

TRAVEL



A Convent in Spain

by ALICE CURTIS DESMOND

WE HAD come to Burgos to learn more of Rodrigo Diaz, whom the Arabs called the Cid (the Lord), that dashing soldier of fortune produced by the long struggle between Christian and Moslem, and who has come down in legend as the most picturesque type of the Castilian gentleman of the twelfth century.

Yet after my husband and I had been in Burgos several days, had been shown the birthplace of the Cid, and his final grave and that of his wife in the Burgos Cathedral, we were still unsatisfied. Although I knew it was a distance from Burgos, and that our train from Madrid left at noon, I longed to see San Pedro de Cardena.

In this convent founded in 537 by Queen Sancha, the Cid, after a lifetime of fighting the Moors, had requested to be interned beside the woman he loved. For generations his wish was sacred. Then prosperity made him the favorite hero of Spain. His skeleton was removed from San Pedro de Cardena, carried to the town hall of Burgos, finally to rest in pomp in the Burgos Cathedral. This magnificent building was not built for two hundred years after the Cid's death, but I felt that he would not have requested to be buried there. I wanted



From "Far Horizons" (McBride)

The Square-towered Church

to see for myself why, when the Cid thought of eternal sleep, he thought of this convent of San Pedro de Cardena.

But when we suggested to our chauffeur that he drive us there in the two hours before our train left for Madrid, he protested. He had lived all his life in Burgos and never been there. "It is far away in a desolate valley over bad roads, Señor" he declared. "The caretaker may be away, and our trip will be in vain. Besides, you would miss your train."

But the more our chauffeur objected, the more we wanted to see this neglected shrine romantically colored by one of the great love affairs of history. Its remoteness only added to its lure. Here was no

Baedekered tourist sight but a poetic spot we could discover for ourselves. So we insisted.

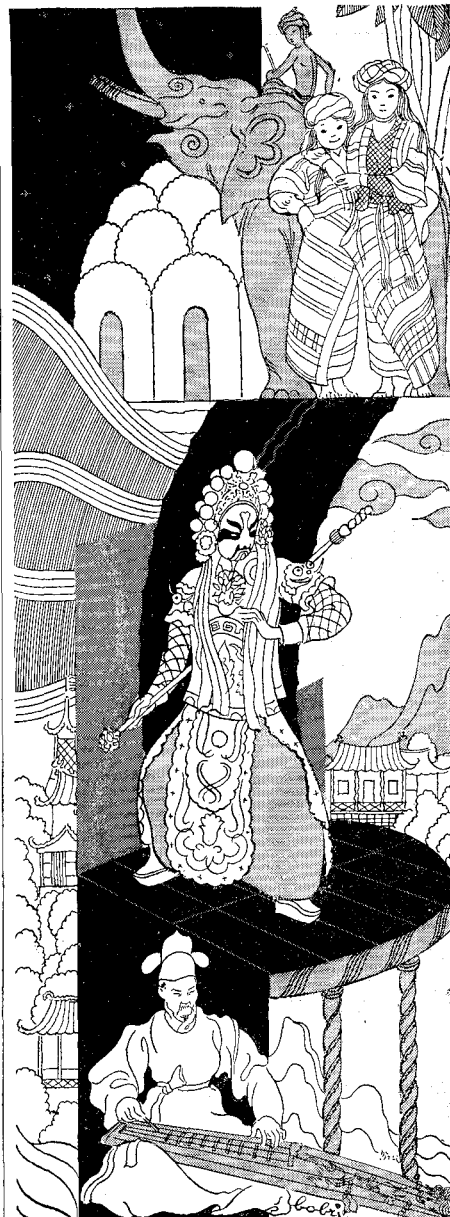
AS THE SPIRES of the Burgos Cathedral disappeared behind us, the Castilian plain stretched dull-green and brown to the horizon, solitary but for a scattered herd of cattle grazing on the brown stubble, or a mounted herdsman, fierce and watchful, wrapped in a great coat, his dog crouched beside him. The wind, without a tree to break its violence, whisked the dust of the road over our car in clouds or sang and hissed around us like a mountain torrent.

Occasionally we would pass large white farms, but most of the treeless roadside was given up to dust and wind. Just as the elements threatened to engulf us, from the clouds of dust would appear long troops of charcoal-laden donkeys, trotting merrily along to the tinkle of the large bell worn by the leader, and driven by men in blue shirts and corduroy trousers, red kerchiefs around their heads like gypsies.

