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START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOHN BULL ON THE GUADALQUIVIR

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JOHN BULL ON THE GUADALQUIVIR.

I AM an Englishman, living, as all Englishman should do, in England, and my wife would not, I think, be well pleased were any one to insinuate that she were other than an Englishwoman; but in the circumstances of my marriage I became connected with the south of Spain, and the narrative which I am to tell requires that I should refer to some of those details.

The Pomfrets and Daguilars have long been in trade together in this country, and one of the partners has usually resided at Seville for the sake of the works which the firm there possesses. My father, James Pomfret, lived there for ten years before his marriage; and since that and up to the present period, old Mr. Daguilar has always been on the spot. He was, I believe, born in Spain, but he came very early to England; he married an English wife, and his sons had been educated exclusively in England. His only daughter, Maria Daguilar, did not pass so large a proportion of her early life in this country, but she came to us for a visit at the age of seventeen, and when she returned I made up my mind that I most assuredly would go after her. So I did, and she is now sitting on the other side of the fireplace with a legion of small linen habiliments in a huge basket by her side.

I felt, at the first, that there was something lacking to make my cup of love perfectly delightful. It was very sweet, but there was wanting that flower of romance which is generally added to the heavenly draught by a slight admixture of opposition. I feared that the path of my true love would run too smooth. When Maria came to our house, my mother and elder sister seemed to be quite willing that I should be continually alone with her; and she had not been there ten days before my father, by chance, remarked that there was nothing old Mr. Daguilar valued so highly as a thorough feeling of intimate alliance between the two families which had been so long connected in trade. I was never told that

Maria was to be my wife, but I felt that the same thing was done without words; and when, after six weeks of somewhat elaborate attendance upon her, I asked her to be Mrs. John Pomfret, I had no more fear of a refusal, or even of hesitation on her part, than I now have when I suggest to my partner some commercial transaction of undoubted advantage.

But Maria, even at that age, had about her a quiet sustained decision of character quite unlike anything I had seen in English girls. I used to hear, and do still hear, how much more flippant is the education of girls in France and Spain than in England; and I know that this is shown to be the result of many causes—the Roman Catholic religion being, perhaps, chief offender; but, nevertheless, I rarely see in one of our own young women the same power of a self-sustained demeanour as I meet on the Continent. It goes no deeper than the demeanour, people say. I can only answer that I have not found that shallowness in my own wife.

Miss Daguiar replied to me that she was not prepared with an answer; she had only known me six weeks, and wanted more time to think about it; besides, there was one in her own country with whom she would wish to consult. I knew she had no mother; and as for consulting old Mr. Daguiar on such a subject, that idea, I knew, could not have troubled her. Besides, as I afterwards learned, Mr. Daguiar had already proposed the marriage to his partner exactly as he would have proposed a division of assets. My mother declared that Maria was a foolish chit—in which by-the-bye she showed her entire ignorance of Miss Daguiar's character; my eldest sister begged that no constraint might be put on the young lady's inclinations—which provoked me to assert that the young lady's inclinations were by no means opposed to my own; and my father, in the coolest manner suggested that the matter might stand over for twelve months, and that I might then go to Seville, and see about it! Stand over for twelve months! Would not Maria, long before that time, have been snapped up and carried off by one of those inordinately rich Spanish grandees who are still to be met with occasionally in Andalusia?

My father's dictum, however, had gone forth; and Maria, in the calmest voice, protested that she thought it very wise. I should be less of a boy by that time, she said, smiling on me, but driving wedges between every fibre of my body as she spoke. "Be it so," I said, proudly. "At any rate, I am not so much of a boy that I shall forget you." "And, John, you still have the trade to learn," she added, with her deliciously foreign intonation—speaking very slowly, but with perfect pronunciation. The trade to learn! However, I said not a word, but stalked out

of the room, meaning to see her no more before she went. But I could not resist attending on her in the hall as she started; and, when she took leave of us, she put her face up to be kissed by me, as she did by my father, and seemed to receive as much emotion from one embrace as from the other. "He'll go out by the packet of the 1st April," said my father, speaking of me as though I were a bale of goods. "Ah! that will be so nice," said Maria, settling her dress in the carriage; "the oranges will be ripe for him then!"

On the 17th April I did sail, and felt still very like a bale of goods. I had received one letter from her, in which she merely stated that her papa would have a room ready for me on my arrival; and, in answer to that, I had sent an epistle somewhat longer, and, as I then thought, a little more to the purpose. Her turn of mind was more practical than mine, and I must confess my belief that she did not appreciate my poetry.

I landed at Cadiz, and was there joined by an old family friend, one of the very best fellows that ever lived. He was to accompany me up as far as Seville; and, as he had lived for a year or two at Xeres, was supposed to be more Spanish almost than a Spaniard. His name was Johnson, and he was in the wine trade; and whether for travelling or whether for staying at home—whether for paying you a visit in your own house, or whether for entertaining you in his—there never was (and I am prepared to maintain there never will be) a stancher friend, choicer companion, or a safer guide than Thomas Johnson. Words cannot produce a eulogium sufficient for his merits. But, as I have since learned, he was not quite so Spanish as I had imagined. Three years among the bodegas of Xeres had taught him, no doubt, to appreciate the exact twang of a good, dry sherry; but not, as I now conceive, the exactest flavour of the true Spanish character. I was very lucky, however, in meeting such a friend, and now reckon him as one of the stanchest allies of the house of Pomfret, Daguilar, and Pomfret.

