ROBERT GRAVES

A BICYCLE IN MAJORCA

IT WAS NOT always so. Majorca used to be the most crime-free island in Europe. When I came back here with my family shortly after World War II, one could still hang one's purse on a tree and return three months later to find its contents intact. Unless, of course, someone short of change had replaced the small bills with a larger bill of equal value.

I am wasting this morning in the draughty corridors of the Palma Law Courts, because of my son William's 'abstracted' bicycle. He lent it to his younger brother, Juan, a year ago, when Juan's own bicycle... But forget Juan's bicycle for the moment and focus on William's. We imported both of them from England. The Spaniards certainly know how to ride bicycles; they are heroic racing cyclists, and the mortality among leaders of the profession is a good deal higher than among bullfighters. A recess at the back of the Palma Cycling Club provides a shrine for one of its members killed on a mountain road during the Tour of Spain -- his pedals and shoes hung up beneath a plaque of St Christopher, with candles perpetually burning. Other members, who have died in lesser contests, are not so commemorated. But we British at least know how to make bicycles. I hasten to say that I am not criticizing Spanish workmanship. The British just happen to be experts in this particular trade; they even export vast quantities of bicycles to the choosy United States. The Spanish government will not, of course, agree that anyone else in the world can make anything better than Spaniards do, and surely a government's business is to foster faith in the nation's industrial proficiency? This attitude, however, makes it difficult for a Spaniard or a foreign resident in Spain -- here comes the point -- to import a British bicycle, especially when Spanish sterling reserves are low. Such a person must fill out fifteen forms in quintuplicate, supplying all his own vital statistics, with those of his relations in at least the nearer degrees, and showing just cause why he should be allowed a British bicycle (despite the hundred-per-cent Spanish import duty) instead of a much better, locally manufactured machine, which can be bought at half the cost. When he has waited fifteen months for an answer, while sterling reserves continue to fall, the chances are that the answer will be: 'We lament to inform you that last year's bicycle import quota has already been satisfied; we therefore advise you to fill out the necessary forms in quintuplicate for the present year's quota' -- the year which, as a matter of fact, ended three months before. The most painless, therefore, way to import a British bicycle, as I learned from a friendly clerk at the Town Hall, is to arrive with it at the frontier, prepared to pay the import duty in cash, and insist on entry.

'If you are accompanied by children,' said the friendly clerk, 'there should be no trouble. All Spaniards are sympathetic toward fatigued fathers of families who have

taken long journeys by train.'

'And if, by ill luck, I hit on an exception?'

'Then try a frontier post farther up the Pyrenees. On occasion, the officials at remote posts have no information about the rate of payment due from residents of Spain for imported bicycles. If the traveller happens to be a fatigued father of a family, they may well advise him -- this has, in fact, happened -- to rub a little mud on the machine and so convert it into an old one. His son can then ride across the frontier as a summer tourist.'

It's a long story... At any rate, we got William's bicycle to Majorca legally enough. That was in 1949, and no immediate trouble ensued. The British bicycle was much admired, for the solidity of its frame and for being the only one on the island with stainless-steel wheel rims and spokes, brakes that really braked, and an efficient three-speed gearshift. Then, around 1951, British, French, and American travellers accepted the fantasy of Majorca as the Isle of Love, the Isle of Tranquillity, the Paradise where the sun always shines and where one can live like a fighting cock on a dollar a day, drinks included. A tidal wave of prosperity struck these shores, and though statistics show that a mere three per cent of the Paradise-seekers return, there are always millions more where they come from. Which means, of course, that thieves, beggars, dope peddlers, confidence tricksters, gigolos, adventuresses, perverts, inverts, deverts, and circumverts come crowding in, too, from all over the world -- of whom no less than ninety-seven per cent stay. Their devious activities place unreasonable burdens on the shoulders of the gentle Civil Guards. Repeat 'gentle'. The Civil Guards are, by and large, gentle, noble, correct, courageous, courteous, incorruptible, and single-minded. They are probably the sole Spaniards without the national inferiority complex about not being bullfighters, which attacks even racing cyclists. You are earnestly advised to refrain from laughing at the Civil Guards' curiously shaped patent-leather helmets and calling them 'comic-opera'. This antique headgear usually covers real men.

