

# ATHELSTAN RENDALL

## WHERE SHALL JOHN GO?

### XII: TENERIFFE

MY DEAR JOHN,

You have already had a good deal of advice as to where to go next winter, the Government willing. One of your great uncles plumped for Egypt, I remember, every time, and was happy nowhere else. I expect you hardly remember Uncle Cedric. He had a simpler taste. He liked a place as little touched by civilization as possible, and year after year went to Teneriffe. All he asked was a good climate, fairly simple conditions of living, and no fuss. He liked to know the people of the place he lived in—not one class, but all kinds, and he worked hard at his Spanish so that he could talk to them. Before long he could talk to his barber and tobacconist, to the hotel gardeners, the labourers and the fishermen, and especially to the women who came to the hotel to take orders for needlework and sell flowers. They were all his friends. He didn't really like travelling. He said he wanted existence under perfect physical and mental conditions. And by mental he meant there must be no, or at least few, sightseers, cinema or dancing fans, no shopping streets or beggars. A few of his own race he liked, but only if they remained silent till they had something worth saying. I wonder how far his taste suits you. A bit cornery was old Cedric, but I think he got hold of the right end of the stick. Anyhow, I've followed his example, and from '32 up to the war I never deserted the place, and here I am back again, I am thankful to say.

How do you get there? There is a good air route: London to Madrid one hop; Madrid to Las Palmas another, and then half an hour flying to Teneriffe. This costs (single) about £50. The Olsen oil boats from London, with some sixteen good cabins, go weekly. Return fare is £36 and your car costs £10 each way. Before the war I could afford to go out *via* Paris, Irun, Madrid, Seville and Cadiz, and the two-day sea voyage by the excellent boats of the trans-Mediterranean Company. I hope, John, you will try that route. When you do, remember that one or two stops off the

train are well worth while. I needn't tell you what you can see at Burgos, Madrid and Seville, all of which you will pass through. But not yet: the British consuls in Spain write me that Spanish trains are at present impossible.

But now comes the question: do you want to go to Teneriffe? Why not somewhere else? Well, here is some personal experience for what it's worth. My dear John, up to the age of fifty I was chained to the House of Commons and to earning my living—or thought I was. Only the Riviera for a fortnight was possible in those days. When I became my own master I experimented first in South Africa. What a joy that was. I was—and you would be—entranced by Cape Town and its peninsula. I even liked Johannesburg, and motored from that place all round the east coast back to Cape Town. En route I climbed—or my pony did—the Drakensburg Mountains. All your pet words, John, go for that journey: 'Marvellous', 'Wonderful', 'Incredible', though riding all day in flannels is not kind to the backside. It was then that I discovered Hermanos and stayed there some months in the following two years. It is ninety miles from Cape Town and twenty from a railway station. Two or three good second-class hotels, and not expensive. Bathing on a glorious coast, a sandy beach, flat red-hot rocks to lie on with marvellous seas in stormy weather. Mountains half a mile from the village where rare wild flowers and an occasional springbok may be found. Why, you may well ask, leave such a climate and such a place for Teneriffe? My main reason is that two voyages covering nearly forty days is too big a price to pay even for South Africa. And remember that a first-class return fare was about £170 before the war and now is much more.

I know some of the family are interested in the West Indies, and I expect they'll tell you to go there—and you certainly must one day. I did a few years ago in a very uncomfortable old banana boat which took a good month on the double voyage. Jamaica is very interesting and very English. Hotels good and expensive. Continuous great heat, no cool nights, mosquito nets essential. There are many good places to stay at, but I think the high spot is a very English hotel run by an English colonel and his wife at Ocho Rios. There you bathe almost under the branches of palm trees, coconuts are falling into the sea, and you return to what is a perfectly run country house in tropical gardens.

