ROBERT GRAVES

EVIDENCE OF AFFLUENCE

IF I DO not know what degree of mutual confidence exists in the United States between income-tax official and private citizen, this is so because the question does not immediately concern me. I have never in my life been asked to fill out an American income-tax return; as a British non-resident I have all my American earnings painlessly taxed at source, and there the matter ends. In Great Britain, of which by an ingenious legal quirk I am 'deemed to be a resident, though permanently domiciled abroad', my earnings are also taxed at source; but I am at least allowed to employ an income-tax consultant, or rather a pair of them -- Messrs Ribbons & Winder of Aquarium Road, Rhyl -- in my defence. Every year they send me a form to fill in (we British fill in, not out, I don't know why) and discreetly advise me how, by clever albeit legal devices, to get a chunk of my forfeited earnings refunded. This year, however, they took twelve months to conclude their business, because the Bank of England ('Safe as the Bank of England!') admitted that it had lost certain documents relevant to my case -- the Government meanwhile enjoying an interest-free loan of my money. Unfair, surely, to Graves, who left his country only for his country's good?

Nevertheless, Mr Bloodsucker, as we British affectionately call the income-tax collector, is a decent man at heart and, not being himself responsible for the Schedule he is called upon to implement, does his best to mitigate its cruelty. Long ago, while a struggling poet, still domiciled as well as resident in Great Britain, I used to visit Mr Bloodsucker once a year, and actually looked forward to our confabulations. He would beam at me through his horn-rims and say: 'Now, don't forget to claim for the upkeep of your bicycle, young man -- or the heating of your work-room, not to mention library subscriptions. And, I suppose, you take in some learned journals? You can recover a bit from that source. By the bye, are you sure you are not contributing in part to the support of an aged relative? Oh, and look here! This claim for postal and telegraphic expenses is remarkably low. Why not add another couple of pounds for good measure? Doubtless you have left something out.'

You see: in Britain the theory is (or at any rate was in those halcyon 'Twenties) that since the simple blue-jeaned or fray-cuffed citizen, as opposed to the clever-clever natty-suited businessman, seldom, if ever, tries to cheat the government, he should be discouraged from cheating himself. And my Mr Bloodsucker possessed great moral rectitude: if he found an anonymous note on his desk informing on Mr Ananias Doe or Mrs Sapphira Roe as unlawfully concealing taxable income, he always (I was told) would blush and tear it into a thousand fragments. To be brief, the British system of income-tax collection was not then, and is not now, fraught -- have I ever used that word before in my life? Never, but here goes! -- fraught with so much drama as that of

certain Latin countries, where it is tacitly understood that only a fool or a foreigner will disclose more than a bare tenth of his net earnings. And where, also, the authorities have no effective means of discovering what these earnings are, since many a -- I hesitate to say 'every' -- sensible businessman, besides keeping at least two sets of books, running at least two secret bank accounts, and forgetting to record cash payments, has the collusive support of a large family and of the political party or racket to which he belongs. Income-tax sleuths in those countries are therefore forced to rely on what is called 'evidence of affluence', meaning the worldly style in which a man lives, and make a preliminary assessment of ten times the amount they hope to recover. Then battle is joined and victory goes to whichever side has displayed the greater strength of character.

Since 1954 I have become liable to Spanish income-tax and, although an honest English fool, take care to offer the minimum evidence of affluence. Indeed, while I occupied that Palma apartment, I found income-tax a splendid excuse for wearing old clothes, shaving every other day, dining at the humble fonda round the corner rather than at the neon-lighted El Patio or El Cantábrico, and living an obscure, almost anti-social, life. For Señor Chupasangre (Mr Bloodsucker's Majorcan counterpart) lurked behind the cash-desk of every expensive restaurant in Town, and behind the curtains of every night club as well. Moreover, if I had joined the Tennis Club and bought a shiny new car, a motor launch, or even an electric gramophone, Señor Chupasangre would have heard of it the next day through his very efficient intelligence service.