He met me at Cadiz, took me about the town, which appeared to me to be of no very great interest;—though the young ladies were all very well. But, in this respect, I was then a Stoic, till such time as I might be able to throw myself at the feet of her whom I was ready to proclaim the most lovely of all the Dulcineas of Andalucia. He carried me up by boat and railway to Xeres; gave me a most terrific headache, by dragging me out into the glare of the sun, after I had tasted some half a dozen different wines, and went through all the ordinary hospitalities. On the next day we returned to Puerto, and from thence getting across to St. Lucar and Bonanza, found ourselves on the banks of the Guadalquivir, and took our places in the boat for Seville. I need say but little to

my readers respecting that far-famed river. Thirty years ago we in England generally believed that on its banks was to be found a pure elysium of pastoral beauty; that picturesque shepherds and lovely maidens here fed their flocks in fields of asphodel; that the limpid stream ran cool and crystal over bright stones and beneath perennial shade; and that every thing on the Guadalquivir was as lovely and as poetical as its name. Now, it is pretty widely known that no uglier river oozes down to its bourn in the sea through unwholesome banks of low mud. It is brown and dirty; ungifted by any scenic advantage; margined for miles upon miles by huge, flat, expansive fields, in which cattle are reared,—the bulls wanted for the bullfights among other; and birds of prey sit constant on the shore, watching for the carcasses of such as die. Such are the charms of the golden Guadalquivir.

At first we were very dull on board that steamer. I never found myself in a position in which there was less to do. There was a nasty smell about the little boat which made me almost ill; every turn in the river was so exactly like the last, that we might have been standing still; there was no amusement except eating, and that, when once done, was not of a kind to make an early repetition desirable. Even Johnson was becoming dull, and I began to doubt whether I was so desirous as I once had been to travel the length and breadth of all Spain. But about noon a little incident occurred which did for a time remove some of our tedium. The boat had stopped to take in passengers on the river; and, among others, a man had come on board dressed in a fashion that, to my eyes, was equally strange and picturesque. Indeed, his appearance was so singular, that I could not but regard him with care, though I felt at first averse to stare at a fellow-passenger on account of his clothes. He was a man of about fifty, but as active apparently as though not more than twenty five; he was of low stature, but of admirable make; his hair was just becoming grizzled, but was short and crisp and well cared for; his face was prepossessing, having a look of good humour added to courtesy, and there was a pleasant, soft smile round his mouth which ingratiated one at the first sight. But it was his dress rather than his person which attracted attention. He wore the ordinary Andalucian cap—of which such hideous parodies are now making themselves common in England—but was not contented with the usual ornament of the double tuft. The cap was small, and jaunty; trimmed with silk velvet—as is common here with men careful to adorn their persons; but this man's cap was finished off with a jewelled button and golden filigree work. He was dressed in a short jacket with a stand up collar; and that also was covered with golden buttons and with golden button-holes. It was all gilt down the front, and all lace down the back. The rows of buttons

were double; and those of the more backward row hung down in heavy pendules. His waistcoat was of coloured silk—very pretty to look at; and ornamented with a small sash, through which gold threads were worked. All the buttons of his breeches also were of gold; and there were gold tags to all the button-holes. His stockings were of the finest silk, and clocked with gold from the knee to the ankle.

Dress any Englishman in such a garb and he will at once give you the idea of a hog in armour. In the first place he will lack the proper spirit to carry it off, and in the next place the motion of his limbs will disgrace the ornaments they bear. “And so best,” most Englishmen will say. Very likely; and, therefore, let no Englishman try it. But my Spaniard did not look at like a hog in armour. He walked slowly down the plank into the boat, whistling lowly but very clearly a few bars from an opera tune. It was plain to see that he was master of himself, of his ornaments, and of his limbs. He had no appearance of thinking that men were looking at him, or of feeling that he was beautiful in his attire;—nothing could be more natural than his foot-fall, or the quiet glance of his cheery gray eye. He walked up to the captain, who held the helm, and lightly raised his hand to his cap. The captain, taking one hand from the wheel, did the same, and then the stranger, turning his back to the stern of the vessel, and fronting down the river with his face, continued to whistle slowly, clearly, and in excellent time. Grand as were his clothes they were no burden on his mind.

“What is he?” said I, going up to my friend Johnson with a whisper.

“Well, I’ve been looking at him,” said Johnson—which was true enough; “he’s a — an uncommonly good-looking fellow, isn’t he?”

“Particularly so,” said I; “and got up quite irrespective of expense. Is he a—a—a gentleman, now, do you think?”

“Well, those things are so different in Spain that it’s almost impossible to make an Englishman understand them. One learns to know all this sort of people by being with them in the country, but one can’t explain.”

“No; exactly. Are they real gold?”

“Yes, yes; I dare say they are. They sometimes have them silver gilt.”

“It is quite a common thing, then, isn’t it?” asked I.

“Well, not exactly; that—Ah! yes; I see! of course. He is a torero.”

“A what?”

“A mayo. I will explain it all to you. You will see them about in all places, and you will get used to them.”

“But I haven’t seen one other as yet.”

“No, and they are not all so gay as this, nor so new in their finery, you know.”

“And what is a torero?”

“Well, a torero is a man engaged in bull-fighting.”

