ROBERT GRAVES

THEY SAY... THEY SAY

THIS IS SATURDAY, listeners, and here I am standing beside the old recording van in a Spanish seaport town on the Costa Brava. The sun is pretty hot, even for this time of year: several scores of farmers and dealers, mainly from outlying districts, have taken possession of the Market Square cafés. Nice fellows, too. Not a knife, pistol or unkind thought in the whole crowd. That hoarse buzz you hear is their usual exchange of views on the price of tomatoes, olive futures, the effects of drought on the regional economy, and so on. The overtones are excited argument about the Grand Tour of Catalonia -- on push-bike -- and the fearful struggle of the local fútbol team to avoid relegation to the Third Division of the League.

Now, suppose we bring the microphone over to a corner table and listen to what those two very relaxed-looking types are saying to each other over their coffee and anís. The melancholy-looking fellow in black corduroys, sporting a massive silver watch-chain, is Pep Prat. Pep breeds mules; and his rubicund vis-à-vis with the blue sash, by name Pancho Pons, grows carnations for the Barcelona market.

PANCHO: Well, Master Pep! Been along Conception Street lately?

PEP: And if not, have I missed much, Master Pancho?

PANCHO: Nothing, nothing. I was only making conversation.

PEP: Make some more by all means.

PANCHO: I went this morning to change a one-hundred-duro note at the Banco Futurístico.

PEP: Did they short-change you? Mistakes often happen on a Saturday. pancho: No, indeed. Don Bernardo Bosch was in a very good humour.

He now has an enchanting little office with three easy chairs, a mahogany desk and a window overlooking the street.

PEP: Of course... Of course... Ah, Master Pancho! That poor woman's face comes back to me so clearly!

PANCHO: What courage, eh? I should never have dared address him as she did.

PEP: It is now more than a year ago.

PANCHO: Yet the words still ring in my ears. I happened to be doing some business with the cheesemonger next door, and poor saintly Margalida never spoke in a low voice, even at the worst of times. On that occasion she might have been missionizing the heathen. She said: 'Don Bernardo, not another word! I have this shop on a hundred years lease, with eighty-six more to run and since (thanks be to God!) I am now only thirty years old and enjoy good health, it should last out my life. I am not selling, I do not need to sell, and though the shop may measure only twenty-five and a half square metres it suffices for my modest business.'

PEP: She had spirit.

PANCHO: And Don Bernardo answered: 'You are a bloodsucker, you are a negress, Margalida Mut, you are Jael and Sapphira rolled into one. I offer you fifteen hundred duros a square metre to surrender your lease and you dare refuse it!' And the poor creature answered: 'I am not selling, you gipsy! But if you and your colleagues think of selling the Banco Futurístico equally cheap, let me know -- I may need it as a lumber room. Adiós!' That ended the comedy.

PEP: But tell me: exactly why would she not sell?

PANCHO: Ask me, rather, why she should sell. Should she sell just because the Banco Futurístico had bought up the rest of the site, and did not wish her rusty shutters and peeling sign to interrupt their beautiful marble façade in Conception Street? Margalida was a martyr to principle.

PEP: Nevertheless, principle puts no bacon in the stew. Her trade was beggarly. She called herself an antique-dealer but I have seen better stuff spread out on a sack in the Flea Market: nails, horseshoes, a broken sewing machine, three cracked dishes, books without covers, half a Salamonic bedrail.

PANCHO: Mind, I know nothing, but they say... very unjustly no doubt... that the excellent woman was a receiver of stolen goods, a usuress at compound interest, a blackmailer, a Protestant!

PEP: They say! Ah, the hypocrites! They said nothing like that at her funeral. What a display! A thousand people at least walked in it, besides priests and acolytes. And an epidemic of tall wax candles. Also columns in the Heraldo about her good works and devotion and saintliness. I recall how shocked Don Bernardo was when he heard the news. He hurried at once in his very pyjamas to condole with the deceased's afflicted sister Joana Mut.

