MARY STEWART

Bestselling author of THORNYHOLD

THE MOON-SPINNERS

Sun-drenched Crete beckons to pleasure seekers. But there is danger lurking in its ancient hills....

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The Moon-Spinners

BY MARY STEWART

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All the characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Kitty and Gerald
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CHAPTER : ONE

Lightly this little herald flew aloft . . .
Onward it flies. . . .
Until it reach'd a splashing fountain's side
That, near a cavern's mouth, for ever pour'd
Unto the temperate air. . . .

Keats: *Endymion.*

IT WAS THE EGRET, flying out of the lemon grove, that started it. I won't pretend I saw it straight away as the conventional herald of adventure, the white stag of the fairytale, which, bounding from the enchanted thicket, entices the prince away from his followers, and loses him in the forest where danger threatens with the dusk. But, when the big white bird flew suddenly up among the glossy leaves and the lemon flowers, and wheeled into the mountain, I followed it. What else is there to do, when such a thing happens on a brilliant April noonday at the foot of the White Mountains of Crete; when the road is hot and dusty, but the gorge is green, and full of the sound of water, and the white wings, flying ahead, flicker in and out of deep shadow, and the air is full of the scent of lemon blossom?

The car from Heraklion had set me down where the track for Agios Georgios leaves the road. I got out, adjusted on my shoulder the big bag of embroidered canvas that did duty as a haversack, then turned to thank the American couple for the lift.

"It was a pleasure, honey." Mrs. Studebaker peered, rather anxiously, out of the car window. "But are you sure you're all right? I don't like putting you down like this, in the middle of nowhere. You're sure this is the right place? What does that sign post say?"

The sign post, when consulted, said, helpfully, ΑΓΙ ΓΕΟΡΓΙΟΣ. "Well, what do you know?" said Mrs. Studebaker. "Now, look, honey—"

"It's all right," I said, laughing. "That *is* 'Agios Georgios,' and, according to your driver—and the map—the village is

about three-quarters of a mile away, down this track. Once round that bit of cliff down there, I'll probably be able to see it."

"I surely hope so." Mr. Studebaker had got out of the car when I did, and was now supervising the driver as he lifted my one small case from the boot, and set it beside me at the edge of the road. Mr. Studebaker was large and pink and sweet-tempered, and wore an orange shirt outside his pearl-grey drill trousers, and a wide, floppy linen hat. He thought Mrs. Studebaker the cleverest and most beautiful woman in the world, and said so; in consequence she, too, was sweet-tempered, besides being extremely smart. They were both lavish with that warm, extroverted, and slightly overwhelming kindliness which seems a specifically American virtue. I had made their acquaintance at my hotel only the evening before, and, as soon as they heard that I was making for the southern coast of Crete, nothing would content them but that I should join them for part of their hired tour of the island. Now, it seemed, nothing would please them better than for me to abandon my foolish project of visiting this village in the middle of nowhere, and go with them for the rest of their trip.

"I don't like it." Mr. Studebaker was anxiously regarding the stony little track which wound gently downhill from the road, between rocky slopes studded with scrub and dwarf juniper. "I don't like leaving you here alone. Why—" he turned earnest, kindly blue eyes on me—"I read a book about Crete, just before Mother and I came over, and believe me, Miss Ferris, they have some customs here, still, that you just wouldn't credit. In some ways, according to this book, Greece is still a very, very primitive country."

I laughed. "Maybe. But one of the primitive customs is that the stranger's sacred. Even in Crete, nobody's going to murder a visitor! Don't worry about me, really. It's sweet of you, but I'll be quite all right. I told you, I've lived in Greece for more than a year now, and I get along quite well in Greek —and I've been to Crete before. So you can leave me quite safely. This is certainly the right place, and I'll be down in the village in twenty minutes. The hotel's not expecting me till tomorrow, but I know they've nobody else there, so I'll get a bed."

"And this cousin of yours that should have come with you? You're sure she'll show up?"

