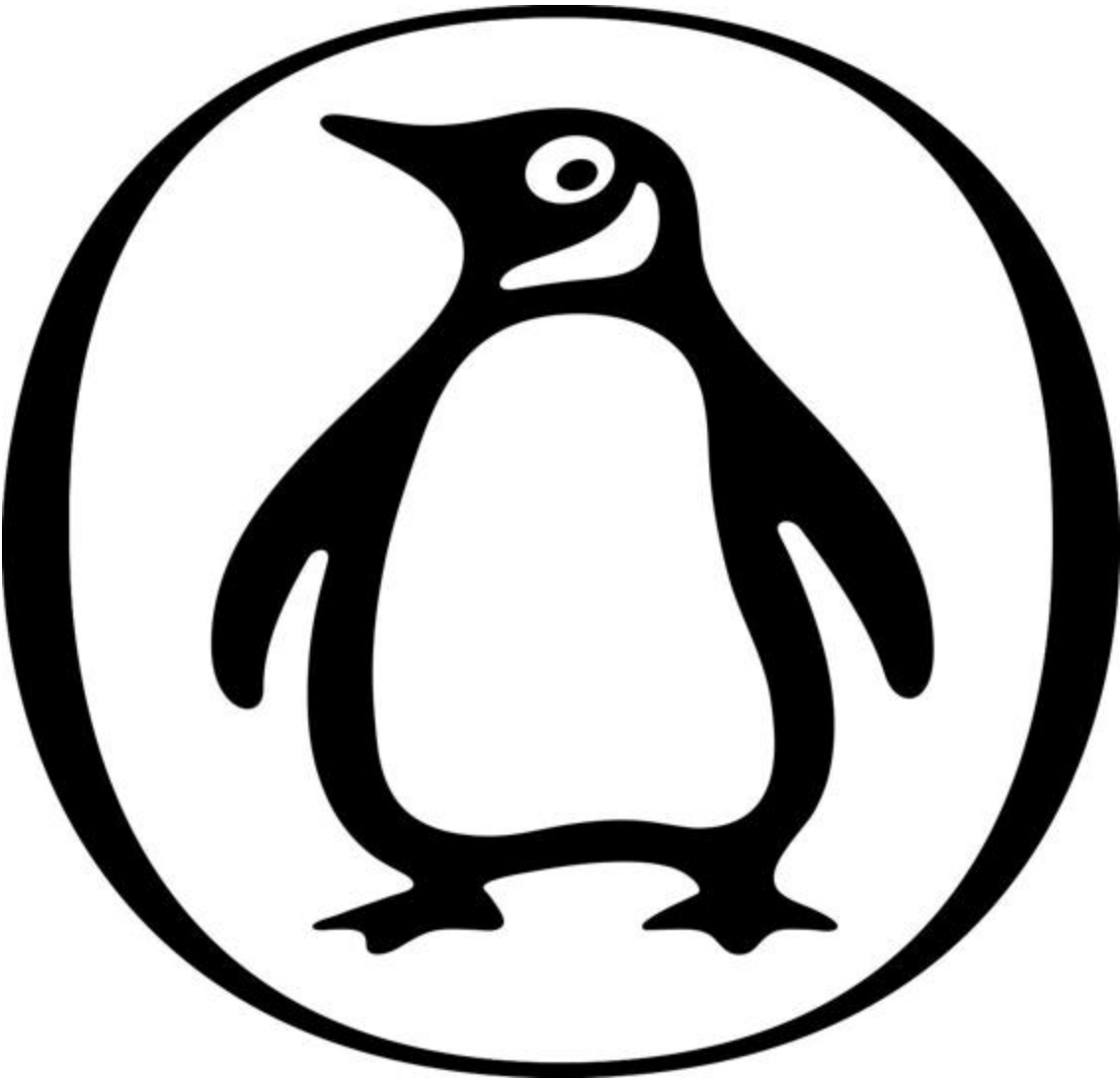




GERALD
DURRELL
THE CORFU
TRILOGY

THREE CLASSIC TALES
OF CHILDHOOD ON AN
ISLAND PARADISE

including
My Family and Other Animals



PENGUIN BOOKS

The Corfu Trilogy

Gerald Durrell (1925–95) moved from England to Corfu with his family when he was eight. He immediately became fascinated by the island's natural history and spent much of his time studying the local wildlife and keeping numerous, and often unusual, pets. He grew up to be a famous naturalist, animal-collector, and conservationist.

Durrell dedicated his life to the conservation of wildlife and it is through his efforts that creatures such as the Mauritius pink pigeon and the Mallorcan midwife toad have avoided extinction. Over his lifetime he wrote thirty-seven books, went on dozens of animal-collecting trips and presented numerous tv shows. He founded the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in 1959 as a centre for the conservation of endangered species – of which his wife Lee is still Honorary Director. He was awarded the OBE in 1982.



