

BARCELONA

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When the soldiers came marching from the barracks of Montjuich into the centre of Barcelona people supposed it was another parade. Parades had been frequent – sabre-rattling gestures supposed by the military authorities to have a sedative effect on the nerves of the populace.

It was not till they opened fire, not till the women out marketing, the breakfasters in the cafés, the street vendors showing their wares, the gardeners tranquilly planting the flowerbeds of the Plaza de Catalonia with scarlet salvia, looked up and saw people falling dead around them, that the sedative effect of this military parade was realized.

It was morning. The workers were already in their factories, safely out of the way. A large body of troops occupied the Hotel Colon, a block-wide building overlooking the Plaza de Catalonia and raking the long, straight boulevard of the Ramblas. Here they sent the guests to the ground floor, the servants to the top floor, and settled themselves and their machine-guns in the remainder of the building. Others continued down the Ramblas, small detachments entering the churches on their route.

What happened then is something which we in England must find almost unbelievable. The police ranged themselves with the people, fighting side by side with members of the middle class, with professors and journalists and intellectuals who left their coffee-cups and their newspapers to make history. The police carried arms already, the others ran to the gunshops, taking what they could find, sporting guns and

automatics, and hunting-knives when nothing better was left them.

Even stranger weapons were utilized. A tram, hastily blinded with some scraps of sheet-metal, was sent at full speed down the Ramblas, through a machine-gun barrage spraying from the heavy Baroque church which has subsequently become so famous and endeared as an exquisite work of art. Where the soldiers had gone in, the tram-cargoes of men with shotguns and pistols followed, though they did not find so easy an access. However, they took the kingdom of heaven by storm, and put the machine-guns out of action. In the sturdily tranquil Barcelona which I saw two months later that tram was running as usual, distinguished, though, from trams of no past by the great wreath of flowers, renewed every morning, which it carried on its bows.

Wearing its proud wreath, it rumbles past the bullet-scarred walls, the trophies of flowers propped here and there against them to mark the death-site of some fighter in the July days, the street-vendors' stalls which line the broad asphalt walk under the trees. Mixed with the old wares, the flowers, the shaving-brushes, the canaries and love-birds, the watermelons, are new wares: militia caps, pistols (toy-pistols to our shame be it spoken), rings and badges and brooches carrying the initials of the anarchist F.A.I. and C.N.T., the Trotskyist P.O.U.M., the Communist P.S.U.C. and U.G.T., the inter-party clenched fist with its motto *No Pasarán* and the hammer and sickle. The bookstalls show new wares, too. Books on political theory, the classics of Marx and Bukharin, Proudhon and Ferrer, the novels of Zola and Rolland and Barbusse. Among them are many treatises – serious, not bawdy – on birth control and sexual hygiene.

On such wares as these the empty sockets of the church windows stare down. They look very queer, these churches, Giant Popes abruptly changed to Giant Pagans: for with their gutted interiors, their unglazed windows, their broken, boarded-up doorways, they carry a sort of dissolute resemblance to Parthenon and Baalbec. Inside them accumulates that peculiar litter which arrives to every derelict building, however made derelict, whether by fire or flood or

earthquake or war or the will of man: mortar and rubble, scraps of paper, scraps of clothing, pigeons' dung and pigeons' feathers.

The barrel-organs rattle out the 'Internationale', at intervals the loudspeakers confirm it. Technically, the broadcasts are pretty bad, the loudspeakers blare and rattle; but the quality of the music broadcast, both classical and popular, is good. It was a shock, even remembering what the B.B.C. is like, to return to the 'popular' programmes of the B.B.C.

It was interesting, too, to compare the commercial art posters still remaining on the walls with the new official posters. These are admirable, with a certain stringent and ascetic quality which exactly echoes the *No Pasarán* of a people who, drilling with broomsticks and fighting against the weight of Europe, drill and fight on. Turning from their sober colouring and grim line to the fading Cadum babies, the public statuary, is as much of a shock as returning to the B.B.C.

But to realize fully what sort of taste the new alliance of worker and artist has driven out one has to visit the torres – the suburban villas where the upper classes enjoyed pure air and a view over Barcelona. If one is English one can undoubtedly swallow a good deal in the way of architectural delirium, if only because we live in a climate which makes any light-coloured building with a great deal of balcony and veranda and top-hammer seem invigoratingly light-hearted. At heart, too, nests the hereditary feeling that people on the Continent dwell naturally in casinos. But swallowing the minarets and the crenellations, the large bastard-Corbusier bathing-huts and the Fitzjohn's Avenue gothic, the toughest stomach quails before the interior decorations of these villas. They can be perfectly studied by those who have a mind to it since their owners left in a hurry, and the State, taking over, has preserved them intact. Or so I believed till at a local Comité I was shown sheet after sheet of typed lists of the valuables taken from these same dwellings: a dinner-service of 120 pieces, in gold; ten embossed wine-coolers, in gold; a chalice in platinum; a washhand set in silver; two grotesque figures, in gold; a coffee service in silver, jewelled.