“Oh! he is a matador, is he?” said I, looking at him with more than all my eyes.

“No, not exactly that;—not of necessity. He is probably a mayo. A fellow that dresses himself smart for fairs, and will be seen hanging about with the bull-fighters. What would be a sporting fellow in England—only he won’t drink and curse like a low man on the turf there. Come, shall we go and speak to him?”

“I can’t talk to him,” said I, diffident of my Spanish. I had received lessons in England from Maria Daguilar; but six weeks is little enough for making love, let alone the learning of a foreign language.

“Oh! I’ll do the talking. You’ll find the language easy enough before long. It soon becomes the same as English to you, when you live among them.” And then Johnson, walking up to the stranger, accosted him with that good-natured familiarity with which a thoroughly nice fellow always opens a conversation with his inferior. Of course I could not understand the words which were exchanged; but it was clear enough that the “mayo” took the address in good part, and was inclined to be communicative and social.

“They are all of pure gold,” said Johnson, turning to me after a minute, making as he spoke a motion with his head to show the importance of the information.

“Are they indeed?” said I. “Where on earth did a fellow like that get them?” Whereupon Johnson again returned to his conversation with the man. After another minute he raised his hand, and began to finger the button on the shoulder; and to aid him in doing so, the man of the bull-ring turned a little on one side.

“They are wonderfully well made,” said Johnson, talking to me, and still fingering the button. “They are manufactured, he says, at Osuna, and he tells me

that they make them better there than anywhere else.”

“I wonder what the whole set would cost?” said I. “An enormous deal of money for a fellow like him, I should think!”

“Over twelve ounces,” said Johnson, having asked the question; “and that will be more than forty pounds.”

“What an uncommon ass he must be!” said I.

As Johnson by this time was very closely scrutinising the whole set of ornaments I thought I might do so also, and going up close to our friend, I too began to handle the buttons and tags on the other side. Nothing could have been more good-humoured than he was—so much so that I was emboldened to hold up his arm that I might see the cut of his coat, to take off his cap and examine the make, to stuff my finger in beneath his sash, and at last to kneel down while I persuaded him to hold up his legs that I might look to the clocking. The fellow was thorough good-natured, and why should I not indulge my curiosity?

“You’ll upset him if you don’t take care,” said Johnson; for I had got fast hold of him by one ankle, and was determined to finish the survey completely.

“Oh, no, I shan’t,” said I; “a bull-fighting chap can surely stand on one leg. But what I wonder at is, how on earth he can afford it!” Whereupon Johnson again began to interrogate him in Spanish.

“He says he has got no children,” said Johnson, having received a reply, “and that as he has nobody but himself to look after, he is able to allow himself such little luxuries.”

“Tell him that I say he would be better with a wife and couple of babies,” said I—and Johnson interpreted.

“He says that he’ll think of it some of these days, when he finds that the supply of fools in the world is becoming short,” said Johnson.

We had nearly done with him now; but after regaining my feet, I addressed myself once more to the heavy pendules, which hung down almost under his arm. I lifted one of these, meaning to feel its weight between my fingers; but unfortunately I gave a lurch, probably through the motion of the boat, and still holding by the button, tore it almost off from our friend’s coat.

“Oh, I am so sorry,” I said, in broad English.

“It do not matter at all,” he said, bowing, and speaking with equal plainness. And then, taking a knife from his pocket, he cut the pendule off, leaving a bit of torn cloth on the side of his jacket.

“Upon my word, I am quite unhappy,” said I; “but I always am so awkward.” Whereupon he bowed low.

“Couldn’t I make it right?” said I, bringing out my purse.

He lifted his hand, and I saw that it was small and white; he lifted it and gently put it upon my purse, smiling sweetly as he did so. “Thank you, no, señor; thank you, no.” And then, bowing to us both, he walked away down into the cabin.

“Upon my word he is a deuced well-mannered fellow,” said I.

“You shouldn’t have offered him money,” said Johnson; “a Spaniard does not like it.”

“Why, I thought you could do nothing without money in this country. Doesn’t every one take bribes?”

“Ah! yes; that is a different thing; but not the price of a button. By Jove! he understood English, too. Did you see that?”

“Yes; and I called him an ass! I hope he doesn’t mind it.”

“Oh! no; he won’t think anything about it,” said Johnson. “That sort of fellows don’t. I dare say we shall see him in the bull-ring next Sunday, and then we’ll make all right with a glass of lemonade.”

And so our adventure ended with the man of the gold ornaments. I was sorry that I had spoken English before him so heedlessly, and resolved that I would never be guilty of such gaucherie again. But, then, who would think that a Spanish bull-fighter would talk a foreign language? I was sorry, also, that I had torn his coat; it had looked so awkward; and sorry again that I had offered the man money. Altogether I was a little ashamed of myself; but I had too much to look forward to at Seville to allow any heaviness to remain long at my heart; and before I had arrived at the marvellous city I had forgotten both him and his buttons.