The Corfu Trilogy

My Family and Other Animals

Birds, Beasts, and Relatives

The Garden of the Gods

GERALD DURRELL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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My Family and Other Animals

To My Mother

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THE RETURN

It is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, which, by often rumination, wraps me in a most humorous sadness.

– SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*

The Speech for the Defence

‘Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’

The White Queen – *Through the Looking Glass*

This is the story of a five-year sojourn that I and my family made on the Greek island of Corfu. It was originally intended to be a mildly nostalgic account of the natural history of the island, but I made a grave mistake by

introducing my family into the book in the first few pages. Having got themselves on paper, they then proceeded to establish themselves and invite various friends to share the chapters. It was only with the greatest difficulty, and by exercising considerable cunning, that I managed to retain a few pages here and there which I could devote exclusively to animals.

I have attempted to draw an accurate and unexaggerated picture of my family in the following pages; they appear as I saw them. To explain some of their more curious ways, however, I feel that I should state that at the time we were in Corfu the family were all quite young: Larry, the eldest, was twenty-three; Leslie was nineteen; Margo eighteen; while I was the youngest, being of the tender and impressionable age of ten. We have never been very certain of my mother's age, for the simple reason that she can never remember her date of birth; all I can say is that she was old enough to have four children. 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.

In order to compress five years of incident, observation, and pleasant living into something a little less lengthy than the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, I have been forced to telescope, prune, and graft, so that there is little left of the original continuity of events. Also I have been forced to leave out many

happenings and characters that I would have liked to describe.

It is doubtful if this would have been written without the help and enthusiasm of the following people. I mention this so that blame can be laid in the right quarter. My grateful thanks, then, to:

Dr Theodore Stephanides. With typical generosity, he allowed me to make use of material from his unpublished work on Corfu, and supplied me with a number of dreadful puns, some of which I have used.

My family. They, after all, unconsciously provided a lot of the material and helped me considerably during the writing of the book by arguing ferociously and rarely agreeing about any incident on which I consulted them.

My wife, who pleased me by laughing uproariously when reading the manuscript, only to inform me that it was my spelling that amused her.

Sophie, my secretary, who was responsible for the introduction of commas and the ruthless eradication of the split infinitive.

I should like to pay a special tribute to my mother, to whom this book is dedicated. Like a gentle, enthusiastic, and understanding Noah, she has steered her vessel full of strange progeny through the stormy seas of life with great skill, always faced with the possibility of mutiny, always surrounded by the dangerous shoals of overdraft and extravagance, never

being sure that her navigation would be approved by the crew, but certain that she would be blamed for anything that went wrong. That she survived the voyage is a miracle, but survive it she did, and, moreover, with her reason more or less intact. As my brother Larry rightly points out, we can be proud of the way we have brought her up; she is a credit to us. That she has reached that happy Nirvana where nothing shocks or startles is exemplified by the fact that one weekend recently, when all alone in the house, she was treated to the sudden arrival of a series of crates containing two pelicans, a scarlet ibis, a vulture, and eight monkeys. A lesser mortal might have quailed at such a contingency, but not Mother. On Monday morning I found her in the garage being pursued round and round by an irate pelican which she was trying to feed with sardines from a tin.

‘I’m glad you’ve come, dear,’ she panted; ‘this pelican is a *little* difficult to handle.’

When I asked her how she *knew* the animals belonged to me, she replied, ‘Well, of course I knew they were yours, dear; who else would send pelicans to me?’

Which goes to show how well she knows at least one of her family.

Lastly, I would like to make a point of stressing that all the anecdotes about the island and the islanders are absolutely true. Living in Corfu was

rather like living in one of the more flamboyant and slapstick comic operas. The whole atmosphere and charm of the place was, I think, summed up neatly on an Admiralty map we had, which showed the island and the adjacent coastline in great detail. At the bottom was a little inset which read:

CAUTION: *As the buoys marking the shoals are often out of position, mariners are cautioned to be on their guard when navigating these shores.*

Part One

There is a pleasure sure
In being mad, which none but madmen know.

– DRYDEN, *The Spanish Friar*, II, i

The Migration

July had been blown out like a candle by a biting wind that ushered in a leaden August sky. A sharp, stinging drizzle fell, billowing into opaque grey sheets when the wind caught it. Along the Bournemouth sea-front the beach huts turned blank wooden faces towards a greeny-grey, froth-chained sea that leaped eagerly at the cement bulwark of the shore. The gulls had been tumbled inland over the town, and they now drifted above the house-tops on taut wings, whining peevishly. 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, pouring it into my skull like cement, so that I was forced to breathe stertorously through open mouth. For my brother Leslie, hunched dark and glowering by the fire, 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, but Larry was designed by Providence to go through life like a small, blond firework, exploding ideas in other people's minds, and then curling up with catlike unctuousness and refusing to take any blame for the consequences. 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 hagridden 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 encyclopædia.’

