ROBERT GRAVES

A TOAST TO AVA GARDNER

IN SPAIN, a married woman keeps her maiden name, but tacks on her husband's after a de. Thus, on marrying Wifredo Las Rocas, our Majorcan friend Rosa, born an Espinosa, became Rosa Espinosa de Las Rocas -- a very happy combination. It means 'Lady Thorny Rose from the Rocks'. Rosa was much luckier than her maternal cousin Dolores Fuertes, who thoughtlessly married a lawyer named Tomás Barriga, and is now Dolores Fuertes de Barriga, or 'Violent Pains of the Stomach'. My wife and I first met Rosa at a Palma store. We were complaining bitterly, in English, of an age-old Majorcan superstition that the sun shines brightly throughout the year, and that consequently no trouble about drying clothes can ever imaginably arise. Majorcans provide no airing-closets in even their grandest houses, and scorn that old-fashioned English contrivance, the nursery towel-horse, which allows harassed mothers to keep abreast of their children's washing during long rainy spells. We had by now visited every furniture shop in Palma, searching for one, but been greeted only by shrugs and smiles.

Then Rosa piped up at my elbow, in beautiful clear English, with hardly a trace of a Spanish accent: 'Excuse me! I could not help overhearing your conversation. My husband Wifredo Las Rocas will, I am sure, be delighted to make you a towel-horse. He knows all about towel-horses. My dear old English nurse, the late Nanny Parker, brought a towel-horse with her when she came to us from the British Embassy at Madrid; but I'm afraid my elder sister in Saragossa has it now. If you care to come along with me...'

Wifredo and his partner, Aníbal Tulipán, worked in a large furniture factory on the outskirts of Palma. Though originally they owned fifty per cent each of the factory shares, the building got badly damaged by fire; so the Central Bank rebuilt and restocked it for them at the price of a controlling interest. Wifredo and Aníbal were, in fact, reduced to mere employees of the Bank, subject to dismissal if they failed to show a profit -- an uncomfortable position in times as difficult as those, for men so proud.

Aníbal looked after supplies and sales; Wifredo, after design, production and personnel. They had been brothers-in-law, but the death of Wifredo's sister from an overdose of sleeping-pills, taken in protest against Aníbal's too serious liaison with a dentist's receptionist, snapped the family tie; and if ever two men were temperamentally more unsuited to become partners, these were they. Aníbal, who loved all things German, especially metaphysics, music and sauerkraut, closely resembled Goering in appearance, and had a truly Wagnerian ill-temper; often, when he felt cross, he would emulate Adolf Hitler by throwing himself on the floor and biting

the carpet. Until the war ended victoriously for the Allies, Wifredo -- tall, fair, and rangy -- was careful to conceal his strongly anglophile tendencies. These had been excited some years previously when he first fell in love with Rosa and came under the posthumous spell of the celebrated Nanny Parker. Nanny Parker, on entering the Espinosa household, had brought with her a bound series of the Illustrated London News, dating from 1906 to 1925, and kept adding a fresh one every year. In 1936, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and Nanny Parker's death -- under a fast car driven by a party of non-intervening Italian airmen, remember? -- closed the series. But a constant study of these volumes had made Wifredo an expert in all things English for the thirty years that they covered.

When Rosa introduced us to Wifredo, and asked whether he could supply a nursery towel-horse, he agreed with enthusiasm, seeing in us a helpful source of information about all that had happened to the British race since the death of George V. The outcome was an almost breath-taking towel-horse, stout and capacious as a church, in solid mahogany, with fluted rails and brass knobs -- and that at a period when mahogany was practically unobtainable on the island. Wifredo charged us only a nominal sum for this masterpiece, assuring us that the pleasure was entirely his.

Then Aníbal heard about the towel-horse from the factory foreman, flew into one of his infernal rages, called Wifredo all sorts of gross names, and accused him of cheating the business, wasting valuable materials, delaying the execution of other orders, and allying himself with certain ancient and inveterate enemies of Spain. He even threatened to bring the ridiculous towel-horse to the notice of the Central Bank. Wifredo replied passionately that Great Britain was Spain's best customer and, after Spain, the noblest country in Europe. He also commented on Aníbal's Teutonic lack of taste, humour and imagination, adding that he proposed to start immediate production, though on a rather less expensive model than the prototype, of no less than one hundred 'Nanniparkér' nursery towel-horses. Then followed some very pointed remarks, such as: 'The priest must have had a bad cold when he christened you "Aníbal". He surely meant "Animal". You are indeed a fat, brutish, sophistical, Germanic beast, save for whose degraded adventures in the lowest haunts of Santa Catalina, my poor sister would still be alive today!'

