ROBERT GRAVES

THE VISCOUNTESS AND THE SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ago, Master Toni, the squat, bald, dark-eyed, muscular, smiling proprietor of our village garage, invited me to dinner on his Saint's Day. The fiesta of San Antonio, which falls on January 17th, is always marked in Majorcan villages by the priest's rather hilarious aspersion with holy water of as many asses, mules, sheep-dogs and motor-cars as his parishioners may care to bring along to the Church door; and by a bonfire, lighted on the previous evening, which around midnight has usually died down low enough for buñuelos -- a sort of doughnut -- to be fried over the embers. On this occasion, the fire being still alive after morning mass, Master Toni's wife Doña Isabel sent her children with shovels to salvage lumps of glowing charcoal for the brazier under our dinner table. The main dish was missel-thrushes stewed in cabbage-leaves, with snails, octopus and saffron rice. We also ate smoked ham; slices of outsized radish; the first pickled black olives of the season; Minorcan sheep-cheese; fig-bread; ordinary bread; and plenty of Binisalem red wine. I remember the missel-thrushes, because a German lady had been enraged to see a pile of them heaped on the garage floor that morning. 'How dare you massacre our beautiful German songbirds?' she screamed.

'Señora,' Master Toni answered, 'your German songbirds are ill-educated; they come to steal the olives. Olives are our main source of wealth: olives, and figs -- figs such as I often watched you steal from my trees as you went down the path by our house this last September.'

Missel-thrushes are caught by a method once known as 'bat-fowling' in England, but now, I believe, extinct there. Two men station themselves a few paces apart, in one of the broad alleys down which the thrushes fly from their roosts among evergreen oaks near the mountain top. The bat-fowlers stretch across the alley a length of fishing-net lashed to two very long canes, held upright. At dawn, the first coveys of thrushes, known as tords d'auba, descend on the olive groves and find themselves entangled in the net. Both canes are simultaneously flung forward and downward, after which the bat-fowlers wring the necks of whatever birds have been caught underneath. At about eight o'clock down flies a smaller wave of thrushes, known as tords de gran dia; then no more can be expected until the tords de vespre, or evening thrushes. Bat-fowling is one of the few sports in which the villagers engage. A mountain terraced steeply all the way up from the sea provides no level space large enough for a football field, or even a tennis court; and since 1906, when a passing traveller had his eye knocked out by a sling-stone flung by young Mateo of the Painted House -- he had mischievously aimed at the man's pipe -- the ancient Balearic sling has been officially banned even for rabbit-hunting.

Anyhow, Master Toni, having made merry on the Eve of San Antonio, and eaten quantities of buñuelos, had returned home for a couple of hours' sleep, then started off at five o'clock to catch tords d'auba for our dinner. But along came the sexton, in overcoat and slippers, to say that his sister, María the Spaghetti-maker, was desperately ill again and that the Doctor must be fetched at once from Sóller. So Master Toni climbed into his antiquated Studebaker; and by the time the Doctor had attended to María (on her death-bed these past fifteen years) and been driven back to Sóller, only the despised tords de gran dia were left to hunt. Nevertheless, Master Toni and a certain Sentiá Dog-beadle, the village odd-job man, managed between them to bag two dozen -- a remarkable catch that year. And very good they tasted.

Perhaps I should explain that María Spaghetti-maker had never made any spaghetti; it was her great-grandmother who plied the trade, but the nickname persisted in the female line. There is now a grown-up granddaughter who holds it, though she only sews gloves. Similarly, the timorous and greedy Sentiá Dog-beadle inherited his nickname from an ancestor whose task had been to keep stray dogs from taking sanctuary on hot days in the cool of Palma Cathedral. 'Sentiá' is short for Sebastián. There are almost too many things which need explanation, once one begins to tell stories about our village.

After dinner, over the coffee and brandy, I found it easy to swear that I had never eaten so well, or so much, in all my life.

'Not even in Piccadilly, Don Roberto?' asked Master Toni shrewdly.

'Certainly not, I assure you!'

'Well, Damián the Coachman, Sentiá Dog-beadle and I ate pretty well there, during our famous stay at the Regent Palacio Hotel.'

'Why have you never told me of this visit to London?'

'I am a busy man, you are a busy man. I have saved up the long history of the Viscountess and the Short-haired Girl for this fiesta.'

Here then is Master Toni's story, as I wrote it down that same evening. Respecting his inability to manage an initial St, Sc, Sp or Sm without an anticipatory e, I prefixed one to all the proper names which demanded it. Let that e stay as a convenient reminder of the estory-teller's Espanishness.

THE VISCOUNTESS AND THE SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

It all began one day in August when two gentlemen, both wearing black coats and

striped trousers -- hardly suitable clothes for the weather, which was of a barbarous heat -- drove up in a very fine taxi from Palma and stopped at my garage. The chauffeur, who knew me, asked whether they might have a private word in my ear. 'At the gentlemen's service,' I answered, 'unless they are trying to sell me something. I am excessively short of money this month.'