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 diaphanous garments, 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 briefcase 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 rain-washed and sorrowful, Switzerland like a Christmas cake, Italy exuberant, noisy, and smelly, 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, somewhere in that tract of moon-polished water we passed the invisible dividing line and entered the bright, looking-glass world of Greece. Slowly this sense of change seeped down to us, and so, at dawn, we awoke restless and went on deck.

The sea lifted smooth blue muscles of wave as it stirred in the dawn light, and the foam of our wake spread gently behind us like a white peacock's tail, glinting with bubbles. The sky was pale and stained with yellow on the eastern horizon. Ahead lay a chocolate-brown smudge of land, huddled in

mist, with a frill of foam at its base. This was Corfu, and we strained our eyes to make out the exact shapes of the mountains, to discover valleys, peaks, ravines, and beaches, but it remained a silhouette. Then suddenly the sun lifted over the horizon, and the sky turned the smooth enamelled blue of a jay's eye. The endless, meticulous curves of the sea flamed for an instant and then changed to a deep royal purple flecked with green. The mist lifted in quick, lithe ribbons, 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 tottering cities of brilliant gold, red, and white rocks. We rounded the northern cape, a smooth shoulder of rust-red cliff carved into a series of giant caves. The dark waves lifted our wake and carried it gently towards them, and then, at their very mouths, it crumpled and hissed thirstily among the rocks. Rounding the cape, we left the mountains, and the island sloped gently down, blurred with the silver and green iridescence of olives, with here and there an admonishing finger of black cypress against the sky. The shallow sea in the bays was butterfly blue, and even above the sound of the ship's engines we could hear, faintly ringing from the shore like a chorus of tiny voices, the shrill, triumphant cries of the cicadas.

The Unsuspected Isle

We threaded our way out of the noise and confusion of the customs shed into the brilliant sunshine on the quay. Around us the town rose steeply, tiers of multi-coloured houses piled haphazardly, green shutters folded back from their windows like the wings of a thousand moths. Behind us lay the bay, smooth as a plate, smouldering with that unbelievable blue.

Larry walked swiftly, with head thrown back and an expression of such regal disdain on his face that one did not notice his diminutive size, keeping a wary eye on the porters who struggled with his trunks. 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, harassed missionary in an uprising, was dragged unwillingly to the nearest lamp post by an exuberant Roger and forced to stand there, staring into space, while he relieved the 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, probably *his* stomach’s out of order,’ said Margo triumphantly.

‘It’s six of one and a dozen of the other.’

‘You mean half a dozen of the other.’

‘Whatever I mean, it’s the same thing.’

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 mediæval 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 were immediately galvanized into activity, and they sped after the cab, yapping vociferously. Our pose was irretrievably shattered, for it took two people to restrain the raving Roger, while the rest of us leaned out of the cab 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. ‘This is like a scene from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.’

‘Why don’t *you* do something; instead of criticizing?’ 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 leaped 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 leaned 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. Later we descended to lunch in a large and gloomy room full of dusty potted palms and contorted statuary. We were served by the bewhiskered porter, who had become the head waiter simply by donning tails and a celluloid dicky that creaked like a convention of crickets. The meal, however, was ample and well cooked, and we ate hungrily. As coffee was served, Larry sat back in his chair with a sigh.

‘That was a passable meal,’ he said generously. ‘What do you think of this place, Mother?’

‘Well, the *food’s* all right, dear,’ said Mother, refusing to commit herself.

‘They seem a helpful crowd,’ Larry went on. ‘The manager himself shifted my bed nearer the window.’

‘He wasn’t very helpful when I asked for paper,’ said Leslie.

‘Paper?’ asked Mother. ‘What did you want paper for?’

‘For the lavatory...there wasn’t any in there,’ explained Leslie.

‘Shhh! Not at the table,’ whispered Mother.

‘You obviously don’t look,’ said Margo in a clear and penetrating voice;

‘they’ve got a little box full by the pan.’

‘Margo, dear!’ exclaimed Mother, horrified.

‘What’s the matter? Didn’t you see the little box?’

Larry gave a snort of laughter.

‘Owing to the somewhat eccentric plumbing system of the town,’ he explained to Margo kindly, ‘that little box is provided for the... er... debris, as it were, when you have finished communing with nature.’