A roughhouse ensued. Wifredo was the stronger of the two; but at some stage or other of the Civil War, Aníbal had attended a hard course in street-fighting, and learned all sorts of clever tricks from his SS volunteer-instructors. Both combatants were seriously injured.

The factory had not been running too well even before this. Worn-out but irreplaceable machinery; power cuts; timber shortages; new national fiestas commemorating the triumph of the Forces of Light, on each of which the management was obliged to reward the workmen with double pay for taking a patriotic vacation; trouble with the syndicates; decrees forbidding the dismissal of a single workman however inefficient,

dishonest or redundant -- all this had been bad enough; but a complete breach between the partners brought matters to a crisis. Wifredo and Aníbal now obstinately pursued their own uncoordinated policies: Wifredo designing his furniture in a yet more provocative English style, Aníbal starving him of suitable timber and making no attempt to sell whatever he might manage to make.

Realizing that the factory would soon go bankrupt unless someone intervened decisively, Rosa did so. She had the good sense to phone a certain Cathedral Canon: elder brother and confessor of the man who stood with a whip above these warring partners -- the Central Bank Director himself. After explaining her predicament, Rosa begged the Canon to impose peace by whatever means he thought best, short of ruining both households. 'Very reverend Father,' she said, 'although it is true that Don Aníbal began this disgraceful quarrel by calling Wifredo gross names which no man of honour could accept, I must admit that Wifredo's reply did nothing to ameliorate the situation. It is equally true that Don Aníbal struck the first blow; yet Wifredo failed to turn the other cheek. Now, however, he repents of his un-Catholic attitude. It is no joke that every day, on going to the factory, he must carefully remove his wrist-watch and place it on a shelf, together with his spare reading-glasses, for fear that they may both be splintered in a fresh hand-to-hand encounter.'

The Canon listened with encouraging snorts, and finally gave his opinion. 'My daughter,' he said, 'I can see only one way out of the trouble which you have so clearly presented. It is that you and Don Aníbal's wife must form a realistic alliance for peace. Until your husbands can be persuaded to clasp hands in friendship, you must insist, at least, on their jointly asking the Bank to appoint a permanent arbiter who shall settle all disputes between them. Such an arrangement should involve no great expense: some retired military man of rectitude and discretion will, I have no doubt, be pleased to undertake the task. Not for a monetary remuneration but, let us say, for a daily allowance of refreshments. Thereafter, your two husbands need not meet except in this arbiter's presence; though the Bank will of course desire them to accept all his decisions without question -- as football players accept those of the umpire, on pain of being ordered off the field. If you can answer for your husband's agreement, let us arrange a meeting between yourself and Don Aníbal's wife at my house tomorrow; there, with God's help, all will be decently settled.'

The name of Aníbal's new wife, the pretty ex-dental receptionist, was Gracia Joncosa de Tulipán. (Another floral combination of names: 'Reedy Grace of a Tulip'.) Gracia was a tough girl and also, like Aníbal, stubbornly anticlerical. She attended the meeting, but warned the Canon straight out that, since the initiative had clearly come from Rosa, Aníbal would reject the plan of arbitration as energetically as if it had been proposed by the Kremlin itself.

This brought a frown to the Canon's roseate face. Yet he refrained from dredging up Gracia's reprehensible past, and merely begged her to imitate Rosa's truly Catholic

spirit. 'Blessed are the peacemakers!' he intoned, wagging a fat finger.

'Blessed are they indeed!' Gracia echoed, impressed against her will by the huge, cigar-scented study: its dark, forbidding bookcases, its dark, forbidding pictures of saints being flayed alive, being grilled over hot coals, or merely kneeling in ecstasy on a mountain crag surrounded by winged demons. 'But my Aníbal,' she went on, 'will at once convince himself that such an arbiter was chosen by connivance between yourself and Don Wifredo as a means of ousting him from his post.'