One of the gentlemen, who could speak Spanish, heard what I said. He was a little game-cock of a man, and had a habit of tilting his head on one side inquiringly, as poultry often do. From his black mushroom hat, I judged him to be less important than the other, who wore a black silk stove-pipe hat. 'Then let me congratulate you, Don Antonio,' he said. 'My friend here, Mr P.P. Jonés, will soon remedy your financial straits. If you listen to his proposal, he will fill your pockets with silver duros. My own name is Charley Estrutt, at your service.'

'He does not require me to violate the Law?' I asked.

Mr Estrutt translated this question to Mr Jonés, who resembled a large, well-cured ham. Mr Jonés shook his head violently, saying: 'On the contrary!' -- a phrase which I understood, the word 'contrary' being identical in our Majorcan idiom, though we sound it differently.

I asked them both upstairs, to take a coffee. They accepted, and when we had emptied our cups I waited until they should come to the point, after all Mr Estrutt's compliments on the beauty and tranquillity of our village. When he continued silent, I said boldly: 'By your gold watch-chains and your reticence, gentlemen, I judge you to be lawyers; and your black clothes indicate that you are here on business, not on a vacation. The labels on your brief-cases say "London". Therefore, since this village has had the honour of welcoming only one compatriot of yours during the past twelve months, that is to say a certain young girl with hair cut short like a boy's, who stayed for a week in May at the Hotel Bonsol with a tall foreigner from God-knows-where, may I conclude that your business somehow concerns her?'

Mr Estrutt's face lighted up. He said: 'You are very intelligent, Don Antonio! That is almost precisely the case, though Señor Jonés alone is a lawyer. In effect, he represents the short-haired girl's disconsolate mother, recently widowed.'

I asked: 'And your profession, Señor? Would it be inconvenient to divulge it?'

Mr Estrutt smiled. 'No inconvenience at all,' he said. 'I used to be an inspector in our Metropolitan Police force. I am now retired, and have become a private detective employed by rich people to conduct delicate inquiries. The remuneration is better.'

I went on: 'By the formality of Mr Jonés's appearance, he must be a lawyer of great importance?'

Mr Estrutt whistled. 'He never accepts less than fifty thousand pesetas a week for a case! The fact is that the disconsolate mother in question reeks of money. Her father was a multi-millionaire from Chile. I worked for the family once; an illegitimate son of his happened to be blackmailing him.'

I remarked: 'One recognizes your accent as South American.'

He blushed a little: 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'you Spaniards despise South Americans for their abuse of your ancient tongue.'

Since Mr Charley Estrutt seemed a pleasant enough man, for all the ridiculous black mushroom-hat balanced on his knee, I assured him that here in Majorca we speak an even coarser dialect of Spanish than the Chileans. Our talk proceeded in this inconclusive manner until Mr Jonés, who did not understand a word, looked at his big gold watch and made some observation to Mr Estrutt. Clearly, the moment had come to discuss business. I told myself: 'These people can pay well. I shall certainly not accept the first price they offer -- for whatever it is that they require of me.'

Mr Estrutt now put forward his proposal. He explained that the short-haired girl, a minor, having run away from a French convent where she was being educated, had been brutally kidnapped by a Bulgarian artist. The pair had, with great difficulty, been traced to our village. The disconsolate Viscountess, her mother, wished to collect sufficient sworn evidence about the tragedy to incarcerate this Bulgarian heretic for life. Yet scandal must be avoided at all costs, and therefore the Spanish police had not been invited to assist. Well, if I and two friends of mine could testify before an English judge to the Bulgarian's having dragged the wretched girl to our Hotel Bonsol, and there committed an offence against her, the unfortunate entanglement could be legally proved, and the criminal punished.

Mr Jonés, so Mr Estrutt told me, knew that I had conveyed the couple in my taxi from the mole at Palma to the Hotel Bonsol; that a certain Sebastián Vivés (meaning Sentiá Dog-beadle) had carried their bags up to a bedroom at the said hotel; and that Damián Frau, meaning 'Damián the Coachman', the hotelkeeper, had brought them breakfast in bed, on a tray, the next morning. Mr Jonés hoped that we would kindly visit London in a month's time, to avenge the honour of a noble English house, more particularly because the disconsolate Viscountess was a very devout Catholic; he had heard of our Majorcan zeal for the sanctity of a Catholic home.

I replied: 'Speaking between ourselves, Mr Estrutt, the short-haired girl seemed to be in no way acting under duress; in fact, on our journey from Palma she was embracing and caressing the heretic -- as I could not help seeing in my driving-mirror -- with every appearance of genuine enjoyment.'

Imagine my surprise, when Mr Estrutt winked at me (but with the eye hidden from Mr Jonés) and answered: 'Don Antonio, in England our young girls have been completely demoralized by the excitements of the recent war. Moreover, the poor child may have feared that, unless she caressed him in public, he would ill-treat her most cruelly once they were alone.'

To be brief, the terms offered us three witnesses for a visit to London were twenty pesetas a day, besides travelling expenses, bed, board, laundry, wine, cigars, and anything else within reason that we might need, not omitting sightseeing excursions; and another five hundred pesetas each, if we gave our evidence in a way that convinced the Judge. He also asked, would I be kind enough to repeat this offer to my friends, Don Sebastián and Don Damián?