Nothing could be nicer than the way in which I was welcomed at Mr. Daguilar’s

house, or more kind—I may almost say affectionate—than Maria’s manner to me. But it was too affectionate; and I am not sure that I should not have liked my reception better had she been more diffident in her tone, and less inclined to greet me with open warmth. As it was, she again gave me her cheek to kiss, in her father’s presence, and called me dear John, and asked me specially after some rabbits which I had kept at home merely for a younger sister; and then it seemed as though she were in no way embarrassed by the peculiar circumstances of our position. Twelve months since I had asked her to be my wife, and now she was to give me an answer; and yet she was as assured in her gait, and as serenely joyous in her tone, as though I were a brother just returned from college. It could not be that she meant to refuse me, or she would not smile on me and be so loving; but I could almost have found it in my heart to wish that she would. “It is quite possible,” said I to myself, “that I may not be found so ready for this family bargain. A love that is to be had like a bale of goods is not exactly the love to suit my taste.” But then, when I met her again in the morning I could no more have quarrelled with her than I could have flown.

I was inexpressibly charmed with the whole city, and especially with the house in which Mr. Daguiar lived. It opened from the corner of a narrow, unfrequented street—a corner like an elbow—and, as seen from the exterior, there was nothing prepossessing to recommend it; but the outer door led by a short hall or passage to an inner door or grille, made of open ornamental iron-work, and through that we entered a court, or patio, as they I called it. Nothing could be more lovely or deliciously cool than was this small court. The building on each side was covered by trellis-work; and beautiful creepers, vines, and parasite flowers, now in the full magnificence of the early summer, grew up and clustered round the windows. Every inch of wall was covered, so that none of the glaring whitewash wounded the eye. In the four corners of the patio were four large orange-trees, covered with fruit. I would not say a word in special praise of these, remembering that childish promise she had made on my behalf. In the middle of the court there was a fountain, and round about on the marble floor there were chairs, and here and there a small table, as though the space were really a portion of the house. It was here that we used to take our cup of coffee and smoke our cigarettes, I and old Mr. Daguiar, while Maria sat by, not only approving, but occasionally rolling for me the thin paper round the fragrant weed with her taper fingers. Beyond the patio was an open passage or gallery, filled also with flowers in pots; and then, beyond this, one entered the drawing-room of the house. It was by no means a princely palace or mansion, fit for the owner of untold wealth. The rooms were not over large nor very numerous; but

the most had been made of a small space, and everything had been done to relieve the heat of an almost tropical sun.

“It is pretty, is it not?” she said, as she took me through it.

“Very pretty,” I said. “I wish we could live in such houses.”

“Oh, they would not do at all for dear old fat, cold, cozy England. You are quite different, you know, in everything from us in the south; more phlegmatic, but then so much steadier. The men and the houses are all the same.”

I can hardly tell why, but even this wounded me. It seemed to me as though she were inclined to put into one and the same category things English, dull, useful, and solid; and that she was disposed to show a sufficient appreciation for such necessities of life, though she herself had another and inner sense—a sense keenly alive to the poetry of her own southern chime; and that I, as being English, was to have no participation in this latter charm. An English husband might do very well, the interests of the firm might make such an arrangement desirable, such a marriage de convenance—so I argued to myself—might be quite compatible with—with heaven only knows what delights of superterrestrial romance, from which I, as being an English thick-headed lump of useful coarse mortality, was to be altogether debarred. She had spoken to me of oranges, and having finished the survey of the house, she offered me some sweet little cakes. It could not be that of such things were the thoughts which lay undivulged beneath the clear waters of those deep black eyes—undivulged to me, though no one else could have so good a right to read those thoughts! It could not be that that noble brow gave index of a mind intent on the trade of which she spoke so often! Words of other sort than any that had been vouchsafed to me must fall at times from the rich curves of that perfect mouth.

So felt I then, pining for something to make me unhappy. Ah, me! I know all about it now, and am content. But I wish that some learned pundit would give us a good definition of romance, would describe in words that feeling with which our hearts are so pestered when we are young, which makes us sigh for we know not what, and forbids us to be contented with what God sends us. We invest female beauty with impossible attributes, and are angry because our women have not the spiritualised souls of angels, anxious as we are that they should also be human in the flesh. A man looks at her he would love as at a distant landscape in a mountainous land. The peaks are glorious with more than the beauty of earth and rock and vegetation. He dreams of some mysterious grandeur of

design which tempts him on under the hot sun, and over the sharp rock, till he has reached the mountain goal which he had set before him. But when there, he finds that the beauty is well-nigh gone, and as for that delicious mystery on which his soul had fed, it has vanished for ever.

I know all about it now, and am, as I said, content. Beneath those deep black eyes there lay a well of love, good, honest, homely love, love of father and husband and children that were to come—of that love which loves to see the loved ones prospering in honesty. That noble brow—for it is noble; I am unchanged in that opinion, and will go unchanged to my grave—covers thoughts as to the welfare of many, and an intellect fitted to the management of a household, of servants, namely, and children, and perchance a husband. That mouth can speak words of wisdom, of very useful wisdom—though of poetry it has latterly uttered little that was original. Poetry and romance! They are splendid mountain views seen in the distance. So let men be content to see them, and not attempt to tread upon the fallacious heather of the mystic hills.

In the first week of my sojourn in Seville I spoke no word of overt love to Maria, thinking, as I confess, to induce her thereby to alter her mode of conduct to myself. “She knows that I have come here to make love to her—to repeat my offer; and she will at any rate be chagrined if I am slow to do so.” But it had no effect. At home my mother was rather particular about her table, and Maria’s greatest efforts seemed to be used in giving me as nice dinners as we gave her. In those days I did not care a straw about my dinner, and so I took an opportunity of telling her. “Dear me,” said she, looking at me almost with grief, “do you not? What a pity! And do you not like music either.” “Oh, yes, I adore it,” I replied. I felt sure at the time that had I been born in her own sunny clime, she would never have talked to me about eating. But that was my mistake.