The Canon replied smoothly: 'Dear daughter, your hot-tempered husband must have no fear. Assure him that I, a Canon of Palma Cathedral, solemnly guarantee to find an arbiter of such absolute rectitude and insight that he might well be a descendant of King Solomon himself. If, however, your husband refuses my assurances, I shall feel that the Church has been spurned, as well as the Bank, and will inform my brother of his obduracy.'

Gracia saw the red light. She cried: 'No, no, most reverend Father! Pray do not talk in that sense! Aníbal is, at bottom, a peace-loving man, and entertains the highest esteem both for yourself and for your distinguished brother. Let me try to make him see reason.'

'You will do well to try, my daughter,' the Canon answered grimly; and so the interview ended.

Aníbal threw another fit when Gracia delivered the Canon's message. 'It is a hold-up!' he is reported as exclaiming. 'Must I indeed hand over my wallet to these shameless gangsters with a truly Catholic smile?'

Yet there was no way out when the Bank Director offered as a possible arbiter the retired and much-decorated Colonel whom I shall call Don Hilario Tortugas. During the Rif War he had been shot on three separate occasions, through calf, knee and shoulder, finally losing all the fingers of his left hand in performing a deed of such terrific valour that it earned him the Grand Cross of San Fernando. For Aníbal to challenge the integrity of so outstanding a hero would have made him ridiculous. Moreover, Don Hilario, bored by inactivity, had readily accepted the task, asking a daily honorarium no larger than two cups of coffee, a salami sandwich, a bottle of beer, and a Canary Islands cigar. The coffee must be scalding hot; that was his one stipulation.

The arrangement worked well enough. True, Don Hilario could claim only the most meagre knowledge of how a factory was run -- an educational fault displayed in Spanish history by a long sequence of gallant, honourable, high-ranking Army officers who have found themselves charged with their country's economic fate. Nevertheless, experience in the command of men had sharpened his natural intuition as to whether

people were telling him lies, truths, or half-truths; and, when disputes arose on technical points he decided them by a careful study of the partners' voices, faces, and demeanour, rather than of the documents laid before him. Thus he settled the vexed question of the 'Nanniparkér' towel-horses by arguing that though Wifredo would doubtless turn out a superbly professional product, if given the required materials, Aníbal's lack of confidence in these novelties suggested the wisdom of postponing their manufacture. He also ruled: 'The factory should, however, bear the expense of creating the prototype, and of selling it at a minimal price to an influential foreign family by way of justifiable propaganda.'

Don Hilario's daily appearance at the factory did much to restore the morale of the workmen. They used to boast in the cafés: 'We have the famous Colonel Tortugas on our payroll -- he who once ran his sword through seventeen Cabyls, one after the other, though wounded in a score of places. There's a fighter for you!' Yet Aníbal found it difficult to swallow his resentment: 'Only imagine! That ancient military relic set over me as supervisor and spy!' He continued to make things as difficult as he could for Wifredo, by misrepresenting both the supply situation and the sales prospects; at the same time complaining to Don Hilario that Wifredo spoiled the workmen and showed an utter ignorance of modern furniture trends.

On Rosa's advice, Wifredo kept cool and behaved as Englishly as possible, in the hope of provoking Aníbal to over-reach himself by some crude act that could not escape official censure. But he was secretly worried by Aníbal's attempts at ingratiating himself with Don Hilario. For instance, when he gave Don Hilario a box of a hundred Romeo y Julieta cigars on his Name Day. Don Hilario, needless to record, firmly declined the gift, swearing that much as he enjoyed a good smoke, he could never allow himself to deviate one hair's breadth from his more than Draconian code, and must avoid even the suspicion of venality. Nevertheless, Wifredo saw him eye the box with badly disguised wistfulness.

From time to time, Wifredo offered Don Hilario a lift back to the centre of town in his boat-shaped 1922 Renault two-seater -- Majorca is where good cars go to die, and they take unconscionably long about it -- but Don Hilario always insisted on walking, even on wet days when his wounds troubled him. He would accept no more and no less than the daily two cups of sweet, scalding coffee, the Canary Islands cigar, the salami sandwich, and the bottle of beer stipulated in the contract. Once only, his conscience permitted him to borrow from Wifredo a couple of cigarette papers with which to roll his own cigarettes; but paid them back the very next day.