I wanted to know how long we should be away, and Mr Estrutt estimated that we should be home again within three weeks. My reply was that we should answer yes or no after a night's reflection; but Mr Jonés urged us to sign a contract that same night. He intended to catch the Barcelona boat.

Well, I left the Englishmen at my house while I went to the Bonsol and took Damián for a little stroll. 'You are a knowledgeable man,' I said, 'and acquainted with the ways of the rich. I have been invited to visit London as witness in a kidnapping case. Now, for a commission of this sort, are twenty pesetas a day, all found, sufficient? I shall be away for about three weeks.'

Damián stopped, gazed at me in wonder, spat with emphasis, and said: 'Ka, man, you would be a fool to refuse! Myself, I would gladly go without pay -- if only to escape from this dull hole and see grand civilization again.'

Damián, you must understand, had earned his nickname himself as coachman to the President of the Argentine Republic, and still remembered those days of glory. He added: 'But what, in the Devil's name, has the kidnapping case to do with you?'

'Patience, friend,' said I. 'First advise me whether the fee is correct in principle.'

He considered the matter. Then he spat again and said: 'In principle, Toni, you should insist upon thirty pesetas a day. The English, as a rule, allow fifty per cent for bargaining where Spaniards are concerned.'

'And five hundred pesetas on top of that!'

'A tidy sum, by God! I wish I had the chance to earn so much by a three weeks' holiday.'

'Then be joyful, Damián! You are invited too!'

He took this for a joke, but when he heard my story he threw his hat so high into the air that it sailed over the terrace, down the valley and into the torrent, and was not found again.

We went off together at once and acquainted Sentiá with his luck. As Sentiá was earning hardly five pesetas a day, a casual labourer's wage at that time, his eyes truly bulged with greed. Yet we had to pour a deal of coñac down his throat before we could persuade him to join us. Never having left the island in his life, Sentiá cherished a tremendous fear of being drowned by a tempest at sea. Finally, however, he agreed; and after Damián and I had won the extra ten pesetas a day from Mr Jonés, without a struggle, we took Sentiá along to the Mayor, who was the local Justice of the Peace, and persuaded him to witness the amended contract. In effect, we all signed the document, which had been prepared by a Spanish notary. Sentiá scrawled his name and rubric with a trembling hand, saying: 'God grant that this be not my death warrant!'

Nobody from our village had ever seen the shores of England, and it seemed a great thing for us three to be the first. Naturally, our wives did not favour the adventure, unless they could come too; is that not so, Isabel? But Mr Estrutt declared that such an arrangement would be most unwise, even if we cared to pay those extra passages and expenses out of what we should earn. Then Sentiá's wife created a scandal. She called us fools for not asking fifty pesetas a day, and a thousand at the close, Mr Jonés having agreed to our demand so readily. She knew in her heart, she shrieked, that I had been bribed by the Englishmen to keep the payment low. But Isabel here, and Damián's wife, Angela, told her to be silent, since the offer was a handsome one and the document had now been securely signed.

Nothing more. After promising to write frequently, and making our wives promise to behave themselves during our absence and keep the children in good order, we declared, hands on heart, that we should never have dreamed of leaving the village even for three weeks, were the preservation of a Catholic home not at stake. Indeed, the women of this island are hardly less zealous in this matter than Mr Estrutt suggested; and I doubt whether any of the three concerned would have let us go for the money alone. I learned later that, while we were away, Isabel here spent half her days in church, praying for my safety and for the spiritual consolation of the unhappy widow.

Well, you have made that journey more than once, Don Roberto, so it is nothing new to you, but for me it was tremendous once we had crossed the frontier into France! It seemed a miracle that within half a mile of country the aspect of so many things could suddenly change: the clothes, the language, the uniforms, the telegraph-poles, the colour of the mailboxes, the very shape and taste of the bread!

Mr Estrutt had fetched us by taxi from the village in order to shepherd us through the customs, the passport inspections, and other troubles. He seemed a very different man, once he had emerged from the shadow of the serious Mr Jonés: being dressed now in a cream-coloured gaberdine suit, a hard straw-hat with a canary-yellow ribbon, and carrying a gold-headed cane. He also began to tell us jokes of the sort we call 'green'. He arrived at my house somewhat fatigued, having spent the previous night at the Bar Macarena. Perhaps you know the Macarena? If so, you will consider it no small feat that he escaped alive from those gipsies and even contrived to preserve his wallet, his pearl tie-pin, and his gold-headed cane. The Metropolitan Police must be a race of lions.

We embarked on the night-boat to Barcelona, and the tears streamed down our wives' faces as they waved us goodbye from the quay; and I confess that, for a moment, I wondered whether my decision had been a prudent one. As for Sentiá, he was in a lamentable condition, and Mr Estrutt made him swallow a tablet which rapidly put him to sleep.