I used to walk out with her about the city, seeing all that is there of beauty and magnificence. And in what city is there more that is worth the seeing? At first this was very delightful to me, for I felt that I was blessed with a privilege that would not be granted to any other man. But its value soon fell in my eyes, for others would accost her, and walk on the other side, talking to her in Spanish, as though I hardly existed, or were a servant there for her protection. And I was not allowed to take her arm, and thus to appropriate her, as I should have done in England. “No, John,” she said, with the sweetest, prettiest smile, “we don’t do that here; only when people are married.” And she made this allusion to married life out, openly, with no slightest tremor on her tongue.

“Oh, I beg pardon,” said I, drawing back my hand, and feeling angry with myself for not being fully acquainted with all the customs of a foreign country.

“You need not beg pardon,” said she; “when we were in England we always walked so. It is just a custom, you know.” And then I saw her drop her large dark eyes to the ground, and bow gracefully in answer to some salute.

I looked round, and saw that we had been joined by a young cavalier,—a Spanish nobleman, as I saw at once; a man with jet black hair, and a straight nose, and a black moustache, and patent leather boots, very slim and very tall, and—though I would not confess it then—uncommonly handsome. I myself am inclined to be stout, my hair is light, my nose broad, I have no hair on my upper lip, and my whiskers are rough and uneven. “I could punch your head though, my fine fellow,” said I to myself, when I saw that he placed himself at Maria’s side, “and think very little of the achievement.”

The wretch went on with us round the plaza for some quarter of an hour talking Spanish with the greatest fluency, and she was every whit as fluent. Of course I could not understand a word that they said. Of all positions that a man can occupy, I think that that is about the most uncomfortable; and I cannot say that, even up to this day, I have quite forgiven her for that quarter of an hour.

“I shall go in,” said I, unable to bear my feelings, and preparing to leave her. “The heat is unendurable.”

“Oh dear, John, why did you not speak before?” she answered. “You cannot leave me here, you know, as I am in your charge; but I will go with you almost directly.” And then she finished her conversation with the Spaniard, speaking with an animation she had never displayed in her conversations with me.

It had been agreed between us for two or three days before this, that we were to rise early on the following morning for the sake of ascending the tower of the cathedral, and visiting the Giralda, as the iron figure is called, which turns upon a pivot on the extreme summit. We had often wandered together up and down the long dark gloomy aisle of the stupendous building, and had, together, seen its treasury of art; but as yet we had not performed the task which has to be achieved by all visitors to Seville; and in order that we might have a clear view over the surrounding country, and not be tormented by the heat of an advanced sun, we had settled that we would ascend the Giralda before breakfast.

And now, as I walked away from the plaza towards Mr. Daguiar’s house, with

Maria by my side, I made up my mind that I would settle my business during this visit to the cathedral. Yes, and I would so manage the settlement that there should be no doubt left as to my intentions and my own ideas. I would not be guilty of shilly-shally conduct; I would tell her frankly what I felt and what I thought, and would make her understand that I did not desire her hand if I could not have her heart. I did not value the kindness of her manner, seeing that that kindness sprung from indifference rather than passion; and so I would declare to her. And I would ask her, also, who was this young man with whom she was intimate—for whom all her volubility and energy of tone seemed to be employed? She had told me once that it behoved her to consult a friend in Seville as to the expediency of her marriage with me. Was this the friend whom she had wished to consult? If so, she need not trouble herself. Under such circumstances I should decline the connection! And I resolved that I would find out how this might be. A man who proposes to take a woman to his bosom as his wife, has a right to ask for information—ay, and to receive it too. It flashed upon my mind at this moment that Donna Maria was well enough inclined to come to me as my wife, but —. I could hardly define the “buts” to myself, for there were three or four of them. Why did she always speak to me in a tone of childish affection, as though I were a schoolboy home for the holidays? I would have all this out with her on the tower on the following morning, standing under the Giralda.

On that morning we met together in the patio, soon after five o’clock, and started for the cathedral. She looked beautiful, with her black mantilla over her head, and with black gloves on, and her black morning silk dress—beautiful, composed, and at her ease, as though she were well satisfied to undertake this early morning walk from feelings of good nature—sustained, probably, by some under-current of a deeper sentiment. Well; I would know all about it before I returned to her father’s house.

There hardly stands, as I think, on the earth, a building more remarkable than the cathedral of Seville, and hardly one more grand. Its enormous size; its gloom and darkness; the richness of ornamentation in the details, contrasted with the severe simplicity of the larger outlines; the variety of its architecture; the glory of its paintings; and the wondrous splendour of its metallic decoration, its altar-friezes, screens, rails, gates, and the like, render it, to my mind, the first in interest among churches. It has not the coloured glass of Chartres, or the marble glory of Milan, or such a forest of aisles as Antwerp, or so perfect a hue in stone as Westminster, nor in mixed beauty of form and colour does it possess anything

equal to the choir of Cologne; but, for combined magnificence and awe-compelling grandeur, I regard it as superior to all other ecclesiastical edifices.

