

PERSONS
and
PLACES

The Background of My Life

BY
GEORGE SANTAYANA

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CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|---|------|
| I. Time, Place and Ancestry | 1 |
| II. My Father | 10 |
| III. My Mother | 30 |
| IV. The Sturgises | 56 |
| V. My Sister Susana | 75 |
| VI. Avila | 96 |
| VII. Early Memories | 116 |
| VIII. I am Transported to America | 130 |
| IX. No. 302 Beacon Street | 140 |
| X. The Latin School | 148 |
| XI. The Church of the Immaculate Conception | 163 |
| XII. First Friends | 178 |
| XIII. The Harvard Yard | 186 |
| XIV. First Return to Spain | 203 |
| XV. College Friends | 224 |
| XVI. College Studies | 238 |
| Index | 255 |

CHAPTER I

TIME, PLACE AND ANCESTRY

A DOCUMENT in my possession testifies that in the parish church of San Marcos in Madrid, on the 1st of January, 1864, a male child, born on the 16th of the previous December, at nine o'clock in the evening, at No 69 Calle Ancha de San Bernardo, was solemnly christened; being the legitimate son of Don Agustín Ruiz de Santayana, native of Zamora, and of Doña Josefina Borrás, native of Glasgow; his paternal grandparents being Don Nicolás, native of Badumés, in the province of Santander, and Doña María Antonia Reboiro, native of Zamora, and his maternal grandparents being Don José, native of Reus, Catalonia, and Doña Teresa Carbonell, native of Barcelona. The names given him were Jorge Agustín Nicolás, his godparents being Don Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana and Doña Susana Sturgis; "whom I admonished," writes Don Joaquín Cabrasco, who signs the certificate with his legal *rúbrica* or flourish, "of their spiritual relationship and duties."

A shrewd fortune-teller would have spotted at once, in this densely Spanish document, the two English names, Glasgow and Sturgis. Where did they come from, what did they forebode? Might not seeds of my whole future lie buried there? And if the diviner had had preternatural powers, he might even have sniffed something important in those last, apparently so effete and perfunctory words, that Doña Susana Sturgis, who was my mother's daughter by a former marriage and then twelve years of age, had been forewarned of her spiritual relationship and duties: not that she should forbear marrying my godfather, my uncle Nicolás, who was a major in the Spanish army, with a wife and child, and

forty-five years old; that was canonical red-tape nothing to the purpose; but that she was called by Providence to be really my spiritual mother and to catechize my young mind. It was she that initiated me into theology, architecture and polite society.

With parents evidently Catalans of the Catalonians how did my mother come to be born in Glasgow, and how did she ever marry a Bostonian named Sturgis? These facts, taken separately, were accidents of travel, or rather of exile and of Colonial life; but accidents are accidents only to ignorance; in reality all physical events flow out of one another by a continuous intertwined derivation; and those odd foreign names, Sturgis and Glasgow, were in fact secretly allied and their presence here had a common source in my grandfather's character and circumstances and in the general thaw, so to speak, of that age: incongruous wreckage of a great inundation.

Not that I would nail the flag of fatalism to the mast at the beginning of this retrospective voyage. What we call the laws of nature are hasty generalizations; and even if some of them actually prevailed without exception or alloy, the fact that these laws and not others (or none) were found to be dominant would itself be groundless; so that nothing could be at bottom more arbitrary than what always happens, or more fatal than what happens but once or by absolute chance. Yet in the turbid stream of nature there are clear stretches, and traceable currents; and it is interesting to follow the beginnings and the developments of a run here and a whirlpool there, and to watch the silent glassy volume of water slip faster and faster towards the edge of some precipice. Now my little cockle-shell and the cockle-shells of the rest of my family, and of the whole middle and upper class (except the unsinkable politicians) were being borne along more or less merrily on the surface-currents of a treacherous social revolution; and the things that happened to us, and the things we did, with their pleasant and their hopeless sides, all belong to that general moral migration.