Well, I must stop talking about myself -- there is no more threadbare subject in the world than a writer's finances -- and get on with my story about the Sánchez family, whose apartment adjoined ours. Since Majorcans always talk at the top of their voices (I once dared ask why? and was told: 'lest anyone should think us either ill or frightened') and since the party-walls of Palma apartment-houses are extraordinarily thin, for the sake alike of economy and of neighbourliness, I can describe in faithful detail a domestic scene which I did not actually witness. You think this impossible, and suggest that the french-windows of both apartments must have been wide open all the time? Permit me to sneer! Half an inch of sandstone, thickened to threequarters by twin coats of plaster and whitewash does not provide adequate insulation even against a devoutly mumbled Sánchez rosary.

Don Cristóbal Sánchez, the smart young owner of a newly-established furniture factory, and his plump, brown-eyed, sallow-skinned young wife, Doña Aina, with incongruously beblonded hair and a heavy gold crucifix dangling on her bosom, always greeted us politely on the stairs, however often we might meet in the course of the day; they also borrowed from us with monotonous regularity methylated spirit, matches, bread, electric light bulbs, needles, thread, iodine, aspirins, and our step-ladder, and came calling at unreasonable hours, frequently when we were in bed, to ask whether they might use our telephone for a long-distance call to Barcelona. The

family Sánchez owned a radio-set and a baby, both shockingly audible; but I persuaded Doña Aina not to turn on the radio during my work-hours, except on red-letter feast days (of which the Spanish calendar, to my Protestant way of thinking, contains far too many). The baby I could disregard: when other people's babies are teething, their wails are almost a pleasure to one who has suffered as much as I have from the sorrows of his own large family. Besides, teething babies do not cry in any tune, or use words intelligible enough to interrupt my inner voice and so destroy the rhythm of what I am writing.

Twelve years ago, before the Majorcan real-estate boom began, Aina's father, a scion of the Aragonese nobility who came over here in 1229 with King James the Conqueror and drove out the Moors, was forced to sell the family palace in Palma, and two heavily mortgaged country estates, to satisfy his deceased uncle's creditors. The prices which they realized were pitiful. Aina's father, however, managed to keep a row of fourteenth-century houses in the centre of Palma, which the Town Council subsequently commandeered and pulled down to make room for a new arcade lined with tourist shops. This brutal act did the poor fellow a lot of good, because under the Rent Restriction Law his tenants were paying him at a rate fixed in 1900, when the peseta was still a silver coin and a labourer's daily wage; it is now not worth two U.S. cents. The generous compensation awarded for the sites saved Aina's father from the poorhouse, and he even started speculating in new suburban building schemes; though not with much judgement, as will appear.

Aina, in the circumstances, was lucky to marry as well as she did. Don Cristóbal comes of respectable, if hardly resplendent, lineage; and has looks, industry, optimism and money to recommend him. Not that Aina had no previous offers; we heard from our maid's brother, who works in a fashionable El Terreno bar, that she was engaged for three years to her second cousin, Don Gregorio de la Torre Oscura y Parelada -- whom we never met, but about whom Cristóbal teased Aina pretty often with loud guffaws of laughter. Cristóbal's major failing, it should be emphasized, was his self-satisfaction, complicated by an inability to keep his large, neatly-moustached mouth shut. We had overheard Doña Aina making some pretty caustic remarks on this trait.

Our maid's brother described for us the precise means by which Cristóbal contrived to detach Aina from Don Gregorio. Briefly, it was as follows. Owing to the impossibility of forming new political parties under Franco's rule, Majorcan youth had found an alternative outlet for its intellectual energies: the ultra-religious group known as 'Mau-Mau'. Aina's parents were among its founders. Mau-Mau was ascetically ultra-Catholic, aghast at the present decadence of manners, and run somewhat on the catch-your-buddy principles of Moral Rearmament: with earnest parties called together amid delightful surroundings, and an active policy of infiltration into high society and the learned professions. Ordinary Catholics, such as our maid's brother, were offended by the Mau-Mau's custom of referring to the Deity as Mi Amo, 'my Master'; and the word 'Mau-Mau' stands, he told us, for Mi Amo Unico, Mi Amo

Universal, 'My only Master, my Universal Master'.