A Civil Guard barracks stands just around the corner from our Palma apartment. Conditions inside are pretty austere, the living quarters being not unlike those in the prison recently demolished near Boston -- what was it called? The one where they had so many mutinies? I know two or three of the Guards there, and my family has a standing invitation to their annual show on March 1st (the Day of the Angel of the Guard), which is really quite something. So when, one evening in 1952, William's bicycle was stolen from the entrance hall of our apartment house -- we live on the second floor -- I went straight to a Guard, whom I remembered as a fat and dirty baby back in 1929, and asked him for immediate action. He called a plainclothes colleague, whose children had been at school with mine, and sent him down to the gipsy camp by the gasworks. (One early sign of Majorcan prosperity was an influx of undisciplined and picturesquely filthy gipsies from the south of Spain.) The camp, consisting of low, unmortared, doorless stone shelters, roofed with driftwood, rags, and odd sheets of

rusty metal, is where one would normally search for stolen bicycles. On this occasion a blank was drawn. But as the plainclothes Guard, trudging back, came within sight of the barracks -- its entrance inscribed 'All for the Fatherland' -- a bicycle shot across the road out of control, brushed past him, and piled up against a lightpole. Its rider, a half-witted young man from Minorca, was severely injured -- and so was William's bicycle. Unaccustomed to a three-speed gear, the poor fellow had changed down as he passed the barracks, without ceasing to pedal, had broken a cog in the gearbox, and thus lost his head, his balance, his consciousness, and his freedom. I had to sign a long charge against the Minorcan and also swear to the bicycle before being allowed to take it back. 'Mind you,' said the lieutenant, 'this machine must be produced in evidence when the criminal comes up for trial. Since we know you well, you may keep it temporarily, but look after it with care!'

The wave of prosperity had caused such a fearful bottleneck in judicial activity that the case is still on the waiting list. Prisoners are allowed bail, but the Minorcan could not even afford to pay for the damage done to William's bicycle, so if he has not succumbed to his injuries, I imagine some prison or other holds him yet. All I can say is that the local press keeps silence on the subject. A young English acquaintance of mine saw the wrong side of a Palma jail not long ago; he was charged with being drunk and in possession of a lethal weapon. When the Captain General released him, in return for some obscure favour from the British Consul, I heard a lot about that jail. A prisoner could earn a day's remission of sentence for every full day of voluntary work (this meant plaiting the palm-leaf baskets, which have 'Souvenir of Majorca' and a few flowers stitched on in coloured raffia, for tourists), also two days' remission for overtime on Sundays and national holidays. The only other inmate, besides the Englishman, who refused to work was a Valencian pickpocket, found guilty of several delinquencies and sentenced to a stretch totalling a hundred and eighty years. From my friend's description, it seemed a very old-fashioned jail as regards bedding, plumbing, and social arrangements -- 'pure eighteenth-century, a regular collectors' piece'. But card-playing, drink, unimproving (i.e., non-devotional) books, and American cigarettes were forbidden. No Majorcans figured among the eleven criminals with whom he shared the cell -- they had to occupy the only three beds in four shifts -- because Majorcans seldom commit crimes (unless smuggling be so regarded, which must remain an open question) and can always raise bail from near or distant relations.

Well, when the bicycle case comes up, perhaps even this year, and the Minorcan is given a ten-year sentence, he will already have cleared it off and be a free man again, with a trade at his fingers' tips, and money in his pocket -- accumulated payment at one cent for each and every basket plaited, less deductions for an occasional coffee or shave. Meanwhile, we have repaired the bicycle, which had lost a pedal bar, and fitted it with a Spanish lamp and a Spanish front mudguard, the original ones having become casualties. The three-speed gear is hardly what it was, but the bicycle still runs, despite other accidents soon to be related.

