VALENCIA, THE CITY OF THE DUST, WHERE SOROLLA LIVES AND WORKS: BY ZENOBIA CAMPRUBI-AYMAR

HEN the sunshine pictures of Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida were exhibited in New York last year, the thousands of people who toiled through the snow and sleet of those bleak winter days up to the rooms of the Hispanic Society in the far northern part of the city usually noticed but one thing when they entered the rooms where the pictures were hung; — the white hot sunlight that seemed to radiate from every canvas as it filtered through flickering leaves, flashed back from tumbling waves or gleamed upon scudding sails and dashing spray. Every picture seemed literally to be steeped in sunshine, and the lithe brown bodies of those inimitable children that ran and played in the fresh, crisp wind or swam through the creaming surf were the bodies of children of the south, — children who had played and slept in the sunshine ever since they were born. And Sorolla, in painting all this splendid opulence of light and air, and swift joyous movement, was merely expressing in his own way the things he had seen around him all his life, for he was born in Valencia and himself played as a child in the sands by the sparkling blue sea of the Valencian coast. He has left it to other painters to portray the gloomy and tragic side of life in Spain, but lest we should forget that there is also sunshine and laughter there, he has given to the world a group of pictures that pulsate with light and express only the spirit of joyousness brought into all the affairs of daily life. Because Sorolla has lived and painted for so many years in the city where he was born, we come to see Valencia more or less through his eyes; to see it sparkling in the golden haze which made the Arabs of many centuries ago call it “The City of the Dust,” and to hear the ripple of laughter that runs through all its life. I know this because I, too, was born in Valencia and grew to womanhood under its sunny skies, and although I left it five years ago, the picture of its stately towers, its gay-colored roofs and domes, and its busy crowded streets are still as vividly before me as if I had never gone outside of the old city gates.

You see Valencia as a whole from the top of the Miguelete Tower, whence you may look down upon the city spread out in a wide circle to the far-off boundary line where it melts imperceptibly into the beginnings of a vast marshland,—the Vega de Valencia,—and it is this general impression, gained from a point high in air and yet closely related to the surrounding buildings, that always rises first in my
ONE SEES VALENCIA AS A WHOLE BEST FROM THE TOP OF THE MIGUELETE TOWER.
TOWERS GUARDING THE OLDEST GATES OF VALENCIA.
THE "TRIBUNAL OF THE WATERS": A SURVIVAL OF ONE OF THE OLDEST CUSTOMS OF VALENCIA; FROM A PAINTING BY FERRANDIZ.

AN OUTDOOR DANCE IN VALENCIA; FROM A PAINTING BY T. AGRAIOT.
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE "VIRGIN DE LOS DESAMPARADOS" FAMOUS THROUGHOUT SPAIN.
A PHOTOGRAPH OF SOROLLA AND HIS FAMILY WHICH SUGGESTS THE FEELING FOR SUNLIGHT IN HIS OWN PAINTINGS.
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recollected. Nearly all the cities of Spain are picturesque, but surely none of them has just the strange half-barbaric individuality of Valencia. As one looks down from the railing that guards the belfry of the Miguelete, one sees in all directions great domes of blue, white and gold, roofs of all shapes, sizes and colors, and narrow streets that are deep-cut, crooked and sometimes even circular. The life of hundreds of years is recorded here, and everywhere gentle and simple rub elbows and the new jostles the old in such a friendly way that there is ultimately room for both. The glory of the city lies in its belfries and its towers. The towers stand there as grim and unshaken as in the days when savage attack and desperate defense were a part of the routine of life, for they were built for strength,—round, massive, aggressive and stubborn. The belfries speak of the other ruling passion of men’s lives in those early days, for they are airy and graceful fancies carved in stone,—the embodiment of the religious fervor that satisfied itself with imaging forth its dreams of an actual Paradise. Down in the streets there is all the color and movement of the south, touched in this case with more than a suspicion of Orientalism. There is a new quarter of the city, the ensanche, or widening. Every Spanish city has an ensanche, which marks the recent awakening of Spain to the realization that her narrow, crooked streets are behind the times. But in Valencia we are careful to leave this quarter to itself, for no amount of “promotion” could make it a part of the genuine growth of the city, and it has been an abject failure. No one cares to live there, and so it is left to itself and to its storehouses, while the white squares of paper (equivalent to the sign “To Let”) continue to multiply on the balconies of untenanted apartments.