It is its deep gloom with which the stranger is so greatly struck on his first entrance. In a region so hot as the south of Spain, a cool interior is a main object with the architect, and this it has been necessary to effect by the exclusion of light; consequently the church is dark, mysterious, and almost cold. On the morning in question, as we entered, it seemed to be filled with gloom, and the distant sound of a slow footstep here and there beyond the transept inspired one almost with awe. Maria, when she first met me, had begun to talk with her usual smile, offering me coffee and a biscuit before I started. "I never eat biscuit," I said, with almost a severe tone, as I turned from her. That dark, horrid man of the plaza—would she have offered him a cake had she been going to walk with him in the gloom of the morning? After that little had been spoken between us. She walked by my side with her accustomed smile; but she had, as I flattered myself, begun to learn that I was not to be won by a meaningless good nature. "We are lucky in our morning for the view!" that was all she said, speaking with that peculiarly clear, but slow pronunciation which she had assumed in learning our language.

We entered the cathedral, and, walking the whole length of the aisle, left it again at the porter's porch at the farther end. Here we passed through a low door on to the stone flight of steps, and at once began to ascend. "There are a party of your countrymen up before us," said Maria; "the porter says that they went through the lodge half an hour since." "I hope they will return before we are on the top," said I, bethinking myself of the task that was before me. And indeed my heart was hardly at ease within me, for that which I had to say would require all the spirit of which I was master.

The ascent to the Giralda is very long and very fatiguing; and we had to pause on the various landings and in the singular belfry in order that Miss Daguiar might recruit her strength and breath. As we rested on one of these occasions, in a gallery which runs round the tower below the belfry, we heard a great noise of shouting, and a clattering of sticks among the bells. "It is the party of your countrymen who went up before us," said she. "What a pity that Englishmen should always make so much noise!" And then she spoke in Spanish to the custodian of the bells, who is usually to be found in a little cabin up there within the tower. "He says that they went up shouting like demons," continued Maria; and it seemed to me that she looked as though I ought to be ashamed of the name of an Englishman. "They may not be so solemn in their demeanour as

Spaniards,” I answered; “but, for all that, there may be quite as much in them.”

We then again began to mount, and before we had ascended much farther we passed my three countrymen. They were young men, with gray coats and gray trousers, with slouched hats, and without gloves. They had fair faces and fair hair, and swung big sticks in their hands, with crooked handles. They laughed and talked loud, and, when we met them, seemed to be racing with each other; but nevertheless they were gentlemen. No one who knows by sight what an English gentleman is, could have doubted that; but I did acknowledge to myself that they should have remembered that the edifice they were treading was a church, and that the silence they were invading was the cherished property of a courteous people.

“They are all just the same as big boys,” said Maria. The colour instantly flew into my face, and I felt that it was my duty to speak up for my own countrymen. The word “boys” especially wounded my ears. It was as a boy that she treated me; but, on looking at that befringed young Spanish Don—who was not, apparently, my elder in age—she had recognised a man. However, I said nothing further till I reached the summit. One cannot speak with manly dignity while one is out of breath on a staircase.

“There, John,” she said, stretching her hands away over the fair plain of the Guadalquivir, as soon as we stood against the parapet; “is not that lovely?”

I would not deign to notice this. “Maria,” I said, “I think that you are too hard upon my countrymen?”

“Too hard! no; for I love them. They are so good and industrious; and come home to their wives, and take care of their children. But why do they make themselves so—so—what the French call gauche?”

“Good and industrious, and come home to their wives!” thought I. “I believe you hardly understand us as yet,” I answered. “Our domestic virtues are not always so very prominent; but, I believe, we know how to conduct ourselves as gentlemen: at any rate, as well as Spaniards.” I was very angry—not at the faults, but at the good qualities imputed to us.

“In affairs of business, yes,” said Maria, with a look of firm confidence in her own opinion—that look of confidence which she has never lost, and I pray that she may never lose it while I remain with her—“but in the little intercourses of the world, no! A Spaniard never forgets what is personally due either to himself

or his neighbours. If he is eating an onion, he eats it as an onion should be eaten.”

“In such matters as that he is very grand, no doubt,” said I, angrily.

“And why should you not eat an onion properly, John? Now, I heard a story yesterday from Don—about two Englishmen, which annoyed me very much.” I did not exactly catch the name of the Don in question but I felt through every nerve in my body that it was the man who had been talking to her on the plaza.

“And what have they done?” said I. “But it is the same everywhere. We are always abused; but, nevertheless, no people are so welcome. At any rate, we pay for the mischief we do.” I was angry with myself the moment the words were out of my mouth, for, after all, there is no feeling more mean than that pocket-confidence with which an Englishman sometimes swaggers.

“There was no mischief done in this case,” she answered. “It was simply that two men have made themselves ridiculous for ever. The story is all about Seville, and, of course, it annoys me that they should be Englishmen.”

“And what did they do?”

“The Marquis D’Almavivas was coming up to Seville in the boat, and they behaved to him in the most outrageous manner. He is here now and is going to give a series of fêtes. Of course he will not ask a single Englishman.”

“We shall manage to live even though the Marquis D’Almavivas may frown upon us,” said I, proudly.

“He is the richest, and also the best of our noblemen,” continued Maria; “and I never heard of anything so absurd as what they did to him. It made me blush when Don — told me.” Don Tomàs, I thought she said.

“If he be the best of your noblemen, how comes it that he is angry because he has met two vulgar men? It is not to be supposed that every Englishman is a gentleman.”

