ROBERT GRAVES

THE FIVE GODFATHERS

DEAR AUNTIE MAY,

About that christening. The baby's father, Don Onofre Tur y Tur, was a lawyer; but that doesn't mean much here in Majorca. Only a few lawyers have offices and clerks and things. The rest take law degrees because their fathers want to make gentlemen of them that way; though there isn't enough law work to go around among them all. And once they become gentlemen they are ashamed to sell melons in the market, or plough olive terraces with a mule-plough; so most of them waste their time in cafés, or make love to foreign lady-tourists who look lonely.

Onofre's father, Don Isidoro, had earned lots and lots by selling icecream outside the boys' colleges in the summer and doughnuts in the winter. Afterwards he bought a dance-house called 'The Blue Parrot' and a souvenir shop called 'Pensées de Majorque', and thus became immensely rich, like Charles Augustus Fortescue in the Cautionary Tales. But Onofre fell in love with Marujita, one of the taxi-girls at 'The Blue Parrot' and secretly married her. (The taxi-girls' job is to dance with the customers and make them buy gallons of expensive drink, and then sit in corners and cuddle them all night.) Don Isidoro was furious when he found out; he banished Onofre to Binijiny with an allowance of a hundred pesetas a day, telling him never to show his face in Palma again.

Of course, everyone at Binijiny knew the story; and the mayor's wife and the secretary's wife were awfully catty to Marujita. But Onofre said she mustn't pay any attention to these low people. He managed to be quite happy himself: he had a motor-bicycle, and an apparatus for spearing fish under water, and a gun for shooting rabbits, and a quail for decoying quail, and a net for netting thrushes. He also used to play poker every day with two American abstract painters and one New Zealand real painter. Marujita may have been a bit lonely, but she loved having a home of her own, after being a taxi-girl, and a hundred pesetas a day seemed like riches.

One day the rumour went round that Marujita was 'embarrassed and soon going to give light', meaning she expected a baby, and presently Onofre asked mother to arrange things with the midwife, a kind woman from Madrid who thinks Binijiny very rustic. So mother did. Marujita couldn't manage the housework towards the end, but the neighbours pretended to be too terribly busy to look in, and we live on the other side of the valley. So, because a Spanish man doesn't help in the house, especially if he's a gentleman like Onofre, Marujita cabled for her younger sister Sita. Don Isidoro had dismissed Sita from 'The Blue Parrot', where she was dancing too, for fear the

men customers found out that she was his relative; he gave her a day's notice and her boat fare, third-class, to Valencia. Wasn't that mean? Well, Sita turned up in Binijiny a month before the baby was expected, and though she seemed scared of mother and us at first, as though we'd certainly be unkind to her, we liked her awfully. The two sisters were always crying over each other and kissing, and saying rosaries; and Sita knitted vests and socks all day.

Anyhow, the baby got safely born, and because it was a boy Onofre simply had to call it after the grandfather; that's a rule here, just as the second son has to be called after the other grandfather. Sita was splendid. She helped the midwife with Marujita, and didn't scream or run in circles like the Binijiny women do; but she made the baby feel at home, and washed it and changed it and sang it lovely Flamenco songs. She also cooked the meals and did all the other housework. Onofre had told her on the first day: 'Sister-in-law, you're a very good girl; you shall be godmother.' When the New Zealand painter was asked to be godfather he answered, 'Look here, I'm a Protestant.' But Onofre said, 'No matter, it's all the same. Priests are priests everywhere.'

Of course, Onofre had announced the birth to the grandparents, first with a respectful telegram, and then with a flowery letter, enclosing an invitation card to the christening. He never expected to get any answer; it was just to keep his allowance safe.

Well, on the day of the christening, Sita put on her Sunday dress and wiped off her make-up and arranged the drinks and cakes and biscuits and tapas for the baptismal party in the sitting-room. Then she wrapped the baby like a mummy in four or five thick shawls and Doña Isabel the midwife accompanied her because she had never been a godmother before. Marujita wasn't well enough to go, so she stayed in bed. Onofre had sent out a whole packet of invitations to the christening, but nobody else came at all except mother and father and me and Richard, and the two American abstract painters and the New Zealand real painter.

