



OVER THE HILLS TO SPAIN

SIGNE TOKSVIG

Drawings by Robert P. Tristram Coffin

IF you live at Hendaye-Plage, the extreme western town of France on the Spanish border, and if you have a bicycle, it ought to be easy just to run into Spain for the afternoon. But Spain is a serious country and doesn't propose to be annoyed by frivolous cyclists. A special sort of passport is required for any vehicle, even the humblest, which means a special application and several special fees. Before you get the large document legitimizing your cycle, you will have to draw on all your vital reserves of initiative and patience. No mere transient, idly curious tourist is going to succeed. But we were resident at Hendaye-Plage and persisted for the better part of a year — and we got it.

So one fine day in December we were able to say, trying to be casual, "Let's run into Spain for the afternoon."

We were going over the hills, not over the prosy, international bridge. Imagine a day like one of those clear, high, sunny, cool October days in New England. Not the same vivid foliage, but more subdued, more like a mellow, old tapestry than a new Turk-

ish rug. Golden, russet, orange, purple, greens in every shade. Mountains sharply blue. We intended to reach a small Spanish town called Vera.

To get anywhere from Hendaye-Plage means that one must climb, but our little French cycles run so lightly that they are almost an aid to climbing. So, up we go, first by the sea — yellow sands, white breakers, a large, sky-blue bay, two high pinnacles of rock absolutely rose-pink with lacings of green moss. Into a country road where we can ride a bit. There is a big, typical Basque farm on it, Mocossorots by name, an incredibly wide house with eaves that slope almost down to the ground and project picturesquely over the front. An outside stairway leads up to the living rooms above the stable on the ground floor. A wooden balcony hung with strings of red peppers, pumpkins, onions. Tall flowering fuchsias by the staircase, rose-bushes, caprifolium. Ancient, carved-in-wood woman, feeding the hens.

Farther on a gorgeous view of the bay, the Spanish mountains, the spit of sand of Hendaye-Plage. Another farm. Women washing at a public washery. Beat the good linen on the stones!

We slide down a little hill, and then up, up, for ever and ever, for a whole half hour, through places that look a hundred miles from human beings, mountain sides of yellow gorse and red bracken, deep ravines, rain-green patches, and ahead of us the real mountains, misty, dark-blue, and bold. Finally the top of the hill, and then an uninterrupted coast down a splendid road, the highway between San Sebastian and Biarritz. Few motors. Through the village of Urrugne, lovely old houses, wide-eaved with colored timbering. The old church has a famous motto on its clock-dial: "All the hours strike, the last kills."

Then slide down from Urrugne to a side road, a delicious, calm, fairly even side road. No houses. Groves of live oaks and real oaks, a clear, quick little stream; near it we sit down to eat our bread and camembert cheese and drink a good white wine — that's lunch. It is so warm that I must take off my sweater. On again we pass a country inn where two French customs officials with a bored expression are drinking cider. They greet us, they're not worrying about us — anyway that is not the road by which we want to go into Spain. Then we come to it. Two other French officials, smoking on a rustic bench under the trees. No, they wave our passports and cycle certificates aside — not in the least interested. "Crazy tourists," you can see they are thinking, but

they are most polite; they tell us that we have an ascent of three kilometres, but that it is a *jolie promenade*.

Now the real, uphill work begins. This is the *col des abeilles*, the "hill of the bees." The road goes zigzag and soon we get magnificent views. What's the use of trying to convey views? There is an infinite, soft extent of rolling hills, hedged fields, far villages and towns, woods and the distant sea. We pat ourselves on the back for having stirred around and taken the trouble. We sweat happily in the sun. Everything is so clear, so golden, so fresh and tranquil. Not a living soul on the whole mountain. Have sheep souls? There are wandering, climbing flocks of them, white with black legs, tinkling bellwethers. Bright trees and bushes, gorse and bracken. The elegant, conical peak of *La Rbune* standing out to the left of us, a luminous mauve. Up — three kilometres is quite long, going steadily up. At last, on that sunless height beyond the gorge of a stream, there is a black, crenelated silhouette, a fortress or a castle. That is Spain. It looks melodramatically



THE FORUM



romantic. The sun is on the French mountains, the shadow on the Spanish. Must we climb all the way up to that fortress?