My grandfather, José Borrás y Bufurull, belonged to a well-

established family of Reus, of the sort that possess a house in the town and a farm in the country. In this as in other ways many old towns near the Mediterranean preserve the character of ancient cities or *civitates*, and Reus in particular is a place of great dignity in the eyes of its inhabitants, who are reputed to speak habitually of "Reus, Paris and London." But José was a younger son, and the law of entail or *mayorazgo* still prevailed at that time in Catalonia, so that the house and land and an almost Roman authority as head of the family fell to his eldest brother. Yet dignity to the classic mind does not involve great wealth or much territory, and younger sons, even in Reus, had to seek their fortunes away from home. They might indeed expect hospitality or a little aid from their families in time of stress, but were well aware that in the ancestral estate and community there was no place or occupation for more than one household at a time. There was the Church always tempting them, if it tempted them; there were the other professions, and there was the New World, or at least Cuba and the Philippines. One of my grandfather's brothers had actually combined these opportunities, become a monk, and later been established as a parish priest in Montevideo or in Buenos Aires.* The ultimate resource, among all my Spanish acquaintance and relations, was some post under the government; and my grandfather might very well have sought his fortunes no further afield than Barcelona, or at most Madrid; but he went much further. Economic considerations were probably not uppermost in his mind; if they were, his career must have disheartened him. Those were unsettled and unsettling times, the repercussions of the French Revolution had not spent themselves, and emancipation of mind was sure to follow, if it had not preceded, being cast

* A history of the Borrás family of Reus has been published, but it contains hardly any information about my grandfather and none about my mother. In some respects the traditions recorded there diverge from those that my mother handed down; they may be more accurate, as my mother had no great interest or respect for the past. The exact facts in any case are not important, and I report the impressions that I have gathered.

loose upon the world. In any case we know that my grandfather, far from becoming a monk, like his brother, became a Deist, an ardent disciple of Rousseau, and I suspect a Freemason; and when a French army entered Spain, in 1823, to restore the shaken authority of Ferdinand VII and the absolute monarchy, José Borrás was compelled or thought it advisable to leave the country. The story goes that he fled first to Las Palmas, in the Balearic Islands, where he saw and wooed Teresa Carbonell, a stout blonde with very blue eyes (my mother's eyes were also blue and large); and that after a romantic marriage he persuaded her to follow him in his wanderings. In my certificate of baptism, however, Teresa Carbonell is set down as a native of Barcelona, which is not strictly incompatible with her living later at Las Palmas, or her family belonging there; but she and her whole history are wrapped in some obscurity, and suggest various problems that I have no means of solving.

One of these problems is why my grandfather should have chosen Glasgow for a place of refuge, and what he did there. Mahon, in the neighboring Minorca, had long been in British occupation, and occasions may have presented themselves to sail from there to Scotland, or perhaps to Lancashire; and he seems to have remained in those parts for some years, probably giving Spanish lessons and in any case learning English. This exile in poverty and obscurity, in so remote, cheerless, and industrial a scene, may not have been altogether unwelcome to him. Catalans are industrially and economically minded; novelty and distance allure them; and who knows how many utopias and ideologies, and what reflections on the missed opportunities of human government may not have kept his brain and heart warm in that chilly climate. All I can say is that his thirst for exploration or his longing for a simpler and more ideal society carried him eventually across the Atlantic, to rural, republican, distinguished, Jeffersonian Virginia. Here, if anywhere, mankind had turned over a new leaf, and in a clean new world, free from all absurd traditions and tyrant mortgages, was beginning to lead a pure life

of reason and virtue. With slavery? Perhaps that was only a temporary necessity, a kindly apprenticeship to instill into the simple negro a love of labor and of civilized arts; and as the protection of industries might be justified provisionally, until they could become well-rooted, so domestic servitude might be justified provisionally, until the slaves were ripe for freedom.