As soon as we were clear of Palma harbour, Mr Estrutt invited Damián and me to join him in the Bar. Over a coñac, he said: 'Boys, presently I shall go to the cabin to restore my loss of sleep, but first let me be honest with you. That kidnapping story, you must understand, is a work of fantasy. The old Viscountess and I thought it out together as a means of convincing your wives that it was their duty to let you go. Moreover, we decided that we should say no word about it to Mr Jonés. Though an intelligent lawyer, he is insular and highly moral, and would never practise a little deception even to assist a good cause.'

'Well, then for God's sake tell us the truth at once!' Damián demanded fiercely.

'The truth,' he replied, 'is that this old witch of a Viscountess lost her husband, the Viscount, three months ago -- he fell from the balcony of their bedroom at the Hotel Espléndido, Cannes, and perhaps it truly was an accident -- who can say? But no matter! The widow is now enamoured of a retired officer in the King's Bodyguard; and this officer, whose profession is to direct a pack of foxhounds, possesses a large estate, but little money to maintain it -- only a mountain of gambling debts. In fact, he is willing to marry the old trout, who is not bad-looking by candle light, if one places the candle well behind her and wears sunglasses. The sole bar to their union has been his young wife, an actress, who married him not long ago, thinking he was rich but, finding that he had cheated her, now considers herself free to take what consolation she can find in the company of others. Yet she carefully covers her tracks when she goes hunting -- hunting men, not foxes, of course. She is good-looking, you agree?'

Since Mr Estrutt was clearly referring to the short-haired girl, Damián and I pronounced that, yes, she was a delicious morsel, though a little thin perhaps, and her eyes of too pallid a blue.

Mr Estrutt went on. 'So you see, boys, that your testimony will be most valuable to the Viscountess. If the foxhunting officer wins his decree of divorce from the short-haired girl, the Viscountess can them marry him, having paid all the expenses of the trial. Now, this is how I enter the story. Last May, the short-haired girl was invited to stay with her elder sister at Tossa on the Costa Brava; but when the Viscountess sent me there in July to make inquiries, I found that after only a single morning at Tossa the girl had crossed over to Majorca at the side of the Bulgarian artist, whom she had met on the Paris train. I discreetly followed their tracks and obtained your names, without visiting your village, from a friendly corporal of Coastguards. With such information I went back to London, where Mr Jonés resolved to make the Viscountess pay a capital sum for his corroboration of my story. I should add that other acts of adultery are charged against the short-haired girl; but this is the only one which Mr Jonés at present dares to bring into Court. Well, boys, do you forgive me for the lies I told you?'

I laughed. 'Ka, man, it is all the same to Damián and me,' I said, 'so long as we are paid according to our contract.'

Mr Estrutt slapped my back and cried: 'I like your spirit, Toni, if I may call you that? And you must call me Charley, as everyone else does who is anyone at all! Now, another thing. When you asked for those extra ten pesetas a day, I informed Mr Jonés that, being staunch Catholics, you were dead against the marriage of divorced persons, and must therefore obtain at least thirty pesetas in all before testifying in a matter that so little interested you. Now I have said enough; but I wager that we will enjoy a wonderful time in London. By the bye, you must not let my lovesick old baggage of a Viscountess know that I have given you the true story; and it would be well, surely, not to let the good Sentiá into our secret, either. It might unsettle his ideas about me.'

Then we refilled our glasses and toasted the Viscountess, the late Viscount, the short-haired girl, the foxhunting officer, Mr P.P. Jonés and the Judge, together with many other persons more remotely connected with the affair, in a multitude of coñacs. Mr Estrutt did not restore his loss of sleep during that particular night.

Despite our excesses we reached port safely, and later ate a grand meal at the Hotel Palacio of Barcelona, with lobster mayonnaise, French wines, and everything of the best. Sentiá Dog-beadle, feeling much embarrassed by the elegant ambience, opened his mouth only a little when he introduced food and kept his enormous red hands under the table while not using them. But Damián gloried in this brief return to the high life he had enjoyed at the Presidential Palace of Buenos Aires, and recounted more about his past than I should ever have believed, though we had known each other twenty years or longer.

After a night spent on a train with very narrow beds, we came to Paris and were taken

in a taxi to the Gare du Nord. At once Mr Estrutt said: 'Boys, will you do me a great favour? I am off into the city. Please wait for me in the restaurant yonder, order what food and drink may be convenient, but be careful to enter into conversation with no one at all! My orders from the Viscountess are never to leave you out of my sight. I shall be back in time to catch our train.'

Damián asked: 'What is this great favour worth to us, Don Charley?'

He answered: 'If you protect me, Damián, I shall protect you. Is that not sufficient?'

Since Mr Estrutt had all the money and our tickets, his answer could not fail to satisfy Damián. Yet it was embarrassing that two Palma businessmen whom I knew by sight should enter the Station Restaurant and greet me. I gazed blankly at them and pretended to be German. I even turned to Damián, saying: 'Heute ist Sonntag!' which was all the German I knew. Damián, who is quick-witted enough, shook his head and answered: 'Donnerwetter!' which was all the German he knew. The two Palma men sat down at a table in the far corner, and from there stared at us. We three dared not talk to one another in our own language until they had gone out again. The food, by the way, was not good.

