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978-1-107-41895-0 - The Clear Mirror: A pattern of Life in Goa and in Indian Tibet

G. Evelyn Hutchinson

Excerpt

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TO anyone who has not been there, Spain seems infinitely remote. Kerguelenland can hardly be more distant, St Brandan's Isle more mythological, for the former can be fairly completely explored in a library, and the latter, being wholly imaginary, can be peopled in the mind and studied at will. But Spain might be traversed from one end to the other without anything of the country being discovered. From a distance it seems an essentially Mediterranean land, an aromatic country whose vegetation can be smelt miles out to sea; yet its Mediterraneity does not ally it with the rest of Europe as is the case with Italy, but rather separates. Spain is pictured as a dry remote region, where the intensity of the sun is measured chiefly by the depth of the shadows; a land of crickets and grasshoppers, but, since most of the Iberian species are endemic, of crickets and grasshoppers set apart; a country of archaic politeness and intense dark passions, utterly unhellenic, yet made most comprehensible through the genius of a Cretan painter.

The imagination is most accurately excited by familiar things, which are well enough known to be picked up from a world where they lie at random,

SPAIN AT SEA

taken apart, reconstructed and redesigned, and their components put in exact places where they are appropriate. Sit in a café in Paris and look at the reflections of familiar objects from which whole new worlds can be constructed. The mirrors on the walls return a simple, left-handed version of the right-handed world. From the shiny surfaces of the cylinders of the coffee engines a silver vertical world emerges, balanced by a horizontal world in gold on the brass rails of the bar. Along the bevelled edges of the window panes small transverse sections of the passers-by run ahead of or lag behind their possessors; while a final decomposition of the scene is achieved in the glasses and bottles on the shelves at the side, so that the world of appearances consists now of nothing but fragmentary spots of light. With these things the imagination may play undisturbed till it is shocked away from thought to perception by some unwonted thing. Looking up to the mirrored ceiling, mugs of beer and cups of coffee hang as if fruits in a tropical orchard. Suddenly wandering among them is a stupendous animal beauty, her living body separated from her sculptured head by a violet and lavender shawl, an earth-brown woman swinging delicate legs from her immense hips. She has introduced a new startling element into the mental pictures. An African courtesan, washed up in a Paris street,

SPAIN AT SEA

has by accident broken the formalistic vision of the mirrors. But that is a rare occurrence; a negress is not often seen in a mirrored ceiling. The Spaniards, however, have made an art of such appearances. They fastened a figure of the Madonna to the surface of a hanging mirror, a cloud of wooden cherubs surrounding her, so that anyone passing by, dissatisfied with an image of the present world, would be rewarded by an apparition of the Queen of Heaven, an illusion of a vision set solidly against unreality. And not content with such a trick on a small scale, Spain has sent out, following not merely her own adventurers but the expanding dominions of Portugal as well, a spiritual army entrusted with placing the Madonna in front of every strange and barbarous culture in which could be recognised the distorted image of her own.

A train rushes south through air from which all moisture was frozen some days before. The atmosphere in the compartment is dampened by the bodies of its occupants, half-a-centimetre of ice forms on the inside of the window panes. Shut off from the world by this ice, the memories of past days struggle with one another. They seem fragments, like bits of painted glass, or perhaps odd tools or clothes thrown into a bag before starting a journey in case some use might

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be found for them, miscellaneous objects which can be discarded if they prove to be a burden, but which in practice are never thrown away. Daphne in gold, turning not to a green shrub but to a twig of red coral; catfish swimming under the ice on the little aquaria outside the animal shops along the river front; the tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn. The Virgin on her mirror struggles with the harlot negress in hers, now blending, now antagonists, each triumphing for a moment. A man snores in the corner opposite, a rug slips; sleep that had come to the mind moves away a little, mocking. Wakeful legs are pushed at random through the cold air of the carriage. Then the hypnotic rattling of the train dominates, sleep again approaches, now coming first to the limbs, leaving the catfishes swimming for a while round Daphne's frozen coral. But at last they die in the cold of an emptied mind; the Virgin stares woodenly from her mirror into the dark; the negress has found a new lover. The train rattles to its unconscious passengers.^{1*}

In the morning the train, emerging from the cold night that lay over Provence, reaches Marseilles. The city, made of wharfs, white walls, green shutters and red roofs, seems to have been thrown up by the sea. Whatever may formerly have occupied its ancient site

* Numerals in the text refer to notes at the end.

