

The Donkey Boy

JOHN DOS PASSOS

Where the husbandman's toil and strife

Little varies to strife and toil:

But the milky kernel of life,

With her numbered: corn, wine, fruit, oil!

THE PATH zigzagged down through the olive trees between thin chortling glitter of irrigation ditches that occasionally widened into green pools, reed-fringed, froggy, about which bristled scrub oleanders. Through the shimmer of olive leaves all about I could see the great ruddy heave of the mountains streaked with the emerald of millet-fields, and above, snowy shoulders against a vault of indigo, patches of wood cut out hard as metal in the streaming noon light. Tinkle of a donkey-bell below me, then at the turn of a path the donkey's hindquarters, mauve-grey, neatly clipped in a pattern of diamonds and lozenges, and a tail meditatively swishing as he picked his way among the stones, the head as yet hidden by the osier baskets of the pack. At the next turn I skipped ahead of the donkey and walked with the *arriero*, a dark boy in tight blue pants and short grey tunic cut to the waist, who had the strong cheek-bones, hawk nose and slender hips of an Arab, who spoke an aspirated Andalusian that sounded like Arabic.

We greeted each other cordially as travellers do in mountainous places where the paths are narrow. We talked about the weather and the wind and the sugar mills at Motril and women and travel and the vintage, struggling all the while like drowning men to understand each other's lingo. When it came out that I was an American and had been in the war, he became suddenly interested; of course, I was a deserter, he said, clever to get away. There'd been two deserters in his town a year ago, *Alemanes*; perhaps friends of mine. It was pointed out that I and the *Alemanes* had been at different ends of the gunbarrel. He laughed. What did that matter? Then he said several times, "Qué burro la guerra, qué burro la guerra." I remonstrated, pointing to the donkey that was following us with dainty steps, looking at us with a quizzical

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air from under his long eyelashes. Could anything be wiser than a burro?

He laughed again, twitching back his full lips to show the brilliance of tightly serried teeth, stopped in his tracks, and turned to look at the mountains. He swept a long brown hand across them. "Look," he said, "up there is the Alpujarras, the last refuge of the kings of the Moors; there are bandits up there sometimes. You have come to the right place; here we are free men."

The donkey scuttled past us with a derisive glance out of the corner of an eye and started skipping from side to side of the path, cropping here and there a bit of dry grass. We followed, the *arriero* telling how his brother would have been conscripted if the family had not got together a thousand pesetas to buy him out. That was no life for a man. He spat on a red stone. They'd never catch him, he was sure of that. The army was no life for a man.

In the bottom of the valley was a wide stream, which we forded after some dispute as to who should ride the donkey, the donkey all the while wrinkling his nose with disgust at the coldness of the speeding water and the sliminess of the stones. When we came out on the broad moraine of pebbles the other side of the stream we met a lean blackish man with yellow horse-teeth, who was much excited when he heard I was an American.

"America is the world of the future," he cried and gave me such a slap on the back I nearly tumbled off the donkey on whose rump I was at that moment astride.

"*En América no se divierte,*" muttered the *arriero*, kicking his feet that were cold from the ford into the burning saffron dust of the road.

The donkey ran ahead kicking at pebbles, bucking, trying to shake off the big pear-shaped baskets of osier he had either side of his pack saddle, delighted with smooth dryness after so much water and such tenuous stony roads. The three of us followed arguing, the sunlight beating wings of white flame about us.

"In America there is freedom," said the blackish man, "there are no rural guards; roadmenders work eight hours and wear silk shirts and earn . . . un dineral." The blackish man stopped,

quite out of breath from his grappling with infinity. Then he went on: "Your children are educated free, no priests, and at forty every man-jack owns an automobile."

"*Ca,*" said the *arriero*.

"*Sí, hombre,*" said the blackish man.

For a long while the *arriero* walked along in silence, watching his toes bury themselves in dust at each step. Then he burst out, spacing his words with conviction: "*Ca, en América no se hace na'a que trabahar y de'cansar. . . .* Not on your life, in America they don't do anything except work and rest so's to get ready to work again. That's no life for a man. People don't enjoy themselves there. An old sailor from Malaga who used to fish for sponges told me, and he knew. It's not gold people need, but bread and wine and . . . life. They don't do anything there except work and rest so they'll be ready to work again. . . ."

Two thoughts jostled in my mind as he spoke; I seemed to see red-faced gentlemen in knee breeches, dog's-ear wigs askew over broad foreheads, reading out loud with unction the phrases, "inalienable rights . . . pursuit of happiness," and to hear the cadence out of Meredith's *The Day of the Daughter of Hades*:

Where the husbandman's toil and strife
Little varies to strife and toil:
But the milky kernel of life,
With her numbered: corn, wine, fruit, oil!

The donkey stopped in front of a little wineshop under a trellis where dusty gourd-leaves shut out the blue and gold dazzle of sun and sky.