LOOKING out to the open country as it encompasses the city on every side, one sees miles of rice fields,—wide stretches of green that are divided into small allotments, making a great checkerboard of labor, for upon each allotment lives the family whose lifelong task it is to keep it in order. The farmers of La Vega de Valencia live in small thatched huts called cabañas, many of which still bear the cross which once distinguished the Christian dwelling from that of the infidel. From the top of the Miguelete one cannot distinguish these cabañas, for it is so far away that all one can see in La Vega is a broad band of silver that winds gleaming in the sunlight through the plain. This is the Guadalaviar, the white river, more commonly known as the Turia. Practically all the personal knowledge that Valencia has of her marshland children is due to this river and to the acequias, which are irrigation canals dating from Moorish
times, although considerably changed by their successors. Every Thursday morning a railing is put up at the lateral door of the Cathedral, facing the Plaza de la Virgin, and within this enclosure is set a row of armchairs. Precisely at half-past eleven a group of men in laborer’s clothes and alpargatas, as the Spanish sandals are called, enter the enclosed spot and establish themselves in the threadbare armchairs. Some of these men wear hats, some have silk handkerchiefs bound around their heads after the fashion of turbans, for they are old-fashioned farmers from the marshland, and their ancestors have sat in that spot at half-past eleven every Thursday morning ever since the days of the Moors. It is the tribunal de aguas, or Tribunal of Waters, that sits to examine and judge any quarrel or complaint arising from difficulties encountered in the irrigation of the rice fields. The process of judgment and adjustment is expeditious and fair, so much so that in all these centuries no one has ever been known to appeal from the decision of the tribunal de aguas. It is one of the relics which yet remain to us of customs which were established in the days when men, deprived of all formal or established law, hammered out for themselves some method by which they could adjust their own difficulties and defend themselves against the aggression of the feudal nobles who harried the land. Many of the usages of these primitive courts have developed into portions of the recognized law of the land, but it is only occasionally that one sees a survival of the court itself.

This is not the only ancient usage, however, that remains unchanged in Valencia, for we find much the same spirit and many of the same customs that prevailed generations and even centuries ago. Especially is this true with religious festivals and observances, into which Valencia enters with an earnestness and fervor in keeping with her history. Take, for example, the ceremonies of Holy Week. Valencia throws herself with all the enthusiasm of her volatile nature into the mad frolic of the three Carnival days, enjoying to the utmost the masking, the bull fights and the beautiful battle of flowers. After the lull on Ash Wednesday, the city goes into a period of deep mourning. By Holy Thursday the streets are filled with female figures in black, ladies in silks and others in coarser stuffs, but all dressed in deepest black. Another feature of the day is that the mantilla is universal. Ordinarily, ladies only wear mantillas to early morning mass, as the hat has been adopted for all other occasions, but on this day and the day following until noon not a hat is to be seen except on very young children. The afternoon drive is abandoned, and for twenty-four hours not a vehicle moves in Valencia, or indeed in all Spain. The black-robed figures move quietly through the streets,
and if you follow one of them for a few hours you may enter into the past. Down a narrow street you turn in the wake of your somber guide, and past a shady square where the birds are twittering gaily in the branches overhead. Presently you find yourself following a crowd through an alleyway into a church. The altar is one blaze of tapers that momentarily blinds you, but it is soon possible to distinguish vague figures kneeling on the cold stone slabs or huddling together on the long mat in the center of the chapel. Prayers are murmured in low tones, heads are bowed, and long-drawn sighs of suffering occasionally disturb the silence. The only other sounds are the soft steps of those who timidly enter and as timidly depart, or the clink of a coin as it is laid on a silver salver that stands on a table by the door. These tables are always watched by nuns or by ladies invited for the purpose by the church authorities, for all the money is devoted to the relief of the poor.