“Angry! Oh, no! he was not angry; he enjoyed the joke too much for that. He got completely the best of them, though they did not know it; poor fools! How would your Lord John Russell behave if two Spaniards in an English railway carriage were to pull him about and tear his clothes?”

“He would give them in charge to a policeman, of course,” said I, speaking of such a matter with the contempt it deserved.

“If that were done here your ambassador would be demanding national explanations. But Almagro did much better;—he laughed at them without letting them know it.”

“But do you mean that they took hold of him violently, without any provocation? They must have been drunk.”

“Oh, no, they were sober enough. I did not see it, so I do not quite know exactly how it was, but I understand that they committed themselves most absurdly, absolutely took hold of his coat and tore it, and—; but they did such ridiculous things that I cannot tell you.” And yet Don Tomàs, if that was the man’s name, had been able to tell her, and she had been able to listen to him.

“What made them take hold of the marquis?” said I.

“Curiosity, I suppose,” she answered. “He dresses somewhat fancifully, and they could not understand that any one should wear garments different from their own.” But even then the blow did not strike home upon me.

“Is it not pretty to look down upon the quiet town?” she said, coming close up to me, so that the skirt of her dress pressed me, and her elbow touched my arm. Now was the moment I should have asked her how her heart stood towards me; but I was sore and uncomfortable, and my destiny was before me. She was willing enough to let these English faults pass without further notice, but I would not allow the subject I drop.

“I will find out who these men were,” said I, “and learn the truth of it. When did it occur?”

“Last Thursday, I think he said.”

“Why, that was the day we came up in the boat, Johnson and myself. There was no marquis there then, and we were the only Englishmen on board.”

“It was on Thursday, certainly, because it was well known in Seville that he arrived on that day. You must have remarked him because he talks English perfectly—though by-the-by, these men would go on chattering before him about himself as though it were impossible that a Spaniard should know their language. They are ignorant of Spanish, and they cannot bring themselves to

believe that any one should be better educated than themselves.”

Now the blow had fallen, and I straightway appreciated the necessity of returning immediately to Clapham where my family resided, and giving up for ever all idea of Spanish connections. I had resolved to assert the full strength of my manhood on that tower, and now words had been spoken which left me weak as a child. I felt that I was shivering, and did not dare to pronounce the truth which must be made known. As to speaking of love, and signifying my pleasure that Don Tomàs should for the future be kept at a distance, any such effort was quite beyond me. Had Don Tomàs been there, he might have walked off with her from before my face without a struggle on my part. “Now I remember about it,” she continued, “I think he must have been in the boat on Thursday.”

“And now that I remember,” I replied, turning away to hide my embarrassment, “he was there. Your friend down below in the plaza seems to have made out a grand story. No doubt he is not fond of the English. There was such a man there, and I did take hold—”

“Oh, John, was it you?”

“Yes, Donna Maria, it was I; and if Lord John Russell were to dress himself in the same way—” But I had no time to complete my description of what might occur under so extravagantly impossible a combination of circumstances, for as I was yet speaking, the little door leading out on to the leads of the tower was opened and my friend, the mayo of the boat, still bearing gewgaws on his back, stepped up on to the platform. My eye instantly perceived that the one pendule was still missing from his jacket. He did not come alone, but three other gentlemen followed him, who, however, had no peculiarities in their dress. He saw me at once and bowed and smiled; and then observing Donna Maria, he lifted his cap from his head, and addressing himself to her in Spanish, began to converse with her as though she were an old friend.

“Señor,” said Maria, after the first words of greeting had been spoken between them; “you must permit me to present to you my father’s most particular friend, and my own,—Mr. Pomfret; John, this is the Marquis D’Almavivas.”

I cannot now describe the grace with which this introduction was effected, or the beauty of her face as she uttered the word. There was a boldness about her as though she had said, “I know it all—the whole story. But, in spite of that you must take him on my representation, and be gracious to him in spite of what he has done. You must be content to do that; or in quarrelling with him you must

quarrel with me also.” And it was done at the spur of the moment—without delay. She, who not five minutes since had been loudly condemning the unknown Englishman for his rudeness, had already pardoned him, now that he was known to be her friend; and had determined that he should be pardoned by others also or that she would share his disgrace. I recognised the nobleness of this at the moment; but, nevertheless, I was so sore that I would almost have preferred that she should have disowned me.

The marquis immediately lifted his cap with his left hand while he gave me his right. “I have already had the pleasure of meeting this gentleman,” he said; “we had some conversation in the boat together.”

“Yes,” said I, pointing to his rent, “and you still bear the marks of our encounter.”

“Was it not delightful, Donna Maria,” he continued, turning to her; “your friend’s friend took me for a torero?”

“And it served you properly, señor,” said Donna Maria, laughing, “you have no right to go about with all those rich ornaments upon you.”

“Oh! quite properly; indeed, I make no complaint; and I must beg your friend to understand, and his friend also, how grateful I am for their solicitude as to my pecuniary welfare. They were inclined to be severe on me for being so extravagant in such trifles. I was obliged to explain that I had no wife at home kept without her proper allowance of dresses, in order that I might be gay.”

“They are foreigners, and you should forgive their error,” said she.

“And in token that I do so,” said the marquis, “I shall beg your friend to accept the little ornament which attracted his attention.” And so saying, he pulled the identical button out of his pocket, and gracefully proffered it to me.

