ROBERT GRAVES

THE LOST CHINESE

JAUME GELABERT WAS a heavily-built, ill-kempt, morose Majorcan lad of seventeen. His father had died in 1936 at the siege of Madrid, but on the losing side, and therefore without glory or a dependant's pension; his mother a few years later. He lived by himself in a dilapidated cottage near our village of Muleta, where he cultivated a few olive terraces and a lemon grove. On my way down for a swim from the rocks, three hundred feet below, I would cut through Jaume's land and, if we happened to meet, always offered him an American cigarette. He would then ask if I were taking a bathe, to which I answered either: 'You have divined my motive correctly,' or: 'Yes, doctors say it benefits the health.' Once I casually remarked that my blue jeans had grown too tight and, rather than throw them away, I wondered if they might come in handy for rough work. 'I could perhaps use them,' he answered, fingering the solid denim. To say 'thank you' would have been to accept charity and endanger our relationship; but next day he gave me a basket of cherries, with the excuse that his tree was loaded and that June cherries were not worth marketing. So we became good neighbours.

This was June 1952 -- just before Willie Fedora appeared in Muleta and rented a cottage. The United States Government was paying Willie a modest disability grant, in recognition of 'an anxiety neurosis aggravated by war service in Korea', which supported him nicely until the tide of tourism sent prices rocketing. Brandy then cost a mere twelve pesetas a litre, not thirty-six as now; and brandy was his main expense.

Our small foreign colony, mostly painters, at first accepted Willie. But the tradition here is that instead of drinking, playing bridge, sunbathing, and discussing one another's marital hazards, as at expensive resorts with more easily accessible beaches, foreigners work. We meet only in the evening around a café table, when our mail has arrived. Occasional parties are thrown, and sometimes we hire the village bus for a Sunday bullfight; otherwise we keep ourselves to ourselves. Willie disliked this unsociable way of life. He would come calling on trivial pretexts, after breakfast, just when we were about to start work, and always showed his independence by bringing along a four-litre straw-covered flask of cheap brandy -- which he called 'my samovar' -- slung from his shoulder. To shut the door in Willie's face would have been churlish; to encourage him, self-destructive. Usually, we slipped out by the back door and waited until he had gone off again.

Willie wrote plays; or, rather, he laboured at the same verse play for months and months, talking about it endlessly but making no progress. The hero of Vercingetorix (Willie himself disguised in a toga) was one of Julius Caesar's staff-captains in the

Gallic War. Whenever Willie began his day's work on Vercingetorix he needed to down half a pint of brandy, because of the fearful load of guilt which he carried with him and which formed the theme of his Roman drama. Apparently towards the end of the Korean War, a senior officer had put Willie in charge of five hundred captured Chinese Communists but, when he later marched them to the pen, a bare three hundred were left. The remainder could neither have been murdered, nor committed suicide, nor escaped; yet they had disappeared. 'Disappeared into thin air!' he would repeat tragically, tilting the samovar. Any suggestion that these Chinamen had existed only on paper -- a 3 scrawled in the heat of battle, we pointed out, might easily be read as a 5 -- enraged Willie. 'Goddam it!' he would shout, pounding the table. 'I drew rations and blankets for five hundred. Laugh that off!'

Before long, we shut our doors against Willie. Let him finish his play, we said, rather than talk about it; and none of us felt responsible for his lost Chinese. Yet every night they haunted his dreams, and often he would catch glimpses of them skulking behind trees or barns even by day.

Now, it is an old custom at Muleta to support the Catholic China Missions, and on 'China Day' the school children paint their faces yellow, slant their eyebrows and dress themselves up in the Oriental clothes, of uncertain origin, which the Mother Superior of our Franciscan convent distributes from a long, deep, camphor-scented chest. They drive around in a tilt-cart and collect quite a lot of money; though who ultimately benefits from it remains a mystery, because (as I told the incredulous Mother Superior) no foreign missions have been tolerated in China for some years. Unfortunately, the young Chinese came tapping at Willie's cottage window one afternoon and scared him out of his wits. Accidentally smashing his samovar against a wine barrel as he stumbled into the café, Willie collapsed on the terrace. When he felt better, we recommended a Palma doctor. He groaned at us: 'You jump off a cliff! I'm through with you all. I'm going native.'