Be that as it may, José Borrás either came well recommended or ingratiated himself easily into the democracy of Winchester, Virginia, becoming (as a florid testimonial averred) one of its most honored and beloved citizens; so much so that as the years revolved, and a change of government in the liberal direction had occurred in Spain, his Winchester friends induced Andrew Jackson, then President of the United States, to appoint him American Consul at Barcelona. Thus his cordial attachments in exile enabled him eventually to return home, not only safely but gloriously, and with some prospect of bread and butter.*

* THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
to all who shall see these presents, greeting.

NO YE, that reposing special trust and confidence in the abilities and the integrity of Joseph Borrás of Spain, I have nominated and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate do appoint him consul of the United States of America for the Port of Barcelona, in Spain, and for such other parts as shall be nearer thereto than the residence of any other consul or vice-consul of the United States within the same allegiance,—and do authorize and empower him to have and to hold the said office and to exercise and enjoy all the rights, preeminences, privileges, and authorities to the same of right appertaining, during the pleasure of the President of the United States for the time being; HE demanding and receiving no fees or perquisites of office whatever, which shall not be expressly established by some law of the United States. And I do hereby enjoin all captains, masters, and commanders of ships and other vessels, armed or un-armed, sailing under the flag of the United States as well as all others of their citizens, to acknowledge and consider him the said Joseph Borrás accordingly. And I do hereby pray and request Her Majesty, the Queen of Spain, Her governors and officers to permit the said Joseph Borrás fully and peaceably to enjoy and exercise the said office without giving or suffering to be given unto him any molestation or trouble, but on the contrary to afford him all proper

An element of mystery or mystification hangs about this home-coming. The date of my mother's birth, according to her official papers, was 1828, but there is reason to believe that in reality it was 1826. When she was brought to Spain in 1835 the shocking fact appeared that she had never been christened. Was there no Catholic priest in Glasgow in those days, and none in Winchester, Virginia? Had no travelling ecclesiastic been met with in all those wanderings? No doubt her father's enlightened principles made him regard all religious practices, morally and philosophically, as indifferent, while socially it was advisable that everyone should be affiliated to the religious customs prevalent in his country. But what was to be my mother's country? If it were to be Scotland or Virginia, she ought to be christened and brought up a Protestant: if it were to be Spain, it was imperative that she should be a Catholic. The matter therefore had to be suspended until the question of final residence was settled: although it may seem singular that my grandmother should have wholly acquiesced in this view and allowed her daughter to grow up, as they say in Spain, a Moor. Now, however, the matter had to be patched up as expeditiously and quietly as possible. Friends and relations, even clerical advisers, are very accommodating in Spain and very ingenious. The age of seven, the canonical age of reason, when one begins to sin of one's own accord, was the right age for confirmation; young Josefina was small for her age; let her official age be reduced to seven years, let a private christening, to supply the

countenance and assistance; I offering to do the same for all those who shall in like manner be recommended to me by Her said Majesty.

IN TESTIMONY WHEREOF I have caused these letters to be made patent, and the seal of the United States be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN under my hand at the City of Washington, the third day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the fifty-ninth.

(Signed) ANDREW JACKSON

By the President

(SEAL)

John Forsyth, *Secretary of State.*

place of the missing documents, be smuggled in before the confirmation, and then the child would be launched quite legally and becomingly in her religious career, with confession and communion to follow immediately. This wealth of sacraments, raining down on her unprepared and extraordinary self-reliant little soul, seems not to have left much hunger for further means of grace. My mother always spoke of such things as of troublesome and empty social requirements; and even ordinary social requirements, like visiting, rather annoyed her, as if they interfered with her liberty and interrupted her peace.