Now about Teneriffe. You will arrive at Santa Cruz, the capital of the island and a busy port. On no account stay there. The hotels are all very indifferent. Drive straight to Puerto Orotava—twenty-five miles across the island—and make that your headquarters. Some English and German business people live at Santa Cruz but the residential English—some thirty or forty families—have made their homes at Orotava. Now, before I attempt greater heights, let me give you the material advantages Orotava can offer. As to hotels: the largest and best is the Taoro, a big three-sided building with large and lofty rooms. Its nominal front—really its back—looks at the lovely little port with its little harbour some three hundred feet below the hotel, and in the far distance the island of La Palma. On its other side the hotel rooms face the morning and afternoon sun, and from most of them you see the fascinating old town of Villa Orotava some way up the mountain with the wonderful peak dominating all. This hotel has well-laid-out gardens, some hundred bedrooms, most of which have recently, following a fire, been rebuilt with very fine bathrooms attached. The hotel has quite a fair billiards table. The food and cooking since the war have actually improved and no hotel that I have met with in England or France gives such plentiful meat, fish, eggs and butter. All vegetables, oranges, lemons, bananas, grape fruit are in great abundance. The Taoro Hotel garden has dozens of paw-paw trees laden with fruit which will be ripe in February. Alcoholic drinks since the war are at English prices for whisky; Spanish gin half our price, ditto brandy and vermouthe. But the local wines, quite drinkable, remain cheap, and at eight pesetas a bottle (pesetas are sixty-six to the pound sterling) one's wine need only cost two shillings a bottle in the hotels and about half that price in the shops. The Taoro charges, which were from four to five pounds weekly pre-war, are now from about fifty pesetas with full board. Cheaper hotels can be found in the puerto. They give excellent accommodation and one of them feeds you well on a genuine Spanish diet. A particularly nice section of the English middle-class fills these hotels regularly. Within a quarter of a mile of the Taoro is an English church (closed), a club that nestles in a perpetual bower of flowers and offers tennis, badminton, bowls and golf croquet on excellent lawns. Close by is the English library with several thousand books. All one's 'laches' in the reading of the novels, biographies and the lighter literature of the

last fifty or seventy years can be made good here. Amongst other books I found a complete edition of Henry James, Greville's, Creevy's and Croker's Memoirs and lots of books few libraries can offer one, and was amazed to find how many of them I hadn't read. I think, John, if you admit to a partially misspent youth, you might do worse than have a look at this library if you decide to come out. Mrs. Grundy has rather governed the selection, but maybe it's a healthy change of diet for a short time.

Now a word as to the bathing at the puerto. It is true that during the months we leave our wintry shores for the sunny ones of Teneriffe, the seas there are often so tremendous that none but the local youths dare enter them to swim. They are truly marvelous swimmers and perform miracles of daring that draw gasps of admiration from visitors. These can take a foam bath on the shore. Facing a big wave and being rolled over by it is quite good fun. Alternatively, long ropes attached to the little esplanade are bound to you if you want to be a little more courageous, and meanwhile the local guardia is supposed to protect you though he certainly couldn't. On ordinary days you swim in the sea or in pools among the rocks, and then lie on the black sand—black because of its volcanic origin—your skin growing darker every minute in the hot sun while you gaze up, spellbound at the peak, white and silver against the dark foothills and cerulean sky. At your choice, and for the more timid, a most excellent swimming bath, open, has recently been made close to the sea. Another almost natural swimming bath, carved out of the rocks and refilled by the sea at high tide is to be found at Bajamar. This bath has the charm of almost complete solitude. It is about fifteen miles from Orotava and about five from Tacaronte.

Now as to the country. Always the Peak: the wonderful Peak dominates all. Twelve thousand feet in height, and usually covered with snow during January and February. But from the puerto up to some eight or nine thousand feet there is a bewildering and constant change in the country you look at. You must take your car to Teneriffe, John. Best to buy an old Ford. All the local cars are Fords, and you can therefore get a Ford mended and new parts if necessary. But you can still hire car and driver very cheaply. Your first drive must be up the Peak. Three miles will bring you to Villa Orotava, a considerable place and of much beauty. Many of the old houses have handsome lattice-work

