



FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE

The Bolted Doors

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Madrid

WHEN YOU RING the doorbell of a house in Madrid these days, the first thing you hear is wary steps coming down the hall, and then a hand cautiously slides open the peephole which all doors here are equipped with. Not until the person has recognized you are the heavy bolts drawn to let you in. "Please excuse all this," the person explains, "but I'm alone here."

If you are a foreigner whose knowledge of Madrid comes from your friends, or if you simply happen to have been away for several months, you will be amazed to see how the city and its inhabitants, as a rule so hospitable and trusting, have changed. I am going to tell you the reason for this so that you won't hastily criticize us.

I am sure you are not acquainted with Eciija Street. Plenty of the people living right here in Madrid don't know it. It is in the quiet district of Argüelles. Perhaps the name "Argüelles" will ring a bell in your memory, for during the Civil War it was in the front-line sector for a long time. All traces of shelling are now gone, and only a few steps away is the Paseo de Rosales, where gaffers sit, sun themselves, and roll their own, and children play while nursemaids and their soldier sweethearts court — "pluck the turkey," we call it. From Rosales the trees of the Pardo are visible, and on clear days, the blue, distant Sierra.

At 6 Eciija Street lived the owner of a small automobile repair shop, Don Rafael Caballero

Quiroga, with his wife, Doña Juana, and their grown son, Julio. This family, a model if ever there was one, should have gone on living in the same way for years, and nothing would ever have been written about them nor would you have heard their name.

But there came that particular afternoon of January 11, an afternoon seemingly like so many other afternoons.

It was getting dusk when Julio, the son, came home from work. Like every other day he let himself in with his key. He saw four pools of blood in the foyer.

For a moment Julio stood there paralyzed, and then trembling, alarmed, he stepped in. The hall, too, was stained with blood, and the terrible trail led to the dining-room and the body of his mother. Doña Juana lay soaked in blood, with three great wounds in her neck. Her throat had been cut.

At the horror-stricken cries of the son some of the neighbors came running in. It was a moment of confusion, everybody exclaiming and milling about.

The news spread like wildfire through the quiet neighborhood. When the police arrived there was a crowd of people at the door. Their remarks ran like this:

"Poor Doña Juana. She was so good."

"Who could the murderer be?"

"He ought to be lynched."

"I was just talking to her this morning at the market as we were buying vegetables. Who would ever have thought this!"

A path was opened for the stretcher-bearers carrying out the body covered with a white sheet.

The police immediately put the case into the hands of the famous Criminal Squad whose agents went to work at once. Not a clue was to be found in the house; just blood, nothing but blood.

The declarations of the dead woman's husband and son revealed that seventy thousand pesetas had disappeared, a gold watch and chain, and two fountain pens. The police learned that the victim never opened the door to anyone she did not know. Some of the neighbors testified that about the middle of the afternoon they had heard cries for help: "Friends, are you going to let me be killed?", and then the sound of a body falling. But as the cries were not repeated, they thought it was just one of the crime programs so popular on the radio today.

The doorman admitted that he had been away from his post

several times that afternoon. The police came to the conclusion that the murder had been committed about the middle of the afternoon by someone known to the family, with robbery as the motive. And on the basis of this hypothesis they went to work.

THE MADRID newspapers carried a full account of the crime. The whole city was stirred, for crimes of this sort are not frequent here. When a murder takes place in Madrid in most cases it is for one of two reasons, both due to the high temperature of the blood that runs in my countrymen's veins. One is jealousy, that wild, irrational passion — "I killed her because she was mine" — and in such cases the criminal gives himself up to the police, wanting to be punished, and lamenting for the rest of his life the death of the beloved.

The other cases of violent death are generally the result of an argument that grows hotter and hotter until, without any-

one's quite knowing how, a knife flashes and the fatal blow has been dealt. This type of criminal, too, is amazed and bewildered by his act, and explains it with: "It was my unlucky day."

Not even crimes of this sort are frequent. And a cold-blooded murder such as the one I have been telling you about occurs only once in a blue moon. For this reason the city was so stirred. People thought there was a murderer at large, and as happens with mass suggestion, it was not one, but thousands upon thousands of cold-blooded assassins lying in wait to ring the doorbell and kill some lonely, defenseless woman.

My mother, a wee, gentle little thing, would say angrily: "When I am by myself, I don't care who comes, I'm not opening the door." And she could not sleep at night until I was home.

The police kept up their search, without results. They questioned relatives, friends, neighbors, employes of the Caballero family, shopkeepers they

José Novais Tomé is a Madrileño (citizen of Madrid) which, he confesses, is a full time occupation, involving the fine art of killing time, pursuing beauty, and passionately loving his people and his country. Although only in his mid-twenties, he has already published two volumes of poetry, Nocturnos (1947) and Calle del Reloj (1950), and written numerous articles on Spanish art. Like so many young Spanish intellectuals, he lives with the certainty that to be a Spaniard is to have a dark secret in the soul.

traded with. Not the slightest clue.