On the whole, however, her ten years or more of girlhood in Barcelona seem to have been gay and happy—the only frankly happy period of her life. Without being robust, her health was perfect, her needlework exquisite, her temper equable and calm; she loved and was loved by her girl-friends; she read romantic verses and select novels; above all, she danced. That was the greatest pleasure in life for her: not for the sake of her partners—those were surely only round dances, and the partners didn't count; what counted was the joy of motion, the sense of treading lightly, in perfect time, a sylph in spotless muslin, enriched with a ribbon or a flower, playing discreetly with her fan, and sailing through the air with feet that seemed scarcely to touch the ground. Even in her old age my mother never walked, she stepped. And she would say in her quaint, perhaps Virginian English: "Will you step in?" She was not beautiful, and prematurely regarded herself as an old woman, and put on a white lace cap; but she had good points and made a favorable ideal impression, even if she did not positively attract. I can imagine her in her young days, agile of foot and hand, silent and enigmatic behind her large sunken blue eyes, thin lips, and brown corkscrew curls, three on a side, setting off her white complexion. If men did not often make love to her, especially not the men who care specifically for women, she amply took her revenge. Her real attachments, apart from her devotion to her father, were to her women friends, not to crowds of them, but to two or three and for life. To men as

men, even to her two husbands, she seems to have been cold, critical and sad, as if conscious of yielding to some inevitable but disappointing fatality.

I will translate a letter written to her by my father, dated Jan. 28, 1888, when I was in my second year at the University of Berlin, and it began to seem clear that I should drift into an academic life in America.

"My dear Josefina; I have had much pleasure in taking note of your kind letter and of the verses which, while thinking of me, you wrote twenty-five years ago. A volume would be requisite for me to recount the memories I have of our relations during now little less than a half a century. When we were married I felt as if it were written that I should be united with you, yielding to the force of destiny, although I saw plainly the difficulties that then surrounded such a union, apart from those that would not fail to arise later. Strange marriage, this of ours! So you say, and so it is in fact. I love you very much, and you too have cared for me, yet we do not live together. But it is necessary to keep in mind the circumstances peculiar to our case. I have always believed that the place in which it would be natural for you to live was Boston, in consequence of your first marriage which determined the course of your whole life. My position has offered and now offers no inducement, none, to balance the propriety or necessity of that arrangement. On my side, I could not then or later leave my own country for good, in order to live in Boston, when in view of my age and impediments it was impossible for me to learn to speak English well and to mix in that society. Here I have been a help to my family, and there I should only have been an encumbrance.

"I should have wished that Jorge should not have been separated from me, but I found myself compelled to take him in person and leave him in your charge and in that of his brother and sisters. Unhappy compulsion! Yet it was much better for him to be with you than with me, and I prefer his good to my pleasure."

How much in this was clearness of vision, how much was mod-

esty, how much was love of quietness and independence? It is not a question for me to decide, but there was certainly something of all those motives. Education such as I received in Boston was steadier and my associations more regular and calmer than they would have been in Spain; but there was a terrible moral disinheritorance involved, an emotional and intellectual chill, a pettiness and practicality of outlook and ambition, which I should not have encountered amid the complex passions and intrigues of a Spanish environment. From the point of view of learning, my education at the Boston Latin School and at Harvard College was not solid or thorough; it would not have been solid or thorough in Spain; yet what scraps of learning or ideas I might have gathered there would have been vital, the wind of politics and of poetry would have swelled them, and allied them with notions of honor. But then I should have become a different man; so that my father's decision was all for my good, if I was to be the person that I am now.