Willie did go native. To the surprise of Muleta, he and Jaume Gelabert struck up a friendship. Jaume, already branded as the son of a Red, had earned a reputation for violence at that year's fiesta of San Pedro, Muleta's patron saint. The Mayor's sharp-tongued son who owned a motorcycle and led the atlots, or village bucks, made Jaume his victim. 'Behold the Lord of La Coma!' Paco sneered. Jaume went pale. '"Lord of La Coma" comes badly from you, Paco, you loud-mouthed wencher! Your own uncle robbed my widowed mother of her share in the estate, and the whole village knew it, though they were too cowardly to protest.' Paco then extemporized a copeo, a satiric verse of the sort current on San Pedro's Day:

The Lord of La Coma he lives in disgrace:

He never eats crayfish nor washes his face!

A group of atlots took up the chorus, dancing in a ring around Jaume:

Ho, ho, that's how we go --

He never eats crayfish nor washes his face!

Jaume pulled a stake from the baker's fence and ran amok, felling Paco and a couple of other atlots before he was disarmed by Civil Guards and shoved without ceremony into the village lockup. The Justice of the Peace, Paco's father, bound Jaume over after a stern caution. At Muleta, no decent man ever uses force: all fighting is done either with the tongue or with money.

The two social outcasts became such close friends that it spared us further responsibility for Willie's health. He had decided to learn Majorcan from Jaume. This old language, not unlike Provençal, is in domestic use throughout the island, though discountenanced by the Government. Willie had a natural linguistic gift, and within three months could chatter fluent Majorcan -- the sole foreigner in Muleta (except my children, who went to school there) who ever achieved the feat. Willie gratefully insisted on teaching Jaume how to write plays, having once majored in dramatic composition at a Midwestern university, and meanwhile laid Vercingetorix aside. By the spring, Jaume had finished The Indulgent Mother, a Majorcan comedy based on the life of his great-aunt Catalina. In return he had made Willie eat solid food, such as bean porridge and pa amb oli, and drink more red wine than brandy. Jaume did not question Willie's account of those lost Chinese, but argued that the command of five hundred prisoners must have been too great a burden for so young a soldier as Willie; and that omniscient God had doubtless performed a miracle and cut down their numbers. 'Suppose someone were to give me five hundred sheep!' he said. 'How would I manage them all single-handed? One hundred, yes; two hundred, yes; three hundred, perhaps; five hundred would be excessive.'

'But, if so, why do these yellow devils continue to haunt me?'

'Because they are heathen and blaspheme God! Pay no attention! And if they ever plague you, eat rather than drink!'

In 1953, Muleta suffered a financial crisis. Foul weather ruined the olive prospects, blighted the fruit blossom, and sent numerous terraces rumbling down. Moreover, Dom Enrique, our parish priest, had ordered a new altar and rebuilt the chancel at extravagant cost; while neglecting the church roof, part of which fell in after a stormy night. One consequence was that the village could not afford to hire the Palma Repertory Troupe for their usual San Pedro's Day performance. But Dom Enrique heard about Jaume's play, read it, and promised to raise a cast from the Acción Católica girls and their novios: if Willie would stage-manage the show, and Jaume devote its takings to the Roof Fund.

This plan naturally met with a good deal of opposition among the village elders: Willie, now nicknamed 'Don Coñac', and Jaume the violent Red, seemed most unsuitable playwrights. Dom Enrique, however, had felt a certain sympathy for Jaume's use of the stake, and also noted the happy improvement in Willie's health under Jaume's care. He preached a strong sermon against the self-righteous and the uncharitable and, having got his way, cleverly cast Paco as the juvenile lead. Nevertheless, to avoid any possible scandal, he laid it down that rehearsals must follow strict rules of propriety: the girls' mothers should either attend or send proxies. He himself would always be present.

The Indulgent Mother, which combined the ridiculous with the pathetic, in a style exploited by Menander, Terence, Plautus and other ancient masters, was an unqualified success. Although no effort of Willie's or Dom Enrique's, as joint stage-managers, could keep the cast from turning their backs on the audience, gagging, mumbling, hamming, missing their cues, and giggling helplessly at dramatic moments, the Roof Fund benefited by fifteen hundred pesetas; and a raffle for a German wrist-watch (left on the beach two years previously) brought in another eight hundred. The Baleares printed a paragraph on the remarkable young playwright, Don Jaime Gelabert, below the heading: 'Solemn Parochial Mass at Muleta; Grandiose Popular Events.' Paco and his novia, the heroine, also secured a niche in the news.

