

PENGUIN BOOKS

Silk Hats and No Breakfast

NOTES ON A SPANISH
JOURNEY



Honor Tracy

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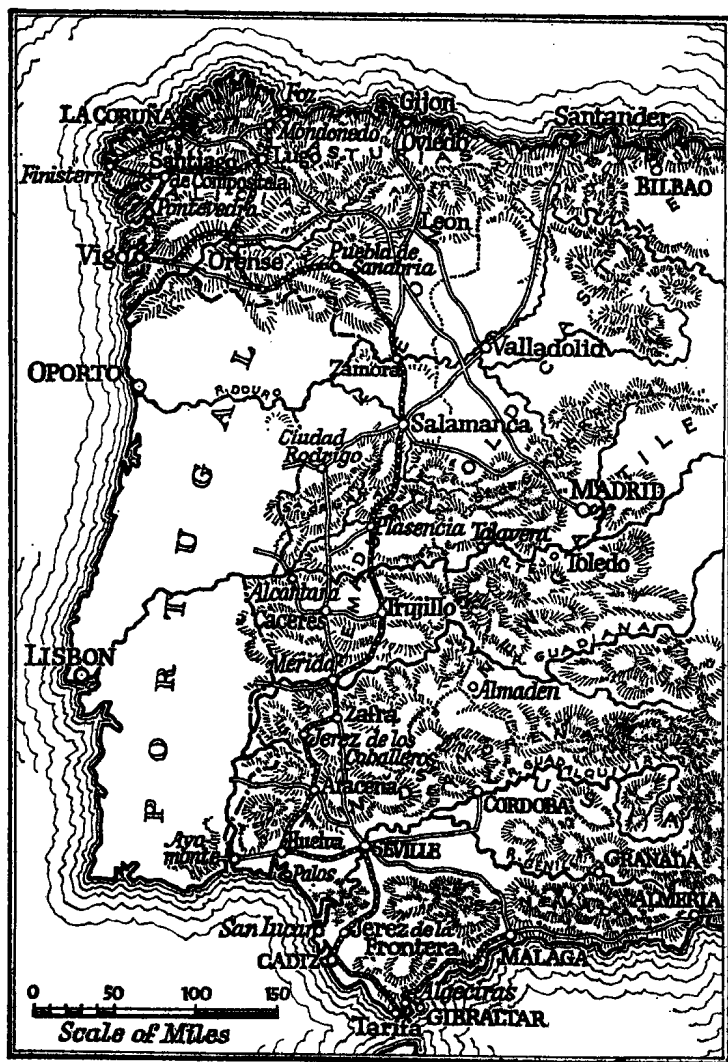
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To
Don Juan



ONE

WHETHER Gibraltar should return to Spain or not is a question difficult to decide; but at least its way of life was Spanish enough for the hotel to have misinformed me about the departure of the ferry for Algeciras. It was only half an hour out, however, and joy at the prospect of entering Spain once more had brought me fussing down to the quay in plenty of time so that the ferry was only just pushing off as the taxi arrived. The driver, again, was Spanish enough to leap from his place and address an impassioned appeal to the master: the ferry immediately pulled in, with a Spanish respect for the needs of the individual, or at any rate of the foreign individual; and then the vessel sturdily ploughed its way into the gold and silver haze of the morning towards the hills of the mainland, still green in this early June.

- Very soon the little fighter planes that buzz angrily about the Rock were left behind: left behind too were order, efficiency, cleanliness, peace, and fair-play. In an ecstasy of ingratitude I sat up on a bridge marked for the use of crew only, watching the dear, grim shores grow nearer and nearer until at last the small figures of men could be seen moving about on their surface. What wouldn't some of these give to be making this journey in the opposite sense? How brilliant, how exotic, how much like a fairyland must seem to them that state of affairs from which we so thankfully hurry away! As far as I was concerned, they were welcome to all of it.

