



The point of honour W. Somerset Maugham

Some years ago, being engaged on writing a book about Spain in the Golden Age, I had occasion to read again the plays of Calderón. Among others I read one called *El Médico de su Honra*, which means the Physician of his Honour. It is a cruel play and you can hardly read it without a shudder. But re-reading it, I was reminded of an encounter I had had many years before which has always remained in my memory as one of the strangest I have ever known. I was quite young then and I had gone to Seville on a short visit to see the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi. It was the height of summer and the heat was terrific. Great sail-cloths were drawn across the narrow streets, giving a grateful shade, but in the squares the sun beat down mercilessly. In the morning I watched the procession. It was splendid and impressive. The crowd knelt down as the Host was solemnly carried past, and the Civil Guards in full uniform stood at salute to do homage to the heavenly King. And in the afternoon I joined the dense throng which was making its way to the bull-ring. The cigarette girls and the sewing girls wore carnations in their dark hair and their young men were dressed in all their best. It was just after the Spanish-American war, and the short, embroidered jacket, the skin-tight trousers, and the broadbrimmed, low-crowned hat were still worn. Sometimes the crowd was scattered by a picador on the wretched hack that would never survive the afternoon, and the rider, with conscious pride in his picturesque costume, exchanged pleasantries with the facetious. A long line of carriages, dilapidated and shabby, overfilled with aficionados, drove noisily along.

I went early, for it amused me to see the people gradually filling the vast arena. The cheaper seats in the sun were already packed, and it was a curious effect that the countless fans made, like the fluttering of a host of butterflies, as men and women restlessly fanned themselves. In the shade, where I was sitting, the places were taken more slowly, but even there, an hour before the fight began, one had to look rather carefully for a seat.

Presently a man stopped in front of me and with a pleasant smile asked if I could make room for him. When he had settled down, I took a sidelong glance at him and noticed that he was well dressed, in English clothes, and looked like a gentleman. He had beautiful hands, small but resolute, with thin, long fingers. Wanting a cigarette, I took out my case and thought it would be polite to offer him one. He accepted. He had evidently seen that I was a foreigner, for he thanked me in French.

'You are English?' he went on.

'Yes.'

'How is it you haven't run away from the heat?'

I explained that I had come on purpose to see the Feast of Corpus Christi.

'After all, it's something you must come to Seville for.'

Then I made some casual remark about the vast concourse of people.

'No one would imagine that Spain was bleeding from the loss of all that remained of her Empire and that her ancient glory is now nothing but a name.'

`There's a great deal left.'

`The sunshine, the blue sky, and the future.'

He spoke dispassionately, as though the misfortunes of his fallen country were no concern of his. Not knowing what to reply, I remained silent. We waited. The boxes began to fill up. Ladies in their mantillas of black or white lace entered them and spread their Manila shawls over the balustrade so as to form a gay and many-coloured drapery. Now and then, when one of them was of particular beauty, a round of applause would greet her appearance and she would smile and bow without embarrassment. At last the president of the bull-fight made his entry, the band struck up, and the fighters, all glittering in their satin and gold and silver, marched swaggering across the ring. A minute later a great black bull charged in. Carried away by the horrible excitement of the contest, I noticed, notwithstanding, that my neighbour remained cool. When a man fell and only escaped by a miracle the horns of the furious beast, and with a gasp thousands sprang to their feet, he remained motionless. The bull was killed and the mules dragged out the huge carcass. I sank back exhausted.

`Do you like bull-fighting?' he asked me. `Most English do, though I have noticed that in their own country they say hard enough things about it.'

`Can one like something that fills one with horror and loathing? Each time I come to a fight I swear I will never go to another. And yet I do.'

'It's a curious passion that leads us to delight in the peril of others. Perhaps it's natural to the human race. The Romans had their gladiators and the modems have their melodramas. It may be that it is an instinct in man to find pleasure in bloodshed and torture.'

I did not answer directly.

'Don't you think that the bull-fight is the reason why human life is of so little account in Spain?'

'And do you think human life is of any great account?' he asked.

