the cinema.

'Do you think I ought to go?' she asked Mother.

'If you want to, dear,' Mother answered, adding firmly, 'but tell him I'm coming too.'

'Oh, Mother, you can't,' protested Margo.

'Nonsense, dear. Turks are quite used to chaperones and things... look at their harems.'

That evening, Larry, Leslie and I waited eagerly for their return. At half past one in the morning, Margo and Mother, in the last stages of exhaustion, crept into the villa and sank into chairs.

'So,' said Larry; 'we thought you'd flown with him. We imagined you galloping about Constantinople on camels, your yashmaks rippling seductively in the breeze.'

'We've had the most awful evening,' said Mother.

'What happened?' asked Leslie.

'Well, to begin with he stank of the most frightful perfume,' said Margo, 'and that put me off straight away.'

'We went in the cheapest seats, so close to the screen that I got a headache,' said Mother, 'and simply crammed together like sardines. It was so oppressive I couldn't breathe. And then, to crown it all, I got a flea. It was nothing to laugh at, Larry. The blessed thing got inside my corsets and I could feel it running about. I couldn't very well scratch, it would have looked so peculiar. I had to keep pressing myself against the seat. I think he noticed, though...he kept giving me funny looks. Then in the interval he went out and came back with horrible, sickly Turkish Delight, and before long we were all covered with white sugar, and I had a dreadful thirst. Then he went out and came back with flowers. I ask you, dear, flowers in the middle of a cinema. That's Margo's

bouquet.'

Mother pointed to a massive bunch of spring flowers, in a tangle of coloured ribbons. She delved into her bag and produced a minute bunch of violets.

'This,' she said, 'was for me.'

'But the worst part was coming home,' said Margo.

'Dreadful!' Mother agreed. 'I thought we were going to get a car, but no, all that way in a horse-cab, and a smelly one at that. It took us hours and *hours*, because the poor horse was tired, and I was trying to be polite, dying to scratch myself, and longing for a drink. All the fool could do was to sit there grinning at Margo and singing Turkish love songs. I could have cheerfully hit him. You'll just have to choose your boy friends more carefully in future, Margo. I can't go through that sort of thing again.'

For Leslie, the coming of Spring meant turtle-doves and wood-pigeons, and the sudden flash and scuttle of a hare. So, after visiting numerous gun-shops, he returned to the villa one day proudly carrying a double-barrelled shotgun. He stripped it down and cleaned it while I stood and watched, fascinated by the gleaming barrels.

'Isn't she a beauty?' he crooned, his vivid blue eyes shining.

At dawn he and I hurried through the misty olive groves and on to the top of the little hill. We stood waist-deep among the vines, Leslie's eyes, intense and gleaming, following the birds. The gun jerked as the report echoed briefly. When five doves hung from his belt, limp, bloodstained, with demurely closed eyes, he lit a cigarette, and cuddled the gun under his arm.

'Come on,' he said; 'we've got enough. Let's give the poor devils a rest.'

Yani, the shepherd, was driving his goats out to graze. His brown face wrinkled into a smile, a gnarled hand was raised in salute.

He called in his deep voice the beautiful Greek greeting, '*Chairete, kyrioi.....be happy.*' The island was drenched with dew, radiant with early morning sun, full of stirring life. Be happy. How could one be anything else in such a season?

End of Episode 7