"He wants to say, 'Have a little drink, gentlemen,'" said the blackish man.

In the greenish shadow of the wineshop a smell of anise and a sound of water dripping. When he had smacked his lips over a small cup of thick yellow wine he pointed at the *arriero*. "He says people don't enjoy life in America."

"But in America people are very rich," shouted the bar-keeper, a beet-faced man whose huge girth was bound in a red cotton sash, and he made a gesture suggestive of coins, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

Everybody roared derision at the *arriero*. But he persisted and went out shaking his head and muttering "That's no life for a man."

As we left the wineshop where the blackish man was painting with broad strokes the legend of the West, the *arriero* explained to me almost tearfully that he had not meant to speak ill of my country, but to explain why he did not want to emigrate. While he was speaking we passed a cartload of yellow grapes that drenched us in jingle of mulebells and in dizzying sweetness of bubbling ferment. A sombre man with beetling brows strode at the mule's head; in the cart, brown feet firmly planted in the steaming slush of grapes, flushed face tilted towards the ferocious white sun, a small child with a black curly pate rode in triumph, shouting, teeth flashing as if to bite into the sun.

"What you mean is," said I to the *arriero*, "that this is the life for a man."

He tossed his head back in a laugh of approval.

"Something that's neither work nor getting ready to work?"

"That's it," he answered, and cried, "*arrh he*" to the donkey.

We hastened our steps. My sweaty shirt bellied suddenly in the back as a cool wind frisked about us at the corner of the road.

"Ah, it smells of the sea," said the *arriero*. "We'll see the sea from the next hill."

That night as I stumbled out of the inn door in Motril, overfull of food and drink, the full moon bulged through the arches of the cupola of the pink and saffron church. Everywhere steel-green shadows striped with tangible moonlight. As I sat beside my knapsack in the plaza, groping for a thought in the bewildering dazzle of the night, three disconnected mules, egged on by a hoarse shouting, jingled out of the shadow. When they stopped with a jerk in the full moon-glare beside the fountain, it became evident that they were attached to a coach, a spidery coach tilted forward as if it were perpetually going down hill; from inside smothered voices like the strangled clucking of fowls being shipped to market in a coop.

On the driver's seat one's feet were on the shafts and one had a view of every rag and shoelace the harness was patched with. Creaking, groaning, with wabbling of wheels, grumble

of inside passengers, cracking of whip and long strings of oaths from the driver, the coach lurched out of town and across a fat plain full of gurgle of irrigation ditches, shrilling of toads, falsetto rustle of broad leaves of the sugar cane. Occasionally the gleam of the soaring moon on banana leaves and a broad silver path on the sea. Landwards the hills like piles of ash in the moonlight, and far away a cloudy inkling of mountains.

Beside me, mouth open, shouting rich pedigrees at the leading mule, Cordovan hat on the back of his head, from under which sprouted a lock of black hair that hung between his eyes over his nose and made him look like a goblin, the driver bounced and squirmed and kicked at the flanks of the mules that roamed drunkenly from side to side of the uneven road. Down into a gulch, across a shingle, up over a plank bridge, then down again into the bed of the river I had forded that morning with my friend the *arriero*, along a beach with fishing boats and little huts where the fishermen slept; then barking of dogs, another bridge and we roared and crackled up a steep village street to come to a stop suddenly, catastrophically, in front of a tavern in the main square.

"We are late," said the goblin driver, turning to me suddenly, "I have not slept for four nights, dancing, every night dancing."

He sucked the air in through his teeth and stretched out his arms and legs in the moonlight. "Ah, women . . . women," he added philosophically. "Have you a cigarette?"

"*Ah, la juventud,*" said the old man who had brought the mailbag. He looked up at us scratching his head. "It's to enjoy. A moment, a *momentito*, and it's gone! Old men work in the day time, but young men work at night. . . . *Ay de mí,*" and he burst into a peal of laughter.

And as if some one were whispering them, the words of Jorge Manrique sifted out of the night:

¿Qué se hizo el Rey Don Juan?
Los infantes de Aragón
¿Qué se hicieron?
Qué fué de tanto galán,
Qué fué de tanta invención,
Cómo truxeron?

Everybody went into the tavern, from which came a sound of singing and of clapping in time, and as hearty a tinkle of glasses and banging on tables as might have come out of the *Mermaid* in the days of the Virgin Queen. Outside the moon soared, soared brilliant, a greenish blotch on it like the time-stain on a chased silver bowl on an altar. The broken lion's head of the fountain dribbled one tinkling stream of quick-silver. On the seawind came smells of rotting garbage and thyme burning in hearths and jessamine flowers. Down the street geraniums in a window smouldered in the moonlight; in the dark above them the merest contour of a face, once the gleam of two eyes; opposite against the white wall standing very quiet a man looking up with dilated nostrils—*el amor*.