balconies, and if one is fortunate enough to be invited inside one finds a cool and quiet patio which seems to breathe the romance of another time. There will be flowers and plants and a tiny fountain, a heavily carved stairway leading to a gallery above, and rooms with ornately painted ceilings. Go and see the hospital, an old building superbly placed. You will see in the enormous old door a revolving barrel-shaped box. Outside it presents nothing remarkable. But push it and it moves round and brings into view the interior of the box in which is a tiny bed all made up and ready for a baby. Here the matron told us any girl might bring her child and leave it with the assurance that it would be looked after and no questions asked. I confess I wondered. The matron was a dear old thing, and talked very freely in fair English. She shook hands with my friend when we left, and I held out my hand for the same purpose. But she smiled and, refusing my hand, said very sweetly: 'With a man I may not'. From the Villa the road rises more sharply, and you are soon passing through small hamlets, and before long there are only isolated cottages. Each cottage has its flowers and small pieces of ground on which a little corn and vegetables are grown. Innumerable children spring up from the roadside spurred by the sound of the car, offering bunches of flowers. Another three or four miles and we are at Agua Manza. This is the water-head where by an ingenious system it is collected and carried by large surface pipes to the valley below. In the barrancos, as one drives through the heather, the unusual sight of beehives is to be seen apparently carved out of the underlying cliffs. Honey should be plentiful and good in Teneriffe, but it is neither. Still climbing, you proceed on your way and will notice how good your road is. This is a monument to Primo de Rivera, the dictator placed in power by Alfonso, the last Spanish king, in a forlorn effort to save his throne. No doubt the road was made to add to the attractiveness of the island, but with a population always on the verge of starvation it is hard to justify. On you go, passing miles of high-standing heather with the trees getting more stunted and the mountain more stony. At every turn of the road you find yourself facing the sea, the Villa and the lovely country you have passed through. Eventually the road ceases to climb and enters the vast volcanic plain that surrounds the Peak. Here there is a plateau of rock and scrub. Find a windless spot and have your

lunch. Afterwards you can walk or drive to the observatory where, I am afraid, friend Franco has failed to find the funds necessary for much research. Don't forget to grease your face and hands whilst on the mountains unless your skin is already pretty hardened. Otherwise the sun and the wind at this height will leave you sorry you came.

Another interesting visit of a different kind can be made to Laguna. This is the University centre, as well as the ecclesiastical. The cathedral is worth looking at, and many of the houses have merits which are not ordinary. The town is in the real agricultural centre of the island and, being much higher than Orotava, is much cooler. From Laguna several choices are open. I think you should first take the drive over the wonderful new road to Esperanza. This, if your headquarters are at Orotava, is a day's excursion. You will eventually come to what is, on a small scale, a truly magnificent forest of huge trees and luxuriant plants of great variety and size. There are lovely open spaces, steep inclines and unexpected views to be got of sea and island as you climb. It was at Esperanza that Franco hatched his conspiracy against the Republican Government, and an announcement to this effect in politer language is to be found on one of the trees. This makes a splendid picnic place. As you eat your lunch leaning against a fallen tree, women of the village below come down the hillsides with stacks of wood and other fuel loaded on the backs of mules. They are accompanied by small children, some of whom, though very shy, probably stop behind to watch you eat your lunch with longing eyes. They never come very near or annoy, but wistfully stand and stare. You can do something for them if the hotel has provided you with any dry bread. Alas, if you have only bread and butter to offer they refuse it. They don't use butter in their homes and won't touch it. Another good day's drive you will again go to Laguna, but turning left instead of right, you make for the high hills or mountains of Mercedes. On this drive you pass through the most highly cultivated land Tenerife possesses, and as your road rises you find yourself in roads deeply dug out of the mountain side, and once again in the midst of luxuriant vegetation. You reach the top and find a shack where I think some form of local wine can be obtained, and there is a bit of flat land where you can park your car. From there you walk where you will in as wild a piece of country as you can desire. Some walks take you to the tops of various small

peaks from which you will see parts of the island you have never seen before and scattered homesteads in lonely spots.

