My Family 6

Mother decided that Gerry was running wild on the island and must have some sort of education. In the hope that Gerry would cease to introduce buzzing, wriggling and crawling creatures into the house, Larry suggested George might have a shot at teaching him.
Gerry, listening to his family arguing about him, wondered who George might be, but lost interest and sloped off into the night with Roger to hunt for glow-worms.

Episode 6

I discovered that George was an old friend of Larry's who had come to Corfu to write. It was George, moreover, who was really responsible for our presence in Corfu, for he had written such eulogistic letters about the place that Larry had become convinced we could live nowhere else. Now George was to pay the penalty for his rashness. He came over to the villa to discuss my education with Mother, and we were introduced. We regarded each other with suspicion. George was a very tall and extremely thin man who moved with the odd disjointed grace of a puppet. He had a deep, melancholy voice, a dry and sarcastic sense of humour.

Gravely, George set about the task of teaching me.

He was undeterred by the fact that there were no school-books available on the island; he simply ransacked his own library and appeared on the appointed day armed with a most unorthodox selection of tomes. Sombrely and patiently he taught me the rudiments of geography from the maps in the back of an ancient copy of Pears Cylopaedia, English from books that ranged from Wilde to Gibbon, French from a fat and exciting book called Le Petit Larousse, and mathematics from memory.
From my point of view, however, the most important thing was that we devoted some of our time to natural history, and George meticulously and carefully taught me how to observe and how to note down observations in a diary.
At once my enthusiastic but haphazard interest in nature became focused, for I found that by writing things down I could learn and remember much more. The only mornings that I was ever on time for my lessons were those which were given up to natural history.

Every morning at nine, George would come stalking through the olive-trees, clad in shorts, sandals, and an enormous straw hat with a frayed rim, swinging a walking-stick vigorously.
“Good morning. The disciple awaits the master agog with anticipation, I trust?” he would greet me, with a saturnine smile.
In the little dining-room of the villa the shutters would be closed against the sun, and in the green twilight George would loom over the table, methodically arranging the books.

‘Let me see, let me see,’ he would murmur, ‘yes,yes,mathematics. If I remember rightly, we were engaged in the Herculean task of discovering how long it would take six men to build a wall if three of them took a week. Let us see if we can make it more exciting.
If it took two caterpillars a week to eat eight leaves, how long would four caterpillars take to eat the same number? Now, apply yourself to that.’
While I struggled with the apparently insoluble problem of the caterpillar’s appetites, George would be otherwise occupied. He was an expert fencer, and was at that time engaged in learning some of the local peasant dances, for which he had a passion. So while waiting for me to finish the sum, he would drift about in the gloom of the room, practising fencing stances or complicated dancing-steps, a habit that I found disconcerting, to say the least, and to which I shall always attribute my inability to do mathematics.

In Geography we made better progress, for George was able to give a more zoological tinge to the lesson.
We would draw giant maps, wrinkled with mountains, and then fill in the various places of interest, together with drawings of the more exciting fauna to be found there. Thus for me the chief products of Ceylon were tapirs and tea; of India tigers and rice; of Australia kangaroos and sheep, while the blue currents we drew across the oceans carried whales, albatross, penguins, and walrus, as well as hurricanes, trade winds, fair weather and foul. Our maps were works of Art.

Our attempts at history were not at first conspicuously successful, until George discovered that by seasoning a series of unpalatable facts with a sprig of zoology, he could get me interested. Thus I became conversant with some historical data which, to the best of my knowledge, have never been recorded before. Breathlessly,I followed Hannibal’s progress over the Alps. My interest lay in the fact that *I knew the name of each and every elephant.* I also knew

that Hannibal had appointed a special man not only to feed and look after the elephants, *but to give them hot-water bottles when the weather got cold.* This interesting fact seems to have escaped most serious historians. Another thing that most history books never seem to mention is that Columbus's first words on setting foot ashore in America were: 'Great heavens, look…a jaguar!' With such an introduction, how could one fail to take an interest in the continent's subsequent history?