Cristóbal Sánchez, it seems, joined the Mau-Mau and volunteered to act as the Group's secret watchman at the Club Náutico, our local yacht club, keeping tabs on not-too-trustworthy young Mau-Mau members there. His motive may only be guessed at, not roundly asserted. All we can say for sure is that though Don Gregorio had also joined the Group as a means of conciliating Aina's parents, his mind was not wholly bent on heavenly things. He used to get drunk at Tito's and Larry's and Mam's, kept disreputable company, preferred American jazz to the Capella Clásica, consorted at the Granja Reus with a Mexican divorcée, and in his cups used to sneer at Mau-Mau by making an irreverent single-letter change in one of the words that form its nickname -- but our maid's brother would not disclose which. Cristóbal reported all this to Aina's father, as was his duty, and Don Gregorio found himself ignominiously expelled from the Group. Moreover, the Mau-Mau's vigilante squad, being authorized to take strong-arm action against such of their fellows as had fallen from Grace, waylaid him outside Tito's one night, pushed him into a taxi, drove him to a lonely building outside the town, and worked on him until dawn, with austere relish.

Aina, having already heard from a friend about the Mexican divorcée, shed no tears for Don Gregorio; he had nearly run through his inheritance, but refused to work and took her complaisance too much for granted -- 'almost as if they had already married and put their honeymoon behind them'. She very sensibly switched to the more eligible Don Cristóbal. Having secured his law-degree, he was now embarking on a prosperous business career, kept an esnipé (or fourteen-foot sailing dinghy) at the Club Náutico, and also enjoyed conveying her on the pillion-seat of his motor-scooter to beauty spots not easily accessible by sea. After an apotheosistical scene in the Club Náutico -- the sordid details of which I must withhold -- Don Gregorio shook the dust of Palma (and very dusty it can be in the sirocco season) from his pointed shoes, and left for Madrid, where he had relatives. 'But listen to me well, you assassin, you pig,' he warned Cristóbal, 'the day will come when I shall return and settle accounts with you!'

And return he did. One hot morning in May, as I sat at my table patiently translating Lucan's Pharsalia, and begging my inner voice to disregard the gramophone across the street playing 'La Paloma', a very loud ring sounded through the wall of Cristóbal and Aina's unusually quiet apartment.

'A beggar,' I thought. 'Beggars always press the bell-push twice as hard as tradesmen or friends. In half-a-minute he'll be pushing at mine...'

I waited, but no beggar appeared. Instead, Doña Aina hurried out to the Sánchez terrace, which is separated from ours by an iron railing. My work-room mirror showed her flattened against the house wall, clasping and unclasping her hands in obvious anxiety. Cristóbal, I guessed, had looked through the grilled spy-hole of the front-door and signalled for her to vanish; so I laid down my pen and listened.

Cristóbal was greeting the visitor in his high tenor voice with every indication of pleasure: 'Why, Gregorio, what a magnificent surprise! I thought you were still in Madrid. Welcome home!'

To my relief, I could distinguish an answering warmth in Gregorio's resonant baritone: 'It is indeed delightful to shake you by the hand, Cristóbal, after so long a time. I have been thinking of you often, remembering the trotting track, and the pigeon-shooting, and our esnipé-races across the harbour, and all the high times we had before... in fact, before...'

In the mirror I watched Doña Aina's face, alert and troubled, as Cristóbal replied: 'Gregorio, I honour your nobility of mind. That you deign to visit my house after the painful threats you uttered at the Club Náutico on that sad day, suggests that you have at last forgiven me for my great felicity. Aina is now not only my wife but has given birth to a precious little boy.'

An anxious moment, but Gregorio, it seemed, took the blow stoically enough. 'Well,' he said, 'your behaviour was a trifle violent, I must confess -- when Aina and I had been courting for three years and made all our wedding preparations; but, of course, now that your theft has been legalized, and crowned with the registered birth of a new citizen, what can I do but felicitate you in a truly Christian spirit? Not another word, man! Besides, Aina is by no means the only girl in Spain. In fact, though I do not mean to insult either of you by invidious comparisons, I have lately formed strong relations with (some might say) an even more intelligent and beautiful girl, of a better family also -- if that were possible. We met at Seville during the Fair. As it happens, she also is a native of this city, and loves me madly.'

Ice having thus been broken, the two former rivals grew still more affectionate.

'My heartiest congratulations, dear friend!'

'Accepted with enthusiasm... The only defect in this new situation is, however, the exaggerated wealth of my fiancée's family. It is a constant trouble to me.'