No, it is a ruin. We come unexpectedly to the top of the "hill of the bees." There is the frontier and a couple of simple barracks. On the sunny side three soldiers are sitting, talking. At first they don't hear us, but when they do they jump up and grab their rifles. One look at our amiable, tweed-clad plumpness and they drop them. An officer emerges. He gazes with wonder at our Irish passports. Then he takes them and the big document that proclaims we may bring these

and no other cycles into Spain and shuts himself up in the barrack to examine them. My companion, who has a lively sense of the necessity for social effort, points to the soldiers, nudges me: "Can't you say something, can't you be nice to them?" They speak only Spanish, so I fly into the breach, trying to make up in smiles what I lack in vocabulary. They are nice, simple soldiers, poor army conscripts; they respond. Officer comes out, handing us back the papers in stern silence. Either he is satisfied or determined not to reveal his ignorance of the Irish Free State.

We are jubilant, but very quietly so. We had been led to expect all sorts of trouble at this particular spot on the border, and then it was easy! Further cause for joy, the soldiers say we can coast all the six kilometres down into Vera. They earnestly advise keeping a good hold on the brakes. Nobody has to tell me that! I crawl down anything that isn't water level.

Well, there we are then, crawling down another zigzag road, keeping well on the inside, away from the bottomless ravine — in chill dark shadow ourselves, but marveling at the sunlit, red, orange, violet mountains next to us. We are ten minutes into Spain, whistling and gaily caroling, thinking there can't be a soul near in this wild landscape, and then, just beyond a hairpin turn,

behold four grim, sunless *carabineros*, barring our way. Not a word out of them, but an imperative outstretched hand.

Dismount: "*Pasaportes!*"

"What, have you got two frontiers?" I exclaim, trying to be light and airy and win them by charm. Not a chance. Frosty, granite faces. The officer actually compares the passport photos with us, quite justly seems to doubt whether mine is really me. These are very different birds from the good, slovenly conscripts. Their pale green, yellow-trimmed uniforms are spick, their curious patent leather tricorns are span, and their black, voluminous capes are operatic. So are the short, black carbines they sling over the shoulder.

Still without a word, we get the passports back. We venture "*adiós, señores,*" and get only a mumble back. We cycle meekly on, but my companion has to get something in his hip pocket. He dismounts, and then he sees the four of them waiting and watching him sharply, carbines at the ready, lest it should be a gun instead of a handkerchief he were looking for. Chilling sensation.

Down, down, clutching the brakes. It is really very steep, and cold to the marrow after the sun on the other side. But lovely, grandiose, all the way. Out beyond the spurs of the hills at last, and into Vera. To the left there is an old manor, square with a sloping roof, that is all; and yet it is proportioned with a grace so pure in its severity that it haunts one like a poem.

A little further on, just before the town, there is a bridge on which people seem to be idling. Not a bit of it, they are simply waiting for us. Two more soldiers, this time with high cockaded hats, they want to see our passports, and there is also a civilian who wants to inspect our cycle permit. I make no remarks of a facetious nature about frontiers. Vera is well protected. I talk bad Spanish to the rather friendly fat civilian who seems to be the mayor, and he talks worse French to me. He even tells me where to get a cup of chocolate.

We lead our cycles humbly through Vera. I know from experience that the Spanish male of every age just can't stand the sight of woman astride a bicycle. It offends all his ideas of woman's place and woman's leglessness. The little boys frankly hoot and call names, the young men feel obliged to leer, the old men frown. So we walk through Vera. It has one or two streets, a church, and a *pelota* wall, and nearly every house is fit subject

for an artist. It is a riot everywhere of long, carved balconies and red peppers, timbering, blue and green shutters, wide, carved eaves, nobly arched doors. One house has an inscription on the middle beam of its timbering: "For loyalty and service of the King, this house was burned the 12th of July, 1678. Let it be in the name of God."

Very few people about. One man leading a team of oxen rejoices us by taking out his leather wine-bottle and expertly squirting a thin red stream into his mouth. There is an inn, clean enough, where we drink chocolate, the strange, Spanish, porridgy kind, full of cinnamon. We are served by a pleasant, smiling girl; and now is the chance, now I ought to get some information about the fights the revolutionaries have had here with the military, but — I don't. We have no lamps, it will soon be dark. I eagerly want to be back in the safety of France before dark.

So we hop on again, and go lickety-split. It is nearly all downhill along the road to France. It follows the Bidassoa, the border river. The scenery is wild, sombre, sinister, superb. Steep mountains, jagged gorges, gleaming water. But every ten minutes we meet the patrolling, suspicious-eyed carabineros. They don't stop us but they look as if they'd like to. About half way, we cross a bridge over the river. At the other end, two soldiers stop us!