"Of course." He was looking so anxious that I explained again. "She was delayed, and missed the flight, but she told

me not to wait for her, and I left a message. Even if she misses tomorrow's bus, she'll get a car or something. She's very capable." I smiled. "She was anxious for me not to waste any of my holiday hanging around waiting for her, so she'll be as grateful to you as I am, for giving me an extra day."

"Well, if you're sure . . ."

"I'm quite sure. Now, don't let me keep you any more. It was wonderful to get a lift this far. If I'd waited for the bus tomorrow, it would have taken the whole day to get here." I smiled, and held out my hand. "And still I'd have been dumped right here! So you see, you *have* given me a whole extra day's holiday, besides the run, which was marvellous. Thank you again."

Eventually, reassured, they drove off. The car gathered way slowly up the cement-hard mud of the hill road, bumping and swaying over the ruts which marked the course of winter's overspills of mountain rain. It churned its way up round a steep bend, and bore away inland. The dust of its wake hung thickly, till the breeze slowly dispersed it.

I stood there beside my suitcase, and looked about me.

The White Mountains are a range of great peaks, the backbone of the westerly end of the mountainous island of Crete. To the southwest of the island, the foothills of the range run right down to the shore, which, here, is wild and craggy. Here and there along the coast, where some mountain stream, running down to the sea, has cut a fresh-water inlet in the ramparts of the cliff, are villages, little handfuls of houses each clinging to its crescent of shingle and its runnel of fresh water, backed by the wild mountains where the sheep and goats scratch a precarious living. Some of these villages are approached only by steep tracks through the maze of the foothills, or by caique from the sea. It was in one of them, Agios Georgios, the village of St. George, that I had elected to spend the week of my Easter holiday.

As I had told the Studebakers, I had been in Athens since January of the previous year, working in a very junior capacity as a secretary at the British Embassy. I had counted myself lucky, at twenty-one, to land even a fairly humble job in a country which, as far back as I could remember, I had longed to visit. I had settled happily in Athens, worked hard at the language (being rewarded with a fair fluency), and I had used my holidays and week ends in exploration of all the famous places within reach.

A month before this Easter holiday was due, I had been

delighted to hear from my cousin, Frances Scorby, that she planned to visit Greece on a cruise she was making with friends that spring. Frances is a good deal older than I am, being my parents' contemporary rather than my own. When my mother's death, three years before, had orphaned me (I had never known my father, who was killed in the war), I went to live with Frances in Berkshire, where she is part-owner of a rather famous rock-plant nursery. She also writes and lectures on plants, and takes beautiful color-photographs which illustrate her books and talks. My ecstatic letters to her about the Greek wild flowers had borne fruit. It seemed that friends of hers were taking a small hired yacht from Brindisi to Piraeus, where they intended to stay for a few days while they explored Athens and its environs, after which they planned a leisurely sail through the islands. Their arrival in Piraeus was to coincide with my own Easter holiday, but (as I had written at some length to Frances) not even for her would I spend my precious few days' holiday among the Easter crowds, and the milling throng of tourists who had been pouring into the city for weeks. I had suggested that she abandon her party for a few days, join me in Crete, where she could see the countryside—and the legendary flowers of the White Mountains—in peace. We could rejoin the yacht together when it called at Heraklion the following week, on its way to Rhodes and the Sporades; then later, on the way home, she could stay over in Athens with me, and see the "sights" unencumbered by the Easter crowds.

Frances was enthusiastic, her hosts were agreeable, and it was left to me to discover, if possible, some quiet place in southwest Crete, which combined the simple peace and beauty of "the real Greece," with some of the standards of comfort and cleanliness which the new tourist age is forcing on it. An almost impossible mixture of virtues—but I believed I had found it. A café acquaintance in Athens—a Danish writer of travel books, who had spent some weeks exploring the less frequented parts of the Greek archipelago—had told me of a small, isolated village on the southern coast of Crete at the foot of the White Mountains.