At Algeciras a Customs officer in shabby tunic and gleaming boots glanced at the whisky, coffee, and cigarettes I had brought as a bribe to Gerald Brenan, and went on to more serious business. Travelling alone? And your husband, where is he? No husband! But there is still time. And so you have come here all by yourself. France is a long way off. My brother was once in Buenos Aires. Are you on holiday, perhaps? There

was a hint of reserve in his manner which disappeared when I said that I was a writer, collecting the material for a book. A woman alone in Spain is an object of suspicion, as probably up to no good : it is slightly better if she is foreign, since foreigners notoriously have no idea of proper conduct ; but if she is a writer she moves up into a special category of lunatics where ordinary rules no longer apply at all. The reassuring information was passed along the file patiently waiting its turn behind.

'I suppose you make a lot of money,' the officer said, and sighing, chalked the bags.

The office of the Bank of Spain was shut and my currency declaration, with its printed warning of what might befall if every one of the formalities were not complied with, had to remain unstamped. Happy to be once more among unregulated people, I passed on towards the town. The man in the tourist bureau gave the necessary information about buses to Malaga and urged me to lose no time in catching one. Algeciras is a small town : there is nothing to see. Nothing. Well, yes, there is the Moorish aqueduct, but it is nothing. *Nada. Nada. Nada.* And the wine here is no good. I pointed to a yellow and crimson poster announcing a stupendous *fiesta* for the coming Sunday, but he shook his head with finality.

'*Nada*,' he said. It was a point of view fresh and interesting in a promoter of tourism.

The pleasure of being in Spain at all left more particular considerations out, but it is true that not a great deal can be said for Algeciras. The seediness of Morocco appears to have crept over the Straits and set in here. An army of touts, beggars, and pedlars of smuggled trash harry the stranger and, in the Arab way, take his refusal as a personal affront ; and since he is unlikely to be there for more than a few hours, the attack has to be launched full-out from the moment of his appearance.

Yet the fifty minutes before the bus left for Malaga could be agreeably spent. Under the striped awnings of the cafés along the harbour front people were laughing and talking with the reverberant Spanish buzz that makes English conversation sound like the hush in a cathedral. Competing, the guitarists strummed their Andalusian songs and surprising

adaptations of American hit songs from many years ago. A fat man with a gold wrist-watch and, on his little finger, a sparkling diamond ring, his shirt open to reveal a mop of black fur, hesitated between two ties from a gay assortment. Should it be the scarlet satin with the bull's-head motif or the yellow silk with the black hoops? It would be terrible to make a mistake: his white, oily face was puckered with the worry of it. Two priests with blue chins and laughing eyes were enjoying a doubtless well-earned drink of Coca-Cola. The tiny boy at the table next to them preferred a glass or two of golden sherry, pressed on him by an adoring father.

I sat drinking cold beer and gazing contentedly about me. A boy with a shallow basket covered with a napkin approached my table. But I wasn't going to buy any of his lovely prawns: I knew I wasn't. Such things are very expensive and I needed all my money for books, theatres, taxis to places of historic importance, and other things of the mind. Gravely the boy withdrew the napkin. The exquisite creatures lay there in rows, their whiskers delicately curled, their plump bodies a creamy pink, their boiled eyes fixed in an appalled blue stare. I shook my head.

'Sí, sí,' the boy said, gently, as one who had the welfare of others at heart.

'I don't like them, really.'

He looked doubtful at this and, choosing one of the fattest, carefully peeled it and handed it to me.

'You will like that one,' he said. 'It was still in the sea this morning.'

Well, it was only twenty pesetas for six. Just this once. In future I should be firm. They needn't suppose they'll have it all their way with an experienced traveller like me, I thought, handing the money over. I'm not one of their green tourists, I thought, adding another five pesetas for the boy's dazzling smile. Twenty-five pesetas: the 'best part' of five shillings: painlessly extracted in the twinkling of an eye. This shall never happen again, I told myself.

Of course it would happen again.