For three days they kept at it. Questions, answers, running from one end of Madrid to the other, from its broad modern avenues to the winding narrow streets of old Madrid where Francis I had been held prisoner, and Philip — “the poet-king” — had strolled with his loves. Useless.

Meanwhile the city buzzed with conjectures. Other crimes which had never been solved were hashed over. In our impatience we forgot that only four days had elapsed since the murder. And as, basically, Madrid has the healthy psychology of a small town, there was a lot of gossip.

The police kept plugging away at anyone who might have had the slightest connection with the Caballero family.

Someone suggested the name of a man who had worked temporarily as a carwasher at Don Rafael's garage. He was so insignificant and his employment so irregular that he did not even belong to a union, and nobody had thought of him. He was a young fellow, known as Ramón Oliva Márquez, and nicknamed “El Monchito.”

With nothing else to go on, the police followed up this new lead. They began to uncover cir-

cumstances that brought him under suspicion. Ever since the day of Doña Juana's death “El Monchito” had been spending money like a drunken sailor, taking his girl to expensive places, buying her a fur coat and himself a fancy accordion that cost over three thousand pesetas.

“El Monchito” lived with his father in one of those tenement houses having a foul-smelling patio criss-crossed with clothes-lines, and through whose dingy halls scamper dirty, half-naked children. They rented a kind of hole-in-the-wall there. Taking advantage of their absence one day, the police searched the place. The result was rewarding. They found the things that had been stolen from the victim there, and more than fifty-one thousand pesetas in cash.

A little while later the criminal was arrested in his sweetheart's house. When he was taken into custody, she said:

“My Ramón has done nothing, he just found a pocket-book.” It seems this was how he had explained to her his sudden richness.

It was not long before “El Monchito” had confessed everything.

This was his story. He was tired of living a dog's life, never having a cent, and as he hated work and knew the Caballeros

had money, he decided to rob them. He found out from one of the children playing in the street that Doña Juana was alone in the house, and then and there he decided to put his plan into action. But when he asked Doña Juana for Don Rafael she told him he was not home, and did not let him in. He went away and came back in two hours, feigning great excitement: "I've got to see Don Rafael, it's something very important about the garage."

"He's not home," Doña Juana told him again.

"Then will you let me use the telephone, so I can see if he's at the café he goes to?" the murderer persisted.

So she let him in. Who wouldn't have done the same?

Once in the house, "El Monchito" pulled out a file — a tool he used in his work — and struck her twice. It was then that she cried out: "Friends, are you going to let me be killed?" and ran down the hall, leaving a trail of blood behind her.

The criminal, who had planned to kill her from the moment he set foot in the house, for it was the only way to keep his identity a secret, caught up with her in the dining-room. There was a brief struggle until Doña Juana, weakened by the loss of blood, collapsed on the floor. "El

Monchito" stabbed her three times with a butcher knife he found in the kitchen. Then he covered the body with a sack, and removed a saucepan of milk that was beginning to boil over. He searched, and to his amazed satisfaction discovered the seventy thousand pesetas.

Rolling up his blood-soaked overcoat around the knife with which he had committed the crime and around the stolen objects, he walked out to the street. The crisp cold air of the afternoon gave him an appetite, so he bought and ate a sandwich, and then calmly went home as though nothing had happened.

"El Monchito" is in jail awaiting trial. There is little likelihood that he will escape the death penalty. Perhaps in his heart he is asking God's forgiveness. But his shadow, the atmosphere he has created, lingers on. I know this will pass. The people of Madrid are by nature easy-going, kindly, friendly, warm. They quickly forget the unpleasant. Something, perhaps this boundless sky of our high plains in which the glittering stars are so white they seem blue, will restore confidence to this city where nobody ever feels himself a stranger.

But now that you know this grim story of "El Monchito" it will not surprise you that, for

the time being, the lady of the house in Madrid bolts her doors.

THE OTHER NIGHT I was at the Varela Café. It's one of those rare old cafés that can still be found in Madrid.

Time seems to have come to a stop there. Everything bears the stamp of the early 1900's — marble-topped tables, wall seats covered with a velvet that in its day was red; huge mirrors that reflect the water goblets and the first-class chocolate they serve there. All very comfortable, very charming.