So much for the situation at the factory. Now for that of the 'influential foreign family'. We had an unexpected visit from Ava Gardner, a close friend of our Maryland friend Betty Sicre. Betty suggested that Ava should take a short holiday from the exhausting social life of Madrid to visit soporific and truly rural Majorca. There she could catch up on sleep, study Spanish grammar, swim daily, and consult me about how to finish her

random education by a crash-course in English poetry. We had met Ava at Betty's house a few months before and found her great fun; afterwards she sent us a huge bouquet of red roses, an attention which my wife and I appreciated all the more because, as we already knew, Ava is not one to distribute idle favours. She was feeling lonely at this time, her elder sister having just gone back to the States, and would borrow each of Betty's four small sons in turn to keep her company at night. 'The other boys at the American School will think me a sissy,' the youngest but one had tearfully complained, 'if they find out that I sleep twice a week with Ava!'

At Palma's Son Bonet airport, she came rushing towards us across the tarmac: a startled deer, pursued by a hungry-looking wolf. When the wolf saw her suddenly engulfed in our large family -- the children had played truant from school by telling their monks and nuns that an aunt was arriving from London -- he slunk off slavering. But word flew from end to end of the airport that the famous Ava Gardner had finally come to Majorca; and crowds went milling around in search of the red carpet, the bouquets, and the press photographers. Meanwhile, we hurried Ava into our Land-Rover, and hauled her baggage off the air-line truck. One filmstruck enthusiast saw a woman who closely resembled his idol bandying nonsense with our children in the dusty car; he stopped, narrowed his eyes, and passed on -- it could not, of course, be she. We made a clean get-away.

Ava explained that there had been two really troublesome Spanish wolves aboard the plane. The first, seated across the gangway, kept addressing her in an experimental sort of Italian, until she slammed shut the Oxford Book of English Verse (supplied by Betty for the poetry course) and said: 'If you must interrupt my reading, why don't you at least talk your own language?'

The wolf answered gallantly: 'Signorina, I decided to give myself the honour of employing your own musical tongue.'

Ava looked puzzled. 'You must have got things mixed,' she said. 'I happen to have married a Sicilian, but my Italian is even worse than yours.'

The wolf leered at her craftily. 'Do not think to deceive me! All our papers assure us that you are a true daughter of Naples.'

'Then they're lying. I was born and raised in North Carolina.'

A horrid doubt overtook the wolf. 'Then I am mistaken? You are not Sofia Loren?'

With a cry of indignation Ava leaped up and took refuge in a vacant seat forward, but found Wolf No. 2 waiting there to pounce. So she read the Oxford Book of English Verse in the washroom, from which she emerged when the plane had landed; only to find the wolf waiting for her with amorous yelps at the foot of the landing-steps.

Female film stars, it seems, are bound by a strict code: they must never insult journalists or press photographers, never refuse to sign autographs (unless desperately pressed for time), and never either slug wolves with overnight bags or poke out their eyes with parasols.

Ava's plans for improving her Spanish grammar and catching up on sleep did not come to much. There are too many places in Palma where gipsies strum at guitars and dance flamenco all night; and Ava can never resist flamenco. Besides, her first visit to Majorca attracted such immense attention that she was forced to change hotels four times in five days; but it fascinated us to bask for a while in the spotlight of her glory. Though far preferring, she said, a meal of shepherd's pie or sausages-and-mash at our Palma flat, she gallantly took us out once or twice to the lusher restaurants.

After dinner, in one of these, she asked me for her poetry lesson, and I told her that so few poems were worth reading, and so many were wrongly supposed to be worth reading, that she had better make sure she would not waste her time by this poetry course. Washing for gold could be very dull work. Then, changing the metaphor, I said that a clear, personal voice was better than all the technical skill and daring experimentation in the world -- really good poetry always makes plain, immediate, personal sense, is never dull, and goes on making better sense the oftener one reads it. 'Poems are like people,' I said. 'There are not many authentic ones around.'

