My Family and Other Animals

This very funny story is about an English family who go to live on the Greek island of Corfu. Gerald, the youngest boy, loves animals and insects. He brings scorpions, spiders, birds, snakes and other animals to the house, and they get him into lots of trouble.

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Introduction

‘We need sunshine... a country where we can grow... George says Corfu’s wonderful. Why don’t we go there?’

So we sold the house and ran from the English summer.

We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother’s cook books, Leslie’s gun, something for Margo’s spots, Larry’s books, my favourite insects and Roger, my dog.

The Durrells, an English family, go to live on the Greek island of Corfu. Gerald, the youngest son, is about ten years old. He is interested in plants and animals – all sorts of animals.

‘There are animals in every corner of the house,’ says his brother Larry. ‘There’s danger at any time of the day or night.’

The Durrells go to Greece for their health and the sun, and they meet a lot of interesting people. They find that life there is very different from life in England. Each person in the family has different ideas and, like any family, they often disagree.

Gerald Durrell was born in 1925. His family went to Corfu in 1935 and stayed until the start of World War II in 1939. After the war, Durrell got his dream job – working in a zoo. Later he travelled to many parts of the world to find animals and to make films about them. In 1959 he started his own zoo on the British island of Jersey. It is called Durrell Wildlife and you can still visit it today. Its main work is to protect kinds of animals that may die out.

Durrell wrote two more books about his family’s stay in Corfu: Birds, Beasts and Relatives and The Garden of the Gods. He wrote a lot of books about his work with animals. His brother Lawrence Durrell (Larry in this story) was also a famous writer. Gerald died in 1995.
Larry’s Idea

After July came the cold winds and the grey skies of August. My family had all their usual illnesses. My mother and I had bad colds. My brother Leslie had a problem with his ears. My sister Margo’s spots were worse than ever. Only my oldest brother, Larry, was healthy, but he found the rest of us very difficult to live with.

‘Why do we stay in England in this weather?’ he asked Mother. ‘They’re ill and you’re looking older every day.’

‘I’m not,’ Mother replied. She was reading at the time.

‘You are,’ Larry said. ‘We need sunshine . . . a country where we can grow.’

‘Yes dear, that’s a good idea,’ Mother answered, not really listening.

‘George says Corfù’s wonderful. Why don’t we go there?’

‘If you like, dear.’ It was important to keep Larry happy.

‘When?’ asked Larry with surprise.

Mother realized her mistake and put down her book. ‘Perhaps you can go first and look at the place,’ she said cleverly. ‘If it’s nice, we can all follow.’

Larry looked at her. ‘You said that last time. I waited in Spain for two months and you didn’t come. No – if we’re going to Greece, let’s go together.’

‘But I’ve only just bought this house!’ Mother answered.

‘Sell it again then!’

‘That’s stupid, dear,’ said Mother. ‘I can’t do that.’

So we sold the house and ran from the English summer.

We travelled by train with our clothes and our most important belongings: Mother’s cook books, Leslie’s guns, something for
Margo’s spots, Larry’s books, my favourite insects and Roger, my dog.

From Italy we caught a boat. We slept when the boat left and then, very early the next morning, we watched for Corfu. The sea turned blue, then purple, and suddenly there was the sleeping island in front of us. We sailed nearer and, above the noise of the ship, we could hear the high, clear sounds of the insects.

PART 1  THE PINK VILLA

Chapter 1  We Meet Spiro

We left the ship and walked towards the town. Larry found two cabs, put the bags in one and sat in the second. Then he looked round angrily. ‘Well?’ he said. ‘What are we waiting for?’

‘We’re waiting for Mother,’ Leslie explained. ‘Roger’s found a streetlamp.’

‘Dear God!’ said Larry, and then shouted, ‘Come on, Mother, come on. Can’t the dog wait?’

‘We waited an hour in Naples for you,’ said Margo.

‘I had a stomach problem,’ Larry explained coldly.

‘Well, he’s probably got one too,’ Margo replied.

Then Mother arrived and the next problem was getting Roger into the cab. He didn’t like the horses, and he didn’t want to climb in behind them. In the end we had to lift him up and throw him in while he cried like a baby. The horses were frightened and started moving, and we found ourselves on the floor of the cab with Roger underneath us.

‘Really!’ said Larry, as we sat up again. ‘Everyone’s looking at us!’
‘Stay calm, dear,’ said Mother. ‘The hotel isn’t far.’

Roger put his head over the side of the cab and saw four dirty dogs lying in the sun. The dogs saw him and ran after us. More dogs heard the noise and came to play. When we arrived at the hotel, there were twenty-four animals in the road and Larry was hitting them with his umbrella. He hit Leslie too.

‘What are you doing?’ Leslie shouted.

‘It was an accident,’ said Larry. He tried again and knocked Mother’s hat to the ground.

We ran into the hotel – the Pension Suisse – with Roger in our arms, and shut the door behind us. The dogs continued to make a terrible noise outside. The man behind the hotel desk looked at us. Mother walked towards him, with her hat on the side of her head and carrying my insects. ‘Our name’s Durrell,’ she said calmly. ‘I think you have some rooms for us.’

‘Yes, Madame,’ said the man, watching Roger carefully, ‘they’re on the first floor.’

‘Then we’ll rest before lunch,’ she said, and we all went upstairs.

The next morning we started looking for a house with Mr Beeler from the hotel. We drove round the island and looked at villas in all sizes and colours. At each one Mother shook her head.

‘Madame Durrell,’ Mr Beeler said at last. ‘What is the problem with all these houses?’

‘Didn’t you notice?’ she asked. ‘None of them had a bathroom.’

‘But Madame,’ Mr Beeler replied, ‘why do you want a bathroom? Have you not got the sea?’

The next morning we went out without him. Taxi-drivers fought to drive us, and Mother was soon quite
frightened by the crowd. We could not understand a word of Greek.

‘Can’t you do something, Larry?’ she asked, pushing away the arms of a large driver.

Then we heard a loud voice above the noise. ‘Hoy!’ shouted the voice. ‘Why’s don’ts yous have someones who can talks your own language?’

We turned and saw an old American car. Behind the wheel was a short, fat man with a big brown face. He lifted himself out of the car and walked towards us. ‘You wants someones who can talks your own language,’ he repeated, ‘nots these criminals. Just a minutes.’

He shouted loudly in Greek until the other drivers went back to their cars, waving their arms and clearly unhappy. Then he turned to us again. ‘Wheres yous wants to gos?’ he asked.

‘We are looking,’ Mother said, ‘for a villa with a bathroom.’

The man thought for a minute. ‘Bathrooms? You wants a bathrooms? Get into the car.’

We climbed in. While we drove dangerously fast through the narrow streets, our driver talked to us. ‘Yous English? English always wants bathrooms. . . . I gets a bathrooms in my house. . . . Spiro’s my name – they alls calls me Spiro Americano because I lives in America. . . . eight years in Chicago. . . . That’s where I learnt my goods English. . . . Wents there for good moneys. . . . Then after eight years I says: “Spiro,” I says, “you haves enough moneys now.” Sos I comes backs to Greece. . . . brings this car – best ons the island. . . .’

We drove along a little white road through the fields and the trees to the top of a hill, and Spiro suddenly stopped the car. ‘Theres you ares,’ he said, pointing with a fat finger.
The man thought for a minute. ‘Bathrooms? You wants a bathrooms? Get into the car.’