The priest was waiting at the church door but the acolytes hadn't arrived. We waited about for nearly an hour talking and joking, while the baby slept. At last the priest said he had other business to do and he must start without the acolytes, and perhaps Onofre would condescend to assist? So he did, to save time. Sita already had the lighted candle in her hand, which every godmother carries, when a large, splendid car drew up in the Plaza, and Don Isidoro and Doña Tecla entered. Onofre turned pale, and the beastly old man said at once: 'I am godfather here and no one else, understand, Onofre? What's more, this immodest woman is not going to be godmother by my side. Unless she goes away I'll cut off your allowance and the child will starve.' Onofre turned paler still, but Sita kept calm. She said to the priest: 'Father, I renounce my rights. Nobody will ever say that I prejudiced the good fortune of this precious infant.' Then she handed the candle to Doña Isabel and went home to tell Marujita. The New Zealand painter also gave up, of course, so the priest started; but as soon as

he turned his back and bowed to the altar Doña Tecla seized the baby from Doña Isabel, and said 'I am godmother here, woman, and no one else, understand?'

But Doña Isabel hung on to the candle, and told the grandparents in a loud whisper that Sita was worth forty basketfuls of canaille like them. Doña Tecla screeched back at her, cackling like an old hen, which made the priest lose his place in the book and start reading prayers for missionaries in foreign parts. He had just found out his mistake and said 'Caramba, what a folly!' when in ran the acolytes without their surplices and laughing fit to burst. The manager of the hotel had sent them to fetch Doña Isabel at once, because two Belgian ladies insisted on sunbathing naked by the fishermen's huts, and if the Guardias caught them he'd be fined two hundred and fifty pesetas for each woman, because they were guests in his hotel, and that is the law. Doña Isabel asked 'Why me?' And they answered 'Because you are accustomed to deal with undressed women.' So Doña Isabel said 'Patience, in a moment!'

The priest took the baby and put the usual salt in its mouth to drive out the Devil, but for some reason or other it didn't cry. Perhaps it liked the taste. So Don Isidoro said 'Put in more, man; the Devil's still inside!' and Doña Tecla reached forward under the shawls and pinched the poor little baby on purpose to make it yell. Onofre noticed that and said in a loud voice 'Mother, you may insult my sister-in-law, and the certificated midwife of this village; these are women's affairs in which I don't meddle. But you will not pinch my son's bottom.'

The priest hurriedly made the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead, and called it Onofre, by mistake for Isidoro. Then Onofre took it from him and gave it to mother, who hurried it out of church before worse could happen. Doña Isabel went with her, still holding the candle.

Naturally Don Isidoro disowned Onofre, and Doña Tecla slapped his face before they stamped out of the church and drove off in their large splendid car. The rest of us trailed along to the baptismal party. Onofre did his best to be cheerful, and said 'Come along, friends, and help me drink up the brandy, because tomorrow we're all beggars.'

Sita was there when we arrived, rocking the baby and looking very pretty and pale without her make-up. Everyone began at once to drink and dance. Our family went away early because Richard had eaten too much cake and drunk half a glass of anís; but presently another guest invited himself in, an officer of the Spanish Blue Division whom the Russians had just let out of prison after fourteen years. He had no friends left and wanted to celebrate his return. Doña Isabel also came. She had frightened the Belgian women into putting on their clothes and then gone back to the church, where she found that Doña Tecla hadn't signed the register as the baby's godmother. So she signed it herself; because, after all, she'd held the candle. And the name would be Onofre, she said, not Isidoro, and that was God's will.

Just before midnight Onofre beat his head with his fist and shouted 'I had almost forgotten; my beast of a father did not sign the book either. Quick, gentlemen, to the Rectory, before the clock strikes twelve and the day becomes extinct!' So the Blue Division prisoner and the two abstract painters, and the real one, all trooped up to the Rectory, very intoxicatedly, and insisted on signing the register as little Onofre's joint godfathers. The priest had to let them, to avoid a scandal.

And guess what? In April they're all going to the Seville Fair at the invitation of Sita's new novio, who's a Chilean millionaire called Don Jacinto; I have met him. Don Jacinto is also lending Onofre and Marujita five million pesetas to start a much more luxurious Palma dance-house than 'The Blue Parrot'. He says 'That will teach Don Isidoro not to insult poor beautiful dancing-girls who are positively saints!' It's going to be called 'Los Cinco Padrinos', which means 'The Five Godfathers', because Don Jacinto has added his name to the list too, for solidarity.

All the same, I can't say I trust him, somehow, and Marujita doesn't either; but we hope for the best.

Lots of love,

Margaret