Questioned about the monstrous legendary self which towers above her, Ava told us that she does everything possible to get out from under, though the publicity-boys and the Press are always trying to clamp it even more tightly on her shoulders. Also, that she has never outgrown her early Hard-Shell Baptist conditioning on that North Carolina tobacco farm, with the eye of a wonderful father always on her; and still feels uncomfortably moral in most film-studios; it isn't what she does that has created her sultry reputation, but what she says. Sometimes she just can't control her tongue.

A photographer suddenly let off a flash-bulb at us, and Ava flashed back at him almost as startlingly in the fiercest language. But when he apologized at once, she half forgave him. The rest of our talk was punctuated by the waiter's handing a succession of autograph-books to Ava for signature; she obliged automatically with a fixed, sunny smile, not losing the thread of our conversation until one autograph-hunter, an overstuffed sofa of a woman, plumped herself down next to me, leant across me, and said: 'Oh, dear Miss Gardner, I have seen every single one of your films! Now I wonder whether you would be so good as to give me your personal autograph for my seven-year-old grandchild. Her name is Wendy Solgotch Wallinger.'

Ava frowned. 'Is the Solgotch Wallinger strictly necessary?' she asked. 'And what am I supposed to write on?'

'Oh, I thought film stars always supply the paper!'

Ava frowned more deeply. Her comments on that paper shortage had better stay off record. They were quite enough to account for her sultry reputation. Nevertheless, loth to infringe the code further, she tore a corner off the menu, scribbled 'Wendy, with best wishes from Ava Gardner,' and waved Mrs Wallinger away with it.

Having found my Collected Poems at our apartment, Ava asked which of them to read first. This question embarrassed me, after what I had already told her. However, there was one, I said, which she might perhaps like to take personally; though it had been written long before we met. I marked the page for study when she went to bed that night -- if she ever did.

She speaks always in her own voice

Even to strangers...

and:

She is wild and innocent, pledged to love

Through all disaster...

That was Ava to the life.

Meanwhile, at the furniture factory, Aníbal had been consistently difficult. He accused Wifredo to Don Hilario of stirring up the workmen and alleging that the timber he supplied was so green, warped and knotted that it would serve only for making rustic seats and the like. Confronted with this charge, Wifredo informed Don Hilario that he had made a factual statement, not a complaint: indeed, far from stirring the workmen up, he had encouraged them to hope that something at least could be made from the eccentric lumps of raw tree which were all that his partner could now buy.

When Don Hilario looked at him quizzically, Wifredo went to the workshop and returned with a particularly unattractive section of local pine, consisting almost wholly of large knots. He asked: 'Am I seriously expected to fulfil a municipal order for eighty classroom desks with timber of this quality? And what about my saw-blades?'

Don Hilario eyed the exhibit and ventured cautiously: 'Well, you might hammer out these knots and use the holes for securing the scholars' inkwells; but I shall make it plain to Don Aníbal that if you were to take this course, there would undoubtedly be many times more inkwells than scholars.'

Seven o'clock struck, and Wifredo exclaimed: 'Pardon me, Don Hilario! The workmen have gone off, and so has my partner. I must lock up without delay. Since I am aware

that any invitation to ride home in my battered car will be declined, let me wish you a respectful good night. There is a certain haste; my English friends, the intellectual Graves family, are honouring my house with a visit, and hope to bring Miss Ava Gardner.'

Don Hilario caught his breath and clutched at Wifredo's sleeve. 'Do you mean the veritable Ava Gardner?' he asked slowly. 'She... is here, in Majorca?'

'Yes, the one inimitable Ava,' Wifredo answered easily. 'The Señores Graves assure me that she is as gracious and intelligent as she is beautiful.'

'"Gracious and intelligent" indeed! "Gracious and intelligent" is petty praise! For me, Ava Gardner is the greatest artist alive!'

