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ROBERT GRAVES

GOD GRANT YOUR HONOUR MANY YEARS

I SLIT OPEN the flimsy blue envelope and, pulling out an even flimsier typewritten slip, began to read without the least interest; but recoiled like the man in Amos who carelessly leans his hand on a wall and gets bitten by a serpent. The Spanish ran:

With regard to a matter that should prove of interest to your Honour: please be good enough to appear in person at this Police Headquarters on any working day of the present month between the hours of 10 and 12. Business: to withdraw your Residence Permit.

God grant your Honour many years!

Signed: Emilio Something-or-other.

Stamped in purple: The Police

Headquarters, Palma de Mallorca.

For two or three minutes I sat grinning cynically at the nasty thing. 'Para retirar la Autorización de Residencia!' Well, that was that!

Though often warned that in a totalitarian state anything might happen, without warning, without mercy, without sense, I had imagined it could never happen to me. I first came to Majorca, twenty-five years ago, during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship; and stayed on throughout the subsequent Republic. Then one fine summer's day in 1936 small bombs, and leaflets threatening larger bombs, began to fall on Palma; soldiers hauled down the Republican flag; unknown young men with rifles invaded our village of Binijiny and tried to shoot the Doctor by mistake for a Socialist politician; the boat service to Barcelona was suspended; coffee and sugar disappeared from the shops; all mail ceased; and one day the British Consul scrawled me a note:

Dear Robert,

This afternoon H.M.S. Grenville will evacuate British nationals: probably your last chance of leaving Spain in safety. Luggage limited to one handbag. Strongly advise your coming.

I hastily packed my handbag with manuscripts, underclothes and a Londonish suit.

An hour later Kenneth, two other friends and I were heading for the port in the taxi which the Consul had considerately sent out to us. Thus we became wretched refugees, and wretched refugees we continued to be for ten years more until the Civil War had been fought to a bloody close, until the World War had broken out and run its long miserable course, and finally until the Franco Government, disencumbered of its obligations to the Axis, had found it possible to sanction our return. Reader, never become a refugee, if you can possibly avoid it, even for the sake of that eventual happy homecoming in an air-taxi, with a whole line of bristly village chins awaiting your fraternal salute. Stay where you are, kiss the rod and, if very hungry, eat grass or the bark off the trees. To live in furnished rooms and travel about from country to country -- England, Switzerland, England, France, the States, England again -- homesick and disorientated, seeking rest but finding none, is the Devil's own fate.

This brings the story up to 1946. I came back to Binijiny, and thanks to the loyalty of the natives found my house very much as I had left it. Certain ten-year-old Kilner jars of homemade green tomato pickle had matured wonderfully, and so had a pile of Economists and Times Literary Supplements. 'Happily ever after,' I promised myself. Then in 1947 Kenneth joined me again, and we resumed work together.

And now this! 'Para retirar la...'

But why? I belong to no political organization, am not a frémasón, have always refused to write either against, or for, any particular form of Spanish Government, and if ever people ask me: 'What is it like on your island?' am careful to reply: 'It is not mine; it is theirs.' As a foreigner who must apply every two years for a renewal of his residence permit, I try to be the perfect guest: quiet, sober, neutral, appreciative and punctilious in money matters. Then of what crime could I be accused? Had someone perhaps taken exception to a historical novel of mine about Spanish colonization under Philip II? Or to the rockets I release every July 24th, which happens to be my birthday as well as the anniversary of the capture of Gibraltar? Had some cathedral canon denounced me for having acted as Spanish-English interpreter at a serio-comic meeting of solidarity between the cornfed Protestant choir of the U.S. aircraft-carrier Midway and the bleak encatacombed Evangelical Church of Majorca? Where could I find out? The police would doubtless refuse an explanation. What means had I of forcing them to say more than 'Security Reasons', which is about all that our own democratic Home Office ever concedes?

Nobody had invited me to settle in Majorca; almost anyone had a right to object to my continued presence there.

... So this was why they had brooded so long over my application for renewing the damned permit!

My wife probably wouldn't much mind a change of house and food and climate. But

how could I break the news to Kenneth? Although I should be sunk without him, he could scarcely be expected to share my exile again; the poor fellow had hardly enjoyed a day's happiness, I knew, during those ten long years. And what if our long association put him on the black list too? And just as he was buying that motorcycle!

Yet why the hell should I take this lying down? After twenty-five years -- after all the sterling and dollars I had imported -- and my four children almost more Majorcan than the Majorcans! I'd hire a car, drive to Palma at once, visit the Chief of Police and ask, very haughtily, who was responsible for what was either a tactless practical joke or a cruel atropellada. (Atropellada, in this sense, has no simple familiar English equivalent, because it means deliberately running over someone in the street.) Afterwards I'd ring up the British Embassy at Madrid. And the Irish Embassy. And the American Embassy. And...

Here came the car. Poor Kenneth! Poor myself! Poor children! It would have to be England, I supposed. And London, I supposed, though in my previous refugee days I had always been plagued by abscesses and ulcers when I tried to live there. My wife loves London, of course. But how could we find a house large enough and cheap enough for us all? And what about schools for the children? And a nurse for the baby? And who would care for our cats in Binijiny?

I had forgotten that, this being a total fiesta in honour of San Sebastián, the Patron Saint of Palma, all offices would be closed. Nothing doing until the next day; meanwhile church bells rang, boot-blacks pestered me, Civil Guards sported their full-dress poached-egg head-dresses and stark white gloves, and the population drifted aimlessly about the streets in their Sunday best.

As I stood check-mated outside the Bar Fígaro, a dapper Spaniard greeted me and asked politely after my health, my family and my busy pen, remarking what a pity it was that so few of my books were available in Spanish and French translation. I couldn't place him. He was probably a shirtmaker, or a hotel receptionist, or a Tennis Club Committeeman, or a senior Post Office clerk, whom I would recognize at once in his proper setting. Awkward!

'Come, Don Roberto, let us take a coffee together!' I agreed miserably, suspecting that, like everyone else, he wanted to cross-examine me on contemporary English literature. But, after all, why shouldn't I continue to humour these gentle, simple, hospitable people? It was their island, not mine. And the Bar Fígaro has sentimental memories for me.

We sat down. I offered him my pouch of black tobacco and a packet of Marfil papers. He rolled cigarettes for us both, handed me mine to lick and stick, snapped his lighter for me, and said: 'Well, distinguished friend, may we expect your visit soon? I ventured to send you an official reminder only yesterday. When will you find time to withdraw

your Residence Permit -- "para retirar la Autorización de Residencia" -- from our files? It has been waiting there, duly signed, since late October.'

In my gratitude I gave Don Emilio an hour's expert literary criticism of the works of such English gran-novelistas as Mohgum, Ootschley, Estrong and Oowohg, promising not only to visit him at the earliest opportunity with the necessary 1 peseta 55 céntimos stampage but to lend him a contraband Argentine edition of Lorca's Poems.

God grant him many years! What a sleepless night he saved me!