I gave him a quick look, for there was an ironical tone in his voice that no one could have missed, and I saw that his eyes were full of mockery. I flushed a little, for he made me on a sudden feel very young. I was surprised at the change of his expression. He had seemed rather an amiable man, with his large soft friendly eyes, but now his face bore a look of sardonic hauteur which was a trifle disquieting. I shrank back into my shell. We said little to one another during the rest of the afternoon, but when the last bull was killed and we all rose to our feet he shook hands with me and expressed the hope that we might meet again. It was a mere politeness and neither of us, I imagine, thought that there was even a remote possibility of it.

But quite by chance, two or three days later, we did. I was in a quarter of Seville that I did not know very well. I had been that afternoon to the palace of the Duke of Alba, which I knew had a fine garden and in one of the rooms a magnificent ceiling reputed to have been made by Moorish captives before the fall of Granada. It was not easy to gain admittance, but I wanted very much to see it and thought that now, in the height of summer when there were no tourists, with two or three pesetas I might be allowed in. I was disappointed. The man in charge told me that the house was under repair and no stranger could visit it without a written permission from the Duke's agent. So, having nothing else to do, I went to the royal garden of the Alcázar, the old palace of Don Pedro the Cruel, whose memory lives still among the people of Seville. It was very pleasant among the orange trees and cypresses. I had a book with me, a volume of Calderón, and I sat there for a while and read. Then I went for a stroll. In the older parts of Seville the streets are narrow and tortuous. It is delicious to wander along them under the awnings that stretch above, but not easy to find one's

way. I lost mine. When I had just made up my mind that I had no notion in which direction to turn I saw a man walking towards me and recognized my acquaintance of the bull-ring. I stopped him and asked whether he could direct me. He remembered me.

‘You’ll never find your way,’ he smiled, turning round. ‘I’ll walk a little with you until you can’t mistake it.’

I protested, but he would not listen. He assured me it was no trouble.

‘You haven’t gone away then?’ he said.

‘I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ve just been to the Duke of Alba’s house. I wanted to see that Moorish ceiling of his, but they wouldn’t let me in.’

‘Are you interested in Arabic art?’

‘Well, yes. I’ve heard that that ceiling is one of the finest things in Seville.’

‘I think I could show you one as good!’

‘Where?’

He looked at me for a moment reflectively as though wondering what sort of a person I was. If he was, he evidently came to a satisfactory decision.

‘If you have ten minutes to spare I will take you to it’

I thanked him warmly and we turned back and retraced our steps. We chatted of indifferent things till we came to a large house, washed in pale green, with the Arabic look of a prison, the windows on the street heavily barred, which so many houses in Seville have. My guide clapped his hands at the gateway and a servant looked out from a window into the patio, and pulled a cord.

‘Whose house is this?’

‘Mine.’

I was surprised, for I knew how jealously Spaniards guarded their privacy and how little inclined they were to admit strangers into their houses. The heavy iron gate swung open and we walked into the courtyard; we crossed it and went through a narrow passage. Then I found myself suddenly in an enchanted garden. It was walled on three sides, with walls as high as houses; and their old red brick, softened by time, was covered with roses. They clad every inch in wanton, scented luxuriance. In the garden, growing wildly, as if the gardeners had striven in vain to curb the exuberance of nature, were palm-trees rising high into the air in their passionate desire for the sun, dark orange-trees and trees in flower whose names I did not know, and among them roses and more roses. The fourth wall was a Moorish loggia, with horseshoe arches heavily decorated with tracery, and when we entered this I saw the magnificent ceiling. It was like a little bit of the Alcázar, but it had not suffered the restorations that have taken all the charm from that palace, and the colours were exquisitely tender. It was a gem.

‘Believe me, you need not regret that you have not been able to see the duke’s house. Further, you can say that you have seen something that no other foreigner has seen within living memory.’

‘It’s very kind of you to have shown it to me. I’m infinitely grateful!’

He looked about him with a pride with which I could sympathize.

‘It was built by one of my own ancestors in the time of Don Pedro the Cruel. It is very likely that the King himself more than once caroused under this ceiling with my ancestor.’