"If it's the real thing you want, an unspoiled village without even a road leading to it—just a couple of dozen houses, a tiny church, and the sea—Agios Georgios is your place," he said. "You'll want to swim, I suppose? Well, I found a perfect place for that, rocks to dive off, sandy bottom, the lot. And if you want the flowers, and the views—well, you can walk in any direction you please, it's all glorious, and as wild

as anyone could wish. Oh, and Nicola, if you're interested, there's a tiny, deserted church about five miles eastward along the coast; the weeds are right up to the door, but you can still see the ghost of a rather quaint Byzantine mosaic on the ceiling, and I'll swear one of the doorjambs is a genuine Doric column."

"Too good to be true," I had said. "All right, I'll buy it; what are the snags? Where do we have to sleep? Over the taverna, with the genuine Doric bugs?"

But no. This, it appeared, was the whole point. All the other attractions of Agios Georgios could be found in a score of similar villages, in Crete or elsewhere. But Agios Georgios had a hotel.

This had, in fact, been the village *kafenéion*, or coffee shop, with a couple of rooms over the bar. But this, with the adjoining cottage, had been recently bought by a new owner, who was making them the nucleus of what promised to be a comfortable little hotel.

"He's only just started; in fact, I was their first guest," said my informant. "I understand that the authorities are planning to build a road down to the village some time soon, and meanwhile Alexiakis, the chap who bought the taverna, is going ahead with his plans. The accommodation's very simple, but it's perfectly clean, and—wait for it—the food is excellent."

I looked at him in some awe. Outside the better hotels and the more expensive restaurants, food in Greece—even the voice of love has to confess it—is seldom "excellent." It tends to a certain monotony, and it knows no variation of hot and cold; all is luke-warm. Yet here was a Dane, a well-rounded epicure of a Dane (and the Danes have possibly the best food in Europe), recommending the food in a Greek village taverna.

He laughed at my look, and explained the mystery. "It's quite simple. The man's a Soho Greek, originally a native of Agios Georgios, who emigrated to London twenty years ago, made his pile as a restaurateur, and has now come back, as these folk do, and wants to settle at home. But he's determined to put Agios Georgios on the map, so he's started by buying up the taverna, and he's imported a friend of his from his London restaurant, to help him. They've not seriously started up yet, beyond tidying up the two existing bedrooms, turning a third into a bathroom, and cooking for their own satisfaction. But they'll take you, Nicola, I'm sure of that. Why not try? They've even got a telephone."

I had telephoned next day. The proprietor had been surprised, but pleased. The hotel was not yet officially opened, he told me; they were still building and painting, I must understand, and there were no other guests there; it was very simple and quiet. . . . But, once assured that this was exactly what we wanted, he had seemed pleased to welcome us.

Our plans, however, had not worked out quite smoothly. Frances and I were to have taken Monday evening's flight to Crete, staying the night in Heraklion, and gone to Agios Georgios next day, by the bi-weekly bus. But on Sunday she had telephoned from Patras, where her friends' boat had been delayed, and had begged me not to waste any of my precious week's holiday waiting for her, but to set off myself for Crete, leaving her to find her own way there as soon as possible. Since Frances was more than capable of finding her way anywhere, with the least possible help from me, I had agreed, swallowed my disappointment, and managed to get onto Sunday evening's flight, intending to have an extra day in Heraklion, and take Tuesday's bus as planned. But chance, in the shape of the Studebakers, had offered me a lift on Monday morning, straight to the south-west corner of Crete. So here I was, with a day in hand, set down in the middle of a landscape as savage and deserted as the most determined solitary could have wished for.

Behind me, inland, the land rose sharply, the rocky foothills soaring silver-green, silver-tawny, silver-violet, gashed by ravines, and moving with the scudding shadows of high cirrus which seemed to smoke down from the ghostly ridges beyond. Below the road, towards the sea, the land was greener. The track to Agios Georgios wound its way between high banks of maquis, the scented maquis of Greece. I could smell verbena, and lavender, and a kind of sage. Over the hot white rock and the deep green of the maquis, the Judas trees lifted their clouds of scented flowers the color of purple daphne, their branches reaching landwards, away from the African winds. In a distant cleft of the land, seemingly far below me, I saw the quick, bright gleam that meant the sea.