Margo’s face turned scarlet with a mixture of embarrassment and disgust.

‘You mean... you mean... that was... My God! I might have caught some foul disease,’ she wailed, and, bursting into tears, fled from the dining-room.

‘Most insanitary,’ said Mother severely; ‘it really is a *disgusting* way to do things. Quite apart from the mistakes one can make, I should think there’s a danger of getting typhoid.’

‘Mistakes wouldn’t happen if they’d organize things properly,’ Leslie pointed out, returning to his original complaint.

‘Yes, dear; but I don’t think we ought to discuss it now. The best thing we can do is to find a house as soon as possible, before we all go down with something.’

Upstairs Margo was in a state of semi-nudity, splashing disinfectant over herself in quantities, and Mother spent an exhausting afternoon being forced to examine her at intervals for the symptoms of the diseases which Margo felt sure she was hatching. 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 crêpe 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 in full and uninhibited grief, preceded the corpse itself. This came on another cartlike vehicle, and was ensconced in a coffin 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, and glittering brass handles. I had never seen anything so colourful and attractive. This, I decided, was really the way to die, with shrouded horses, acres of flowers, and a horde of most satisfactorily grief-stricken relatives. I hung over the balcony rail watching the coffins pass beneath, absorbed and fascinated.

As each funeral passed, and the sounds of mourning and the clopping 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.’

‘Perhaps they save ’em up and bury ’em in a bunch,’ suggested Leslie callously.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mother. ‘I’m sure it’s something to do with the drains. It can’t be healthy for people to have *those* sort of arrangements.’

‘My God!’ said Margo sepulchrally, ‘then I suppose I’ll get it.’

‘No, no, dear; it doesn’t follow,’ said Mother vaguely; ‘it might be something that’s not catching.’

‘I don’t see how you can have an epidemic unless it’s something catching,’ Leslie remarked logically.

‘Anyway,’ said Mother, refusing to be drawn into any medical arguments, ‘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 cringing eyes and 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.

By the following morning Mother had decided that we would hire a car and go out house-hunting on our own. She was convinced that somewhere on the island there lurked a villa with a bathroom. We did not share

Mother’s belief, and so it was a slightly irritable and argumentative group that she herded down to the taxi rank in the main square. The taxi drivers, perceiving our innocent appearance, scrambled from inside their cars and flocked round us like vultures, each trying to out-shout his compatriots.

Their voices grew louder and louder, their eyes flashed, they clutched each other’s arms and ground their teeth at one another, and then they laid hold of us as though they would tear us apart. Actually, we were being treated to the mildest of mild altercations, but we were not used to the Greek temperament, and to us it looked as though we were in danger of our lives.

‘Can’t you *do* something, Larry?’ Mother squeaked, disentangling herself with difficulty from the grasp of a large driver.

‘Tell them you’ll report them to the British consul,’ suggested Larry, raising his voice above the noise.

‘Don’t be silly, dear,’ said Mother breathlessly. ‘Just explain that we don’t understand.’

Margo, simpering, stepped into the breach.

‘We English,’ she yelled at the gesticulating drivers; ‘we no understand Greek.’

‘If that man pushes me again I’ll poke him in the eye,’ said Leslie, his face flushed red.

‘Now, now, dear,’ panted Mother, still struggling with the driver who was propelling her vigorously towards his car; ‘I don’t think they mean any harm.’

At that moment everyone was startled into silence by a voice that rumbled out above the uproar, a deep, rich, vibrant voice, the sort of voice you would expect a volcano to have.

‘Hoy!’ roared the voice. ‘Whys donts yous have someones who can talks your own language?’

Turning, we saw an ancient Dodge parked by the curb, and behind the wheel sat a short, barrel-bodied individual, with hamlike hands and a great, leathery, scowling face surmounted by a jauntily tilted peaked cap. He opened the door of the car, surged out onto the pavement, and waddled across to us. Then he stopped, scowling even more ferociously, and surveyed the group of silent cab drivers.

‘Thems been worrying yous?’ he asked Mother.

‘No, no,’ said Mother untruthfully; ‘it was just that we had difficulty in understanding them.’

‘Yous wants someones who can talks your own language,’ repeated the new arrival; ‘thems bastards... if yous will excuses the words... would swindles their own mothers. Excuses me a minute and I’ll fix them.’

He turned on the drivers a blast of Greek that almost swept them off their feet. Aggrieved, gesticulating, angry, they were herded back to their cars by this extraordinary man. Having given them a final and, it appeared, derogatory blast of Greek, he turned to us again.

‘Wheres yous wants to gos?’ he asked, almost truculently.

‘Can you take us to look for a villa?’ asked Larry.

‘Sure. I’ll takes yous anywheres. Just yous says.’