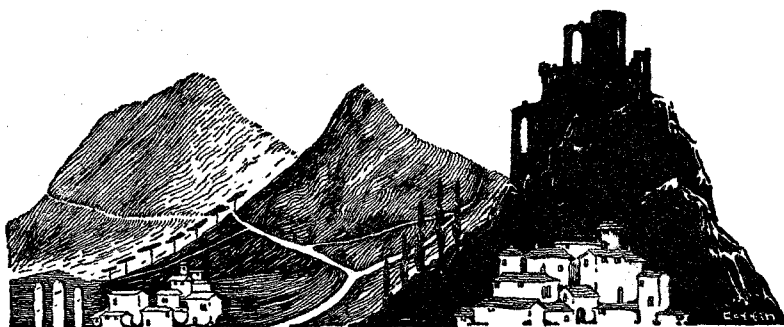
Off again! Passports? No. What then? There is an old civilian who keeps saying "*papeles*," "*papeles*," papers, papers. At last I gather that he wants to see if we have a receipt for the bicycle dues. In vain I tender him our Magna Charta, the great document of the liberty of our cycles. No, if we haven't got the kind of receipt he wants, we must pay a peseta right then and there. Why, why, in Heaven's name, I expostulate, when we have already passed through three sets of officials and they didn't make us pay! Ah, but we are now in the province of Guipuzcoa! At last it is made clear that we entered Spain by way of the province of Navarra, and Navarra apparently hasn't a special bicycle graft, but this bridge takes us into Guipuzcoa, and Guipuzcoa wants a peseta, please. As Guipuzcoa stands by with two rifles, we hand over the peseta.

It is twilight, and we speed on as fast as we can. I get very tired of all those carabineros. They seem like somebody's fingers, choking this poor Spain.

Just at dark we reach the bridge of Béhobie, the bridge into France. One last lingering interview with the Spanish customs

who must look at the number of our cycles and inscribe on our document that we did duly take these cycles and none other out of Spain again, and then the patent leather passport men, who take another puzzled look at the harp of the Saorstat Eireann, and then we glide over the Bidassoa.

The big, casual French officer at the other side waves us on kindly, instead of making us get off and go through the proper formalities. If I could be sure he would understand that the salutation was for France, bright, easy, twentieth century France, I could hug that man!



PITTSBURGH HAS A PLAN

A New Way to Pay City Debts

McALISTER COLEMAN

At the present time, when the National Chamber of Commerce insists upon an enormous reduction in Federal taxes, the local tax assessor goes quietly about his business, levying his heavy toll upon productive wealth at its source. The question may be seriously raised whether local taxes do not present a more urgent problem than Federal taxes, making our much-touted prosperity seem "a goodly apple rotten at the core." The harassed taxpayer will, therefore, lend a willing ear to Mr. McAlister Coleman.

TAXES, taxes everywhere, and no relief in sight. Such is the burden of the song of business man and bus-boy, steel puddler and stockbroker. The spokesman for the United States Chamber of Commerce tells us that the only fly in the prosperity ointment is that of taxation. In Cleveland, Ohio, business men have taken the taxation situation in hand, and sitting as a volunteer advisory board, pass upon the

desirability of all issues of bonds for city improvements. Somewhat similar efforts to balance bonds and assessments are being made in Indianapolis. In New York the dry figures of the city budget march across the front pages of the papers. Reading, Pennsylvania, suddenly goes Socialist, not so much because its citizens have been converted to the doctrines of Marx, but because they resent the unjust assessment methods of old-party administration.

It is to Pittsburgh, however, that one turns to find a unique and realistic grappling with the fundamentals of this vexatious business of paying for the ever-increasing costs of government. For Pittsburgh to-day is the outstanding example of the American city which dares to wear its taxation rue with a difference. Pittsburgh has a plan. The Pittsburgh Plan has been in quiet operation for fourteen years, but only during the last two years has it been in full effect. It is now possible to evaluate that plan, show something of its origins and unfoldings, and indicate the possibilities of its application to other American cities.

At the outset it should be stated that what amounts to a revolution in the methods of municipal assessments has caused no barricades to be thrown up on Pittsburgh's narrow streets. When I asked the editor of one of the largest newspapers in town what he thought of the Pittsburgh Graded Tax Plan, he gazed blankly