'Well, Aina's family do not suffer from that defect, at least. On the contrary, they come to me every second Monday, asking for material support.'

'Naturally! Aina was a prize that demanded handsome payment. But your furniture business flourishes, I understand?'

'Like a row of runner-beans: I am pretty well off now, thanks be to God and the tourist boom. Thirty-three new hotels, sixty new residencias, and eighty-four pensiones are building this winter! But, dear Gregorio, if your fiancée is so deeply attached to you,

why should her family's wealth discommode you?'

'Don't pretend to be a fool, friend Cristóbal; clearly, they wish to assure themselves that their daughter will continue to live as she is accustomed to live -- with servants, parties, visits, tennis, plentiful new clothes, an hour at the hairdresser's every day, and so forth. However, she's a match for that old egoist, her father. She threatens to enter a nunnery if she may not marry me. So he has given way, with bad grace. But first I must make a respectable quantity of money in my new job; that is his firm condition.'

'You really have a job, Gregorio? Love indeed works miracles!'

'Oh, not much of a job; hardly, indeed, one to boast about, or even mention in polite society. But it has certain possibilities.'

'Black market, I presume?'

'No, no: my future father-in-law, Don Mariano Colom y Bonapart, is so highly connected that he would never think of damaging his reputation by putting me into any dubious business.'

'No? I suppose that the fortune he made a few years ago, smuggling penicillin from Tangier to our hospitals -- so-called penicillin that required an act of faith to make it work -- has now been decently invested in those fantastic tourist novelties? He must be prospering.'

'Well, of course, nobody ever proved that he smuggled penicillin -- a most charitable business, by the way -- still less that it was ineffective when properly used. I have no doubt but that the doctors themselves adulterated their supplies to make them go further. At any rate, the case against him has been officially dropped... Oh, yes, the novelties you mention are doing well enough, especially among conducted groups of Germans -- best of all, the diverting little dog that cocks its leg. Don Mariano is now considering more austere lines for the English; he has consulted an English judge who is here on holiday.'

'But your job, Gregorio?'

'Forgive me, Cristóbal; I am ashamed. It is with one of the Ministries -- too boring and distasteful to discuss.'

'Yet it carries its traditional perquisites?'

'Of course! Would Don Mariano have arranged it for me otherwise?'

'You seem a trifle gloomy, Gregorio. Will you drink a nipkin of brandy?'

'I don't drink, for the present. Don Mariano would not favour an alcoholic son-in-law. It will have to be an orangeade, I fear.'

'Why not a Coca-Cola? I'll fetch you one from our electric refrigerator.'

'So you own a refrigerator, Cristóbal?'

'Thanks be to the Virgin! We are not among those who cool their butter in a pail let down the well!'

'It is very pleasant to hear of your increased earnings and domestic amelioration, dear Cristóbal. This refreshing Coca-Cola is conclusive evidence of prosperity... Friends tell me that you gave a grand party the other day at the Hotel Nacional?'

'Ah, I wish you had been there! How the champagne corks popped! It was to celebrate the christening of our son.'

'That must have cost you a capital!'

'It did, and Aina's parents contributed not a single peseta of all the five thousand. I can speak freely to you -- Aina is away at the moment, being fitted for an evening dress. By the bye, she still thinks very highly of you.'

To judge from the tightening of Doña Aina's lips, Cristóbal would pay for this remark as soon as Gregorio left. But she continued in hiding, though I could see that the sun's glare was bothering her. I quietly opened my french-windows, went out and, with a polite smile, handed her a pair of sunglasses through the railing. Doña Aina looked startled at this unexpected loan, but gratefully slipped them on.

Gregorio was saying: 'Your wife's opinion flatters me. And you could hardly expect much help from those Mau-Mau simpletons, her parents. They have suffered several financial reverses of late, or so I hear from my lawyers: particularly their need to compensate the former tenants of that new apartment-house. What an unfortunate investment it proved!'

'You are altogether right!' Cristóbal agreed. 'Your prospective father-in-law palmed it off on my actual father-in-law only just in time. I trust Don Mariano will not be sent to jail when the Inquiry publishes its findings on the cause of the building's collapse.'