Presently it was time to board the coach for Malaga. It was

a shiny monster with an indefinable menace glaring out of its great headlights, but provided with comfortable leather seats, first class in front, second to the rear, and all efficiently numbered and reserved. Before we could get in, there was another set of Customs to be gone through. I remembered that the last time I made this journey I had passed through the two *aduanas* in Algeciras, armed Customs officers had stopped the coach on the road and there had been a further inspection at Malaga itself. This was said to be due to the fact that smuggling from Gibraltar was one of the staple industries of the region ; but the curious thing about it was that not one of the officials concerned ever made a real inspection, of my luggage or anyone else's. They were simply items on General Franco's pay-roll, carrying out phantom duties for all but phantom wages.

Round the coach passionate farewells were being said, as always when the members of a Spanish family have to be separated by a few miles for a day or two. Inside it, passengers were carefully drawing the little blinds in order to exclude the sun. The driver put on his smoked glasses and with dignity assumed the peaked cap he would lay aside the instant we left the town. With a last outcry from the bereaved we were off.

Having secured a window-seat, I pulled the curtain back and prepared to enjoy the view ; but the pressure of silent misery from my neighbour grew steadily greater and after a mile or so I gave in. Brief glimpses through a crack were to be all : of the high eucalyptus trees waving their feathery arms above the white dusty road, coarse, fleshy cactus with frilly yellow blossom or rosy fruit, families of baby pigs, brown and glossy as water-rats, mean, bony mules and, now and again, under a broad straw hat a wonderful face, lined and brown, full of pride, humour, and patience. My neighbour tried to make up for the disappointment to me with the half of a cold, oily omelet from his basket and a steady flow of conversation.

At one point the road narrowed suddenly, just as another coach came tearing up from the opposite direction. It was a case for one or other to slow down and pull into the side ; but the question was, of course, which should do it, a question involving so many points as not to be seriously considered by

either. Proudly our driver trod on the accelerator while his opponent did the same: the coaches thundered on towards each other like knights of old on the jousting field and passed with nothing more than a deafening crash and the loss to both sides of some paint. The driver glanced round with a grin of satisfaction and received the warm applause of us all for having maintained our honour.

At last the coach rolled into Malaga and drew up outside an impressive new bus-station, with polished floors, ticket offices, cloakrooms, left-luggage department, a most up-to-date leather and chromium bar, and everything appropriate to the New Spain; but at the same time, and as if it were impossible to see to everything at once, the crowd of hungry, ragged porters still was there, fighting for a chance to haul bulky cases through the baking streets for a peseta or two. I left my luggage and went to a hotel, listed as third class, but spotlessly clean, where the service has that peculiar Spanish quality of friendly nonchalance and the staff that rich assortment of personalities that bring back the traveller over and over again. But '*Nada, nada!*' shouted the receptionist as I came into the hall: the pain of having to refuse made him sound really annoyed. It was the eve of Corpus Christi and the place was flooded with French pilgrims; and there indeed the dear souls were, more incorrigibly bourgeois than ever in this Spanish setting, on the one hand shrilly exclaiming at the cheapness of everything, and on the other fiercely contesting each peseta from force of habit.

There was nothing for it but to set out again in search of a roof for the night. In the streets preparations were going forward for the great feast of the morrow. National and Party flags waved from public buildings, for this Government has requisitioned the Faith entirely. At one end of the Alameda was a curious erection, suggestive from a distance of a vast gold ball hovering over an egg-cup, which turned out to be a giant host and chalice of cardboard, placed on a temporary altar simply and pleasantly decorated with green branches, but picked out with a fringe of multicoloured electric lights in the usual blend of charm and vulgarity. The way that the procession would take from the Cathedral to this altar was being

strewn with rushes; nets, like those used for trapping little birds, were going up each side of it and awnings placed here and there overhead, no doubt for the protection of clerical pates from the noonday sun. In a square off the main street another altar was being hastily run up to house the Virgin and Child. Men swaying precariously on the top of ladders shouted to their mates knee-deep in pink and white carnations on the ground: all worked with grim intentness in the dual purpose of suitably honouring the Body of Christ and holding their own against Granada.