CHAPTER II

MY FATHER

THE name Santayana is derived by phonetic corruption from that of a small town in the Cantabrian hills, not far from the sea and from Santander. This name was originally Santa Juliana, doubtless that of some shrine or hermitage; but in Latin, as in Italian, *J* is only a double *i*, or *y*, the consonant, and the consonant *y* in Spanish is often confused with the stronger sound of *ll*, or the Italian *gl*; so that Santa Juliana could obviously yield in the vernacular to Santa Lliana, Santallana, Santayana, and Santillana. This last is the present name of that village; and on the other side of Santander, towards the Southeast, lies the village of Espinosa; so that my witty friend and translator, Don Antonio Marichalar, Marqués de Montesa (from whom I borrow the above etymology), half in banter and half in compliment finds in those seaside mountains, opposite one another, the native soil of Spinoza and of myself. But if I cannot be mentioned without a smile in the same breath with Spinoza for greatness of intellect, he cannot be compared with me for Spanish blood. He was a Jew: his ancestors could have found their way to Espinosa only as they did later to Amsterdam, or he himself to The Hague, or I to America; whereas if the reader will look back to the first page of this narrative, he will see that my grandfather was born in the province of Santander though not at Santillana, and that his wife and my father were born at Zamora, in Leon, my grandmother having the distinctly Portuguese or Galician surname of Reboiro: so that my ancestry on my father's side points distinctly to northwestern Spain, and Celt-Iberian blood; while my mother's origins were as unmistakably Catalanian

and Balearic; rooted, that is, in those northeastern shores that look towards Provence and towards Italy and have linked Spain for many ages with the whole Mediterranean world.

The name Santayana is tolerably well known in Spain. My father had a book of the eighteenth century written by one of the family on the subject of international trade, advocating the Spartan policy of isolation and autarchy. My father didn't call it Spartan, but monkish; and it was based perhaps more on fear of heresy than on love of political independence; but the author was not an ecclesiastic, but a man of affairs. My two forlorn unmarried aunts, older than my father, used to tell me that our family was noble and allied to the house of a Marqués de Santayana then existing in Madrid; but they had no means of tracing the relationship, nor did my father give the least attention to questions of this kind; so that I know nothing of my ancestry beyond his own time. Moreover our family name is really Ruiz, a very common one; and perhaps the addition of de Santayana was as accidental in our family as the addition of de Espinosa must have been in a family of Amsterdam Jews. Dropping Ruiz and retaining only Santayana was my father's doing, and caused him some trouble in legalizing his abbreviated signature in formal documents. He loved simplicity, and thought plain Agustín Santayana as pompous a name as his modest position could carry. I sympathize with the motive; but why not drop the Santayana and keep the Ruiz, which was the true patronymic? Legally I still possess both; and the question has no further importance, since with me our branch of the family becomes extinct.

If I were looking for ancestors there is only one known to fame to whom I might attempt to attach myself, and he is Gil Blas, whose blood I should rather like imagining I had in my veins. I feel a natural sympathy with unprejudiced minds, or if you like with rogues. The picaresque world is the real world; and if lying and thievery and trickery are contemptible, it is because the game is not worth the candle, not because the method is unworthy of the prize. If you despise the world, and cheat it only to laugh

at it, as the Spanish rascals seem to do, at least in fiction, the sin is already half forgiven. When the rogue tires of the game or is ruined by it, he may unfeignedly turn his free spirit towards higher things, or at least, like the good thief in Calvary, may recognize their existence. Those who lack the impudence and nimbleness of the rascal cannot help admiring his knowledge of things, and his quick eye; and the very meanness and triviality of his arts will keep him from thinking, as sinners do on a larger scale, that they are altogether heroes. Gil Blas doesn't become a saint—his biographer is a Frenchman—but becomes a good bourgeois, rich and happily married. It is a sort of redemption, though the Spanish spirit in him demanded another sort. The worthy solution would be found not in prosperity (too nearly what the unregenerate Gil Blas was pursuing) but rather in devotion, religious in its quality, even if not in its object: the solution that the poet Zorilla, a friend of my father's in their youth, puts into the mouth of the reformed Don Juan, reformed, that is, by love.

¿Nos es verdad, ángel de amor,
que en esta apartada orilla
la luna mas clara brilla
y se respira mejor?

Angel love, is it not true
that on this sequestered shore
the moon shines as ne'er before
and to breathe is something new?