Meanwhile Willie, whom the Baleares unfortunately named 'Don Guillermo Coñac, the transatlantic theatrician,' had celebrated Jaume's debut a little too well, singing Negro spirituals in the village streets until long after midnight. When at last he fell insensible, Paco and the other atlots pulled off his clothes and laid him naked on a vault in the churchyard, with the samovar under his head. He was there discovered by a troop of black-veiled old beatas, or religious women, on the way to early Mass -- an appalling scandal! Jaume had gone straight home, after the final curtain, to escape congratulations. In the morning, however, he pieced the story together from village gossip, caught Paco outside the café and threw him into the Torrent, where he broke an ankle. This time, Jaume would have been tried in the capital for attempted homicide, had Willie not intervened. 'Punish Jaume,' he warned the Mayor, 'and you will force me to sue your son. I have witnesses who can testify to his shameless behaviour, and the United States Government is behind me.'

Jaume and I remained on good terms. I told him: 'Jaume, in my view you acted correctly. No true friend could have done less under such provocation.'

Winter and spring went swiftly by, and another San Pedro's Day was on us. Willie visited Dom Enrique at the Rectory and offered to stage-manage a new play of Jaume's: The Difficult Husband. He did not arrive drunk but (as they say in Ireland) 'having drink taken', and when he announced that this comedy had merits which would one day make it world famous, Dom Enrique could hardly be blamed for excusing himself. A deceased widow, the Lady of La Coma, had just left the Church a small

fortune, on the strength of which his parishioners trusted him to re-engage the Palma Repertory Troupe as in previous years.

Bad news further aggravated this setback. Jaume, due for the draft, had counted on being sent to an anti-aircraft battery, three miles away, from where he could get frequent leave; in fact, the Battery commander had promised to arrange the matter. But something went wrong -- Paco's father may have spoken a word in the Captain's ear -- and Jaume was ordered to Spanish Morocco.

Willie, with streaming eyes, promised to irrigate the lemon grove, plough around the olive trees, plant the beans when the weather broke, and wait patiently for Jaume's return. But two hundred phantom Chinese took advantage of his loneliness to prowl among the trees and tap at the kitchen window. Willie's samovar filled and emptied, filled and emptied four or five times a week; he neglected the lemon grove, seldom bothered with meals, and locked the cottage door against callers: at all costs he must finish an English translation of The Difficult Husband. I met him one morning in the postman's house, where he was mailing a package to the States. He looked so thin and lost that, on meeting the Mayor, I suggested he should take some action. 'But what would you have me do?' cried the Mayor. 'He is committing no crime. If he is ill, let him consult the Doctor!' That afternoon, Willie saw Toni Coll digging a refuse pit below the cottage: convinced that this was to be his own grave, he sought sanctuary in the church organ-loft, drank himself silly, and was not discovered for twenty-four hours. Dom Enrique and his mother carried him to the Rectory, where they nursed him until the American Embassy could arrange his transfer to the States. At New York, a veterans' reception committee met Willie, and he was sent to a Pittsburgh army hospital. On New Year's Day, 1955, he broke his neck falling out of a window, apparently pursued by Chinese oppressors. I felt bad about him.

If Muleta expected to hear no more about Jaume's comedy, Muleta erred. Just before the rockets soared up in honour of San Pedro two years later, Mercurio the postman (who also acts as our telegraphist) tugged at my sleeve. 'Don Roberto,' he said, 'I have a telegram here from New York for a certain William Schenectady. Do you know the individual? It came here three days ago, and none of your friends recognize the name. Could he be some transitory tourist?'

'No: this is for our unfortunate Don Coñac,' I told him. In Spain only the middle name counts, being the patronymic, and Willie's passport had read 'William Schenectady Fedora.'

'A sad story,' sighed Mercurio. 'How can telegrams benefit the dead, who are unable even to sign a receipt? And there is no means of forwarding the message...'

'I'll sign, since that's what worries you,' I said. 'Probably it contains birthday greetings from some old aunt, who has remained ignorant of his fate. If so, I'll tear it up.'

After the fun was over, I remembered the cable. It ran:

WILLIAM SCHENECTADY FEDORA: MULETA: MAJORCA: SPAIN MAGNIFICENT BRAVO BRAVO BRAVO STOP DIFICTUL HUSBAN SENSACIONAL FUST THE PLOY NEEDED ON BIRDWAY WIT NEUMANN DIRECION HARPVICKE IN THE LED STOP AIRMALLING CONTRACT STOP PROPOSE FOLOV UP WIT PRESONAL VISIT SO ONEST KINDLY REPLAY STOP REGARDS

EVERETT SAMSTAG EMPIRE STAT ENTERPRIXES NEW YORK

I frowned. My neighbour Len Simkin was always talking about Sammy Samstag, the Broadway impresario, and had even promised Willie to interest him in Vercingetorix; but somehow this cable did not seem like a joke. Who would waste ten dollars on kidding a dead man? Yet, if it wasn't a joke, why did Samstag send no prepaid reply coupon?