A four-piece orchestra plays selections from romantic operas or musical comedies that were hits fifty years ago; lovers, generally students or working people, listen to the music while they hold hands. Old folks who have to stretch their pensions to get by indulge their hunger for sweets with little cakes. One of those gentlemen who, like the *hidalgos* of bygone days, still wears a cape — gold, old-fashioned broadcloths — sits at a table without moving, watching the hours expire. An old waiter talks to us about Antonio Machado, the greatest, or at least one of the greatest Spanish poets of this century, and his *tertulia* — the café salon — and of that of the incorrigible Bohemian, the bard of a Madrid of

cloak and dagger, Emilio Carrere.

I was there the other night in connection with poets and poetry. I have a weakness for poetry and occasionally, in an idle moment, I write verses; however, I don't want to bore you with my personal affairs, but to tell you about the entertaining things happening at the Varela.

In Madrid, as in all Spain, there are poets all over the place. Not since our Golden Age have we had such an abundant, flourishing crop. You know how everybody who writes poems itches to read them to someone or to shove them into the hands of the first person who crosses his path. In Madrid there is no market for poetry. Not a single publisher is willing to take on a book of verses.

"These are not the times for poetry," they growl. "Bring me something on economics or life in Hollywood. That's what sells."

And the poor poet slinks away, his virgin manuscript in his pocket.

But now the poets have found a way to bring their work to the public, and a very simple and pleasant way it is. They give public recitals in the cafés. So you can understand how this idea could catch on the way it

has, with people coming in droves to listen to poetry, despite the fact that there is no market for verse in Madrid.

When the people heard about the poets' idea, they said: "What do you say we go and listen to them? We can kill a little time that way." Of course, this idea of "killing time" as a design for living is in sharp contrast to your American concept, based on the premise that "Time is money." There is no length to which a Spaniard will not go to kill time.

But getting back to the poets. It goes without saying that today there are many cafés which have their afternoon and evening "poetry" sessions. The result is that business has picked up for the proprietors of these establishments, and the poets have the satisfaction of an audience. Moreover, to recite in one of these cafés, all you have to do is make your wish known, and, aside from whatever artistic value the performance may have, in itself the action is most entertaining.

As poetry knows neither rank nor age, on the same program there will be readings by a distinguished university professor, a well-known journalist, as well as some beardless youth whose inspiration comes from a pair of dark, dark eyes. The recitals be-

gin about midnight — we are terrible nighthawks here, and even the most respectable matron doesn't turn in before one or two in the morning. But we have to get to the café early if we want to find a seat. It is a completely heterogeneous public: the long-haired pseudo-existentialist, the curious student, a bored passer-by, a romantic office-boy, even the shopkeeper who, after closing up, comes in to enjoy an hour of well-earned relaxation.

Truly, if, as the poets say, poetry is intended for everyone, for Humanity at large, no poet ever dreamed of a more varied, open-minded public, free from all prejudice, than this.

And the poetic modes are as different as the authors. The four main trends of present-day poetry are clearly reflected: the neo-classicists with their well-turned sonnets; the shoddy imitators of Garcia Lorca, with their ballads of Andalusian local color designed for export, pulling all the tragic, romantic stops which, it must be admitted, are the ones the public likes best; the serene souls who, like Antonio Machado, sing of the broad plains of Castile and its deep, slow-moving rivers; and, now and again, the surrealists, the dadaists and the exponents of other "isms" made in Paris.

Just last night I heard one of them recite this poem:

Millions of passersby tread on her
lips,
Unaware of the pity that throbs
In flowers nourished
On the empty eye-sockets of the
lakes of mice.

These, as a rule, are not too well received. One old woman crossed herself as she listened and muttered:

"Good Lord! The things that young man says! He must be inspired by the Devil."

This will give you a rough idea of the democratic process that is taking place in poetry.

It is the first time there has really been a direct contact here between the poet and the people.

What will come of all this? Who knows . . . Maybe the Spanish poet is going to become a kind of medieval street-singer whom people will pay to hear his verses; perhaps people will develop a taste for good poetry.

It may very well be that nothing will come of all this, but it is pleasant to set down the fact that here in Madrid, which is daily growing more cosmopolitan and more impersonal, there are still places where people foregather simply to hear a poet recite his verses.

(Translated by Harriet de Onis, who also translated the "Letter from Buenos Aires" in the April issue of this magazine.)

A Letter from London

ANGUS WILSON

THE LAST MONTH has been a strange one. No month, perhaps, seems so much to face two ways. In shop windows and street barrows alike spring flowers of all kinds — some of them actually grown in the West of England — announce colorfully the approach of brighter days — glad tidings, let me hasten to say, which are only offered at an

astronomical price. What has been a long, cold, and depressing winter has come to an end. Influenza, though less of it, is still with us, but then so are old Auntie Eva and Granny, and we may reflect, perhaps with mixed feelings, that the Great Harvester has spared them for at least another year. Many a "veteran actress" or "statesman hon-