Gil Blas represents also the sort of spiritual democracy that is characteristically Spanish, Christian, or Oriental. An unprejudiced man will be ready and happy to live in any class of society; he will find there occasions enough for merriment, pleasure, and kindness. Only snobs are troubled by inequality, or by exclusion from something accidental, as all particular stations are. Why should I think it unjust that I am not an applauded singer nor a field-marshal

nor a puppet king? I am rather sorry for them; I mean, for the spirit in them. Success and failure in the world are sprinkled over it like dew: it does not depend on the species of plant that receives it, save that the plant must exist and must spread its living texture to the elements. That is a great privilege, and a great danger. I would not multiply or inflate myself of my own accord. Even the punctilious honor of the Spanish gentleman is only an eloquent vanity, disdaining many advantages for the sake of a pose. Why assume so much dignity, if you have it not? And if you have it, what need have you of parading it? The base and sordid side of life must be confessed and endured humbly; the confession and the endurance will raise you enough above it.

The Spanish dignity in humility was most marked in my father. He lived when necessary and almost by preference like the poor, without the least comfort, variety, or entertainment. He was bred in poverty, not the standard poverty, so to speak, of the hereditary working classes, but in the cramped genteel poverty of those who find themselves poorer than they were, or than they have to seem. He was one of twelve children, imposing the strictest economy in the household of a minor official, with insecure tenure of office, such as his father was. For supper they had each a small bowl of garlic soup—something that my father loved in his old age, and that I also liked, especially if I might break a raw egg into it, as those twelve children were certainly never allowed to do. You fry some garlic in a pan with some olive oil; when crisp you remove the larger pieces of garlic, add hot water according to the size of the family, with thin little slices of bread, no matter how dry, *ad libitum*, and a little salt; and that is your supper. Or perhaps with a further piece of bread, you might receive a slice of cheese, cut so thin that the children would hold it up to the light, to admire its transparency, and to wink at one another through the frequent round holes.

That oil and water will not mix is disproved by this excellent garlic soup but also by a salad, *gazpacho*, that somewhat corresponded to it in the South. Bread, tomatoes and cucumbers, with

oil and vinegar, and some slivers of raw onion, if you were not too refined, composed its substance, all floating in an abundance of water; so that if hunger was partly mocked, thirst at least was satisfied, and this is the more urgent need in a warm climate.

If supper at my grandfather's was only bread and water, with condiments, breakfast probably included a tiny cup of thick chocolate into which you might dip your bread, before you drank your water; for a glass of water after chocolate was *de rigueur* in all classes in old Spain. The difference between simplicity and luxury was only this: that the luxurious had an *azucarillo*, a large oblong piece of frosted sugar blown into a light spongy texture, and flavored with lemon, to be dissolved in a glass of water. At midday the daily food of all Spaniards was the *puchero* or *cocido*, as the dish is really called which foreigners know as the pot-pourri or *olla podrida*. This contains principally yellow chick-peas, with a little bacon, some potatoes or other vegetables and normally also small pieces of beef and sausage, all boiled in one pot at a very slow fire; the liquid of the same makes the substantial broth that is served first.

My father was educated at Valladolid, I don't know first under what schoolmaster, but eventually at the university there, where he studied law; and he at least learned Latin well enough to take pleasure in translating the tragedies of Seneca into Castilian blank verse; a pure work of love, since he could expect no advancement, perhaps rather the opposite, from such an exhibition of capricious industry. Nor was that his only taste; he also studied painting, and quite professionally, although he made no great progress in it. His feeling for the arts and sciences was extraordinarily different from that which prevailed in the 1880's in English-speaking circles. As to painting all in England was a matter of culture, of the pathos of distance, of sentimental religiosity, pre-Raphaelitism, and supercilious pose. Even the learned and gifted that I saw in Oxford were saturated with affectations. My friend Lionel Johnson was typical: although thirty years later, during the war, I had other distinguished friends in Oxford, Robert Bridges and Father Wag-