I held out the book I was carrying.

'I've just been reading a play in which Don Pedro is one of the important characters.'

'What is the book?'

I handed it to him and he glanced at the title. I looked about me.

'Of course, what adds to the beauty is that wonderful garden,' I said. 'The whole impression is awfully romantic.'

The Spaniard was evidently pleased with my enthusiasm. He smiled. I had already noticed how grave his smile was. It hardly dispelled the habitual melancholy of his expression.

'Would you like to sit down for a few minutes and smoke a cigarette?'

'I should love to:

We walked out into the garden and came upon a lady sitting on a bench of Moorish tiles like those in the gardens of the Alcázar. She was working at some embroidery. She looked up quickly, evidently taken aback to see a stranger, and gave my companion an inquiring stare.

'Allow me to present you to my wife,' he said.

The lady gravely bowed. She was very beautiful, with magnificent eyes, a straight nose with delicate nostrils, and a pale smooth skin. In her black hair, abundant as with most Spanish women, -there was a broad white streak. Her face was quite unlined and she could not have been more than thirty.

'You have a very lovely garden, Señora,' I said because I had to say something.

She gave it an indifferent glance.

'Yes, it is pretty.'

I felt suddenly embarrassed. I did not expect her to show me any cordiality, and I could not blame her if she thought my intrusion merely a nuisance. There was something about her that I could not quite make out. It was not an active hostility. Absurd as it seemed, since she was a young woman and beautiful, I felt that there was something dead in her.

'Are you going to sit here?' she asked her husband.

'With your permission. Only for a few minutes.'

'I won't disturb you.'

She gathered her silks and the canvas on which she had been working and rose to her feet. When she stood up I saw that she was taller than Spanish women generally are. She gave me an unsmiling bow. She carried herself with a sort of royal composure and her gait was stately. I was flippant in those days, and I remember saying to myself that she was not the sort of girl you could very well think of being silly with. We sat down on the multi-coloured bench and I gave my host a cigarette. I held a match to it. He still had my volume of Calderón in his hands, and now he idly turned the pages. .

'Which of the plays have you been reading?'

'*El Médico de su Honra.*'

He gave me a look, and I thought I discerned in his large eyes a sardonic glint.

'And what do you think of it?'

'I think it's revolting. The fact is, of course, that the idea is so foreign to our modern notions.'

'What idea?'

'The point of honour and all that sort of thing.'

I should explain that the point of honour is the mainspring of much of the Spanish drama. It is the nobleman's code that impels a man to kill his wife, in cold blood, not only if she has been unfaithful to him, but even if, however little she was to blame, her conduct has given rise to scandal. In this particular play there is an example of this more deliberate than any I have ever read: the physician of his honour takes vengeance on his wife, though aware that she is innocent, simply as a matter of decorum.

'It's in the Spanish blood,' said my friend. 'The foreigner must just take it or leave it:

'Oh, come, a lot of water has flowed down the Guadalquivir since Calderón's day. You're not going to pretend that any man would behave like that now.'

'On the contrary I pretend that even now a husband who finds himself in such a humiliating and ridiculous position can only regain his self-respect by the offender's death.'

I did not answer. It seemed to me that he was pulling a romantic gesture, and within me I murmured, Bosh. He gave me an ironic smile.

'Have you ever heard of Don Pedro Aguria?'

'Never.'

'The name is not unknown in Spanish history. An ancestor was Admiral of Spain under Philip II and another was bosom friend to Philip IV. By royal command he sat for his portrait to Velasquez.'

My host hesitated a moment. He gave me a long, reflective stare before he went on.

'Under the Philips the Agurias were rich, but by the time my friend Don Pedro succeeded his father their circumstances were much reduced. But still he was not poor, he had estates between Cordova and Aguilar, and in Seville his house retained at least traces of its ancient splendour. The little world of Seville was astonished when he announced his engagement to Soledad, the daughter of the ruined Count of Acaba, for though her family was distinguished her father was an old scamp. He was crippled with debts, and the shifts he resorted to in order to keep his head above water were none too nice. But Soledad was beautiful and Don Pedro in love with her. They were married. He adored her with the vehement passion of which perhaps only a Spaniard is capable. But he discovered to his dismay that she did not love him. She was kind and gentle. She was a good wife and a good housekeeper. She was grateful to him. But that was all. He thought that when she had a child she would change, but the child came, and it made no difference. The barrier between them that he had felt from the beginning was still there. He suffered. At last he told himself that she had a character too noble, a spirit too delicate, to descend to earthly passion, and he resigned himself. She was too high above him for mortal love.'