I tackled Mercurio, who admitted that such a form had, as it happened, come with the cable for Don Coñac; adding: 'But since Don Coñac is no more, perhaps some other foreigner may care to dispatch a telegram with its help.' So I cabled Samstag:

INTERESTED IN YOUR INTEREST STOP WILL ADVISE AUTHOR OF DIFFICULT HUSBAND CURRENTLY ON SAFARI TO GRANT OPTION IF FINANCIALLY COMMENSURATE WITH YOUR TRIPLE BRAVO STOP REGARDS

To explain that Willie was no longer available, and that the job of protecting Jaume fell to me, would have exceeded the prepaid allowance, so I signed 'Fedora'. 'Currently on safari' was cablese for 'at present trailing his rifle through North Africa, but will be back next week', and sounded far more opulent.

At the café, I met Len, a young-old fabricator of abstract mobiles. He had once briefly taken a very small part in an off-Broadway play, but was Muleta's sole contact with the Great White Way. 'A pity poor Willie's dead,' I said, when Len had finished his scathing comments on last night's performance by the Palma Repertory Troupe. 'He might have got you a speaking part in this new Broadway play. Willie always admired your delivery.'

'I don't get the joke,' Len grumbled. 'That wack gave me the creeps! One of those "creative artists" who create chaos. A few drinks from the old samovar, and I could see those goddamned Chinese! I bet they infiltrated into his coffin, and pulled the lid down after them.'

'If you take my front-page news like that, Len,' I told him, 'you'll not be offered even a walk-on!'

'Still, I don't get it...'

'Well, you will -- as soon as Sammy Samstag turns up here toting an enormous box of Havanas, and you're left in a corner smoking your foul Peninsulares.'

'Neumann directing? Hardwicke in the lead as Vercingetorix?'

'No, the title isn't Vercingetorix. It's The Difficult Husband. Otherwise you've guessed right.'

'You're very fonny, don't you, Mister?' Len stalked away, then wheeled angrily, and came out with a splendid curtain line: 'In my opinion, jokes about dead Americans stink!'

When Jaume stepped from the Palma-Muleta bus, looking bigger and more morose than ever, no one rolled out the red carpet. That evening I found him alone in his cottage, cooking a bean and blood-pudding stew over the wood fire; and accepted an invitation to share it. Jaume asked for details on Willie's death, and wept to hear about the open window.

'He was a brother to me,' he choked. 'So magnanimous, so thoughtful! And since he could not manage this little property by himself, I had asked Toni Coll to tend the trees, and go half-shares in the lemons and oil. Toni has just paid me two thousand pesetas. We are not friends, but he would have lost face with the village by neglecting my land while I was doing my service. He even repaired the terrace that fell before my departure.'

I had brought along a bottle of red Binisalem wine, to celebrate Samstag's cable.

'Poor Willie, how wildly enthusiastic he would have been,' Jaume sighed, when I read it to him. 'And how he would have drunk and sung! This comes too late. Willie always wanted me to enjoy the success that his frailties prevented him from attaining.'

'May he rest in peace!'

'I had no great theatrical ambition,' Jaume continued, after a pause. 'Willie forced me to write first The Indulgent Mother, and then The Difficult Husband.'

'Did they take you long?'

'The Indulgent Mother, yes. Over the second I did not need to rack my brains. It was a gift.'

'Yet Señor Samstag, a most important person, finds the result magnificent. That is certainly a triumph. You have a copy of the play?'

'Only in Majorcan.'

'Do you realize, Jaume, what will happen if The Difficult Husband pleases Broadway?'

'Might they pay me?'

'Pay you, man? Of course! With perhaps five per cent of the gross takings, which might mean fifty thousand dollars a week. Say it ran for a couple of years, you'd amass... let me work it out -- well, some two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.'

'That means nothing to me. What part of a peseta is a dollar?'

'Listen: if things go well, you may earn twelve million pesetas... And even if the play proved a dead failure, you'd get two hundred thousand, merely by selling Señor Samstag the right to stage it!'

'Your talk of millions confuses me. I would have accepted five hundred pesetas for the job.'

'But you would equally accept twelve million?'

'Are these people mad?'

'No, they are clever businessmen.'

'You make fun of me, Don Roberto!'

'I do not.'