PANCHO: It was well done, although Margalida had not been on speaking terms with

either of the two sisters since their parents' death -- some dispute about the inheritance, they say.

PEP: Yes, they say. And they say... But never mind.

PANCHO: An extraordinary end, eh? Altogether baffling. It happened, you will remember, at precisely seven o'clock, when all the shutters in the street were clanging down; and her protests, if any, must have been drowned in the noise. Nobody was aware that anything unusual had occurred until nine o'clock next morning when someone noticed the gap at the bottom of the shutter -- which showed that she had not locked it as was her custom when she went home to her solitary flat. A pity, because it was then too late to telephone the station-police at Port Bou and have the passengers searched as they crossed the frontier. You may be sure that the assassin was French.

PEP: My brother-in-law at Police Headquarters disagrees.

PANCHO: No Catalan of the Costa Brava would murder even a supposed usuress for her money!

PEP: Certainly not! But no money was taken. A two-hundred-duro note was left untouched in the open cash-box. They say that the assassin was a married lady who wished to retrieve some compromising document from it. They say that a long strand of hair was found in poor Margalida's fingers...

PANCHO: Yes, they say! But they also say it was Margalida's own hair, torn out in the struggle.

PEP: Of the same colour and thickness, I admit. It certainly seemed to be Mut hair... What I cannot understand is why my brother-in-law had orders from high up to post an armed guard at either end of the street for a whole month; as if to prevent a disturbance.

PANCHO: It is, of course, a theory that murderers revisit the scene of their crimes. But what I should have liked to ask your brother-in-law was, why he allowed that picture of poor Isidoro Núñez to appear in the Heraldo entitled: 'Wanted, dead or alive, for the Conception crime!' Isidoro is not a bad fellow. Once he got drunk and borrowed the mayor's bicycle and ran it into a tree, so they jailed him for a couple of months; but that was his one crime. Actually, it was well known that he had gone off, two days before, to visit his father in Galicia; and when he returned the police did not even interrogate him. They say...

PEP: Oh yes, they say! They also say that it was a love tragedy, that the poor woman was killed by an amorous and impulsive youngster whom she had rejected.

PANCHO: Ka! Margalida was as ugly as a fisherman's boot.

PEP: Pancho, you must not speak disrespectfully of the dead. Very well, let us suppose that the amorous youngster was really after her money...

PANCHO: Good! And that he believed her to have already closed the bargain with Don Bernardo. Tell me, by the way, did her heirs sell the lease for those fifteen hundred duros the square metre?

PEP: No. You see, Margalida had not been quite accurate: she had the shop on a life tenure only. When she died it reverted to the landlord. A pity, because under the Rent Restriction Law the landlord could never have made the lessee pay more than the price originally agreed on -- a mere ten duros a month. That law is a great protection to poor people.

PANCHO: Who was the landlord, by the way?

PEP: By a remarkable coincidence it was Joana Mut herself. And since she had no aptitude for the family antique business, she regretfully parted with the freehold. The Bank paid a thousand duros a square metre, they say, but that may be an exaggeration. The other sister got nothing except Margalida's stock and personal effects, poor child!

PANCHO: Garlic and onions, Pep! Do you know what I think?

PEP: Tell me.

PANCHO: I think that the unfortunate angel pulled down the shutters and choked herself with her own hands in mortification for having turned down Don Bernardo's offer!

PEP: It is very possible. Indeed, they say...

Well, listeners, I expect you have heard enough. But before I return you to the Studio let us cross the street and hear what that vigorous but charming-looking fishwife has to say for herself. The one with the spotted handkerchief round her hair. Well, well, what a coincidence! If she isn't Aina, the youngest of the three Mut sisters! I wish you could watch her now, knife in hand, ripping the tough brown skin off an ugly-looking sting-ray! My word, personally I shouldn't like... And, look, if that isn't Don Bernardo himself buying prawns at the next stall! Good Heavens! Aina has recognized him! She has laid down the sting-ray...

Oh! Oh! I'm glad you missed that, listeners! Garlic and onions!