Silence. No sound of bird; no bell of sheep. Only the drone of a bee over the blue sage at the roadside. No sign of man's hand anywhere in the world, except the road where I stood, the track before me, and a white vapor-trail, high in the brilliant sky.

I picked my case up from among the dusty salvias, and started down the track.

A breeze was blowing off the sea, and the track led downhill, so I went at a fair speed; nevertheless it was fully fifteen minutes before I reached the bluff which hid the lower part of the track from the road, and saw, a couple of hundred yards further on, the first evidence of man's presence here.

This was a bridge, a small affair with a rough stone parapet, which led the track over a narrow river—the water supply, I supposed, on which Agios Georgios lived. From here the village was still invisible, though I guessed it could not be far, as the sides of the valley had opened out to show a wide segment of sea, which flashed and glittered beyond the next curve of the track.

I paused on the bridge, set down my case and shoulder-bag, then sat down on the parapet in the shade of a sycamore tree, swinging my legs, and staring thoughtfully down the track towards the village. The sea was—as far as I could judge—still about half a mile away. Below the bridge the river ran smoothly down, pool to pool dropping through glittering shallows, between shrubby banks lit by the Judas trees. Apart from these the valley was treeless, its rocky slopes seeming to trap the heat of the day.

Midday. Not a leaf stirring. No sound, except the cool noise of the water, and the sudden *plop* of a frog diving into the pool under the bridge.

I looked the other way, up-stream, where a path wound along the waterside under willows. Then I slid to my feet, carried my case down below the bridge, and pushed it carefully out of sight into a thicket of brambles and rock-roses. My canvas bag, containing my lunch, fruit, and a flask of coffee, I swung back on to my shoulder. The hotel was not expecting me; very well, there was no reason why I should not, in fact, take the whole day "out"; I would find a cool place by the water, eat my meal, and have my fill of the mountain silence and solitude before going down later to the village.

I started up the shady path along the river.

The path soon began to rise, gently at first, and then fairly steeply, with the river beside it rockier, and full of rapids which grew louder as the valley narrowed into a small gorge, and the path to a roughly-trodden way above a green rush of water, where no sun came. Trees closed in overhead; ferns dripped; my steps echoed on the rock. But for all its apparent seclusion, the little gorge must be a highway for

men and beasts: the path was beaten flat with footprints, and there was ample evidence that mules, donkeys, and sheep came this way daily.

In a few moments I saw why. I came up a steepish ramp through thinning pines, and emerged at once from the shade of the gorge onto an open plateau perhaps half a mile in width, and two or three hundred yards deep, like a wide ledge on the mountainside.

Here were the fields belonging to the people of Agios Georgios. The plateau was sheltered on three sides by the trees: southwards, towards the sea, the land fell away in shelving rock, and slopes of huge, tumbled boulders. Behind the fertile ground, to the north, soared the mountainside, silver-tawny in the brilliant light, clouded here and there with olives, and gashed by ravines where trees grew. From the biggest of these ravines flowed the river, to push its way forward across the plateau in a wide meander. Not an inch of the flat land but was dug, hoed and harrowed. Between the vegetable fields were rows of fruit trees: I saw locust trees, and apricots, as well as the ubiquitous olives, and the lemon trees. The fields were separated from one another by narrow ditches, or by shallow, stony banks where, haphazard, grew poppies, fennel, parsley, and a hundred herbs which would all be gathered, I knew, for use. Here and there, at the outlying edges of the plateau, the gay little Cretan windmills whirled their white canvas sails, spilling the water into the ditches that threaded the dry soil.

There was nobody about. I passed the last windmill, climbed through the vine-rows that terraced the rising ground, and paused in the shade of a lemon tree.