This was two o'clock. Our train to Calais would depart at six o'clock; but four o'clock had passed, and five, and half past five, and a quarter to six, and still there we sat. At ten minutes to six, Damián said: 'I like this very little. What can have happened to Mr Estrutt?'

'Patience!' said I. 'He's a good fellow and will keep his word.'

But Sentiá grew more and more nervous. He cried out that we should never have come: we have been decoyed to Paris for some business of the Devil, he said -- to be sold in slavery to the Moors, it might be. Had he not been plagued by a black foreboding on the day of the contract?

We made no reply. At last Damián stood up: 'Well,' he said, 'let us put on our overcoats and have everything ready. Mr Estrutt will, I have no doubt, appear mathematically at the last moment.'

Even as he spoke, Mr Estrutt burst into the restaurant, paid our small bill with a single large banknote, and rushed us off to the platform. We caught the Calais train with thirty seconds to spare.

'My God, that was close!' exclaimed Mr Estrutt, sinking into his seat. 'Nevertheless, I found what I went out to find!'

Damián asked: 'Was it a nice tender chicken?'

Mr Estrutt took the joke in good part. 'Alas, no,' he answered, 'this was serious business, not gastronomic pleasure. You shall hear about it one day. But I thank you very much for your great patience, boys! Now, what about a game of cards?' So we played truc until we reached Calais.

Contrary to all we had heard, the English Channel was as smooth as glass, and on the other side we found an altogether different country again, green and beautiful! Though it was already autumn, the sun shone without pause all the time we spent there. I cannot imagine why Spaniards call the English climate a bad one. At Dover, a huge Rolls-Royce limousine took us by road to London, in which we drove for hours, it seemed, through a wilderness of streets, and across the river Támesis. Finally we came to Piccadilly Circus with its fantastic coloured signs, and its hurrying crowds. Close by stood the Regent Palacio Hotel, where a private suite awaited us on the first floor, complete with two bathrooms, a dining-room, and every comfort in the world, including waiters to wait on us and a barber to shave us every day after breakfast!

Mr Estrutt was a humorous man. On the next morning he took Damián and me aside, and said: 'When the old hen enters to greet you, do not omit to condole with her on the fate of her poor daughter. The more profuse your condolences, the more it will disturb her conscience because of the kidnapping fiction; and the less carefully will she examine our expense account. Flatter her, too! I should have explained that we occupy this private suite owing to her fear of your making contact with the general public. I myself suggested that, were the short-haired girl's lawyer to hear of your presence here, he would surely try to impress the true story upon you; with the result that you might not wish to testify. It is a situation very useful for us. We shall play on these fears of hers, and enjoy a marvellous life together; and I shall never (in theory) let you stray from my sight.'

Scarcely had he spoken, when the Viscountess herself came through the door, wearing a fur-coat of black sable-skins, a black hat, and black gloves. She also kept a black-edged handkerchief pressed to her black eyes. After welcoming us in fluent Spanish, broken by many sobs, she thanked us from the bottom of a mother's heart for our readiness to rescue her daughter from that criminal Bulgarian heretic -- whom the police, thanks be to the Virgin of Guadelupe! now held in safe custody. Sentiá wept too, and Damián assured her that he also had suffered a like tragic sorrow -- his own daughter having once been decoyed away from home by an English Lord, ruined and cast aside like an old glove. Damián, as you know, is childless; and can lie without a tremor of his wicked face, which resembles carved mahogany. This tale impressed even Mr Estrutt, who patted Damián on the back and said in admiration: 'I wonder, Señor Frau, that your heart ever permitted you to forgive the English aristocracy. It must be ruled by a very pious spirit.'

A comedy, in short! For myself, I told the Viscountess that only so great a distress as

hers could have persuaded me to abandon my island, my wife and my children, and venture to this unknown, this most terrifying city. The Viscountess, still occupied with her handkerchief, replied that only a Spaniard could have spoken so nobly. She was no less devout a Catholic than I, she declared, and God and the Virgin would bring the righteous cause to triumph.

I spoke what came into my mind. 'The Bulgarian heretic looked a veritable ruffian,' I said. 'Let us hope that they hang him high! Imagine any well-nurtured girl trusting herself to the beast! Yet that your poor daughter did so, must surely be a sign of her formidable innocence... But what surprises me in this painful affair is how you, Señora Viscountess, can be her mother -- you do not look half old enough!'

'I married very young,' she explained, drying her eyes again.

When she went away, we opened the windows in order to drive out the strong perfume of violets and sandalwood which she had left behind.

The trial was postponed for a fortnight, because of some legal complication; we should now be absent for another three weeks at least, but none of us cared a tassel. On Mr Estrutt's advice, however, we told Mr Jonés that our business would surely go to ruin in our absence, and that we should need fifty pesetas a day, and one thousand at the close. The Viscountess was delighted to meet our demands, and we were delighted to sign a new contract. Never in my life had I earned so much money for nothing at all!

Mr Estrutt, I should tell you, had that same enormous Rolls-Royce limousine at his disposal whenever we wished to take an outing. He showed us the principal sights of London: the Tower and the Tower Bridge, and the Historical Waxworks, and the Museum of Animals and Birds, and the Docks, and the wonderful Botanical Gardens where one enters a tropical palm-house and nearly dies of the heat! Also the Law Courts, where we would soon give evidence, and many other places; with cines or music-halls nearly every evening.