'Then, at least, you exaggerate? What I want to know is whether this telegram will help me to buy a donkey and retile my roof.'

'I can promise you an avalanche of donkeys!'

Two days later the contract came, addressed to Willie. Its thirty pages covered all possible contingencies of mutual and reciprocal fraud on the part of author and producer, as foreseen by the vigilant Dramatists Guild of the Authors League of America; and dealt with such rich minor topics as Second Class Touring Rights, Tabloid Versions, Concert Tour Versions, Foreign Language Performances, and the sale of dolls or other toys based on characters in the play...

I was leafing through the document on the café terrace that afternoon, when Len entered. 'There's a man at my place,' he gasped excitedly, 'name of Bill Truscott, who says he's Willie's agent! Bill and I were at Columbia together. Nice guy. He seems sort of puzzled to find no Willie... See here: could it be that you weren't kidding me about his Broadway show the other day?'

'I never kid. Got no sense of humour.'

'Is that so? Well, anyhow, I told Bill you might be able to help him. Come along!'

Bill Truscott, a gaunt Bostonian, welcomed us effusively. 'I sent The Difficult Husband to Samstag's office ten days ago,' he said, 'and a spy I keep there sent word that the old s.o.b. was jumping my claim. Doesn't like agents, favours the direct approach. But let's get this straight: is Fedora really dead? My spy swears that he cabled Samstag from this place.'

'Correct. He's dead. Yet he promised to meet Samstag and discuss this document' -- I tapped the contract -- 'which maybe you'd better have a look at. Tell me, do you speak Spanish? Jaume Gelabert has no English or French.'

'Gelabert? Who's Gelabert? Never heard of him.'

'Author of The Difficult Husband. Fedora's only the translator.'

'Only the translator -- are you sure? How extremely tense! That changes everything. I took it for Fedora's own work... What sort of a guy is this Gelabert? Any previous stage successes?'

'He made a hit with The Indulgent Mother,' I said, kicking Len under the table. 'He's a simple soul -- you might call him a recluse.'

'Know of any arrangement between Fedora and Gelabert as to the translator's fee?'

'I can't think that they made one. Fedora drank, and did the job by way of a favour to Gelabert, who had been caring for him... Are you worried about your commission?'

'Am I worried? However, Gelabert will need an agent, and, after all, Fedora sent the play to my office. Len will vouch for me, won't you, Len?'

'I'm sure he will, Mr Truscott,' I said, 'and you'll vouch for him. Len needs some vouching for.'

'I'm on my knees, Don Roberto,' Len whined, grovelling gracefully.

I let him grovel awhile, and asked Truscott: 'But didn't Fedora acknowledge Gelabert's authorship in a covering letter?'

'He did, I remember, mention a local genius who had defended him against some Chinese and was now setting off to fight the Moors, while he himself guarded the lemon grove -- and would I please try enclosed play on Samstag; but that's as far as it went, except for some passages in a crazy foreign language, full of x's and y's.'

'I gather the letter has disappeared?'

Truscott nodded gloomily.

'In fact, you can't prove yourself to be Fedora's agent, let alone Gelabert's?'

No reply. I pocketed the contract and rolled myself a cigarette, taking an unnecessarily long time about it. At last I said: 'Maybe Gelabert would appoint you his agent; but he's a difficult man to handle. Better leave all the talking to me.'

'That's very nice of you... I surely appreciate it. I suppose you've seen a copy of The Difficult Husband?'

'Not yet.'

'Which makes two of us! You see: after reading Fedora's crazy letter, I tossed the typescript, unexamined, to my secretary Ethel May, who, for all that she was the dumbest operator on Thirty-eighth Street, had beautiful legs and neat habits. Hated to throw away anything, though -- even gift appeals. She filed it under "Try Mr Samstag." Ethel May got married and quit. Then, one day, I came down with the grippe, and that same evening Sam wanted a script in a hurry -- some piece by a well-known author of mine. I called Ethel May's replacement from my sickbed and croaked: "Send off the Samstag script at once! Special messenger." The poor scared chick didn't want to confess that she'd no notion what the hell I was talking about. She chirped: "Certainly, Chief!" and went away to search the files. As a matter of fact, said script was still in my brief case -- grippe plays hell with a guy's memory. Scratching around, the chick comes across The Difficult Husband, and sends Sam that. A stroke of genius! -- I must give her a raise. But Sam is short on ethics. He bypassed my office and cabled the defunct Fedora, hoping he'd sign along the dotted line and remember too late that he should have got my expert advice on what's bound to be the trickiest of contracts. If ever there was a thieving dog!'