Now, to speak of Juan's own bicycle, also legally imported -- or very nearly so. We chose one of pillar-box red, for conspicuousness, because the wave of prosperity was mounting and we did not want it stolen. Being a perfectionist, Juan treasured that bicycle like the apple of his eye, treating it daily with oily rag, duster, and saddle soap. In an evil hour we entered him at -- let us call it San Rococo -- reputedly the best boys' school in Palma. Juan is a Protestant, and the worthy priests who run San Rococo hoped to steer him into the Catholic fold, as they had just steered in a little Dane, two little Germans, and another little Englishman. But Juan, who has inherited bitter black Protestant blood from both sides of his family, remained obdurate. The baffled priests withdrew their fatherly protection, and Juan was soon assaulted by a group of his classmates. It happened that England had just beaten Spain at association football, four goals to one, so these patriotic lads accused the English forwards, and Juan, of foul play. They kicked out two of his bicycle spokes, threw the top of his bell over a wall, wrecked his lighting dynamo, and made away with his pump. It should be explained that they were not Majorcans but sons of wave-of-prosperity Galicians, recently come to Palma, and that Spain's goalkeeper had been a Galician.

'Juvenile high spirits,' sighed Father Blas when I complained. 'It would be virtually impossible to discover the names of the culprits, because in San Rococo we do not encourage tale-bearing. Besides, your son's lack of cooperation in our Christian devotions...'

So Juan's bicycle was repaired at our expense, but it was stolen, early one Monday morning, from the school lockup inside the building while he was at his studies. I went to protest that same night. Father Blas beamed, and would not take the matter seriously. He had no doubt but that one of his sportive pupils was playing an innocent joke on my son. The solution -- please God! -- would appear the next day, and I need hardly disquiet myself, since the lockup was under the charge of a reliable seminarist. 'If it does not turn up tomorrow,' I said, 'please report the matter to the Civil Guard without delay. My wife and I are flying to Madrid tonight and cannot attend to it ourselves. Juan's is a distinctive bicycle, and even if it were repainted --'

'Not another word, my dear sir! What you say is perfectly logical,' cried Father Blas.

Juan's pillar-box-red bicycle was not returned by any sportive pupil. On the following Monday another bicycle was stolen, and on the Monday after that five more -- all non-Protestant machines. On my return from Madrid, I went to see Father Blas again, and asked for news. Father Blas admitted to having taken no practical steps in the matter as yet, since the school had been engaged in a severe course of spiritual exercises (this was a sideswipe at the uncooperative Juan), but tomorrow, without fail, the reliable seminarist would advise the Civil Guard of the mysterious disappearances.

I said firmly that unless Juan got back his legally imported British bicycle within the

next ten days, I should expect San Rococo College to repay me its value, which amounted to two thousand pesetas, including duty -- or, say, fifty dollars. Father Blas shook hands warmly on my departure; he would write to me at once after a deliberation with his reverend colleagues. His answer came just before the end of term, enclosed with the school bill: a terse note to the effect that in the considered opinion of the lawyers retained by San Rococo College, the said college incurred no responsibility for the disappearance of bicycles from its lockup, since no particular charge had been made to scholars for the privilege of keeping them there during school hours.

One soon learns in Majorca never to sue for anything so unimportant as a bicycle. An action, I knew, would cost far more than the bicycle's value, and a year or two must elapse before the case would come to court; besides, as my barber pointed out when I discussed the matter with him, the Church always wins -- always has won, except during the iniquitous Liberal regimes of the early nineteenth century and under the equally iniquitous Republic. So I simply took Juan away, wrote Father Blas a courteous letter thanking him for the care he had lavished on my son's education, and omitted to pay the school fees. It cuts both ways: San Rococo would never sue me -- an action would cost them far more than the value of the school fees, and my counterclaim for the bicycle would do the college no good, especially if our lawyer cited the six other thefts as evidence of negligence.

Since then, Juan has taken most of his lessons at home, but attends French classes at the Alliance Française. And William, now being educated in England, has lent him his bicycle during term-time. 'And if you ever forget to fasten it with a chain and padlock while I'm away, I'll kill you!'

This brings us to February 1957, when I gave some lectures in the States. My Majorcan friends were anxious about my voyage to that land of gangsters, neurotics, Red Indians, and sheriffs' posses, so familiar to them from the cinema; the more pious of them, I believe, burned candles on my behalf to their favourite saints. I had a clamorous welcome when I returned home bearing my sheaves with me -- candy, nylons, rock-'n'-roll records, Polaroid film, ballet slippers, a Panamanian shrunken head -- and a respectful salutation in the local press. To my relief, I found William's bicycle safely chained and padlocked to the newel post at the bottom of our staircase.