Many of the dark figures go out through a door on the farther side of the church. If you are interested you follow them into an alleyway similar to that through which you came, but in an angle of this alleyway is an object which was not to be found in the first alley. The women approach it with awe and you hear many suppressed exclamations. "The Blood of Christ!" cries one. You approach to see a wooden cross with wine flowing in rich crimson streams out of four holes bored through it. Obvious symbolism enough, but even at that the people fail to understand it as symbolism, and innocently interpret what they see according to their light.

ONCE out of the alley you may cross the street to the church opposite to be again greeted by the blaze of light, the dark, bent figures and the murmured prayers, and again you may see the figures rise and leave through a farther door. If you follow you will enter an arcaded courtyard where you may see women of all stations in life following the way of the cross; some dragging silks and laces over the rough cobblestones of the court, while the most devout touch the dust at their feet before making the sign of the cross at every station. I have seen some of these women even touch the ground with their foreheads in the completeness of their humility. Nine churches does each of these shrouded women visit before she returns to her home, and nine times she opens her heart in intense adoration before the symbolic sepulcher of the Lord. Nor is this profound religious feeling at all an affectation; the humility is as real as the love and enthusiasm which greet the famous image of the Virgin de los Desamparados when it is brought into the streets by the procession to be acclaimed by the populace. The peasants of the surrounding
villages come in hundreds to Valencia merely for the purpose of seeing this image, which represents the Virgin sheltering two orphan children, and they grow breathless with enthusiasm shouting “Long live the Virgin de los Desamparados.” The image itself is a singularly vivid commentary upon the naïve tastes and beliefs of the people. The Virgin is represented as a typical Spanish girl carrying a typical Spanish child, and both are almost buried in the stiff-embroidered robes, jewels and gewgaws with which they are loaded. Even the two kneeling orphans are most gorgeously clad, for the people have given liberally of their wealth and their ornaments to adorn the much-admired image as they think the Queen of Heaven should be adorned. I remember one old man, his head bare, his eyes brilliant with adoring love, following the image through the streets with such passionate yearning expressed in his whole figure that I wondered how long he could restrain himself from flinging himself bodily at the feet of his embodied vision.

But Valencia is not all like that. Beside the ecstatic figure of the old man, I noticed another figure very different in appearance and expression. It was a young artisan, pale-faced and sharp-featured. From the sneer on his lips it was evident that his feelings were not at all in sympathy with those of the crowd, and from the hat firmly planted on his head it was also evident that, not content with dissenting, he was offering an open protest against public opinion. Through the crowd of enthusiastic worshipers were scattered similar figures, all with their hats firmly set on their heads, all with mocking sneers on their lips. If I had asked the devotees to what party they belonged, they would have answered, stoutly and unhesitatingly: “We are Catholics.” Had I put the same question to the dissenting artisans, quite as unhesitatingly would they have answered: “We are Republicans.” Republicans and Catholics; there are your two parties among the lower classes in Valencia. It is an odd classification. Nevertheless, to one who has lived in Valencia, these names represent two parties that are verily distinct. A Catholic is the illiterate peasant, as a rule hard-working, who pours out his devotion and his troubles at the feet of the Virgin de los Desamparados; believes implicitly in the king and does not bother his head about reforms. A Republican is the Valencian who has been to larger towns and cities and has learned just enough to think he knows a great deal; who sings the Marseillaise as he rattles the dominoes at the café, and who can even repeat “Liberty: Equality: Fraternity,” to himself and to others without transposing so much as a consonant in the repetition.