“I shall carry it about with me always,” said I, accepting it, “as a memento of humiliation. When I look at it, I shall ever remember the folly of an Englishman and the courtesy of a Spaniard;” and as I made the speech I could not but reflect whether it might, under any circumstances, be possible that Lord John Russell should be induced to give a button off his coat to a Spaniard.

There were other civil speeches made, and before we left the tower the marquis had asked me to his parties, and exacted from me an unwilling promise that I would attend them. “The señora,” he said, bowing again to Maria, “would, he

was sure, grace them. She had done so on the previous year; and as I had accepted his little present I was bound to acknowledge him as my friend.” All this was very pretty, and of course I said that I would go, but I had not at that time the slightest intention of doing so. Maria had behaved admirably; she had covered my confusion, and shown herself not ashamed to own me, delinquent as I was; but, not the less, had she expressed her opinion, in language terribly strong, of the awkwardness of which I had been guilty, and had shown almost an aversion to my English character. I should leave Seville as quickly as I could, and should certainly not again put myself in the way of the Marquis D’Almavivas. Indeed, I dreaded the moment that I should be first alone with her, and should find myself forced to say something indicative of my feelings—to hear something also indicative of feelings. I had come out this morning resolved to demand my rights and to exercise them—and now my only wish was to run away. I hated the marquis, and longed to be alone that I might cast his button from me. To think that a man should be so ruined by such a trifle!

We descended that prodigious flight without a word upon the subject, and almost without a word at all. She had carried herself well in the presence of Almavivas, and had been too proud to seem ashamed of her companion; but now, as I could well see, her feelings of disgust and contempt had returned. When I begged her not to hurry herself, she would hardly answer me; and when she did speak, her voice was constrained and unlike herself. And yet how beautiful she was! Well, my dream of Spanish love must be over. But I was sure of this; that having known her, and given her my heart, I could never afterwards share it with another.

We came out at last on the dark, gloomy aisle of the cathedral, and walked together without a word up along the side of the choir, till we came to the transept. There was not a soul near us, and not a sound was to be heard but the distant, low pattering of a mass, then in course of celebration at some far-off chapel in the cathedral. When we got to the transept Maria turned a little, as though she was going to the transept door, and then stopped herself. She stood still; and when I stood also, she made two steps towards me, and put her hand on my arm. “Oh, John!” she said.

“Well,” said I; “after all it does not signify. You can make a joke of it when my back is turned.”

“Dearest John!”—she had never spoken to me in that way before—“you must not be angry with me. It is better that we should explain to each other, is it not?”

“Oh, much better. I am very glad you heard of it at once. I do not look at it quite in the same light that you do; but nevertheless—”

“What do you mean? But I know you are angry with me. And yet you cannot think that I intended those words for you. Of course I know now that there was nothing rude in what passed.”

“Oh, but there was.”

“No, I am sure there was not. You could not be rude though you are so free hearted. I see it all now, and so does the marquis. You will like him so much when you come to know him. Tell me that you won’t be cross with me for what I have said. Sometimes I think that I have displeased you, and yet my whole wish has been to welcome you to Seville, and to make you comfortable as an old friend. Promise me that you will not be cross with me.”

Cross with her! I certainly had no intention of being cross, but I had begun to think that she would not care what my humour might be. “Maria,” I said, taking hold of her hand.

“No, John, do not do that. It is in the church, you know.”

“Maria, will you answer me a question?”

“Yes,” she said, very slowly, looking down upon the stone slabs beneath our feet.

“Do you love me?”

“Love you!”

“Yes, do you love me? You were to give me an answer here, in Seville, and now I ask for it. I have almost taught myself to think that it is needless to ask; and now this horrid mischance—”

“What do you mean?” said she, speaking very quickly.

“Why this miserable blunder about the marquis’s button! After that I suppose —”

“The marquis! Oh, John, is that to make a difference between you and me?—a little joke like that?”

“But does it not?”

“Make a change between us!—such a thing as that! Oh, John!”

“But tell me, Maria, what am I to hope? If you will say that you can love me, I shall care nothing for the marquis. In that case I can bear to be laughed at.”

“Who will dare to laugh at you? Not the marquis, whom I am sure you will like.”

“Your friend in this plaza, who told you of all this.”

“What, poor Tomàs!”

“I do not know about his being poor. I mean the gentleman who was with you last night.”

“Yes, Tomàs. You do not know who he is?”

“Not in the least.”

“How droll! He is your own clerk—partly your own, now that you are one of the firm. And, John, I mean to make you do something for him; he is such a good fellow; and last year he married a young girl whom I love—oh, almost like a sister.”

Do something for him! Of course I would. I promised, then and there, that I would raise his salary to any conceivable amount that a Spanish clerk could desire; which promise I have since kept, if not absolutely to the letter, at any rate, to an extent which has been considered satisfactory by the gentleman’s wife.

“But, Maria—dearest Maria—”

“Remember, John, we are in the church; and poor papa will be waiting breakfast.”

I need hardly continue the story further. It will be known to all that my love-suit thrived in spite of my unfortunate raid on the button of the Marquis D’Almavivas, at whose series of fêtes through that month I was, I may boast, an honoured guest. I have since that had the pleasure of entertaining him in my own poor house in England, and one of our boys bears his Christian name.

From that day in which I ascended the Giralda to this present day in which I write, I have never once had occasion to complain of a deficiency of romance either in Maria Dagular or in Maria Pomfret.

***END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOHN BULL ON THE
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