

MARCELIN DEFOURNEAUX

DAILY LIFE
IN SPAIN
IN THE GOLDEN AGE

Translated by Newton Branch



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FOREWORD

Time-honoured even in Spain, the expression 'Golden Century' (*el Siglo de oro*) can be interpreted in two ways. It can cover that long period which lasted from the time of Charles V until the Treaty of the Pyrenees. During this period, gold, and more important silver, coming from America, enabled Spain to launch great ventures abroad and to gain military ascendancy over the whole of Europe. Yet, by the end of the reign of Philip II, signs were manifest in the homeland that Spain was suffering from economic exhaustion.

On the other hand, 'The Golden Century' can mean that period which was made illustrious by the genius of Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Velazquez, and Zurbaran. During this time, Spain, although politically enfeebled, was able to impose some of her cultural brilliance on the world of letters, especially in France, where her example provided the pattern from which was born that country's 'Great Century'.

To attempt to give a picture of daily life during the whole of the sixteenth century and the next fifty years would be to risk anachronism, not only in the description of the material aspects of existence, but also, what is more important in our view, in the proper understanding of them.

The sum total of the actions and behaviour which make up the daily life of individuals is inseparable, not only from the social framework of their lives, but also from their beliefs and ideals, which themselves constitute the spirit of an age.

Between the reigns of Philip II (1556-1598), Philip III (1598-1621), and Philip IV (1621-1665), there was evolution both in politics and morals, whose influence was seen in the life of the nation and in the literature which is a reflection of it. The death of the 'prudent king' gave the aristocracy an important place in the government and enhanced its place in society. The expulsion of the Moriscos meant that the last vestiges of Islam were erased from medieval Spain. The economic decline helped to accentuate the differences between social classes, and the slowing down of creative activity was accompanied by an increasing taste for ostentation and formalism. Thus, by a paradox, whilst the genius of her culture

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was felt throughout Europe, the country seemed to become increasingly introspective and, in a way, more purely 'hispanic' than in the previous century.

Clearly one must challenge the innumerable literary documents which show us both sides of the coin and one must suspect that often they distort the truth by describing as normal and 'everyday' things which in fact were remarkable only because they were singular. Their use is possible only if we constantly compare them with other documentary sources. Among these, the accounts of foreign travellers are of particular interest; for, despite their multiplicity and the uneven intellectual qualities of their authors, their similarity is, in some measure, a warranty of truth.

We should not forget that in the first half of the seventeenth century the 'Spanish Tour' had become fashionable for writers, and remained so up to the time of Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas, and beyond, with all that it implied in the systematic search for the picturesque.

These travellers' tales, however, do illuminate certain material and moral aspects of the Golden Century, which, looking back over three hundred years, we might be tempted to regard as singular and untypical of the era. Checking them with other contemporary texts, we discover that Spain was already endowed with a marked originality both in her people and in her countryside which had made a striking impression on travellers from other parts of Europe.

These accounts finally allow us to correct the inaccurate impression gained from a consideration of the more superficial and frivolous accounts of life in Spain. We are put on our guard against an illusion, arising from our knowledge of subsequent history, that an impoverished Spain was in some way beaten in advance in her duel with France. For there is hardly a traveller in Spain during the first part of the seventeenth century who is not amazed by the might of 'Spanish Monarchy' – a term meaning all the possessions under the direct authority of the government in Madrid. This was the monarchy which Richelieu, up to the time of his death several months before Rocroi, never ceased to fear for its skill in both political and military enterprises.

These are the reasons which have led us to entrust to a few foreign travellers, mostly French, the task of writing an imaginary 'Letters from a Journey in Spain'.

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DAILY LIFE IN SPAIN
in the Golden Age

CHAPTER ONE

'LETTER ABOUT A JOURNEY IN SPAIN'

The journey: customs, transport, inns – Diversity of the Spanish countryside. Expulsion of the 'Moriscos' and its consequences. The economic decline and its causes. Decadence of the towns. The part played by foreigners. The Spanish temperament and provincial independence – The kingdom of France and the kingdom of Spain.

Having studied the Castilian language for a long time in order to explore the excellent works in which so many able minds have revealed to us the characters and the customs of their country, I sought a more personal knowledge of that proud and prudent nation which seems unwilling to go abroad except to dominate others and to extend her empire over other peoples.