I moved a little uneasily in my seat. I thought the Spaniard was unduly rhetorical. He went on.

'You know that here in Seville the Opera House is open only for the six weeks after Easter, and since the Sevillans don't care very much for European music we go more to meet our friends than to listen to the singers. The Agurias had a box, like everybody else, and they went on the opening night of the season. Tannhauser was

being given. Don Pedro and his wife, like typical Spaniards, with nothing to do all day but always late, did not arrive till nearly the end of the first act. In the interval the Count of Acaba, Soledad's father, came into the box accompanied by a young officer of artillery whom Don Pedro had never seen before. But Soledad seemed to know him well.

"` Here is Pepe Alvarez," said the Count. "He's just come back from Cuba and I insisted on bringing him to see you."

` Soledad smiled and held out her hand, then introduced the newcomer to her husband.

"` Pepe is the son of the attorney at Carmona. We used to play together when we were children."

` Carmona is a small town near Seville, and it was here that the Count had retired when his creditors in the city grew too troublesome. The house he owned there was almost all that was left him of the fortune he had squandered. He lived in Seville now through Don Pedro's generosity. But Don Pedro did not like him and he bowed stiffly to the young officer. He guessed that his father the attorney and the count had been concerned together in transactions that were none too reputable. In a minute he left the box to talk with his cousin, the Duchess of Santaguador, whose box was opposite his own. A few days later he met Pepe Alvarez at his club in the Sierpes and had a chat with him. To his surprise he found him a very pleasant young fellow. He was full of his exploits in Cuba and he related them with humour.

` The six weeks about Easter and the great Fair are the gayest in Seville, and the world meets to exchange gossip and laughter, at one festivity after another. Pepe Alvarez with his good nature and high spirits was in great request and the Agurias met him constantly. Don Pedro saw that he amused Soledad. She was more vivacious when he was there, and her laughter, which he had so seldom heard, was a delight to him. Like other members of the aristocracy he took a booth for the Fair, where they danced, supped, and drank champagne till dawn. Pepe Alvarez was always the life and soul of the parties.

` One night Don Pedro was dancing with the Duchess of Santaguador and they passed Soledad with Pepe Alvarez.

"` Soledad is looking very beautiful this evening," she remarked.

"` And happy," he replied.

"` Is it true that once she was engaged to be married to Pepe Alvarez?"

"` Of course not."

'But the question startled him. He had known that Soledad and Pepe had known one another when they were children, but it had never crossed his mind that there could have been anything between them. The Count of Acaba, though a rogue, was a gentleman by birth, and it was inconceivable that he could have thought of marrying his daughter to the son of a provincial attorney. When they got home Don Pedro told his wife what the duchess had said and what he had replied.

"` But I was engaged to Pepe," she said.

"` Why did you never tell me?"

"` It was finished and done with. He was in Cuba. I never expected to see him again."

"` There must be people who know you were engaged to him."

"` I daresay. Does it matter?"

"` Very much. You shouldn't have renewed your acquaintance with him when he returned"

"` Does that mean that you have no confidence in me?"

"` Of course not. I have every confidence in you. All the same I wish you to discontinue it now."

"` And if I refuse?"

"` I shall kill him. "

` They looked long into one another's eyes. Then she gave him a little bow and went to her room. Don Pedro sighed. He wondered whether she still loved Pepe Alvarez and whether it was on account of this that she had never loved him. But he would not allow himself to give way to the unworthy emotion of jealousy. He looked into his heart and was sure that it harboured no feeling of hatred for the young artilleryman. On the contrary, he liked him. This was not an affair of love or hate, but of honour. On a sudden he remembered that a few days before when he went to his club he noticed that the conversation suddenly failed, and, looking back, he seemed to remember that several of the group who were sitting there and chatting eyed him curiously. Was it possible that he had been the subject of their conversation? He shivered a little at the thought.

