

# A House in Spain—A Reverie

by Samuel Hux (August 2017)



*Moonlight Near Ultrera*, Albert Moulton Foweraker



*Give it a chance to remember, and the mind **does** wander. Occasionally it's a discipline to allow it to do just that.*

Old John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Did he not die in the second act of *Richard II*—"His tongue is now a stringless instrument"—he might

walk away with the play. Before the instrument is unstrung, the old soldier, wise counsellor, man of deeds, has his famous aria on England the “other Eden, demi-paradise . . . Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege / Of wat’ry Neptune.” Strange to think of Gaunt (in his Shakespearean apotheosis somehow *the* Englishman—although in history evidently a man of overweening pride and preening arrogance) declaring himself King of Castile, his second wife being Constance the bastard daughter of Pedro I (“Peter the Cruel”), and invading Spain in 1386 in the doomed pursuit of his claim. He did marry one daughter, however, to the Castilian heir and another to the King of Portugal.

With the Portuguese, the English have had a very special relationship down the years, a treaty of mutual defense signed in 1386 and renewed in one form or another ever since. I’ve heard it said (without believing it) that the bulls are not killed in Portugal so as not to offend English sensibilities. I prefer the Spanish form, brutal as it is: some recognition that the final act is, after all, death.

I think of John of Gaunt as a hard drinking man, perhaps because his men were so reputed to be, perhaps because so many English I know in Spain are, and a couple or three look more or less as I imagine Gaunt to have looked—erect, bearded, weather-beaten. Some people will tell you that Lord Nelson brought gin to his headquarters at Mahón on Menorca, others that he found it there and brought it to England; it hardly matters. But “sherry” is definitely really *Jérez*, and one of the larger bottlers of brandy in Spain, with its logo a bull, bears the clearly English name of Osborne.

I first read the story of Gaunt’s Spanish venture, as told by the Renaissance chronicler Froissart, in the house in Spain of an Englishman who died, according to his Spanish common-law wife, of much too much brandy. He was a painter and, she said, sometimes dipped his brush onto the pallet and sometimes into the constant brandy snifter.

I never met him, but I adored her very much, at least as much as is proper toward a person who was twenty years my senior and was my landlady. I would push more rent money on her than she requested; it was absurdly low because I was, by her insistence, English, as her *marido* had been. No, I would tell her, I'm not really English, I am a *norteamericano* or *estadounidense* ("United States-er"), but she'd introduce me to friends as *el inglés*.

We are closer in age now. Indeed, I am the elder, as I assume the dead do not age. I would have wished her death, and the surrounding circumstances, to have been more serene, noble, dignified. The death was . . . merely what a death can be . . . and the surrounding circumstances a grim comedy. I hope her Englishman, Harry, loved her presence as much as she did his memory. The house was full of English books she could not read, the *sala* dominated by a family crest and an enormous portrait of a Gaunt-like Englishman. "No, it's not Harry, but his grandfather. Regal, isn't he?" she said to me. I like to think her love returned, and I dismissed the rumor that it was but rarely.

Spanish affection *is* rarely returned by the English. Or by those other English, *los estadounidenses*. The American style of non-reciprocation I find at last milder—a slight condescension as when the Spaniard is confused with some Hollywood version of a lazy Mexican. The English style, at least that of a certain class, upper or in that direction, is akin to the French—barely disguised contempt for an inferior: "Spanish is not a proper language," says one unilingual English acquaintance who lives in Spain, chosen land of the Tory pensioner.

"Why do they not learn our language if they live here?" a Spanish friend asks me, being overly generous and courteous to Americans it seems to me. "Well, that's not quite fair," I answer; "That one speaks it quite well—better than I do, admit it—and this other one is absolutely fluent." But my friend is right in a way; perhaps he

responds to an annoying tendency to flatten the most common and easy Spanish words as if they should be pronounced some other-than-Spanish way. *Pan*, for instance, ceases to sound like the bread it is, sounds like something you boil water in. An American painter who lives in Spain asked me why the English, so practiced after all in the use of the broad "a," lose the capacity to say it when they want butter (*mantequilla*) for their bread.

My own Spanish is nothing to boast of, so I do not wish to be unfair. But if one meets, say, a Dutch, Swedish, or German resident of Spain, it's an impertinence to assume he or she does not have a working grasp of the language; if one meets an English or American resident one's skepticism is at least an educated assumption. Of course German no longer travels as well as it once did, and of course Dutch or Swedish travel hardly at all, and their speakers have traditionally learned another language or two. On the other hand, Spanish is not a popular language of instruction in northern Europe: they learn it *in* Spain. And while it's true that practice in language acquisition facilitates the acquisition of yet another, and that we English and Americans are poorly practiced, that's no answer. We are poorly practiced by our own choice, and, besides, I'm not speaking of expertise but rather of a simple willed acquisition of a tentative grasp that works outside a restaurant. I suspect instead a kind of imperial mentality.

The principal jewel in the English crown was given to Gaunt's older brother Edward the Black Prince by Pedro the Cruel (who'd killed a Moorish king for it) in partial payment for Edward's aid against Pedro's rebellious half-brother. In 1369, the half-brother became Enrique II when he murdered Pedro (who was trying at that precise moment to murder *him*). That's when Gaunt, married to Pedro's daughter, first proclaimed himself the putative King of Castile. A Lancaster dynasty in Spain would seem odd, but really no odder than the Hapsburg one that was to come or the Bourbon one that replaced it. (The English acceptance of which cost Spain Gibraltar and, briefly, the Balearic

island of Menorca.)

But we can exaggerate English dabbling on the Iberian peninsula and in Spanish affairs. Gaunt's invasion was really the rarity, and was hardly as consequential as American stick-wielding and soft speech (Cuba, Philippines); nor does the history of English intentions compete in consistency with a history of Franco-Spanish relations and mis-relations which encompasses the Spanish March or *Marca Hispanica* of Charlemagne, the installing of the Bourbon dynasty, the Napoleonic invasion lasting from 1808 to 1814, and (Spaniards suspected with some good reason) the French government's cynical manipulation of Spain's desire to enter the Common Market back in the 1980s (one cost of the promise of which was, tipplers assured me, the raising of prices of those Spanish products which had been "unfairly" competitive with those French products, like cognac, which French people could barely afford in their own country. My unilingual English acquaintance complained about the price of his