Those who genuinely want to explore the island are somewhat cramped by the difficulty of finding accommodation, and must generally limit themselves to daily excursions. At Vilaflor, the highest and most attractive little place in the Canaries, an American woman before the war found its primitive solitude so enchanting that she rented a humble little fonda, isolated 130 feet above the village, and was willing occasionally to put up small parties. I hear she has gone and do not yet know if her fonda is still open. A long dusty drive from Santa Cruz with innumerable hairpin bends on the south of the island is one way of reaching Vilaflor, perched up 4,540 feet on the mountain side; but up and over the range from Orotava and down the other side on mules is the real way to go and one never to be forgotten.

Drive up 7,000 feet to meet your muleteers. They will have set out at first light to be in time for the rendezvous. This will be in the Cañadas, the vast basin surrounded by distant mountains and from which the Peak rises solitary and formidable in the middle. It would seem impossible to discover a living soul in this scene of desolation, a pumice-stone desert intersected by lava streams and many-coloured cinder heaps; nevertheless your driver will soon find the little group of threadbare men waiting for you with their skinny mules.

Then take your choice of these rather sorry steeds, and mounted you will pick your way over the villainous surface towards the Pass of Guajara (7,874 feet). Anyone, however ignorant of a horse's back, may mount such mules with confidence. They slither down slopes of lava, climb rocks and balance on the precipitous edges and, defying their masters and riders, choose little detours which invariably prove the best way.

On the southern slopes the stony paths continue unrelieved by vegetation, unless you have the good fortune to spy, on a cinder heap, a patch of the rare endemic violet (*Viola Teydensis*) which may even be found flourishing bravely at 11,000 feet.

Late in the afternoon the pines become numerous, some of immense size, and the sound of rushing water quickens the pace of the tired animals, and Vilaflor with its innumerable little terraces of cultivation, a haze of pink almond blossom and wreaths of blue smoke rising from the huddle of rough stone cottages,



makes a sweet sight for tired sunburnt eyes. The rooms at St. Rocque are bare and very simple, and you wash in icy spring water in enamel basins, but a heavenly content creeps over you as you sit eating eggs and honey on the little terrace, drowsy with the strong air and the smell of the pines and watch the sunset warm the distant peaks of Gran Canaria. If you have thick coats and are not sluggards, you will be up at 5.30 a.m. to watch the sunrise, a 'glory chambered mortals view not'. Later you will take lunch and mules again and make excursions into heights and barrancos of romantic beauty, and with views of other islands surpassingly lovely; and at night, if you have the right approach and remember to take up a bottle of wine from the village, you may persuade the muleteers and their women to come and sing to you. They are very shy, and their songs are more plaintive than musical; but we warmed them all up by teaching them Auld Lang Syne. Grasping the very horny hands of these peasants was a queer sensation, but it won their hearts and we heard them murmuring 'Simpatico', and our hostess wrote us weeks after that they were still singing the air of Auld Lang Syne on the mountain side.

Here, John, I am going to interpolate a few words about the climate. If you are as wise as I think you are your reaction to that remark will be: 'Is this chap as big a liar as the rest of my advisers?' Well, here are the facts. I have stayed in Orotava for four months at a time and had only one day's rain. In other years there have been hurricanes lasting a day and a half with wind and rain so heavy that the banana fields have been partially destroyed, and some of the big windows of the hotel smashed. But this is very rare. In a really 'bad' season there is very little rain, not much wind, and the worst that happens is that there is a larger proportion of dull, but not cold, days. On the whole it is fair to compare Teneriffe's winter months to our very best and warmest summer weather. That means that at midday you may think it a bit too warm. But the remedies are easy for that. There is the seashore with always a gentle breeze. And there are the drives to higher climes. In a quarter of an hour in your car you can be two or three miles up on the way to the Peak, and at once in a cooler



zone, braced up and happy to return to the warmer climate you left.