‘We are looking,’ said Mother firmly, ‘for a villa with a bathroom. Do you know of one?’

The man brooded like a great, suntanned gargoyle, his black eyebrows twisted into a knot of thoughtfulness.

‘Bathrooms?’ he said. ‘Yous wants a bathrooms?’

‘None of the ones we have seen so far had them,’ said Mother.

‘Oh, I knows a villa with a bathrooms,’ said the man. ‘I was wondering if its was goings to be bigs enough for yous.’

‘Will you take us to look at it, please?’ asked Mother.

‘Sure, I’ll takes yous. Gets into the cars.’

We climbed into the spacious car, and our driver hoisted his bulk behind the steering wheel and engaged his gears with a terrifying sound. We shot through the twisted streets on the outskirts of the town, swerving in and out among the loaded donkeys, the carts, the groups of peasant women, and innumerable dogs, our horn honking a deafening warning. During this our driver seized the opportunity to engage us in conversation. Each time he addressed us he would crane his massive head round to see our reactions, and the car would swoop back and forth across the road like a drunken swallow.

‘Yous English? Thought so... English always wants bathrooms... I gets a bathroom in my house... Spiro’s my name, Spiro Hakiaopulos... they alls calls me Spiro Americano on accounts of I lives in America... Yes, spent eight years in Chicago... That’s where I learnt my goods English... Went there to makes moneys... Then after eight years I says, “Spiros,” I says, “yous makes enough...” sos I comes backs to Greece... brings this car... best ons the islands... no one else gets a car like this... All the English tourists knows me, theys all asks for me when theys comes here... Theys knows theys wonts be swindled... I likes the English... best kinds of

peoples... Honest to Gods, ifs I wasn't Greek I'd likes to be English.'

We sped down a white road covered in a thick layer of silky dust that rose in a boiling cloud behind us, a road lined with prickly pears like a fence of green plates each cleverly balanced on another's edge, and splashed with knobs of scarlet fruit. We passed vineyards where the tiny, stunted vines were laced in green leaves, olive groves where the pitted trunks made a hundred astonished faces at us out of the gloom of their own shadow, and great clumps of zebra-striped cane that fluttered their leaves like a multitude of green flags. At last we roared to the top of a hill, and Spiro crammed on his brakes and brought the car to a dust-misted halt.

'Theres you ares,' he said, pointing with a great stubby forefinger; 'thats the villa with the bathrooms, likes yous wanted.'

Mother, who had kept her eyes firmly shut throughout the drive, now opened them cautiously and looked. Spiro was pointing at a gentle curve of hillside that rose from the glittering sea. The hill and the valleys around it were an eiderdown of olive groves that shone with a fishlike gleam where the breeze touched the leaves. Halfway up the slope, guarded by a group of tall, slim cypress trees, nestled a small strawberry-pink villa, like some exotic fruit lying in the greenery. The cypress trees undulated gently in the breeze, as if they were busily painting the sky a still brighter blue for our

arrival.

2

The Strawberry-Pink Villa

The villa was small and square, standing in its tiny garden with an air of pink-faced determination. Its shutters had been faded by the sun to a delicate creamy green, cracked and bubbled in places. The garden, surrounded by tall fuchsia hedges, had flower beds worked in complicated geometrical patterns, marked with smooth white stones. The white cobbled paths, scarcely as wide as a rake's head, wound laboriously round beds hardly larger than a big straw hat, beds in the shape of stars, half-moons, triangles, and circles, all overgrown with a shaggy tangle of flowers run wild. Roses dropped petals that seemed as big and smooth as saucers, flame red, moon white, glossy, and unwrinkled; marigolds like broods of shaggy suns stood watching their parents' progress through the sky. In the low growth the pansies pushed their velvety, innocent faces through the leaves, and the violets drooped sorrowfully under their heart-shaped leaves. The bougainvillæa that sprawled luxuriously over the tiny front balcony was hung, as though for a carnival, with its lantern-shaped magenta flowers. In the darkness of the fuchsia hedge a thousand ballerina-like blooms quivered expectantly. The warm air was thick with the scent of a hundred dying

flowers, and full of the gentle, soothing whisper and murmur of insects. As soon as we saw it, we wanted to live there; it was as though the villa had been standing there waiting for our arrival. We felt we had come home. Having lumbered so unexpectedly into our lives, Spiro now took over complete control of our affairs. It was better, he explained, for him to do things, as everyone knew him, and he would make sure we were not swindled.

‘Donts you worrys yourselfs about anythings, Mrs Durrells,’ he had scowled; ‘leaves everythings to me.’