At a fork the road to Madrid turned to the right, while we dashed off to the left on a cart track filled with rocks over which our car leaped like a mountain goat. But our chauffeur had warned us back in Burgos. It was too late now to protest.

When our journey across this rocky plain had begun to seem not only a rough but an interminable pilgrimage, we were cheered to see ahead of us a village, so much the color of the parched soil around it as almost to fade into it. The Plaza Mayor proved to be a square of wind-swept dust, deserted except for a gayly festooned mule hitched before a little brown square-towered church, around which the houses clustered like frightened chicks around their mother hen.

The chauffeur disappeared into a hut. Tom and I, waiting in the car outside in



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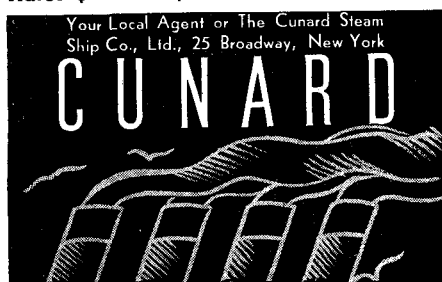
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Travel

the blinding sunshine, proved a sensation in this village that saw few strangers. The deserted square quickly filled with people who issued from the tawny houses around us. Housewives, passing with baskets laden with bright colored vegetables, stopped to stare at us. A girl, a brass water jug on her head, wedged her way through the crowds of curious ragged children clustered around our car.

As the minutes passed without our chauffeur reappearing, I was afraid that Tom would declare that we must return to Burgos without seeing our convent — or miss the train. But finally our driver appeared with a smiling Castilian woman, who dipped us a curtsy before she climbed into the front seat beside the chauffeur. She held a key of ornate workmanship red with rust.

"She has not unlocked the convent of San Pedro de Cardena for five years," the chauffeur explained his delay as he started his engine. "She had forgotten where she kept the key. Finally she found it under her *fiesta* dress."

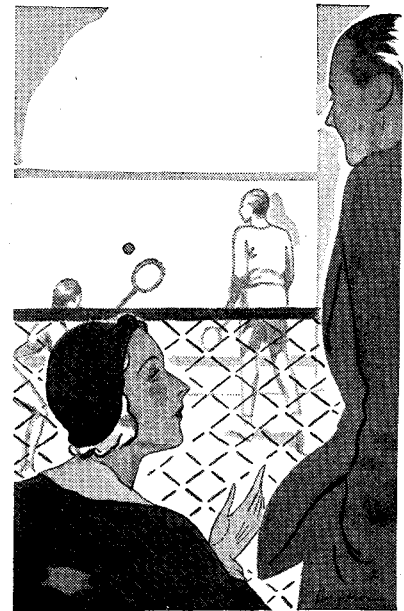
Again we started across the vast barren plain of Castile by an even rougher road than before. The village quickly faded behind us into the tannish soil. The market carts of the Madrid road no longer diverted us. Across the plain as far as we could see there was neither tree nor sign of human life. I began to remember the bandits who still infest the unpoliced back roads of Spain. Would our driver rob us in this lonely spot? Was the caretaker an accomplice? Where, *where* was the convent of San Pedro de Cardena? Was any place worth coming so far at such risk to see?

"Are you sure you know the way?" Tom spoke anxiously to the chauffeur. "The convent's said to be only six miles from Burgos. We must have come twenty!"

"Six miles, Señor?" the youth flung over his shoulder as he navigated his car through the ruts. "Possibly as the crow flies but not by the road."

To distract my mind from fleeting time and the rough road, I visualized the Cid, before going to fight the Moors, riding out along this road to say farewell to Ximena, his adored wife, whom he was leaving with the nuns. Years later, I saw the Cid's dead body being borne this way on the back of Babieca, the favorite charger, his sorrowing followers bringing him from Valencia to the spot of which he had dreamed — the convent of San Pedro de Cardena.

Our car maneuvered a steep hill down into a ravine whose green vegetation watered by a brook was refreshing in contrast to the arid plain roundabout. Here, among a cluster of poplars stood a church, its steeples not high enough to be seen from the plain above. Hence the suddenness with which we came upon it.



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