

THE SPANISH

Moyle Shere

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The countenance of the Spaniard is noble, his stature tall, his walk erect, his deportment haughty: his manner of speaking varies greatly; it is generally grave and solemn, but on points of *deep interest* and feeling, is animated beyond expression. There is very great variety in the costume of Spaniards, for the natives of each province are readily distinguished by their dress, and, when you see an assemblage of men from various parts of Spain, the effect is very striking. The market-place of Badajos, which, at the time I saw it, was crowded with strangers, had all the appearance of a picturesque, and well-arranged masquerade. The different modes of dress, ancient and not liable to daily changes, are, no doubt, the same they were four centuries ago.

The Estremaduran himself has a brown jacket without a collar, and with sleeves, which lace at the shoulder, so that they are removed at pleasure. The red sash is universally worn, and a cloak is generally carried on the left arm. A jacket and waistcoat profusely ornamented with silk lace, and buttons of silver filigree, the hair clubbed, and tied with broad black ribbon, and a neat cap of cloth, or velvet, mark the Andalusian. The ass driver of Cordova is clothed in a complete dress of the tawny brown leather of his native province.

The lemonade seller of Valencia has a linen shirt open at the neck, a fancy waistcoat without sleeves, a kilt of white cotton, white stockings rising to the calf, and sandals. Muleteers, with their broad body-belts of buff leather, their captains or train masters, with the ancient cartridge belts, and the old Spanish gun, were mingled in these groups. Here, too, were many officers and soldiers of the patriot armies, which, raised in haste, were not regularly or uniformly clothed, if I except some of the old standing force. Of these, you might see the royal carabineer, with the cocked hat, blue coat faced with red, and, instead of boots, the ancient greaves, of thick hard black leather, laced at the sides. The dragoon, in a uniform of yellow, black belts, and a helmet with a cone of brass. The royal or Walloon guards in their neat dress of blue and red, with white lace. The common soldier in brown; mingled with these was the light-horseman, in a Hussar jacket of brown, and overalls capped, lined, and vandyked at the bottom with tan leather; here, again, a peasant with the cap and coat of a soldier, there, a soldier from Navarre, or Aragon, with the bare foot, and the light hempen sandal of his country. There was a pleasure I took in the contemplation of these scenes, which the deep interest I felt in the fate of the unfortunate Spaniards very greatly enhanced. They are people of the most primitive, and uncorrupted singleness of heart; a people, whose national character is very ill understood, and has been very often, and very cruelly misrepresented. Shut out from the rest of Europe by their geographical position, having long since ceased to be a commercial people, and their country, grand and beautiful as are its features, being little visited, from its utter want of convenience and accommodation for travelers, the Spaniards, until the late contest, had been long lost sight of. The rays of science and of truth, which had enlightened other nations, shone not on wretched Spain; the institutions for civil and religious liberty, which had given new dignity and value to existence over half Europe, were there unknown, and the Spaniards themselves trembled at the march of improvement, of which they heard only, as of a spirit of destruction, from whose wrathful, though salutary visitations, they were happy to be spared. Such apathy was appalling, but it was not incurable; their energies lay dormant, but were not dead. Enervated by the conquest of America, a conquest achieved by such high and heroic enterprise, as gives to historical detail all the charm and the splendor of romance, but which opened on them the floodgates of wealth, and its attendant miseries, the Spaniards neglected to promote domestic trade, manufactures, and husbandry. They had been a martial people; such are usually averse to daily labor and habitual exertion; the countries of Europe, however, had by successful leagues shaken their power, and circumscribed their means of indulging this restless passion for glory. Their swords might then have been turned into ploughshares, and they might have become peacefully industrious and prosperously happy. They were made, however, by the easy conquest of New Spain suddenly, and without effort, wealthy, and from this misfortune they have never yet recovered.

Let us briefly examine the common charges now preferred against them. They are accused of being indolent, and it is true that they are not very laborious, for their wants are few, and these by the fruitfulness of their soil are readily supplied; but they are not half so indolent as prejudiced travelers would pretend. It is objected that, in many of their provinces, there are spacious tracts of land uncultivated. On enquiry you will find that there is no water to assist in fertilizing many of these deserts, while others have been set apart as public sheep walks, by the authority of the government, for whose impolicy in sanctioning so absurd a custom the wretched and powerless inhabitants must not be condemned. If, however, an appearance of cultivation is the true criterion of industry, in many of their mountainous districts well supplied with water, we see vines and fruit trees on the steepest cliffs, and corn produced

in small plots of ground, on the summits of precipitous and rocky mountains, inaccessible save to the active goat, and the laborious peasant.

The Spaniards are often despised for their ignorance. It is true that in the philosophy of nature and metaphysical inquiry they are far behind most other nations in Europe; but, in such principles of moral ethics as should regulate human conduct, they are well versed, and their practice keeps pace with their knowledge. On such subjects they have a dignified and forceful eloquence, which would confound the mere scholar. Unpracticed in schools, and little acquainted with books, experience and observation form them, and they can boast of solid characters, and sound judgments.

The Spaniards are reproached with being very superstitious; and they are so. But superstition is not *always* the parent of crime. Those who would attribute to a willing and consenting nation the establishment of that merciless tribunal, the Inquisition, *greatly err*; that barbarous institution originated in the wicked and detestable policy of cruel rulers and crafty ecclesiastics, who built up their iniquitous power upon the piety, reverence, and zeal of a devout and enthusiastic people.

The Spaniards, blessed with a fertile imagination and a lively fancy, are exalted, consoled, or awed by the strange creations and idols of their subject minds. The arm is nerved with tenfold vigour, the heart steeled with tenfold courage, the tear of affliction is dried, or the commission of crime averted by feelings of irresistible influence, the offspring of holy superstition. In a country where the laws are ill-administered, this authority of conscience rules the heart of each individual, and with such success, that I do not hesitate to say, I think there are fewer atrocious crimes committed in Spain than in the British islands; there is more manslaughter, but less murder, less deliberate assassination. There are bands of robbers in their mountain-passes, and their extensive forests, but, there are fewer villains in their towns and villages, and crimes are rarely heard of in the peaceful bosom of their inoffensive societies. The Spaniards are hospitable and generous, and *unaffectedly* so; they are good fathers and husbands, humane, and considerate masters of families. They are patriotic and brave, temperate and honest. I am here speaking of the mass of the Spanish people, of her citizens, her yeomen, and her peasantry, not of the nobler and more wealthy classes; for among these, alas! many examples of degeneracy are to be found. Some of these have lost all, which made the Spaniard respectable, without acquiring that which has given the more polished and enlightened inhabitants of other countries, their admitted superiority. For myself, I look forward eagerly to that moment, when forced by the loss of her American colonies to examine her resources at home, and to learn the true value of her possessions in the Peninsula, Spain shall, once more, exhibit herself in greatness and in glory to astonished Europe—when she will forget her ancient maxim that it is wiser to bear with the failings of kings than to punish them—when she will have firmness enough to represent her grievances, and resolution enough to insist on their redress—when she will abolish the impious and hellish powers of the Inquisition, and secure to herself liberty without licentiousness, and religion without persecution.

These observations may seem perhaps misplaced. It may be so: but I do not follow the order either of a traveler or narrator. My travels and campaigns are over, and I am rather mingling past and present reflections, than confining myself to the ordinary detail of first sights and first impressions....

Moyle Sherer. *Recollections of the Peninsula* (1825).