Roger, of course, thought that I was simply wasting my mornings. However, he did not desert me, but lay under the table asleep while I wrestled with my work. It was comforting to be able to rest my feet on his woolly bulk, but it was hard to concentrate, for the sun would pour through the shutters, reminding me of all the things I might be doing.

Realising this, George wisely instituted the novel system of outdoor lessons.Some mornings he arrived, carrying a large furry towel, and we would make our way to a bay, secluded and small, with a crescent-shaped fringe of white sand running round it. A grove of stunted olives grew there, providing a pleasant shade.

We would walk out into the warm, bright water, to drift face down, occasionally diving to bring up something that caught our eye. We would hunt for new shells for my collection, or hold long discussions on the other fauna we had found. George would suddenly realize that all this, though most enjoyable, could hardly be dscribed as education in the strictest sense of the word, so we would drift back to the shallows and lie there. The lesson then proceeded, while the shoals of little fish would gather about us and nibble gently at our legs.

'So the French and British Fleets were slowly drawing together for what was to be the decisive sea battle of the war. When the enemy was sighted, Nelson was on the bridge bird-watching through his telescope… he had already been warned of the Frenchmen's approach by a friendly gull….eh? …oh, a greater black-backed gull I think it was…The British sailors were a bit worried because the French seemed so strong, but when they saw that Nelson was so little affected by the whole thing that he was sitting on the bridge labelling his birds'-egg collection, they decided that there was really nothing to be scared about…'

Around my legs the coloured fish stood on their heads while they mumbled at me with toothless gums. In the drooping clusters of olives a cicada whispered gently to itself.

'…and so they carried Nelson down below…He was mortally wounded, and lying below decks with the battle still raging above, he murmured his last words: 'Kiss me, Hardy,' and then he died …What? Oh yes. Well, he had already told Hardy that if anything happened to him he could have his birds' eggs…..'

So it was in this way that George, hampered by inadequate books and a reluctant pupil, would strive to make his teaching interesting.

One afternoon , I arrived at George's villa, gave a perfunctory knock, and dashed in. Only then did I realise he had company – a figure which, at first glance, I decided must be George's brother, for he also wore a beard. He was,however, in contrast to George, immaculately dressed. I paused, embarrassed, while George surveyed me sardonically.
'Thank heavens you're here, Theodore. Gerry, this is Doctor Theodore Stephanides. He is an expert on practically everything you care to mention. He, like you, is an eccentric nature lover.'

I was at once confused and amazed by Theodore. He was obviously a scientist of considerable repute (I could have told this by his beard). He was the only person I had met until now who seemed to share my enthusiasm for zoology. He not only talked to me as if I was grown up, but also as though I was as knowledgeable as he. I made my way home to tell my family of my meeting with Theodore. There were many things I wanted to ask him, but I felt it would be unlikely that he would have very much time to spare for me. I was mistaken, however, for two days later Leslie handed me a small parcel.
'Met that bearded johnny,' he said laconically; 'you know, that scientist bloke. Said this was for you.'
Incredulously I stared at the parcel. Surely it couldn't be for me? A great scientist would hardly bother to send me parcels. I tore off the paper as quickly as I could. Inside was a small box and a letter.
My dear Gerry Durrell,
I wondered if it might not assist your investigations of the local natural history to have some form of magnifying instrument. I am therefore sending you this pocket microscope, in the hope that it will be of some use to you. It is, of course, not of very high magnification, but you will find it sufficient for field *work.*

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,
Theo. Stephanides

P.S. If you have nothing better to do on Thursday, perhaps you would care to come to tea, and I could then show you some of my microscope slides.

During the last days of that dying summer, and throughout the warm, wet winter that followed, tea with Theodore became a weekly affair. Every Thursday I would set out, my pockets bulging with specimens, to be driven into town by Spiro. It was an appointment that I would not have missed for anything.

End of Episode 6