Though I have learnt much from travel in a foreign land, I did not have enough time in Spain to be enlightened about everything. I did not fail to ask trustworthy people about the things which I could not see for myself, for they alone know those who live there. Everything here, therefore, will appear as I saw it. Dealing with so many diverse matters, it will not be surprising if I tell untruths without meaning to lie and others in which I may err, not knowing that I am astray.¹

I entered Spain by the easiest way, crossing the Bidassoa, a river, or rather a torrent, which separates the two kingdoms. The inhabitants on both banks speak a language which is understood only by the people of those parts. There is constant communication across this frontier even when there is a state of war between the two countries.

At Irun, the first township belonging to the king of Spain, a quarter of a league away, you are not asked for a passport nor the reason for your coming, and there appears to be no fear or mistrust. An agent of the Inquisition merely asks if you have in your luggage any literature banned by the Holy Office (nearly all of which is the work of heretical theologians), and, for this inspection, makes you pay an obol which they claim as a due to the Inquisition.²

The first royal custom-house is not reached till one leaves the mountains of Vascony and approaches the town of Vitoria. It is here that the 'kingdom of Castille' begins, which includes the whole of Spain, save for the kingdoms of Navarre, Aragon-Catalonia, and Valencia. These, nevertheless, are part of the Spanish monarchy and owe allegiance to the King. But they retain their *fueros*, which are certain privileges, one of which is extremely inconvenient to the traveller, as I have several times found to my cost. Between Castille and the other kingdoms – or, to be more precise, provinces – there are 'toll-houses', or control points, where there are customs officers and guards, and you are not allowed to enter or leave a province, under the threat of a severe penalty, unless you register your apparel, merchandise and money, and pay for everything even if it is a little used. Moreover, one has to have a passport. The possession of one, however, does not prevent the functionary from questioning it, saying that it is not in order, and pretending to check whether there is more in your trunks and valises than you have declared in your papers. The fact is they want to hold you to ransom for a few more pistoles before they let you go on your way.

One day I complained to a Spanish nobleman about the importunities of these gentry who, like harpies, await the traveller, especially a foreigner, in order to play all sorts of dirty tricks on him. He replied that one tolerated these blackguards because the King's main revenue comes from customs dues of this type. In consequence one allows a bit of thievery in order that they may produce more income. These tax-farmers are nearly all Portuguese Jews (although they pretend to be Christians). Moreover, when they have done well by their robbery and are gorged with silver and gold, one tries to catch them in the Inquisition's net by disclosing the fact that they only claim to be nationals in order to be accepted in Spain, despite the fact that they belong to the race that blasphemes against the name of Jesus. Then they are forced to disgorge, and are slowly tortured until they have paid for all the wrongs and injustices they have done to the king and his subjects.³

Apart from the inconvenience of the customs, there are other things which delay the traveller, above all the small use which is made of horses. Yet there is no country in the world where the postmen have better mounts and, since the relay stages are only two to

four leagues apart, these horsemen can go at full speed and cover up to thirty leagues in a single day. But the Royal Mail is used only for letters and special dispatches which are sent from Madrid to the principal towns and frontiers of the kingdom, whence they go to Flanders and Italy (when war with Spain does not prevent it).

Although Philip II has permitted certain private individuals to use this service, people rarely do so because mule transport is generally preferred. Persons of quality who wish to travel comfortably, hire a litter which is carried by two mules. But, in addition to being very slow, this mode of travel is also extremely costly. Ordinarily one travels on muleback and I had to come to an agreement at St Sebastian with a *moco de mulas* (a muleteer) for me to hire two of his animals and for him to serve as guide on the way to Madrid.⁴

As far as food is concerned, I also learnt to travel according to the custom of the country, which is to buy what one wants to eat here and there; for it is impossible to find along the way, as one can in France and Italy, inns which provide both board and lodging. Here is the daily procedure: as soon as you arrive at an inn you ask if there are beds; having taken care of that, you hand over the raw meat which you have brought with you, or else you search for a butcher or give some money to the innkeeper's varlet to buy it for you, as well as other necessities. But as – and this usually happens – they swindle you, the best thing is to carry your victuals in your own saddle-bags and to make provision each day, wherever you are, for the needs of tomorrow, such as bread, eggs, and oil. It is true that on the road you sometimes meet hunters who have killed partridges and rabbits, which they will sell at a reasonable price.⁵

It is very strange that one cannot find in a tavern anything that one has not brought oneself. The reason for this is that taxes, called *millions*, are imposed on everything that one eats and drinks. In each town and village the right to collect these taxes is granted to tax-farmers, and meat and other comestibles can be sold only by those who have bought the concession.