So he would take us shopping, and after an hour’s sweating and roaring he would get the price of an article reduced by perhaps two drachmas. This was approximately a penny; it was not the cash, but the principle of the thing, he explained. The fact that he was Greek and adored bargaining was, of course, another reason. It was Spiro who, on discovering that our money had not yet arrived from England, subsidized us, and took it upon himself to go and speak severely to the bank manager about his lack of organization. That it was not the poor manager’s fault did not deter him in the least. It was Spiro who paid our hotel bill, who organized a car to carry our luggage to the villa, and who drove us out there himself, his car piled high with groceries that he had purchased for us.

That he knew everyone on the island, and that they all knew him, we soon discovered was no idle boast. Wherever his car stopped, half a dozen voices would shout out his name, and hands would beckon him to sit at the little tables under the trees and drink coffee. Policemen, peasants, and priests waved and smiled as he passed; fishermen, grocers, and café owners greeted him like a brother. ‘Ah, Spiro!’ they would say, and smile at him affectionately as though he were a naughty but lovable child. They respected his honesty and his belligerence, and above all they adored his typically Greek scorn and fearlessness when dealing with any form of governmental red tape. On arrival, two of our cases containing linen and other things had been confiscated by the customs on the curious grounds that they were merchandise. So, when we moved out to the strawberry-pink villa and the problem of bed linen arose, Mother told Spiro about our cases languishing in the customs, and asked his advice.

‘Gollys, Mrs Durrells,’ he bellowed, his huge face flushing red with wrath; ‘whys you never tells me befores? Them bastards in the customs. I’ll take you down theres tomorrows and fix them: I knows them alls, and they knows *me*. Leaves everythings to me – I’ll fix them.’

The following morning he drove Mother down to the customs shed. We all accompanied them, for we did not want to miss the fun. Spiro rolled into

the customs house like an angry bear.

‘Wheres these peoples things?’ he inquired of the plump little customs man.

‘You mean their boxes of merchandise?’ asked the customs official in his best English.

‘Whats you thinks I means?’

‘They are here,’ admitted the official cautiously.

‘We’ve comes to takes them,’ scowled Spiro; ‘gets them ready.’

He turned and stalked out of the shed to find someone to help carry the luggage, and when he returned he saw that the customs man had taken the keys from Mother and was just lifting the lid of one of the cases. Spiro, with a grunt of wrath, surged forward and slammed the lid down on the unfortunate man’s fingers.

‘Whats fors you open it, you sonofabitch?’ he asked, glaring.

The customs official, waving his pinched hand about, protested wildly that it was his duty to examine the contents.

‘Dutys?’ said Spiro with fine scorn. ‘Whats you means, dutys? Is it your dutys to attacks innocent foreigners, eh? Treats them like smugglers, eh? Thats whats yous calls dutys?’

Spiro paused for a moment, breathing deeply; then he picked up a large

suitcase in each great hand and walked towards the door. He paused and turned to fire his parting shot.

‘I knows you, Christaki, sos donts you go talkings about dutys to me. I remembers when you was fined twelve thousand drachmas for dynamitings fish. I won’t have any criminal talkings to *me* abouts dutys.’

We rode back from the customs in triumph, all our luggage intact and unexamined.

‘Thems bastards thinks they owns the islands,’ was Spiro’s comment. He seemed quite unaware of the fact that he was acting as though he did.

Once Spiro had taken charge he stuck to us like a burr. Within a few hours he had changed from a taxi driver to our champion, and within a week he was our guide, philosopher, and friend. He became so much a member of the family that very soon there was scarcely a thing we did, or planned to do, in which he was not involved in some way. He was always there, bull-voiced and scowling, arranging things we wanted done, telling us how much to pay for things, keeping a watchful eye on us all and reporting to Mother anything he thought she should know. Like a great, brown, ugly angel he watched over us as tenderly as though we were slightly weak-minded children. Mother he frankly adored, and he would sing her praises in a loud voice wherever we happened to be, to her acute

embarrassment.

‘You oughts to be carefuls whats you do,’ he would tell us, screwing up his face earnestly; ‘we donts wants to worrys your mothers.’

‘Whatever for, Spiro?’ Larry would protest in well-simulated astonishment. ‘She’s never done anything for us... why should we consider her?’

‘Gollys, Master Lorrys, donts *jokes* like that,’ Spiro would say in anguish.

‘He’s quite right, Spiro,’ Leslie would say very seriously; ‘she’s really not much good as a mother, you know.’

‘Donts says that, *donts says that*,’ Spiro would roar. ‘Honest to Gods, if I hads a mother likes yours I’d gos down every mornings and kisses her feets.’