This discourse to you, John, is a mixture of information picked up on my many long visits and of my doings, excursions and gossips with Teneriffians of all sorts and has made me very interested in the people. You probably know that their main job is the growing of bananas at horribly low wages. These got better after the first Great War and by interesting means. The men struck and were out for a long period and were approaching starvation and defeat. The two largest firms of growers, one English and the other American, were willing to grant the men's claim when pressure from the local Spanish growers induced them to abandon their tardy sense of justice. Suddenly the Left-wing intellectuals at Santa Cruz took a hand in the game and let the English dock workers know what the fight was about. The dock workers were impressed and refused to unload the banana boats unless the men's demands were granted. Following this the directors of the two big companies conferred and sent orders to Teneriffe that the men's demands were to be granted. The Spanish growers had to come to heel and the men won when on the point of giving in. So you see, John, that our old friend the brotherhood of man is not a complete fiction. The mass of the workers are kind and have excellent manners. They wear cotton clothes which are always clean but seem to me a bit cold for much of the weather. During the Spanish War they seemed 'Red' to a man and 'Socialism' was chalked up on many a wall. They have little use for their church and when the Republicans won the last election their elation found vent in processions which rather alarmed the upper classes and the English residents. Franco was the governor of Teneriffe at the moment when he left it to fight against the Republic in Spain. But he saw to it that all the Left leaders were imprisoned on the hulks at Santa Cruz or in prisons on land before he left. Thenceforth there were horrible beatings and many cruel deaths. Most of the population were dumb from fear whilst the employers and, alas, the English residents, made Franco their hero and became Fascists to a man and woman. These

Francophils nourished the amusing fiction that the masses were really with them and would say so but for their tyrannical leaders. But I got much evidence from women who did odd jobs for us and from drivers of hired cars that the moment they thought they could safely unburden their souls they showed an intense hatred of Franco and all he stood for. But that, of course, was pre-war and there seems now to be a general tendency to avoid talk of politics altogether.

I have met a few of the Teneriffe landowners and banana growers, but chiefly their sons who generally seem to manage the business. They have generally been to English and German schools for a year or two. They have a slight acquaintance with both languages and often a little French. Surprisingly these brief excursions to foreign climes seem to have provided them with no cultural background and not the faintest knowledge of the trend of world affairs. But they have considerable charm and it is always pleasant to have them to dine. Their views on such questions as their duty, political, economic and moral to their fellow subjects on whose labour they live are either non-existent or archaic past belief. But, of course, they are devout Catholics to a man. And to me the mere incredibility of their opinions makes it amusing to meet them.

There, John, is my picture of Teneriffe, and I hope you may soon join me there and we will bathe in its warm sea-water and re-do some of my excursions.

## CORRESPONDENCE

*To the Editor of HORIZON*

22 January 1947

IN the name of the CIAM (Les Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) to which attend the leading modern architects, I would like to communicate to you our disagreement about the way of putting the Lawn Road Flats into a group of ridiculous houses in your December number, 1946. It seems to us absolutely absurd that the building of Wells Coates, erected in 1934 as the first modern building in England after the sleep of three decades, is brought in that kind of relation, and completely inadequate with the literary and artistic line of your highly estimated magazine.

Very sincerely yours,

S. GIEDION,

Secretary-General to the CIAM

*To the Editor of HORIZON*

10 January 1947

READING the December issue of HORIZON I was baffled to find the Lawn Road Flats near Belsize Park, London, brandished under the caption 'Ugly Buildings Competition'.

I lived in these from 1934-7 and remember the building, which I know very well, to be cheerful and good to live in. Its design—by Wells Coates—is a result of careful study of contemporary living. If the colour of the building should be unattractive at present this cannot veil the basic soundness of this handsome building of which I thought London could be proud.

I fail to understand the point of view of the jury making this derogative award.

Very truly yours,

WALTER GROPIUS

*Dear HORIZON*

I ALSO think that Lawn Road Flats are hideous. Photographed from the other side perhaps they would be less so. At the beginning of the war I lived in one, and did give it some high marks for practical good ideas and convenience, but it was box-like and claustrophobic with a perpetual smell of cooking drifting in which made me sick.

I think it a pity that when awarding the ugly prize you didn't know the architect, date, etc., since to me the fact that Lawn Road tried so hard and was cracked up to be the best that anyone could produce increased the horror. No doubt it made useful and sensible practical advances but it is monstrous to look at and, after all, the competition was for looks.

JANELIA SINCLAIR LOUITT