It is pitiful to see these inns. You are put off your food as soon as you have seen their filth. The kitchen is a place with a fire in the middle under a big pipe or chimney, from which the smoke belches back so thickly that you often feel you are in a fox's earth in which the beast has hidden itself and from which they are trying to smoke it out. A woman or a man looking like a wretched

vagabond and dressed in rags will pour you a measure of wine from a goatskin or a pigskin, which serves instead of a cellar (it is only in Catalonia and in the kingdom of Valencia that wine barrels are used). All this makes choice wine, plenty of which is produced in that country, stink of hide and pitch and it becomes a very disagreeable beverage. But if you are travelling during the fruit season you can get figs, grapes, apples, and also oranges of marvellous flavour.

Since the table set in the dining-hall is communal, masters, servants, and muleteers all eat their own food together before retiring to rest – some on piles of straw, others in beds, which are worse than the straw because it would be a miracle if the fleas and bedbugs allowed you a wink of sleep.

Listen to Guzman d'Alfarache. He was a native of the country and, having passed a night in a *venta* (an inn) in Andalusia, he said, 'If I had been placed on my mother's doorstep, I do not think she would have recognized me, such was the strength of the fleas which attacked me. It was as if I had measles when I got up in the morning and there was not an inch on my body, my face, or my hands where there would have been room for another bite.'⁶

A slight consolation for this ill-treatment is that it costs little. You pay in accordance with a tax marked on a board called *el arancel*, which the landlord must exhibit so that it can be read by all, and on this are displayed the prices which are fixed by royal decree. These are moderate. One generally pays a real (which is worth four of our sols) for a bed, a real for the meal, and a real for the candle and service. But the *ventoros* (the innkeepers) are sometimes just as thieving as highwaymen and, in the morning when you mount your mule, you should not fail to check your gear, otherwise something is bound to be missing.

The elder Mariana says in his *History* that the soil of Spain can be counted as among the best in the world and that no other country has a better climate or greater fertility.⁷ But it has to be admitted that nature has not heaped on Spain the natural advantages of France, and, apart from the Biscay area and the regions of the Asturias and Galicia, the dryness of the climate, and the starkness of the mountains, together with the indolence of the people, leave a great part of the country uncultivated and wild. The mountains which cross Spain on every side are neither culti-

vated nor embellished with villages as in France. They consist of high, bare, and jagged rocks which are called *sierras* or *penas*. If they are smaller and covered with trees, the people call them *monts* and pasture their cattle on them. Between them are plains of very even ground, like those in Castille; for the most part, however, these are not cultivated except around the big towns and for a league or half a league around the villages. The villages are so far apart that one can sometimes ride a whole day without seeing a living soul, except perhaps an occasional shepherd tending his flocks. The greater part of Aragon is even more arid, without trees or vegetation, except for thyme and other plants on which sheep can graze. I am told that more than two hundred thousand of these sheep come from France each year.⁸

It is true that not all of Spain has this hard and desolate aspect. A man can easily draw water from the earth or use streams to irrigate beautiful gardens in the middle of these deserts. In the flat open country of the Mancha – one of the driest areas – I saw a great number of wells, which are called *norias*. Over them people erect wheels to which earthenware pots are tied. Mules turn the contraption to raise the water in the pots to the top of the well. The water then falls into a reservoir, from which it flows through small channels to irrigate the soil, thus making it possible to produce all sorts of cereals and vegetables.⁹ But it seems as if nature has confined these most fertile and agreeable parts to the perimeter of the country. As one reaches Andalusia one's eyes marvel at the innumerable olive, orange, and cypress trees, which spread out like forests.¹⁰ The most admirable area is around Granada, where the Moors for a long time occupied the kingdom. They brought water from the snow-capped Sierras, by means of canals and tunnels, to fertilize the plains and the blossoming hills which surround them to make it one of the most beautiful sights in the world.

Another delightful part is to be found in the kingdom of Valencia, which is so lush that they call it *regalada* (which means ‘the offering’), as if it were a gift from heaven. It seldom rains, but the people use spring water which they channel through narrow brick troughs into their gardens. The place is everywhere green with trees, grass and vines, and they grow rice in the marshes. There are palms, lemon and orange trees, mulberry trees (for they breed silk-worms), and a kind of cane, from which they extract a sweet liquid which they make into sugar.¹¹