Mr Estrutt also took us to visit his wives, first explaining to Sentiá that polygamy was customary among the Metropolitan Police force. Two of these wives lived in different parts of London -- each occupying a small red brick house with a flower garden. We Majorcans sat in the sunny garden drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, while Mr Estrutt went upstairs to talk family affairs with his wife. Each wife also had a little boy, with whom we played, throwing a ball about on the lawn. We next met a third wife, who had a big house near Brighton. She seemed very rich, though not nearly so beautiful as the other two. The rich one gave us whisky and cigars, while we Majorcans sat on the lawn and played with a poodle-dog. Mr Estrutt afterwards showed us a new gold cigarette-lighter, his birthday present from this lady. The fourth wife, however, who lived many kilometres to the north of London, was old, ugly and ill-tempered. To judge from her curt greeting to Mr Estrutt, she must have been the

head-wife. Or so Damián said, who had seen similar behaviour in Moorish families while doing his military service at Melilla; the head-wife was invariably jealous and spiteful.

One day Mr Estrutt took me aside and said: 'Toni, my friend, I think we need a little change. I have no complaint to make against the Palacio, but even the best hotel grows wearisome after three weeks. Nor should I wish my old clothes-rack of a Viscountess to think that I have forgotten the serious task that she has imposed on me. Be prepared, therefore, to move at midnight; but, as usual, not a word to Sentiá!'

That night, Sentiá retired at about eleven o'clock and was soon snoring. Then Mr Estrutt telephoned the Viscountess, speaking in tones of great seriousness. Damián and I heard her frightened voice ring high through the apparatus. Mr Estrutt answered: 'Yes, yes, yes, my lady!' several times. He told her, I believe, that though a Spanish-speaking waiter had been bribed by the short-haired girl's lawyer to provide us with the true story, his own prompt appearance fortunately interrupted the conversation as soon as it started. The Viscountess urgently begged Mr Estrutt to remove us to another hotel at once.

We packed our bags and woke Sentiá. Damián said: 'Lad, we are in great danger! The Bulgarian heretic has discovered us. Pack for your life!'

The Rolls-Royce limousine was waiting at the hotel door when we emerged. The Viscountess sat inside, very nervous, and wearing a purple scarf pulled over her face so that she might not be recognized. Mr Estrutt agreed that no time should be lost, and the chauffeur drove off without delay. We purred away at great velocity, but the Viscountess felt certain that we were being pursued. She ordered the chauffeur to dodge down side-streets at random, twisting and turning until we had shaken off the pursuit. The chauffeur obeyed but, however wild his course, she continued to peer through the rear-window and cry: 'There it is! The same car again!' Sentiá sweating with terror, kept crossing himself and asking: 'Do you think they will kill us?'

After an hour of this foolishness we reached open country. The chauffeur backed the Rolls-Royce down a lane, and turned off its lights. We sat in the darkness for another hour, while a stream of cars raced by. When at last the Viscountess was confident that she had cheated our pursuers, we turned back by devious ways, and at two o'clock in the morning found a new private suite awaiting us in the Estrand Palacio Hotel (hardly a kilometre distant from the Regent Palacio) where, for secrecy, we were admitted by the service door. Strange, was it not, that each of the hotels we visited on our journey was named the Palacio? But poor Sentiá had died a hundred deaths that night!

We wrote home once every week to say we were well, that business prospered, and that we trusted all would end normally; adding those graceful concluding phrases which one learns at school. Our families replied in the same manner, though more

religiously. Nothing of importance had happened to the village during our absence, except that a great thunderstorm had torn many branches from my olive grove, and caused the walls of three terraces to collapse.

One day Mr Estrutt asked me: 'My friend, do you still enjoy this life?'

I answered: 'Enormously! Only think! under this new contract I shall soon have gained enough money for the purchase of a fine American car; giving my old Studebaker in partial payment. A just reward for all my hard labours! But, Don Charley, in one thing you have deceived us!'

'How deceived you?' he asked with surprise.

'Well,' I answered, 'you have fed us nobly, you have given us good beds, good drinks, and admirable Havana cigars, you have taken us often to the cine and the music-halls and once, even, to the Opera, besides showing us the famous sights of London... But you have not ministered to other pressing needs of ours! That is, as we say in Majorca, like asking children to view the confectioner's shop, but buying them no caramels. Though we are all good Catholics, none of us happens to be a monk.'

(How fortunate, Don Roberto, that at this particular stage of my story Isabel has gone off, to wash the dishes, I suppose, and feed the hens; otherwise I should have been forced to omit the subsequent incident. In any case, I must keep it short.)

Well, Mr Estrutt understood me before the words were well out of my mouth. 'If there is nothing else, my friend Toni, this can readily be arranged,' said he, 'but I had feared to make any suggestion that might offend your sensibilities. Not being members of the Metropolitan Police force, I thought you might consider yourselves less free in certain respects than I am. Very well, I shall at once telephone to an associate of mine who orders such matters. I promise that you will have no further cause to complain of having been deceived.'