Ava did not, as it happened, come to Wifredo's with us that evening. She had made a trip to the fine sandy beach of Camp de Mar; but, the weather being bitterly cold -- it was just before the fearful February freeze-up of 1956 -- she alone was hardy enough to swim. Several carloads of admirers stood watching, and a roar of admiration rose as she tripped down the hotel steps in her bright Italian bathing costume and dived into the tempestuous waves. Yet no would-be life-saver, we were told, jumped in after her; if only because Spaniards, though incurably romantic, are not altogether Quixotic. Later, Ava was whisked on to the Binisalem vineyards, where she spent so agreeable a time sampling our sole Majorcan vintage wine that we did not catch up with her again until midnight.

The next morning, Don Hilario drew Wifredo aside and said urgently: 'Friend, tell me about her!'

Hating to disappoint the Colonel, Wifredo answered: 'A phenomenon! So gentle, so beautiful, so humorous.'

Don Hilario sighed. 'Ah, Don Wifredo, your experience fills me with the greenest envy!' He added in a sudden rush: 'I have never, you know, accepted a gift or a favour from you, ever since I came to this factory. Not a cigarette, not a match, not a ride in your crazy automobile! However, I will say that, unlike your boorish partner, you always show the utmost consideration for my feelings in this respect, never making any move which might be open to malicious misinterpretation; and for that I honour you. Indeed, I honour you so highly, and so commend your correctness, that I feel emboldened to make a surprising request: one that you will, I am sure, recognize as being on a quite different level from the mundane round of industry in the ambience of which we daily meet. Don Wifredo, I am a lonely old man; all winter long my wounds ache; I have few pleasures. Well... to be short, if you could, by any plea, prevail on your distinguished English friends to approach Miss Gardner...'

Wifredo answered: 'Not another word, Don Hilario! And if anyone else in all Palma were to ask this of me -- even the Director of the Central Bank, upon whose good will my livelihood depends -- I should say: "Impossible!" But when the most courageous soldier of our race makes such a request, how dare I rebuff him? I trust that the matter can be arranged before Miss Gardner leaves the island early this afternoon.'

A few minutes later our phone rang. 'Robert,' Wifredo said excitedly, 'will you meet me at noon in the Café Mecca on a matter of the gravest importance? I cannot explain over the telephone.'

To my relief, Ava had read the marked poem and decided to accept it as a personal tribute; in fact, begged me to copy it out in long-hand and sign it for her.

'With great pleasure,' I said, 'if you'll do a trade. Ava, I want a print of your most supremely glamorous photograph, inscribed: "To the heroic Colonel Don Hilario Tortugas y Postres, with the heartfelt admiration of Ava Gardner." Let me write it down for you.'

'Is "heartfelt admiration" strictly necessary?'

'It's essential!'

I wrote out the poem for Ava in a fair hand, and soon after she had flown back to Madrid (with four crates of Binisalem wine among her luggage) a splendidly large signed photograph arrived, duly inscribed for the Colonel: a portrait, I was half-glad to see, of her exotic legend rather than of herself.

Rosa and Wifredo invited us to the most English dinner we had eaten in years: mulligatawny soup; roast beef with roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, a boiled cabbage; apple dumplings with cream; and (as Edward Lear has put it) 'no end of Stilton cheese'. Wifredo even produced a bottle of vintage port -- how he got hold of either the Stilton or the port, beats me -- and solemnly toasted Ava Gardner.

We all drank.

Then, in a voice thick with emotion, he announced: 'Dear friends, in consequence of Don Hilario's report to the Bank, delivered two days ago, I now have sole charge of the factory, being answerable to the Bank Director alone. Aníbal has been bought out and dismissed; and I am empowered not only to arrange my own timber supplies, but to choose a new sales manager!'

We congratulated him riotously.

'That is not all,' he went on. 'The "Nanniparkér" Nursery Towel-horse now goes into

immediate production, as well as a similar contrivance, suggested by dear Rosa, for hoisting wet linen to the kitchen ceiling by means of a cord and pulley. It will equally serve, in better weather, for hams, sausages, strings of red peppers, and ropes of onions. How original, and how very useful! I propose to name it "The Ava Gardner Drying Rack". Each example will bear a beautiful coloured miniature of my benefactress, taken from the authentic photograph of her plunge into the sea at Camp de Mar. Do you consider that I need write to ask her permission?'

'She would consider it strictly unnecessary,' I answered, sipping my port, cracking my walnuts, and thinking: 'Dear Ava!'