'Yes,' I said, 'if Fedora had been the author, and if you'd been his agent, you'd have a right to complain. But, let's face it, you've no standing at all. So calm down! I suggest we call on Gelabert. He can probably supply supper.'

Night had fallen windily, after a day of unseasonable showers; and the path to Jaume's cottage is no easy one at the best of times. The ground was clayey and full of puddles; water cascaded from the trees. I lent Truscott a flashlight; but twice he tripped over an olive root and fell. He reached the cottage (kitchen, stable, well, single bedroom) in poor shape. I gave Jaume a brief outline of the situation, and we were soon sharing his pa amb oli: which means slices of bread dunked in unrefined olive oil, rubbed with a half tomato and sprinkled with salt. Raw onion, bitter olives, and a glass of red wine greatly improved the dish. Pa amb oli was something of a test for Truscott, but he passed it all right, apart from letting oil drip on his muddied trousers.

He asked me to compliment Jaume on 'this snug little shack. Say that I envy him. Say that we city folk often forget what real dyed-in-the-wool natural life can be!' Then he talked business. 'Please tell our host that he's been sent no more than a basic contract. I'm surprised at the size of the advance, though: three thousand on signature, and two thousand more on the first night! Sam must think he's on to a good thing. Nevertheless, my long experience as a dramatic agent tells me that we can easily improve these terms, besides demanding a number of special arrangements. Fedora is dead; or we could fiction him into the contract as the author. Unlike Gelabert, he was a non-resident American citizen, and therefore non-liable to any tax at all on the property. Maybe we can still fiction it that way...'

'What is he saying?' asked Jaume.

'He wants to act as your agent in dealing with Señor Samstag, whom he doesn't trust. The rest of his speech is of no interest.'

'Why should I trust this gentleman more than he trusts the other?'

'Because Willie chose Señor Truscott as his agent, and Samstag got the play from him.'

Jaume solemnly held out his hand to Truscott.

'You were Willie's friend?' he asked. I translated.

'He was a very valued client of mine.' But when Truscott produced an agency agreement from his brief case, I gave Jaume a warning glance.

Jaume nodded. 'I sign only what I can read and understand,' he said. 'My poor mother lost her share of the La Coma inheritance by trusting a lawyer who threw long words at her. Let us find a reliable notary public in the capital.'

Truscott protested: 'I'm not representing Gelabert until I'm sure of my commission.'

'Quit that!' I said sharply. 'You're dealing with a peasant who can't be either bullied or

coaxed.'

A cable came from Samstag: he was arriving by Swissair next day. Mercurio asked Len, who happened to be in the postman's house, why so many prodigal telegrams were flying to and fro. Len answered: 'They mean immense wealth for young Gelabert. His comedy, though rejected by Dom Enrique two years ago, is to be staged in New York.'

'That moral standards are higher here than in New York does not surprise me,' Mercurio observed. 'Yet dollars are dollars, and Jaume can now laugh at us all, whatever the demerits of his play.'

Len brought the cable to my house, where he embarrassed me by paying an old debt of two hundred pesetas (which I had forgotten), in the hope that I might deal him into the Broadway game. 'I don't need much... just an itty-bitty part,' he pleaded.

Why dash his hopes? Pocketing the two hundred pesetas, I said that his friend Bill would surely recommend him to Samstag.

News of Jaume's good fortune ran through the village two or three times, each time gaining in extravagance. The final version made Samstag a millionaire second cousin from Venezuela who, reading the Baleares account of The Indulgent Mother, had appointed him his heir. I asked Jaume to say no more than that he was considering the American offer: it might yet prove unacceptable.

Truscott and I met Samstag's plane at Palma airport. Spying Truscott among the crowd, he darted forward with scant respect for the Civil Guard who was shepherding the new arrivals through Customs, and grabbed his hand. 'By all that's holy, Bill,' he cried, 'I'm glad to see you. This solves our great mystery! So that anonymous package emanated from you, did it?'

'Yes, it did, Sammy,' said Truscott, 'and, like all packages I've ever sent you, it was marked all over with my office stamp.'

'Why, yes, my secretary did guess it might be yours, and called you at once -- but you were sick, and I couldn't get confirm --'

The Civil Guard then unslung his rifle and used the barrel-end to prod Samstag, a small, dark roly-poly of a man, back into line. Finally he emerged with his baggage and guessed that I was Mr William Fedora. When Truscott undeceived him, he grew noticeably colder towards me; but the two were soon as thick as thieves, and no less suspicious of each other. Climbing into our taxi, Samstag lighted a large cigar, and turned away from me; so I asserted myself as a principal in the business. 'I can use one of those,' I said, stretching out a finger and thumb.

