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Part XXIII

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#### ROMA AETERNA

THE Romans have won Mérida for good. True, every one who ever left an imprint on the Spanish race has passed through the once magnificent capital of Lusitania, but of Visigoth and Moor hardly any traces remain, of the Renaissance nothing, of the Templars a 'mountain of ruins'. So that one now leaves Spain, becoming no longer a traveller in the Iberian Peninsula, but in ancient Rome, treading the quiet paths of the archaeologist, pensive with other memories, of Palatine and Pincian Hills, of Capitol and Forum, of the roomy and sovereign empires of Augustus, Trajan, and Hadrian. I have my own strong conviction that the Spaniard more than any other Latin nation continues the features and ideal of the Roman, but the familiar quiet of the grass-grown and sunny Circus, the Stadium, the theatre, that elaborate architectural housing for the human voice, the heavy solemnity of the aqueduct, these dominations of an empire whose emperors were gods belong to an older world than Spain. Perhaps the very decay and unimportance of Mérida in the time of Spain's great building epoch after the Reconquest saved the Roman monuments from

being further despoiled. No considerable palace seems to have been erected on the spot. Visigoth and Moor had taken all they wanted of column and moulding. The earth lay lightly on Eternal Rome. Beside the ruins, at which the learned are now busy, the town lies like an Arab town, unable to open out into views, its chimneyless house roofs lying close and almost overlapping, one narrow street disclosing nothing until one turns into the next, its whitewashed house fronts striking an oriental dazzle to the eyes. How relentless is the Roman bridge which led to the splendours of Mérida! Its half-mile of narrow, undeviating level lies over the Guadiana like an ordeal by sunlight. Before one has gone half-way one has the feeling of being unable to turn back. One must go on, caught in the forced march across, or die in the returning. Once in that formidable narrow alley, horses, oxen, carts, donkeys, as men, are all under the lash of necessity. Fortitude wavers. One is no longer an individual. Legions march with one to an imperial command—I want more room.

More kindly is the stride of the aqueduct over my head. The flickering of olives beneath it, the



passing of wings about it, do not abash the gravity of its antiquity. Its ruin is portentous but beneficent, its iron-grey piers being a kind of St. Kilda of the beanfields, its use solved by the migratory storks.

'Ah! you should have been here earlier when the storks were here. Then they ("los milagros" is the country name) were a much better sight. Every one of the miracles has its population of storks. Now it is *very* solitary and the nests have been ruined by bad weather and wind. But when they begin to come, on the day of San Blas, it becomes very animated. Hundreds of storks come here, all the miracles have their nests. It is a *población* of storks.' So our ploughman told us, as proud of the storks as of the miracles and not very sure that they were not somehow indissolubly connected.

'Ay . . . ye, Amorita! Otra vez!' He turns his mules and the 'Beloved' staggers 'once more' to the hard furrows.

What a beautiful white house of colonnaded marble this imperial race built here for its intellectual diversion! One is so accustomed to see sculptured marble figures like that of the goddess Ceres in the orderly twilight of museums, that one blinks in the bright sun to see gods and warriors, garlands and oxen, dancers and flowers and all the prodigality of marble art, set in position again in the marble proscenium. The reconstruction is being done with great discretion and taste. One wing of the proscenium is now almost complete—a lordly pleasure-house, a stage strangely permanent for the human drama which was vocal there as a wind that passes and echoes. On one side are the lovely columns of the vestibule; on the other, in a back street behind the theatre, is the humble Christian basilica of the early Roman settlers, a tiny dissenting chapel of brick, the feet of saints and confessors still showing in the red glazed Pompeian decoration of its interior, the anagram of

Christus in the mosaic pavement of its atrium. There were palaces of Visigoths and the Alcázar of Moorish rulers—Castle of Templars and Knights of Santiago—but one great edifice accommodated many changes. So that the mighty stones of El Conventual may have been placed in position many times—only the Visigothic ornament is unmistakable, and the cistern of waters in the ruined Alcázar carries their tradition. Columns worked and laboured like ivories, palm-trees—alder leaves—birds in flocks—plaited rope—Solomonic pillar, such museum remnants show the passing of this race of fine architects through ancient Lusitania. I said that the Romans won Mérida, but the town has for its patron saint a young girl-martyr, Santa Eulalia (Olalla), whom the Romans roasted in an oven. From as early as the fourth century comes the Visigothic inscription found near her church.

*'May this house be under thy peaceful rule, O martyr Eulalia, so that the enemy, knowing of thy protection, may be confounded, and that this house and its inhabitants may flourish beneath thy patronage. Amen.'*

They have made a sort of amende to Santa Eulalia by reconstructing a portico of an old temple dedicated to Mars by 'Vetilla, wife of Paculo' upon the traditional site of her martyrdom. Whatever primitive church bore her name the present one is of an unusual and grand form of Romanesque, a basilica of lofty halls, echoing something pagan, something of majesty. A strange and imposing interior—an architectural development of Romanesque, as unusual as impressive.

I leave the theatre with its stone hall. Up on an eminence where the temple of Mithras and Serapis stood is the Plaza de Toros—the great circular Colosseum of Spain—so much too large for the size of the town. It too is Roman in scale. I eat a dish of lamb's liver stewed with the peel of fresh oranges for lunch—I feel sure that Lucian ate it long ago.



MERIDA

*Drawings*

THE GUADIANA AND THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE, MERIDA  
(*Headpiece*)

THE ROMAN BRIDGE AND THE ROAD TO THE WEST, MERIDA

ERMITA DE SAN JUAN DE DIOS, MERIDA

ROMAN AQUEDUCT CALLED 'THE MIRACLES', MERIDA

NIGHT—TRAJAN'S ARCH, MERIDA





Manuel Ros  
Merida

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