` The Fair was drawing to its end, and when it was over the Agurias had arranged to go to Cordova, where Don Pedro had an estate which it was necessary for him to visit from time to time. He looked forward to the peace of a country life after the turmoil of Seville. The day after this conversation Soledad, saying she was not well, stayed in the house, and she did the same the day following. Don Pedro visited her in her room morning and evening and they talked of indifferent things. But on the third day his cousin Conchita de Santaguador was giving a ball. It was the last of the season and everyone in her exclusive set would be there. Soledad, saying she was still indisposed, announced that she would stay at home.

"` Are you refusing to go because of our conversation of the other night?" Don Pedro asked.

"` I have been thinking over what you said. I think your demand unreasonable, but I shall accede to it. The only way I can cease my friendship with Pepe is by not going to places where I am likely to meet him." A tremor of pain passed over her lovely face. "Perhaps it is best."

"` Do you love him still?"

"Yes."

` Don Pedro felt himself go cold with anguish.

"Then why did you marry me?"

"Pepe was away, in Cuba, no one knew when he would come back. Perhaps never. My father said that I must marry you."

"` To save him from ruin?"

` "From worse than ruin."

"` I am very sorry for you."

"` You have been kind to me. I have done everything in my power to prove to you that I am grateful."

` "And does Pepe love you?"

` She shook her head and smiled sadly.

"` Men are different. He's young. He's too gay to love anyone very long. No, to him I'm just the friend whom he used to play with when he was a child and flirt with when he was a boy. He can make jokes about the love he once had for me."

` He took her hand and pressed it, then kissed it and left her. He went to the ball by himself. His friends were sorry to hear of Soledad's indisposition, but after expressing a proper sympathy devoted themselves to the evening's amusement. Don Pedro drifted into the card-room. There was a room at a table, and he sat down to play chemin de fer. He played with extraordinary luck and made a good deal of money. One of the players laughingly asked where Soledad was that evening. Don Pedro saw another give him a startled glance, but he laughed and answered that she was safely in bed and asleep. Then an unlucky incident occurred. Some young man came into the room. and addressing an artillery officer who was playing asked where Pepe Alvarez was.

"` Isn't he here?" said the officer. No.

` An odd silence fell upon the party. Don Pedro exercised all his self-control to prevent his face from showing what he suddenly felt. The thought flashed through his mind that those men at the table suspected that Pepe was with Soledad, his wife. Oh, the shame! The indignity! He forced himself to go on playing for another hour and still he won. He could not go wrong. The game broke up and he returned to the ballroom. He went up to his cousin.

"` I've hardly had a word with you," he said. "Come into another room and let us sit down for a little."

"` If you like."

` The room, Conchita's boudoir, was empty.

"` Where is Pepe Alvarez tonight?" he asked casually.

"` I can't think."

"` You were expecting-him?"

"` Of course."

` She was smiling as he was, but he noticed that she looked at him sharply. He dropped his mask of casualness and, though they were alone, lowered his voice.

"` Conchita, I beseech you to tell me the truth. Are they saying that he is Soledad's lover?"

"` Pedrito, what a monstrous question to put to me!"

` But he had seen the terror in her eyes and the sudden instinctive movement of her hand to her face.

"` You've answered it."

` He got up and left her. He went home and looking up from the patio saw a light in his wife's room. He went upstairs and knocked at the door. There was no answer, but he went in. To his surprise, for it was late, she was sitting up working at the embroidery upon which much of her time was spent.

"` Why are you working at this hour?"

"` I couldn't sleep, I couldn't read. I thought it would distract my mind if I worked."

` He did not sit down.

"` Soledad, I have something to tell you that must cause you pain. I must ask you to be brave. Pepe Alvarez was not at Conchita's tonight."

"` What is that to me?"

"` It is unfortunate that you were not there either. Everyone at the ball thought that you were together."