So we were installed in the villa, and we each settled down and 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. One of the trunks was so big it had to be hoisted in through the window. Once they were installed, Larry spent a happy day unpacking them, and the room was so full of books that it was almost impossible to get in or out. Having constructed battlements of books round the outer perimeter, 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 throw out its head and 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 horny-handed 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 Theosophy 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.’

‘Yo *u* 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, but more like the Indian Mutiny. Mother, whose nerves had also been somewhat frayed by the reports, 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. On the table was a tottering pile of books which she consulted from time to time. 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 learned some surprising things. Roger, for example, found that it was unwise to smell hornets, that the peasant dogs ran screaming if he glanced at them through the gate, and that the chickens that leaped suddenly from

the fuchsia 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. Among the thick, silky petals of each rose bloom lived tiny, crablike spiders that scuttled sideways when disturbed. Their small, translucent bodies were coloured to match the flowers they inhabited: pink, ivory, wine red, or buttery yellow. On the rose stems, encrusted with green flies, lady-birds moved like newly painted toys; lady-birds pale red with large black spots; lady-birds apple red with brown spots; lady-birds orange with grey-and-black freckles. Rotund and amiable, they prowled and fed among the anæmic flocks of greenfly. Carpenter bees, like furry, electric-blue bears, zigzagged among the flowers, growling fatly and busily. Humming bird hawk-moths, sleek and neat, whipped up and down the paths with a fussy efficiency, pausing occasionally on speed-misty wings to lower a long, slender proboscis into a bloom. Among the white cobbles large black ants staggered and gesticulated in groups round strange trophies: a dead caterpillar, a piece of rose petal or a dried grass-head fat with seeds. As an accompaniment to all this activity there came from the olive groves outside the fuchsia hedge the incessant shimmering cries of the cicadas. If the curious, blurring heat haze produced a sound, it would be

exactly the strange, chiming cries of these insects.

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, watching now this creature, now that, 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 among the flowers, I found I could concentrate more. I would spend hours squatting on my heels or lying on my stomach watching the private lives of the creatures around me, while Roger sat nearby, a look of resignation on his face. In this way I learned a lot of fascinating things.

I found that the little crab spiders could change colour just as successfully as any chameleon. Take a spider from a wine-red rose, where he had been sitting like a bead of coral, and place him in the depths of a cool white rose. If he stayed there – and most of them did – you would see his colour gradually ebb away, as though the change had given him anæmia, until, some two days later, he would be crouching among the white petals like a pearl.

I discovered that in the dry leaves under the fuchsia hedge lived another type of spider, a fierce little huntsman with the cunning and ferocity of a tiger. He would stalk about his continent of leaves, eyes glistening in the

sun, pausing now and then to raise himself up on his hairy legs to peer about. If he saw a fly settle to enjoy a sun-bath he would freeze; then, as slowly as a leaf growing, he would move forward, imperceptibly, edging nearer and nearer, pausing occasionally to fasten his life-line of silk to the surface of the leaves. Then, when close enough, the huntsman would pause, his legs shift minutely as he got a good purchase, and then he would leap, legs spread out in a hairy embrace, straight onto the dreaming fly. Never did I see one of these little spiders miss its kill, once it had manœuvred into the right position.

All these discoveries filled me with a tremendous delight, so that they had to be shared, and I would burst suddenly into the house and startle the family with the news that the strange, spiky black caterpillars on the roses were not caterpillars at all, but the young of lady-birds, or with the equally astonishing news that lacewing flies laid eggs on stilts. This last miracle I was lucky enough to witness. I found a lacewing fly on the roses and watched her as she climbed about the leaves, admiring her beautiful, fragile wings like green glass, and her enormous liquid golden eyes. Presently she stopped on the surface of a rose leaf and lowered the tip of her abdomen. She remained like that for a moment and then raised her tail, and from it, to my astonishment, rose a slender thread, like a pale hair. Then, on the very

tip of this stalk, appeared the egg. The female had a rest, and then repeated the performance until the surface of the rose leaf looked as though it were covered with a forest of tiny club moss. The laying over, the female rippled her antennæ briefly and flew off in a mist of green gauze wings.

Perhaps the most exciting discovery I made in this multicoloured Lilliput to which I had access was an earwig's nest. I had long wanted to find one and had searched everywhere without success, so the joy of stumbling upon one unexpectedly was overwhelming, like suddenly being given a wonderful present. I moved a piece of bark and there beneath it was the nursery, a small hollow in the earth that the insect must have burrowed out for herself. She squatted in the middle of it, shielding underneath her a few white eggs. She crouched over them like a hen, and did not move when the flood of sunlight struck her as I lifted the bark. I could not count the eggs, but there did not seem to be many, so I presumed that she had not yet laid her full complement. Tenderly I replaced her lid of bark.