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is now buried. The process of burial still continues. A brand new cathedral has been deposited there; the old cathedral, outgrown and discarded, lies by its side, far below the level of the street. Under this small sanctuary Lazarus is reputed to lie. He came to France with his sisters and their black servant St Sarah, whom the gypsies venerate at Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. By the side of his second and perennial tomb, children are repeating their catechism. A priest is instructing the boys, and several middle-aged ladies have classes of little girls grouped around them. One of these children, whose hair is golden-red and whose grey-green eyes, set in a pale ivory face, seem to have seen the whole of human existence, repeats to her teacher, "Les sept péchés mortels sont..." The traditions of the land have burrowed underground in Marseilles; the city above has been built and nourished by the sea and is perpetually fluid. People come here merely to leave again. The best food is obtained from the sea, langouste and numerous kinds of fishes; bread and potatoes must here be saturated with the marine flavours of such sea-beasts if they are fully to be enjoyed. Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, standing on a hill that towers over the anadyomenous growth of the city, is the only church in Marseilles that has come fully into the open, but it is a marine church paid for by

SPAIN AT SEA

the sea and filled with votive models of ships. Recently a smart red monoplane has been added to the collection by the devoted mother of some aeronaut. It hangs in readiness at the end of the nave. Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde has had in these days to assume new duties; it is too soon to know where they may take her.

Three Jesuit fathers from Barcelona have come to Marseilles to stay but for a moment. Their society has met with new difficulties in its ancient home and its members are taking refuge in its professed houses in Africa, South America and Asia. These three are perhaps the last from Spain to embellish the mirror in which India reflects the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean lands reflect India. At Marseilles the fathers embark for Bombay; at the height of Spanish missionary fervour in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Goa would have been their destination; even to-day the stewards on the boat are mostly Goanese.

The boat passes Stromboli; passengers, speculating on the islet volcano, suspect it is Vesuvius or contest that it is Etna. Dolphins leap through the gilded crests of grey-blue waves, and talk turns to flying fishes and sharks. The Jesuit fathers stand apart from the other passengers, taking pictures of the islands with a small hand-camera; then they walk up and down with their breviaries. Later in the morning, one of the

SPAIN AT SEA

fathers sits on deck, sorting loose photographs and putting them in an album. The collection forms his complete illustrated biography. First come his father and mother, his brother in the Spanish army, then school groups, football teams in shorts and sweaters, “les jours héroïques”, he explains, the long laboratories of his college, portraits of students, and geological parties examining barren exposures of tilted limestone. And, mixed with these, set in the middle of many of the pages of the album, surrounded by the schoolboys in football shorts and the students in laboratories, smiles Mary, the Queen of Heaven and the lady of his heart.

In the evening the ship glides through the Straits of Messina. Behind the rows of street lights, the hills rise faintly black against the sky. Between the front streets and the bottom of the slope a marionette theatre no doubt still stands; the performance will have just begun. The stage is filling with figures so heroic that a live man, appearing at the side of them, would suddenly seem transformed to more than a giant relative to the four feet of painted wooden immensity supported by a rod from above. But the ghost of Orlando does not trouble Charybdis; the lights of the broken town alone evoke memories of his puppet. The boat moves toward the darkness east of Taormina.

The photographs of college laboratories in the album

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turn conversation toward science. The nearness of Sicily deflects it to one of the most curious products of the impact of scientific knowledge upon religious logic, the *Embryologia Sacra* of Francesco Emanuele Cagniamila.² This book, the work of an eighteenth-century Sicilian priest, is a discussion of, almost propaganda for, the immediate Caesarian section of dead expectant mothers, that their unborn children may be baptised and so brought to salvation. In order that priests and others, not familiar with embryological anatomy, may administer this sacrament correctly, elaborate instructions are given, the method of baptism of very young embryos being carefully described. It being doubtful, writes Cagniamila, to what extent the embryonic membranes are to be considered part of the embryo, and therefore capable of receiving the sacrament of baptism, they should be opened so as to expose the embryo whenever this can be done without undue risk. In dealing with very young embryos, however, the best procedure is to give a conditional baptism to the membranes, using the formula, “Si tu es capax, ego te baptiso”; then, on opening the membranes, the baptism should be repeated in the conditional form, “Si tu es capax et si non es baptisatus.” By this method it is possible to avoid the indignities of attempting to baptise what is unbaptisable on the one