'Most of them have been melted down. They were of no artistic interest.'

I could well believe it.

Out of the churches a great deal has been taken and placed in museums. Some of these preservations are interesting from other points of view than those of the artist and antiquarian. One church was being burned out when a connoisseur who was present recollected that a certain exceedingly venerable tapestry had been overlooked in the preliminary sifting. He ran forward and beat out the flames which had already begun to consume it. As he did so pieces of charred paper were seen fluttering down. Further inspection showed that the back of the tapestry was wadded with bank-notes.

I heard other stories of non-sacred valuables stored in churches; and it seemed to me extraordinary that a cult sufficiently modern-minded to preserve machine-guns and ammunitions in its churches should not have a more accurate appreciation of the beauties of a bank-balance. I did not discredit the good faith of those who told me these stories, but I supposed that legend, always a quick breeder in a crisis, might have made fifty different versions of one incident.

When I had looked at the rich men's houses, when I had read the lists of the valuables taken therefrom, I revised my opinion. The Spanish aristocracy is in a primitive stage of capitalism, it preserves the medieval brag of possessions, it locks up its money in gold and jewels and keeps the gold and jewels for display.

An amusing example of this was the celebrated boarding-school for young ladies kept by the sisters of the Sacred Heart. No young lady was allowed to enter this establishment (officially sacred to the daughters of the nobility) without a trousseau in which every article of clothing was numbered by a dozen dozen. So valuable was the social prestige of this establishment that the un-enobled rich, equipping their daughters with the requisite 144 nightgowns, bustbodies, etc., strained every nerve and every persuasion to get their daughters received there. So powerful was the tradition of the social prestige that the un-enobled daughters, even when they had been admitted, were

not allowed to mingle with the blue-blooded.

The modesty of our English aristocracy, hanging its womenkind with Ciro pearls and synthetic emeralds while the genuine articles repose in the bank, is unknown to them. So strong is this tradition in Spain that the magnates of Barcelona, to seem aristocrats, did the same. That the tradition has its advantages is proved by the number of empty jewel-cases, bare ruined choirs where late the sweet dollars chinked, which they left behind in the villas. If the laity is thus medieval, no wonder that the church is medieval too, only with Christian humility burying its gold beneath the flagstones, lining its tapestries with bank-notes.

The works of ecclesiastical art are in the museums, the churches are bare and barred. Apologists in this country have tended to stress the first statement, but the second is the more significant. Those systematically gutted interiors are the more impressive when one contrasts them with the preservation of the villas. In the villas was as great, or greater, a demonstration of luxury, idleness, and superbity. In the villas were objects infinitely more desirable as loot than anything the churches could offer. Had the churches been sacked, as some say they were, by a greedy and envious mob, that mob would have sacked the villas with more greed and better satisfaction. But the villas are untouched, and the churches are gutted. They have been cleaned out exactly as sick-rooms are cleaned out after a pestilence. Everything that could preserve the contagion has been destroyed.

It is idle, too, to suggest that this work was the result of a policy imposed on the people by a Marxist leadership. One might well wish that it had been. It would be a feather in the Marxist cap. But actually, Barcelona is an anarchist town, and anarchism does not impose policies. It was the people themselves who, deliberately and systematically, put the churches out of action. So extensive, so thorough a campaign, could not have been carried out unless it were by the will of the people. And it was more than the expression of resentment at finding the churches used as arms-dumps and machine-gun nests. Not every church was so used, but the blameless on this count have not fared any better than the

others. It was a longer, a more universal resentment which stripped the walls and burned the pulpits and confessionals, and barred up the doors, a realization that here, beyond the other strongholds of Fascism and capitalism, was the real stronghold of the oppressors.

I was lucky enough to see one belated example of this. It was reported that in the garden of a suburban villa a religious plaque which had escaped notice was being used as a private praying centre. The local Comité to whom this was reported sent two men with hammers. Seriously, without a vestige of either rage or contempt, they smashed it to bits. Their expressions were exactly those of two conscientious decontaminating officers dealing with a bag of infected linen which had been discovered in a house which was supposed to be free of infection.

A dozen people or so watched the ceremony, and when the plaque had been destroyed one of them drew the men's attention to a garden statue half concealed in bushes. The two men looked at it. 'It's not a saint,' they said, and went away.

Among those lookers-on was a servant girl who had been suspected of worshipping before the plaque. She had had a religious upbringing, she could neither read nor write. While the hammer-blows fell she watched with painful attention. Her face expressed profound animal fear. But it was not on the men that she fixed her terrified stare. It was the plaque itself which she watched with such bewildered and abject terror.