A hotel soon was found half-way down the Larios, so that there would be a fine free view of the procession from the balcony in the morning. The porter hastened away to fetch my bags. Only one little chore remained before I could give myself up to the pleasures of contemplation. On the following afternoon Gerald Brenan and his wife would be expecting me at Churriana, a few miles out in the countryside, and since all would be upside down with the *fiesta* it seemed prudent to find out now when the bus left, and from where. The proprietor of the hotel was unable to help. But many small local buses left from the end of the Alameda near the port, where the trees threw a delicious shade, and thither I went to consult the policeman on point duty. But as I stepped off the pavement, he trilled sharply on his whistle. In this land of irremediable anarchy, of total administrative confusion, of lost files and dead letters and disregarded law, I had broken the single rule which always and everywhere has to be observed: I was attempting to cross the road at the wrong point. Abashed, I crept round in a wide detour and was rewarded with a courteous salute and a smile of forgiveness. The bus for Churriana left from just nearby, first to the right, then to the left, then right again and there would be a little square. Another salute, another smile: *nada, nada*.

In the little square the people disclaimed all knowledge of a Churriana bus. A tiny, dispirited vehicle did stand there, its roof piled with hens, wine-bottles, and vegetables, its interior crammed with jovial countrymen, but it was going somewhere else. If it would not do instead, if in a queer foreign way I was

bent on Churriana or nothing. I must return whence I had come to the trees of the Alameda. There was nothing to wonder at in this. It has happened before that a Spanish policeman was unaware of a bus that left several times a day about twenty yards from where, for years, he had stood on duty. I went back to the Alameda, slinking furtively through the trees lest the policeman should see me and feel wounded in his prestige. In the open-air café waiters were darting to and fro with trays of coffee, beer, cakes, and ices: were they, perhaps, more observant than policemen? I asked one of them. Carefully he set down a rainbow ice before a dignified gentleman with a long silver beard and turned, entirely at my disposal.

'The bus for Churriana,' he said, pointing decisively into the green shadows, 'leaves from there.'

Where?

'There, there,' he said, patiently.

A passer-by stopped dead in his tracks and asked: 'What does she want?'

'The bus for Churriana.'

'It leaves from the new bus station.'

'Hombre! It goes from over there.'

An altercation broke out, in which many others joined. Voices were raised. A splinter movement held that there was no bus to Churriana at all, but only a small train. The great majority refused even to admit this. The gentleman with the rainbow ice was appealed to and, with all the weight of his beard, came down for the bus-station party. Discomfited, the waiter shrugged and turned away.

'Anyhow, she has missed it,' he called over his shoulder.

The men in charge of the bus station were mildly vexed at the idea that a bus for Churriana could ever darken their doors. Their coaches went to Seville and Alicante and Granada, fine upstanding things that they were. You had better go, they said, to the Alameda and ask the policeman on duty there. Deep inside me there now began a stirring and twitching, not unlike the movement of water as it comes to the boil: it is a sensation familiar to travellers in this country, and one that, if not checked at once, can lead to horrible explosions.

It seemed best to make a clean break and a fresh start and to concentrate my powers on finding the small train. That it existed was sure, for I had been in it once: it was a dear, mad little toy with its own little station, and it toddled very gently and slowly along the coast for a while before tacking inland of a sudden and incontinently discharging its passengers miles from anywhere. I went out once more into what I was beginning to think of as 'the pitiless sunlight' and in a short space of time after only half a dozen or so inquiries arrived at the station.

'But why don't you take the bus?' asked the man in the ticket office.

'Because nobody knows where it starts,' I screamed.

'Here! It starts here!'

Here?

'Just outside this station. Everyone knows that,' he assured me. 'But the last one has gone,' he said mournfully. *Nada*, I was merely finding out for tomorrow; and at this he raised his head and gave me a long, astonished stare.