He kept his word. That night after coffee, we heard a soft knocking at the door and in walked three beautiful smiling blondes, all wearing the tightest of silk dresses. Mr Estrutt at once made the necessary introductions, taking care to give us fictitious names. Then he uncorked a prodigiously large bottle of champagne and filled seven glasses. I quickly engaged the attention of the leading young lady; and Damián was not far behind me in securing the second. But Sentiá, who, as usual, had not been informed of the arrangement, sat perplexed and paralysed, goggling like a great moribund fish, when he saw the two young ladies perch on our knees. The third had addressed herself to Mr Estrutt, who explained, however, that the shy gentleman in the corner was her chosen sweetheart; he himself would merely be our interpreter. Although disappointed, she flung herself on Sentiá with a fine pretence of enthusiasm. Sentiá leaped up, knocking over his chair, and retreated to the bathroom; but the

determined girl thrust her foot between the door and the jamb, calling on Mr Estrutt for help. Mr Estrutt pushed the door open, and when she had entered, locked it behind her.

I shall say no more than that Damián and I needed no interpreter... But, Lord, how ashamed of himself Sentiá was afterwards, and how we laughed! Of one thing we could be sure: once safely home again, he would never reveal one word of the proceedings, not even in the confessional!

The Viscountess came to visit us the next morning, with her usual tale of how God and the Virgin would uphold the right, and how greatly she appreciated our chivalrous defence of her Catholic home. Then, noticing suddenly how ill-at-ease Sentiá appeared to be, she laid a black-gloved hand on his shoulder to comfort him. 'My poor fellow,' she cried, 'you must miss your wife deeply!'

At that, Sentiá Dog-beadle wept like a little child. Fearful that he would make some foolish remark, I hastened to say: 'Yes, my lady, Sebastián here misses his Joana terribly, not having expected to be away so many weeks. Nor is he the only one of us who suffers. Don Damián and I are equally sensitive; but, for the sake of your unfortunate daughter, we try to suppress our misery.'

The Viscountess promised that we should never regret our visit, and charitably dabbed Sentiá's eyes with her scented black lace handkerchief. But even that did not console him!

Two days later, the divorce case began. Mr Estrutt sat with us in the Law Court and explained in a whisper who was who, and what was happening. The foxhunter had presented four or five charges of adultery in respect of the short-haired girl, but Mr Jonés and his squadron of lawyers chose from them only those two that seemed easiest to prove: namely, the affair with the Bulgarian artist at Damián's hotel, and an earlier affair in Paris with a rich Escottish manufacturer named Simon Macwilly. Mr Macwilly was married and, shocked to find himself cited as co-respondent in this case, had agreed to pay the short-haired girl's defence, so as to protect himself against the complaints of his wife.

It appears that an official of the British Embassy at Paris had lent Mr Macwilly his apartment during a temporary absence, and that the short-haired girl passed the night there with Mr Macwilly. This Embassy official, however, did not wish to be accused of pandering to his friend's vices, and when Mr Estrutt and Mr Jonés went to make inquiries of him, immediately sent his two servants away into the country, thus preventing them from becoming witnesses. The only relevant evidence could now come from a taxi-driver who had conducted the couple, with their bags, to the door of the apartment; and this would, perhaps, be found insufficient. Yet Mr Estrutt, by studying the calendar, reckoned that the short-haired girl must have spent another

night somewhere in Paris, after vacating the Embassy official's apartment. Therefore, during our long wait at the Gare du Nord, he had persuaded his friends among the French Police to scrutinize the registers of certain hotels. Sure enough, they found a small hotel on the left bank of the Sena where Mr Macwilly had signed the register for himself and Mrs Macwilly on the night in question. The French hotelkeeper and his wife demanded an expense fee which Mr Jonés thought excessive, but which they refused to make less; to give the required evidence, they said, might injure their establishment's name for discretion. The Viscountess, however, would pay almost anything for this testimony, and an agreement was reached.

The charge of having committed adultery with Mr Macwilly was heard first. Now, on the previous afternoon the advocate, a King's Councillor, had explained to us just what questions he would ask, and how we should reply. This drama we rehearsed over and over again with the help of an interpreter; but Sentiá Dog-beadle proved so slow at learning his lesson that the advocate cried impatiently: 'Man, man, I hardly dare call you as a witness; for fear you may ruin our case! Your companions have far greater agility of mind.' We implored Sentiá to gather his wits, since three thousand pesetas hung on our satisfying the Judge; but he seemed like a lost man.

'You will be called next, boys!' Mr Estrutt warned us, as the first witness appeared and took the oath on a large Bible, which he kissed. Sentiá went whiter than a sheet at the warning, and began crossing himself like a madman. I felt uneasy myself, though with little cause, being now word-perfect in my lesson.

To be brief: the French hotelkeepers identified the short-haired girl, who was now wearing black in competition with the Viscountess, and swore to her presence at their establishment that night, in company with the fat, bald man who signed the register as Simon Macwilly. The couple had engaged two bedrooms with a communicating door, the key of which was on the short-haired girl's side.