` "That's preposterous. "

"I know, but that doesn't help matters. You could have opened the gate for him yourself and let him out, or you could have slipped out yourself without anyone seeing you go or come."

But do you believe it?"

` "No. I agreed with you that the thing was preposterous. Where was Pepe Alvarez?"

` "How do I know? How should I know?"

` "It is very strange that he should not have come to the most brilliant party, the last party, of the season."

` She was silent for a minute.

"` The night after you spoke to me about him I wrote and told him that in view of the circumstances I thought it would be better if in future we saw no more of one another than could be helped. It may be that he did not go to the ball for the same reason that I did not "

` They were silent for a while. He looked down at the ground, but he felt that her eyes were fixed on him. I should have told you before that Don Pedro possessed one accomplishment which raised him above his fellows, but at the same time was a drawback. He was the best shot in Andalusia. Everyone knew this and it would have been a brave man who ventured to offend him. A few days earlier there had been pigeon-shooting at Tablada, the wide common outside Seville along the Guadalquivir, and Don Pedro had carried all before him. Pepe Alvarez on the other hand had shown himself so indifferent a marksman that everyone had laughed at him. The young artilleryman had borne the chaff with good-humour. Cannon were his weapon, he said.

"` What are you going to do?" Soledad asked.

"` You know that there is only one thing I can do. "

'She understood. But she tried to treat what he said as a pleasantry.

"` You're childish. We're not living any more in the sixteenth century."

"I know. That is why I am talking to you now. If I have to challenge Pepe I shall kill him. I don't want to do that. If he will resign his commission and leave Spain I will do nothing."

"` How can he? Where is he to go?"

"` He can go to South America. He may make his fortune."

"` Do you expect me to tell him that?"

"` If you love him. "

"` I love him too much to ask him to run away like a coward. How could he face life without honour?"

` Don Pedro laughed.

"` What has Pepe Alvarez, the son of the attorney at Carmona, to do with honour?"

She did not answer, but in her eyes he saw the fierce hatred she bore him. That look stabbed his heart, for he loved her, he loved her as passionately as ever.

Next day he went to his club and joined a group who were sitting at the window looking out at the crowd passing up and down the Sierpes. Pepe Alvarez was in it: They were talking of last night's party.

"Where were you, Pepe?" someone asked.

"My mother was ill. I had to go to Carmona," he answered. "I was dreadfully disappointed, but perhaps it was all for the best." He turned laughingly to Don Pedro. "I hear you were in luck and won everybody's money."

"When are you going to give us our revenge, Pedrito?" asked another.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait for that," he answered. "I have to go to Cordova. I find that my attorney has been robbing me. I know that all attorneys are thieves, but I stupidly thought this one was honest "

He seemed to speak quite lightly, and it was as lightly that Pepe Alvarez put in his word.

"I think you exaggerate, Pedrito. Don't forget that my father is an attorney and he at least is honest "

"I don't believe it for a minute," laughed Don Pedro. "I have no doubt that your father is as big a thief as any."

The insult was so unexpected and so unprovoked that for a moment Pepe Alvarez was staggered. The others were startled into sudden seriousness.

"What do you mean, Pedrito?"

"Exactly what I say."

"It's a lie and you know it's a lie. You must withdraw that, at once."

Don Pedro laughed.

"Of course I shall not withdraw. Your father is a thief and a rascal."

Pepe did the only thing he could do. He sprang from his chair and with his open hand hit Don Pedro in the face. The outcome was inevitable. Next day the two men met on the frontier of Portugal. Pepe Alvarez, the attorney's son, died like a gentleman with a bullet in his heart.'

The Spaniard ended his story on such a casual note that for the first moment I hardly took it in. But when I did I was profoundly shocked.

'Barbarous,' I said. 'It was just cold-blooded murder.'

My host got up.

'You're talking nonsense, my young friend. Don Pedro did the only thing he could do in the circumstances!

I left Seville next day, and from then till now have never been able to discover the name of the man who told me this strange story. I have often wondered whether the lady I saw, the lady with the pale face and the lock of white hair, was the unhappy Soledad.