Startled, Samstag offered me his case. 'Take a couple,' he begged.

I took five, smelt and pinched them all, rejected three. 'Don't mind me, boys!' I said through a fragrant cloud of smoke. 'You haggle about the special arrangements. I'll manage the rest.'

At this reminder of our compact, Truscott hastily enlarged on the strong hold I had on Señor Gelabert, assuring Samstag that without me he would get nowhere. Samstag gave him a noncommittal 'Oh yes?' and then back to his discussion of out-of-town performances prior to a possible London première. Just before we sighted the village round the bend of our road, I tapped Samstag on the arm: 'Look here, Sam, what told you that The Difficult Husband was God's gift to Broadway?'

'Not what, but who?' he answered cheerfully. 'It was Sharon, of course! Sharon always knows. She said: "Pappy, believe me, this is going to be the hottest ticket in town." So I cabled Fedora, and flew. She's only fourteen, my Sharon, and still studying at Saint Teresa's. You should see her grades: lousy isn't the word! And yet she always knows... Takes a script, sniffs it, reads three lines here, four there; spends a couple of minutes on Act Two; skips to the final curtain... Then' -- Samstag lowered his voice and ended in a grave whisper -- 'then she goddamwell pronounces!'

'So you haven't read the script either? That makes three of us. What about having a look at it after supper? Or, to save time and eyesight, we might have Len Simkin -- another Thespian chum of yours, Sam -- read it aloud to us?'

'If you insist. Perhaps Señor Gelabert has a copy. I haven't brought one myself -- came here for business, not to hear a dramatic reading.'

In fact, nobody had a script. But that did not prevent Samstag and Truscott from arguing Special Arrangements together at the village inn all the rest of the day, until everything seemed sewed up. The meeting with Señor Gelabert, they congratulated themselves, would be a mere formality.

Hair slicked, shoes well brushed, Jaume arrived at our rendezvous in his Sunday best, and showed impressive sang-froid. Early cares, ill luck, and the tough barrack life at Melilla had made a man of him. After profuse congratulations, which Jaume shrugged off, Samstag sent for the village taxi and invited us both to dinner in Palma. Len, to his disappointment, was left behind. We chose Aquí Estamos, Majorca's most select restaurant, where Samstag kept slapping Jaume's shoulders and crying '¡Amigo!', varied with '¡Magnífico!', and asking me to translate Sharon's appreciative comments on the play, one of which was: 'The name part couldn't be more like you, Pappy!' (¡El papel titular corresponde precisamente contigo, Papaíto!') At this Jaume, now full of crayfish, asparagus, roast turkey, wild strawberries and champagne, smiled for the

first time that evening. We wound up around 3 a.m. drinking more and worse champagne to the sound of flamenco in a gipsy night club. Truscott and Samstag, who were flying back together at 8 a.m., had let themselves go properly; their goodbyes could not have been warmer.

However, Jaume had stood by his guns: declining to commit himself until he could read the amended contract and get it approved by a reliable notary. Nor would he anticipate his good fortune by the purchase of so much as a pig, let alone an ass.

When Truscott finally sent me the document, Len offered his expert advice gratis -- he knew all about Broadway contracts, and could tell at a glance whether anything were wrong. 'Maybe Bill and Sammy did a crooked deal together,' he suggested. 'Of course, he's an old friend of mine, but in show business...'

Shaking Len off, I took the contract to Jaume's cottage. 'A letter from Señor Samstag is attached,' I told him. 'Shall I read it first, or shall I first translate this document?'

'The document first, if you please.'

I read: 'Whereas the Author, a member of the Dramatists Guild of the Authors League of America Inc. (hereinafter called the "Guild") has been preparing the book of a certain play or other literary property now entitled The Difficult Husband. And whereas the Producer etc., etc., desires to produce the said play in the United States and Canada, etc., etc... Now therefore, in consideration of the premises and the mutual promises and covenants herein contained and other good and valuable considerations, it is agreed:

'FIRST: The Author hereby a) warrants that he is the author of the said play and has a right to enter into this agreement --'

Jaume interrupted: 'But I am not a member of this Guild!'

'Never mind, you can apply for membership.'

'And if they won't accept a foreigner?'

'Don't worry! Señor Truscott will fix you up. Let's get on: "The Author b) agrees that on compliance with this contract --"'

'Maybe, Don Roberto, you should translate the letter first.'