Here I hesitated, half-inclined to stop. There was a cool breeze from the sea, the lemon blossom smelt wonderful, the view was glorious—but at my feet flies buzzed over mule droppings in the dust, and a scarlet cigarette packet, soggy and disintegrating, lay caught in weeds at the water's edge. Even the fact that the legend on it was ΕΘΝΟΣ, and not the homely Woodbine or Player's Weights, didn't make it anything but a nasty piece of wreckage capable of spoiling a square mile of countryside.

I looked the other way, towards the mountains.

The White Mountains of Crete really are white. Even when, in high summer, the snow is gone, their upper ridges are still silver—bare, grey rock, glinting in the sun, showing paler, less substantial, than the deep-blue sky behind them, so that one can well believe that among those remote and

floating peaks the king of the gods was born. For Zeus, they said, was born in Dicte, a cave of the White Mountains. They showed you the very place. . . .

At that moment, on the thought, the big white bird flew with slow, unstartled beat of wings, out of the glossy leaves beside me and sailed over my head. It was a bird I had never seen before, like a small heron, milk-white, with a long black bill. It flew as a heron does, neck tucked back and legs trailing, with a down-curved, powerful wing-beat. An egret? I shaded my eyes to watch it. It soared up into the sun, then turned and flew back over the lemon grove, and on up the ravine, to be lost to view among the trees.

I am still not quite sure what happened at that moment. For some reason that I cannot analyze, the sight of the big white bird, strange to me; the smell of the lemon flowers; the clicking of the mill-sails and the sound of spilling water; the sunlight dappling through the leaves on the white anemones with their lamp-black centres; and, above all, my first real sight of the legendary White Mountains . . . all this seemed to rush together into a point of powerful magic, happiness striking like an arrow, with one of those sudden shocks of joy that are so physical, so precisely marked, that one knows the exact moment at which the world changed. I remembered what I had said to the Americans, that they, by bringing me here, had given me a day. Now I saw that, literally, they had. And it seemed no longer to be chance. Inevitably, here I was, alone under the lemon trees, with a path ahead of me, food in my bag, a day dropped out of time for me, and a white bird flying ahead.

I gave a last look behind me at the wedge of shimmering sea, then turned my face to the northeast, and walked rapidly through the trees, towards the ravine that twisted up into the flank of the mountain.

CHAPTER : TWO

When as *she* gazed into the watery glass
And through *her* brown hair's curly tangles scanned
Her own wan face, a shadow seemed to pass
Across the mirror. . . .

Oscar Wilde: *Charmides.*

IT WAS HUNGER, in the end, that stopped me. Whatever the impulse that had compelled me to this lonely walk, it had driven me up the track at a fair speed, and I had gone some distance before, once again, I began to think about a meal.

The way grew steeper as the gorge widened, the trees thinned, and sunlight came in. Now the path was a ribbon along the face of a cliff, with the water below. The other side of the ravine lay back from it, a slope of rock and scrub studded here and there with trees, but open to the sun. The path was climbing steeply, now, towards the lip of the cliff. It did not seem to be much used; here and there bushes hung across it, and once I stopped to gather a trail of lilac orchids which lay, unbruised, right at my feet. But on the whole I managed to resist the flowers, which grew in every cranny of the rock. I was hungry, and wanted nothing more than to find a level place in the sun, beside water, where I could stop and eat my belated meal.

Ahead of me, now, from the rocks on the right, I could hear water, a rush of it, nearer and louder than the river below. It sounded like a side-stream tumbling from the upper rocks, to join the main watercourse beneath.

I came to a corner, and saw it. Here the wall of the gorge was broken, as a small stream came in from above. It fell in an arrowy rush right across the path, where it swirled round the single stepping-stone, to tumble once again, headlong, towards the river. I didn't cross it. I left the path, and clambered, not without difficulty, up the boulders that edged the tributary stream, towards the sunlight of the open ground at the edge of the ravine.

In a few minutes I had found what I was looking for. I climbed a tumble of white stones where poppies grew, and