A fondness for Malaga is, perhaps, a special or acquired taste. There are interesting and beautiful things to be seen there, but nothing superb. The Cathedral itself is chiefly endearing for what it hasn't: namely, the second of the twin towers which for lack of either money or impulse never was built, so that the edifice stands today as a one-armed giant, affectionately known to the populace as *La Manquita*. The gardens are lovely with their brilliant lawns, tall smooth-leaved trees, and flights of delicate blossom, tended and groomed in the careful Spanish way; and the small public library set up in the very heart of it shows a generous and un-bureaucratic imagination. There is the quiet dignity of the precincts and the Bishop's palace and the charm of narrow twisting streets in the old town, with their gay flower-booths and vegetable markets, and the bright, vivid life of cheap eating-houses and taverns. But round the corner from the show places, a step from the flashy window displays in the *Larios*, is a terrible and killing poverty. Despair looks out of the people's eyes in these quarters of comfortless age and hopeless youth. The same is true of many parts of Spain,

particularly in the south, so that at times the foreigner seems to be sailing comfortably in a private craft through oceans of misery ; but in Malaga there is a certain tang in the air, a bitterness, as if its people did not share in that humble acquiescence which makes the Spanish poor as a whole appear either saintly or mad. Red Malaga it was called once, before General Franco taught it Christian duty with his machine-guns ; and perhaps the spirit of rebellion is not entirely quenched.

Whatever the reason, I am always glad to come back to this stringent town ; and I now set off on a little tour of renewal and recollection. From one of the main squares I turned into an ancient, rambling house which is the British Institute and where two years before a most original and entertaining character had been in charge. This was a young man from the North Country who had visited Spain on a holiday and, as often happens, immediately succumbed to her charms, remaining there with little but mother wit to depend on until in time he was given the job of organizing English studies in Malaga. This he did with much success, at the same time becoming an authority on the life and customs of the port, so that an afternoon in his company was as instructive as amusing. Unlike so many Hispanophiles, however, he did not go native, but remained sturdily English to the core, even to making regular trips to Gibraltar to fetch supplies of the mouse-trap cheese and milk chocolate on which he mainly subsisted. He introduced me to a friend of his, a pretty Spanish girl of eighteen or so, who was putting money aside every month for her funeral. It was to be *lujo*, or first class, with three priests and black plumes for the horses, and I can see now the look of serene anticipation on her little face as she described it. But when I inquired for him now, he was gone ; and the cultured young woman who seemed to have taken his place could give me no information.

There would be no one, then, to translate into homely Lancashire the salvos that crackled off between the tiny street-urchins who, with their dark curls and great innocent eyes, put one in mind of the cherubs of Murillo : and who from the age of four upwards exhorted, admonished, and apostrophized

each other in terms to be found in no respectable dictionary. This thought came, with a poignant sense of loss, as I watched a French lady caress the head of one of them, inquiring his name and age. The infant responded with a single classic and lapidary phrase known even to me. '*Qu'il est mignon!*' the lady cried delightedly to her companion, '*il dit que je suis sa mère.*'

Down in the port a Spanish destroyer was in, and the ship's company was assembling on deck for the evening salute to the colours. The small white figures carried out the drill with a smartness and a precision never to be seen in the sister service while the onlookers on the quay chuckled appreciatively. Perhaps it was the idea of Spain possessing a Navy, or indeed anything at all, that diverted them, or perhaps they found a subtle comedy in the notion of discipline itself; but there they were, rooted to the spot until the ceremony was over, when they slowly and reluctantly dispersed, smiling as people retrospectively smile when they leave a theatre. A small boy took possession of me, explaining that Spain had many ships like this, but bigger, that Spanish ships were the best in the world and Spanish sailors afraid of nothing, not even thunder: adding urgently as I moved away, that he was fond of ice-cream.

The hours were passing, as they do in Spain, like the minutes in England. The golden glare of the afternoon gave way to a soft primrose shot with red and the mountains up the coast were a dark blue. As ever in the poetic fading of the light my thoughts turned to sherry; and rather than be stared at in one of the cafés of the town, I strolled along to one that stood on the shore some way off, past the beaches where fishermen in the morning are to be seen dragging their heavy nets in from the depths of the sea: only to find as often as not that the dead weight that nearly bursts their blood-vessels contains more jelly-fish than sardine. In this bar, which was also an excellent fish restaurant, were old acquaintances among the army of famished cats who went writhing and twisting like snakes from one table to the next, in the hope of a head or a skeleton or even, who knows, a piece of skin. Now and again, a token of what the night held in store, a rocket hissed up into the sky and exploded with a bang that recalled London evenings during