'Very well, then... It says here that Señor Samstag greatly enjoyed his visit to Majorca, and is delighted that we all see eye to eye, and that it only remains for you to sign the attached instrument, your agent, Señor Truscott, having agreed with him on the

terms.

'Then, wait a bit... then the tone of the letter changes. While still considering the play to be superb, Señor Samstag suggests certain radical changes in the treatment. It is by no means good theatre yet, he writes. The Difficult Husband, for instance, remains too static a character; his actions are predictable, and so is the eventual victory of his wife. In a sophisticated play, the leading man's character must develop; and this development must be substantiated by brisk dialogue. Here, the Husband should grow gradually less difficult, more human, as the action advances. Also, he should be granted an occasional small victory over his wife...'

Jaume's eyes were smouldering. 'He says that, does he, the imbecile?'

I tried to smooth him down. 'After all, show-business people are apt to understand the market. They study it year in, year out.'

'Read on!'

'He insists that the scene where the couple quarrel about household accounts must be changed. Let the husband, instead, teach his wife how to manage something else, something visible -- say, a television set or a garbage disposer. "In the theatre we want to see things," he writes. "Then, when the wife wins his permission to take a long cruise and pretends that she has gone, but stays ashore to save household money -- this is most unconvincing! Let her go for her health, really go, and fall in love with a handsome adventurer on the ship! Her husband can get comically jealous at the beginning of the Third Act --"'

'Stop!' Jaume roared. 'Why does this fellow first telegraph that my play is magnificent, and now want to change it altogether, though offering me the same immense sum of money?'

'Patience, Jaume! He cabled "Bravo!" because he hadn't read your play. Now he writes the reverse because he still hasn't read it. Knowing you to be inexperienced, he naturally entrusts The Difficult Husband to his assistants, who are expert play-doctors. The suggestions you so dislike emanate from these play-doctors. If you will not rewrite the play, that task necessarily falls to them, or to someone working under their direction.'

'Then it will no longer be mine?'

'Oh yes, it will be! You're protected by the contract. Your name will flash out in red, green, and yellow neon lights from the front of the theatre, and you will get the big money. Play-doctors get no more than their salaries. They can't write plays; they can only rewrite them.'

'Willie would never have agreed!'

'Are you sure?'

'Willie would not have changed a single word! He had a stubborn nature.'

'Well, I admit that this letter sounds nonsense -- not that I've read The Difficult Husband... But you are faced by a clear choice. Either fight for every word of your play, and be lucky if you keep one in ten; or else refuse to sign the contract.'

'Enough, enough, Don Roberto! My mind is made up. The devil take this contract! If Señor Samstag's assistants care to rewrite my play, very good! Let them spin a coin to decide who shall be the author. I will sell The Difficult Husband outright, making no conditions whatsoever, except that Señor Samstag must pay me a sum down, in pesetas, and -- pff! -- that's it!... What might he pay?'

I told him: 'Fortunately it's not a case of buying your name: he's only buying your story. Since the Señorita Samstag believes in it so strongly, he might be good for ten thousand dollars -- around half a million pesetas. That's nothing for a producer like Samstag.'

Jaume said slowly: 'Not having yet signed my agreement with Señor Truscott, I am still my own master. Let us telegraph Señor Samstag that, if he flies here again, a new one-page contract will be awaiting him at the notary's.'

'And Señor Truscott?'

'For three hundred thousand I can become the Lord of La Coma, which is in the market now; so, since Señor Truscott envies me this cottage, he may have it and welcome. I will add a terrace or two, to round off the property. As for the lemon grove and olives, which are worth far more, they are yours, Don Roberto.'

'Many thanks, Jaume; but I want nothing but your friendship. We should dispatch your message at once.'

Three days later Samstag flew in, delighted not to find Bill Truscott about. 'Agents create unnecessary complications between friends, don't you think?' he asked us. A one-page contract in legal Spanish was easily agreed upon, and Samstag had arranged for the necessary pesetas. They went straight into an account which Jaume opened at the Bank of Spain.

As we drove home from Palma, Jaume said the last word on the subject: 'What can be done with a man who complains that a play is dramatically bad before he even reads

it? The Difficult Husband, as many Majorcans know, though perhaps few Americans, enjoyed a remarkable success at the Cine Moderno some years ago. My poor mother took me there. The film ran for three whole weeks. Only an imbecile would wish to change its plot. It was called -- what was it called? -- ah, now I remember: "La Vida con Papá". How does one say that in English, Don Roberto?'