At eight o'clock next morning, as I dressed unhurriedly for breakfast (to be followed by a revision of Juan's Latin exercises done in my absence), I was startled by a yell and a fearful crash. I assumed that Juan had been celebrating the shrunken head in a truly Indian orgy and had accidentally knocked over the crockery cupboard. 'Stop it!' I shouted.

Juan appeared, looking scared. 'It's outside,' he said. 'I think they must be fighting again.'

Two years ago, the staircase of our apartment house had been the scene of a sanguinary battle. A respectable Majorcan couple living on the fourth floor had objected to the constant flamenco singing of a servant girl employed by a non-Majorcan woman living below them. In Majorca, nobody sings or dances flamenco except gipsies and girls in the red-light district and occasional American lady tourists who buy castanets and attend (let us call it) Pascualita Pastís's School of Spanish Dancing to justify the shawls, tortoise-shell combs, and earrings they have bought in Seville. The Majorcan couple called the flamenco-singing girl by a bad name. She flew at them, bit the wife's hand to the bone, and broke the husband's ankle. Her employers, who hated the Majorcan couple -- their old aunt's venerable sewing machine shook the ceiling above them far into the night, and their young child played at ninepins all day -- did nothing by way of dissuasion. The incident gave our street quite a bad name.

But this can hardly be another fight, I thought, as I hurriedly put on my slippers. The flamenco singer and her mistress had moved away long ago, and the whole building was respectable again. We were the only non-Majorcans left, so far as I knew.

I ran out of the apartment and stood on the landing. As I touched the iron banisters, a drop of blood fell on my hand and I heard a gurgling noise overhead. I looked up. A young man with contorted features, glaring eyes, and a bleeding forehead stood poised on the banisters one floor above me. He was about to leap down the well for the second time. I shouted in Spanish: 'Get off from there, and behave in a Christian manner!' -- but he screamed and jumped. I made a grab at him as he flashed past. His weight was too much; down he went to the bottom of the well, struck the bicycle with the same crashing noise that had startled me only a minute before, rolled over, and lay still.

This second attempt at suicide looked pretty successful; all I know about first aid is how to apply a tourniquet above a gun shot wound in a limb -- I learned that during World War I -- and how to administer morphia if anything worse has happened. So I ran downstairs, then out of the front hall and around the corner to the Civil Guard barracks. I reported, panting, to the Guard on duty: 'A man has just tried to kill himself outside my apartment door. Please fetch a doctor.'

'One moment, sir! Do you wish to make a charge? If so, you must wait until the office opens; the desk sergeant has not yet breakfasted.'

'No, no, man! He may be dying, and though I regret disturbing the sergeant's breakfast --'

'Is the individual personally known to you?'

'No.'

'Does he seem to be a foreigner?'

'I could not say. The important thing is to fetch a doctor.'

'I cannot take that upon myself. Who would pay him? Why not fetch a doctor yourself? Try the nursing home down the road. It would surely be quicker than waking the sergeant and asking him to wake the lieutenant.'

I saw the force of his argument, and hurried to the nursing home. By chance, a car labelled 'MEDICO' had just drawn up there. I buttonholed the driver as he got out: 'Please, Doctor, come at once to my house -- no more than a hundred yards away. A man has jumped from the third floor and hit the paved floor.'

'Let me alarm the nuns,' he said. 'Myself, I am only an analyst. My surgical training lies many years behind me.'

I thanked him for his kindness. Well, I thought, we had better get the madman on a mattress and under a blanket, if he is still alive. Returning to the scene of the incident, I found a great crowd of jabbering neighbours -- but no victim. It seems that he had recovered enough to crawl up two flights of stairs and start making a third gallant attempt at suicide from the landing, but that Juan had summoned the rest of my family, who held him until help arrived. Then the midwife who lives in our building, and has had no lack of experience with excitable husbands, took charge.