But these restless spirits are after all only a small part of life in
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Valencia, for the spirit of simple childlike devotion to their saints and images and quaint fasts and festivals have endured from generation to generation. Valencia may be sunk in the depths of woe during Holy Week, but go through the streets again on the eve of Corpus Christi and you will see the other side of the picture. Every street is filled with busy shoppers. The gayest goods are exhibited at the street doors, and in many cases tables littered with gaudy stuffs are pushed out on the sidewalk,—a circumstance which explains the popularity of the driveways with Valencian pedestrians. The streets are so crowded that it is hard to walk even in the middle of the driveway, and at the market-place the crowd thickens until it is almost impassable. Buying and selling go on briskly until about four o'clock in the afternoon, by which time the multitude of small stalls are bare and the piles of vegetables have been removed from the ground, so that one can move without examining the pavement before each step lest the rasping voice of a market-woman should burst out suddenly with: “Señora, those eggs cost me some money; be so kind as to pay me for all you have broken.” One can move now, but the crowd is still so thick that it is necessary to move with it if one expects to make any progress. The center of attraction on all feast days is the Plaza de la Virgen, and toward this everyone turns his steps.

If the market was crowded, this square is packed. A gigantic Saint Christopher with infant held aloft mounts guard at one side of the square. At the Cathedral door tall mannequins in Medéval costumes, with crowns on their heads, stand ranged against the stone apostles in their niches. Beyond them, backed against the walls of the chapel of the Virgin, is an indescribable conglomeration of figures under a large canopy which covers almost half of the square. These are the seven rocas,—rocks or effigies,—each enthroned in a separate chariot. They are grotesque, but gay and imposing, and on the morrow they will hold the center of the stage in one of the festivities which is not attended by the aristocrats, but which the people rejoice in to the last happy howling moment.

I remember well how these seven rocas looked the last time I saw them. In the matter of precedence the Virgin, as a lady, is always given the first place, and on either side of her, equally honored as to position, were St. Vincent, the patron saint of the city, and Fame, a golden figure blowing on a golden trumpet. I remember that Santa Lucia occupied the chariot next to St. Vincent, but I forget who came next to Fame. What I do remember distinctly is that the two end chariots were occupied respectively by the Holy Trinity
and a whole legion of demons. There were gorgeous trappings and dozens of accessory figures in costume, so that even standing still in the square it was a spectacle to be remembered. But the best part of the rocas comes on Corpus Christi when, after the solemn procession has been swallowed up by the Cathedral and the various churches, the charioteers break loose. They have had as much of sedateness as a Valencian can stand, and they run mad races with all the holy and unholy effigies bobbing and shaking in their places. It is on record that the diablera,—or devil-coop,—has never been beaten.

This reckless spirit of fun is quite as characteristic of the students in Valencia as it is of the lower classes, and the students take an important part in everything that goes on in the city. The art students are especially busy, and during the Carnival each school takes advantage of the masquerade to revive the picturesque customs and costumes of the primitive Valencian schools. The students, in black velvet with white lace collars and cuffs, buckled shoes and the inevitable cockade in their seventeenth-century hats, parade through the streets with banners and music, collecting alms for the poor, which they immediately distribute to the beggars who hover near them. From the balconies, ladies shower coins into the extended hats below, and the students hand them to the beggars and pass on with many compliments and courtly salutations to the fair almsgivers.

THE "inevitable cockade" to which I referred is a small ivory spoon. In earlier days poor students made money by touring Spain in bands, playing and singing as they went. They were treated everywhere with great hospitality and generosity, and the ivory spoons were very useful at times in places where everybody ate out of the same dish and minor details of etiquette were quite forgotten in the effort to supply the more immediate necessities of life. The old serenades have long been obsolete, but six years ago there was a strange renewal of musical demonstrations among the students of Valencia. Like students everywhere these gay young fellows welcome any excitement that interrupts the routine of daily life. Politics are always a fruitful source of controversy, and Spanish students plunge into them with all the enthusiasm of fiery tempers.

It is only a few fleeting glimpses that I can give of Valencia. Sorolla has fixed her laughter and color and charm upon his brilliant canvases, with here and there a hint of the pathos and passion that underlies all Spanish gaiety and gives tragic shadows to the sunshine of national life. To understand the illusive individuality of the city, one must be a Valencian either by birth or by adoption.