From that moment I guarded the nest jealously. I erected a protecting wall of rocks round it, and as an additional precaution I wrote out a notice in red ink and stuck it on a pole nearby as a warning to the family. The notice read: 'BEWAR – EARWIG NEST – QUIAT PLESE.' It was only remarkable in that the

two correctly spelled words were biological ones. Every hour or so I would

subject the mother earwig to ten minutes' close scrutiny. I did not dare examine her more often for fear she might desert her nest. Eventually the pile of eggs beneath her grew, and she seemed to have become accustomed to my lifting off her bark roof. I even decided that she had begun to recognize me, from the friendly way she wagged her antennæ.

To my acute disappointment, after all my efforts and constant sentry duty, the babies hatched out during the night. I felt that, after all I had done, the female might have held up the hatching until I was there to witness it.

However, there they were, a fine brood of young earwigs, minute, frail, looking as though they had been carved out of ivory. They moved gently under their mother's body, walking between her legs, the more venturesome even climbing onto her pincers. It was a heart-warming sight. The next day the nursery was empty: my wonderful family had scattered over the garden. I saw one of the babies some time later; he was bigger, of course, browner and stronger, but I recognized him immediately. He was curled up in a maze of rose petals, having a sleep, and when I disturbed him he merely raised his pincers irritably over his back. I would have liked to think that it was a salute, a cheerful greeting, but honesty compelled me to admit that it was nothing more than an earwig's warning to a potential enemy. Still, I excused him. After all, he had been very young when I last saw him.

I came to know the plump peasant girls who passed the garden every morning and evening. Riding side-saddle on their slouching, drooping-eared donkeys, they were shrill and colourful as parrots, and their chatter and laughter echoed among the olive trees. In the mornings they would smile and shout greetings as their donkeys pattered past, and in the evenings they would lean over the fuchsia hedge, balancing precariously on their steeds' backs, and, smiling, hold out gifts for me – a bunch of amber grapes still sun-warmed, some figs black as tar striped with pink where they had burst their seams with ripeness, or a giant watermelon 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 and haltingly I started to use them myself; then I 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 greeting or a simple remark, and when I had successfully concluded they would beam at me, nodding and smiling, and clap their hands. By degrees I learned their names, who was related to whom, which were married and which hoped to

be, and other details. I learned where their little cottages were among the olive groves, and should Roger and I chance to pass that way the entire family, vociferous and pleased, 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 and clingingly 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.

3

The Rose-Beetle Man

In the morning, when I woke, the bedroom shutters were luminous and barred with gold from the rising sun. The morning air was full of the scent of charcoal from the kitchen fire, full of eager cock-crows, the distant yap of dogs, and the unsteady, melancholy tune of the goat bells as the flocks were driven out to pasture.

We ate breakfast out in the garden, under the small tangerine trees. The sky was fresh and shining, not yet the fierce blue of noon, but a clear milky opal. The flowers were half asleep, roses dew-crumpled, marigolds still tightly shut. Breakfast was, on the whole, a leisurely and silent meal, for no

member of the family was very talkative at that hour. By the end of the meal the influence of the coffee, toast, and eggs made itself felt, and we started to revive, to tell each other what we intended to do, why we intended to do it, and then argue earnestly 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, delicately picking his teeth with a matchstick.

‘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 first sleepy cicadas starting to fiddle experimentally among the olives? No hurry, with the island waiting, morning cool, bright as a star, to be explored? I could hardly expect the family to understand this point of view, 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 and saunter towards the gate, where Roger sat gazing at me with a questioning air. Together we would peer through the wrought-iron gates into the olive groves beyond. I would

suggest to Roger that perhaps it wasn't worth going out today. He would wag his stump in hasty denial, and his nose would butt at my hand. No, I would say, I really didn't think we ought to go out. It looked as though it was going to rain, and I would peer up into the clear, burnished sky with a worried expression. Roger, ears cocked, would peer into the sky too, and then look at me imploringly. Anyway, I would go on, if it didn't look like rain now it was almost certain to rain later, and so it would be much safer just to sit in the garden with a book. Roger, in desperation, would place a large black paw on the gate, and then look at me, lifting one side of his upper lip, displaying his white teeth in a lopsided, ingratiating grin, his stump working itself into a blur of excitement. This was his trump card, for he knew I could never resist his ridiculous grin. So I would stop teasing him, 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 swiftly as a cloud-shadow, his deep bark welcoming the new day.

In those early days of exploration Roger was my constant companion.

Together we ventured farther and farther afield, discovering quiet, remote olive groves which had to be investigated and remembered, working our way through a maze of blackbird-haunted myrtles, venturing into narrow valleys where the cypress trees cast a cloak of mysterious, inky shadow. He