When all had quieted down again, a couple of Civil Guards turned up. Since the would-be suicide proved to be a respectable Majorcan grocer, who blamed his fall on a sudden blackout caused by an anti-catarrhal injection given him by a French doctor in Marseilles a few days previously, the sergeant was able to report the incident as a regrettable loss of balance overcoming Don Pedro Tal y Cual while he descended the stairs from a business visit to friends on the third floor. 'Any important damage done to your machine,' the sergeant said to me, 'will be paid, naturally, by the unfortunate man himself -- against whom, it is hoped, you will bring no charge.'

'No, no,' I answered. 'After all, he is our neighbour and a Palma man -- not by any means to be suspected of criminal intent.'

'They take a lot of punishment, these British bicycles,' said the blacksmith admiringly as he straightened the fork. 'If it had been one of ours, that grocer would not have bounced off the frame. By the way, how is the poor fellow?'

'Suffering from a headache, I am told, and a grazed elbow.'

'A miracle!'

'This is a very historic bike,' Juan told the blacksmith. 'It has sent one man to prison and saved another's life.'

A week had not passed before the bicycle was stolen from the lockup at the Alliance Française during one of Juan's evening classes. He went at once to the Civil Guard barracks and reported the loss. 'Run away, boy, you are far too young to make a proper charge,' he was told. 'Besides, the charge office is closed until tomorrow morning. Ask your professor to come here at about ten o'clock.'

Juan trailed miserably home, late for supper. 'William's bike is stolen,' he managed to force out between sobs, 'and William said he'd kill me...'

'Wasn't it chained?'

'No, that's the worst of it. On the way to class, I remembered that I'd forgotten the chain and padlock, so I biked back, but then I couldn't remember what it was I'd forgotten, so I whizzed down to the class again and hoped it would be all right. But it wasn't!'

We gave Juan some sausage and coffee, and then hurried to the port. The night boat to Barcelona had not yet sailed. I asked the Civil Guard sergeant at the barrier whether an English-type bicycle had come through, by any chance. 'We have just had one stolen,' I explained. 'Sometimes, they say, thieves steal bicycles and hurry them aboard at the last minute, aware that official charges cannot be made at this late hour.'

'No, sir. No such bicycle has passed through this barrier. But you are misinformed. This being an era of prosperity, the Barcelona fences are now interested only in stolen motor bicycles.'

'We shall never see that historic bike again,' Juan mourned. 'I can't face William when he comes home at Easter.'

Since bicycles are occasionally borrowed for a joy ride and then abandoned, we went to the Lost Property Office at the Town Hall, where municipal policemen bring them in. No luck.

The man in charge advised us against reporting the loss to the Civil Guard. 'If they do find your bicycle, you may never get it back. It will be held in evidence until the case comes up in court.'

'Better that than never, surely?' I asked.

'A distinction without a difference, I fear, sir,' he answered gloomily.

I regret not taking his advice. Although by this time the Civil Guard had forgotten about the Minorcan prisoner, and associated the bicycle only with an attempted suicide, they made me put the loss on record. And the very next day Juan's best friend at the Alliance Française happened to spot the bicycle in a disreputable alley, some distance away, propped unattended against a wall. We celebrated the discovery with a chicken dinner. But a Civil Guard called soon afterward to inquire whether the bicycle had been recovered. We reported that -- God be praised! -- it was in our possession once more.

'My friend Pepe found it in Oil Street,' said Juan.

'Who is this Pepe? What is his surname? Where does he live?'

Today I have been ordered to appear before the judge in the matter of 'a summary which instructs itself concerning the ninety-sixth bicycle abstraction of the current year; on the penalty of the prescribed fine.' It occurs to me that our new Captain-General may have started tightening things up and demanding vengeance on bicycle thieves, and that the lieutenant of the Civil Guard may suspect Juan's friend Pepe of abstracting the bicycle himself. I don't know whether the difference between abstraction and robbery is the same in the States as in Spain. Here, if the lockup had been really locked, or if Juan had remembered to chain the bicycle, and if the thief had then used force to possess himself of it, why, that would have been robbery, and worth several more years in jail.

I don't see Pepe anywhere around, nor do I expect to see him marched up presently between a couple of Civil Guards. Though not a respectable Majorcan (which would exempt him from all suspicion), he happens to be even better placed: his father is the new Civil Guard captain at the other barracks, a fire-eater from Estremadura.