ROBERT GRAVES

THY SERVANT AND GOD'S

DEAR UNCLE GEORGE,

Don't ask me whether Spanish is easy to learn; because Spain is where I live and I can't remember when I couldn't talk it. And I don't know if it's as like Latin as you think, because I haven't done much Latin yet. But Father says that when the Roman soldiers came here to fight Aníbal and taught Latin to their allies the Ibéricos, they used an awful dog-Latin like the dog-English our sailors talk to Chinese men and undiscovered tribes who sell them coconuts. So I don't suppose the Latin you learned at Winchester will get you very far. But as you say you don't know a word of Spanish, except fiesta and siesta and Tío Pepe and mañana, I thought I'd give you an idea of what it's like, by using a letter from my friend Anita Fons y Pons. I've made two translations with Father's help: first what you'd think it means, and then what it does mean.

Most desired little friend Margarita:

I write this little card with the motive of rendering thee graces in respect of thy most attentive target which fills me with gaiety, since the same informs me that thou rejoicest in perfect health. Thus the same I lament that thou canst not make us grateful by visiting our house the other week for a pair of days at least, as I was hoping, for the fifteen days beginning after the Easters of the Nativity.

[Dearest Margaret,

This is to thank you for your kind card. I am so pleased to hear you're well, though disappointed that you can't stay with us for a bit. I'd been hoping that you'd come next week, as soon as Christmas is over, for at least a fortnight.]

But look, man, I am estranged by this that in it thou so unconsciously depreciatest the mothers, above all our own little sisters. I consider it almost as grave as to mock your fathers. I encounter them goodest (bonísimas) persons, and my mamma opinionates that it is convenient always to treat them as intimate parents, even if one or other of them has a genius.

[But, darling, I'm surprised that you say such impolite and wild things about the nuns, especially our own Sisters. In my opinion that's almost as bad as being rude to your father and mother. I find them awfully kind people and mother says we should always treat them like our own relations even if one or two of them do have bad tempers.]

Actually I suffer from a grain on my little beard, which holds pus, owed to a disgrace which I suffered while Ricardito, who is a veritable uncle, was pulling my dietary at me; which, when the people's medical, who is only a practitioner and very donkey, examined, he declared that it wasn't nothing of importance, but that at the best a little pomade of penicillin might not go badly.

[At present, I have a rather nasty spot on my chin, due to an accident: Dickie, who's a very nasty boy, threw my diary at me. The village doctor, who isn't really qualified and very stupid, looked at it and said it was nothing really, though perhaps it might be a good idea to use a little penicillin ointment.]

Precisely at the hour of his arrival, it passed that thy servant had commenced practising the paces in her dietary class of ballet, utilizing the tablet of the ancient hennery to stamp upon with more commodity than the little responsive portland of the cave; and he gave me a good hour, affirming that much dance had rendered my legs curious, and counselled me not to inflame my little bottom with the small candles. He always goes with seeming groceries to give fear.

[When he came along I was just beginning to practise my daily ballet steps. I had borrowed some boards from the old chicken house to make a better dancing floor than the terribly hard cement in the cellar. He congratulated me on the improvement which all this dancing has made in the shape of my legs and warned me not to let my ballet skirt catch fire from the footlights. He always teases me in this frightfully rude way.]

In exchange, the Chief of the Library who, since then, is a very formal cavalier, said when I entered his tent to buy a head-breaker of those that join themselves and form infantile caprices, that in the theatrical function to which he had given his presence, I had merited in an imposing manner the homage which the respectable obsequiated me, and for this he most charmingly regaled me with an imposing coloured gum.

[On the other hand, when I went to the bookshop to buy one of those 'Children's Fun' jigsaw puzzles, the manager, who's a very polite man of course, said that I had thoroughly earned my applause at the last show he watched; so he very nicely gave me a wonderful red india-rubber.]

In these moments I come from touching my instrumental duty and from concluding the Apology which touched me to write of the much-spoken-of Don Quijote. In brief, I go to play with my little companions of the vicinity, passing the corner, the 'wheel of the potatoes', which is very diverted and holds much grace.

[I have just been doing a piano exercise, and finishing the Eulogy which I had to write about that dreary Don Quixote. I'm off soon to play 'Potato Ring' with the girls round the corner; it's great fun and pretty to watch.]

I was very content to assure myself of the reality of the leaping out of thy ingress. To me also they accorded a diploma for the holy writings, and with that a bend azure, and a precious rosary of variously formed accounts. But I lament to inform thee that from my cosmological sciences I sacked no more than a regular.

[I was so pleased to see that you really did get 'outstanding' in your entrance exam. I was given a diploma too, in Scripture, also a blue sash and a lovely rosary of different shaped beads. But I'm sorry to say that I got only a 'fair' in general science.]

Good, I haven't nothing more to communicate to thee. Salute thy papas affectionately, give a little kiss to Hieronimito, and do thou accept, my most desired Margarita, a most strong embrace from the best of all thy little friends, desiring for thee that thou wilt learn much Latin in these vacations and utilize the good time to take many baths. Goodbye until another.

Anita, Thy servant and God's.

[Well, that's all. My love to your father and mother, a kiss for little Jeremy, and a big hug for yourself from your best friend. I hope you'll learn plenty of Latin these holidays and swim a good deal while the weather holds. Goodbye till next time.

Ever your Anita.]

I expect you think that Anita is silly and affected and old-fashioned. She isn't, Uncle George, I promise. She's my best friend, and very modern and rather naughty, and I write to her in just the same correct style as this. You have to, in Spanish; otherwise it doesn't make sense.

Lots of love to you and Aunt May, from

Margaret.

P.S. 'Lots of love' would sound silly in Spanish!