When summoned to give evidence herself, the short-haired girl admitted having spent a night in that hotel, but strongly denied the charge of adultery. Mr Macwilly, she said, was liable to heart attacks and, as his only reliable friend in Paris, she had wished to be at hand to attend him if he were taken ill during the hours of darkness. Our advocate put it to her that misconduct had certainly taken place between them. She pretended to be outraged and cried: 'Misconduct, why, that is ridiculous! Mr Macwilly is an ancient man of sixty!'

It was a grave error in tactics. At once our advocate addressed the Judge (who was wearing an enormous wig, I did not ask why). Having observed the Judge's angry expression when the short-haired girl implied that, at sixty, a man is ancient and altogether spent, he said very shrewdly: 'My Lord, I shall call no more witnesses; but let my plea rest upon the evidence you have now heard.' For this Judge had not only just celebrated his sixtieth birthday: he had emphasized it by a third marriage!

Mr Estrutt had difficulty in repressing his joy when he heard these words spoken. He clapped Sentiá on the shoulder and whispered in his ear: 'My lad, you are saved!' Then he similarly told Damián and me: 'You also are saved. You will not be required to give evidence after all.'

Damián flew into a temper and asked in a loud voice: 'What of my thousand pesetas? I am being robbed. Why should I not give evidence?'

The Judge glared at Damián in great anger, calling for order in Court.

Mr Estrutt whispered: 'You madman, of course you will be paid!'

At that, Damián subsided, muttering.

We listened to the Judge's summing-up, and his decision that he could not believe the story told by this shameless young woman, and doubted whether anyone else present could believe it either. Then he praised our advocate for his great restraint in not pressing the second charge, and thus perhaps exposing the wretched woman as a common prostitute -- since two proved charges of adultery, she must be aware, would under English Law earn her that disgraceful appellation!

In brief, he granted the divorce, and ordered the short-haired girl to pay all the legal costs of the case. Her advocate did not appeal from this decision, and so the case ended...

But that is not quite the end of my story. When the Judge and all the fashionable spectators had dispersed, there remained in Court only ourselves, the French hotelkeeper and his wife, several lawyers and their clerks, some ushers, the short-haired girl and the Viscountess. The costs of the case having been paid by Mr Macwilly's lawyers, the Viscountess came running up with eyes that shone like stars, and kissed us each in turn on both cheeks, including Mr Estrutt. She cried: 'God and the Virgin have listened to my prayers!'

It then amused me to say: 'Heartiest congratulations, my lady. Yet your poor daughter there seems quite overcome by distress. Perhaps she grieves for the fate of that Bulgarian heretic? Or could it be that she fears you will never forgive her?'

'Indeed, friend!' she cried. 'How stupid I am! I must make my peace with her at once.'

She hurried across to the short-haired girl, followed by Mr Estrutt, who was a most inquisitive man. He heard her say: 'My dear girl, you put up a very good fight, I must admit, and I do not wish to triumph over your misery, having suffered this sort of trouble myself once. What do you propose to do now?'

The short-haired girl smiled back at her faintly and replied: 'How can I tell? I have lost everything! Though Mr Macwilly has paid the costs of the case, his wife would never agree to a divorce, even if I consented to marry him, which I have no intention of doing. Boris is the man I love. Yet I have not a copper to call my own, and neither has Boris.'

The Viscountess kissed her on the forehead. 'My poor innocent,' she said, cooing like a pigeon. 'You should never have chosen an artist as your prospective husband, and really, were you not rather imprudent to tease the old Judge as you did? How much money would put you right with the world again?'

The short-haired girl thought for a moment. Then she said slowly: 'I fear I could hardly manage with less than ten thousand pounds. Boris and I might start some business with that, I suppose.'

'Let me make it twenty thousand!' cried the Viscountess in a burst of commiseration, producing her cheque-book and a gold fountain-pen. She signed the cheque then and there.

We Majorcans, too, profited from her generosity to the extent of still another thousand pesetas each; and six months later, we heard that she had married her foxhunter. On the very same day, but in a different city, the short-haired girl was united with the Bulgarian artist. They bought a pensión near San Sebastián, which is now very luxurious and always crowded; so Mr Estrutt recently informed me on a picture postcard. He wrote that his wife had accompanied him to San Sebastián for a holiday, and that he wished Damián Frau and I could have been present to share their fun. He did not specify which wife; but perhaps he had recently married a fifth, unknown to us, with the money that the Viscountess paid him.

You may wonder, as we all did, why the Viscountess, however fabulously rich, wasted so much money on the case when, by offering the short-haired girl twenty thousand pounds before the trial, she might have persuaded her not to defend the action. Well, the answer, supplied by Mr Estrutt, was that Mr P. P. Jonés advised against this course, which would have been a crime known as 'collusion', and therefore in conflict with his high moral principles. Besides, why should he deprive himself of an excessively profitable legal case? Again, the short-haired girl prided herself on having shown such prudence that no charge could possibly be proved against her; but she had not reckoned with a detective of the experience and perspicacity possessed by my friend, Mr Charley Estrutt!