'Don Mariano in jail!' laughed Gregorio. 'What a ridiculous thought! No, no! The Inquiry has already been closed. You see, the plans were the City Architect's, and a City Architect is above suspicion; and if Don Dionisio Gómez, the building-contractor, economized in cement and used defective beams, how was Don Mariano to know? Don

Dionisio emigrated to Venezuela, I understand, before Aina's father could sue him...'

'Of course, that was a great blow to us. But, by the mercy of God, no one perished in the disaster, except the Ibizan widow without relatives; all the other tenants were away, watching the Corpus Christi procession. As for the automobile in the garage below, which got smashed to pieces when the four apartments with their furniture fell on top of it -- fortunately, that old museum-piece was Don Dionisio's own! In the circumstances, he will hardly dare claim compensation.'

'I agree, my dear Cristóbal. It is, as a matter of fact, about that automobile that I have heard an amusing story. You yourself sold it to Don Dionisio in 1953, as I recall?'

'Exactly; and very glad I was to rid myself of it, at so good a price, too. Not only were the brakes and the steering defective, but someone warned me just in time that, under the new income-tax system, possession of an automobile would be regarded as evidence of affluence. I acted at once...'

'That was smart! But, Cristóbal, what about your other signs of affluence -- the 5000-peseta christening party, that electric refrigerator, this vacuum cleaner, your honoured wife's evening dresses, the English baby-carriage in the hall, the financial help you are known to give your father-in-law? Don't you realize that these must inevitably catch the attention of Señor Chupasangre, the Chief Inspector?'

'Aina and I laugh at him. We pass for poor folk; I am careful to keep no automobile.'

'But Cristóbal, you do!'

'I keep an automobile? What joke is this?'

'I mean the one which got crushed by the deciduous apartments.'

'Idiot, I sold that to Don Dionisio four years ago!'

Gregorio said slowly and clearly: 'Yes, you sold it, but Don Dionisio never registered that change of ownership at the Town Hall; consequently it remains in your name. As I see it, you are liable for income-tax during the whole of 1954, 1955, 1956 and 1957, at a high rate that is almost certain to be discussed between you and Señor Chupasangre.'

'The insect! How did you discover this trick?'

'I happened to consult the register at the Town Hall in the course of my business.'

'But, Gregorio, that is nonsense! The automobile has been Don Dionisio's, not mine,

since 1953!'

'In the eyes of the Law it is still yours, pardon me. And Don Dionisio is not here to tell them otherwise.'

'Pooh!' blustered Cristóbal. 'Who says that I am liable to income-tax? I can show Señor Chupasangre my business accounts -- the more pessimistic official ones, naturally -- to prove that I do not qualify. If he asks me, I shall swear that the refrigerator and the vacuum cleaner were wedding presents, and that the English baby-carriage has been lent us by my sister. As for the party and Aina's evening dresses...'

'Do you take Señor Chupasangre and his colleagues for fools?'

'Why not?'

But Doña Aina had already scented danger. I saw her involuntarily clap a hand over her own mouth, since she could not clap it over her husband's.

Gregorio protested: 'Cristóbal, dear friend, as I have been trying to tell you throughout this pleasant conversation, Aina is no longer anything to me, except your faithful wife and the mother of your little son; yet I owe to myself, and to my Ministry, the performance of a sacred duty. For, granted that I may be the fool you call me, this new job of mine...'

'Gregorio! What are you saying, man?'

'... this new job, however distasteful it may be at times, carries with it (as you suggested) certain traditional perquisites. By your leave, I shall call again officially tomorrow. Meanwhile, my best regards to your distinguished wife! Tell her how enchanted I am that she still remembers my name.'

The door slammed. Gregorio's footsteps could be heard retreating unhurriedly down the stairs.

In the mirror, I saw Doña Aina stoop to pick up a sizeable pot of pink geraniums. Would she drop it, ¡catacrok!, on Gregorio's head as he emerged into the street?

But I should have known that this would not be Doña Aina's way. Instead, she flung wide open the french-window of her own apartment and stood for a moment with one foot advanced, the flower-pot poised low on her right palm, the left hand raised as though in a Falangist salute.

'Animal! Imbecile!' she cried, and let fly at Cristóbal with all her strength.

I stuffed a finger into each ear to drown the crash.