As the coach jangled its lumbering unsteady way out of town, our ears still throbbled with the rhythm of the tavern, of hard brown hands clapped in time, of heels thumping on oak floors. From the last house of the village a man hallooed. With its noise of cupboards of china overturned the coach crashed to stillness. A wiry, white-faced man with a little waxed moustache like the springs of a mousetrap climbed on the front seat, while burly people heaved quantities of corded trunks on behind.

"How late, two hours late," the man spluttered, jerking his checked cap from side to side. "Since this morning nothing to eat but two boiled eggs. . . . Think of that. *¡Qué incultura! ¡Qué pueblo indecente!* All day only two boiled eggs."

"I had business in Motril, Don Antonio," said the goblin driver grinning.

"Business!" cried Don Antonio, laughing squeakily, "and after all what a night!"

Something impelled me to tell Don Antonio the story of King Mycerinus of Egypt that Herodotus tells, how hearing from an oracle he would only live ten years, the king called for torches and would not sleep, so crammed twenty years' living into ten. The goblin driver listened in intervals between his hoarse investigations of the private life of the grandmother of the leading mule.

Don Antonio slapped his thigh and lit a cigarette and cried, "In Andalusia we all do that, don't we, Paco?"

“Yes, sir,” said the goblin driver, nodding his head vigorously.

“That is *lo flamenco*,” cried Don Antonio. “The life of Andalusia is *lo flamenco*.”

The moon has begun to lose foothold in the black slippery zenith. We are hurtling along a road at the top of a cliff; below the sea full of unexpected glitters, lace-edged, swishing like the silk dress of a dancer. The goblin driver rolls from side to side asleep. The check cap is down over the little man’s face so that not even his moustaches are to be seen. All at once the leading mule, taken with suicidal mania, makes a sidewise leap for the cliff-edge. Crumbling of gravel, snap of traces, shouts, uproar inside. Some one has managed to yank the mule back on her hind quarters. In the sea below the shadow of a coach totters at the edge of the cliff’s shadow.

“*Hija de puta*,” cries the goblin driver, jumping to the ground.

Don Antonio awakes with a grunt and begins to explain querulously that he has had nothing to eat all day but two boiled eggs. The teeth of the goblin driver flash white flame as he hangs wreath upon wreath of profanity about the trembling, tugging mules. With a terrific rattling jerk the coach sways to the safe side of the road. From inside angry heads are poked out like the heads of hens out of an overturned coop. Don Antonio turns to me and shouts in tones of triumph: “¿*Qué flamenco, eh?*”

When we got to Almuñecar Don Antonio, the goblin driver, and I sat at a little table outside the empty Casino. A waiter appeared from somewhere with wine and coffee and tough purple ham and stale bread and cigarettes. Over our heads dusty palm-fronds trembled in occasional faint gusts off the sea. The rings on Don Antonio’s thin fingers glistened in the light of the one tired electric light bulb that shone among palpitating mottoes above us as he explained to me the significance of *lo flamenco*.

The tough swaggering gesture, the quavering song well sung, the couplet neatly capped, the back turned to the charging bull, the mantilla draped with exquisite provocativeness: all that was *lo flamenco*. “On this coast, *señor inglés*, we don’t work much, we are dirty and uninstructed, but by God we

live. Why the poor people of the towns, d'you know what they do in summer? They hire a fig-tree and go and live under it with their dogs and their cats and their babies, and they eat the figs as they ripen and drink the cold water from the mountains, and man-alive they are happy. They fear no one and they are dependent on no one; when they are young they make love and sing to the guitar, and when they are old they tell stories and bring up their children. You have travelled much; I have travelled little—Madrid, never further,—but I swear to you that nowhere in the world are the women lovelier or is the land richer or the cookery more perfect than in this vega of Almuñecar. . . . If only the wine weren't quite so heavy. . . .”

“Then you don't want to go to America?”

“*¡Hombre por dios!* Sing us a song, Paco. . . . He's a Galician, you see.”

The goblin driver grinned and threw back his head.

“Go to the end of the world, you'll find a Gallego,” he said. Then he drank down his wine, rubbed his mouth on the back of his hand, and started droningly:

‘Si quieres qu'el carro cante
mójale y dejel'en río
que después de buen moja'o
canta com'un silbi'o.’

(If you want a cart to sing, wet it and soak it in the river, for when it's well soaked it'll sing like a locust.)

“Hola,” cried Don Antonio, “go on.”

‘A mí me gusta el blanco,
¡viva lo blanco! ¡muera lo negro!
porque el negro es muy triste.
Yo soy alegre. Yo no lo quiero.’

(I like white; hooray for white, death to black. Because black is very sad, and I am happy, I don't like it.)

“That's it,” cried Don Antonio excitedly. “You people from the north, English, Americans, Germans, whatnot, you like black. You like to be sad. I don't.”

“Yo soy alegre. Yo no lo quiero.”

The moon had sunk into the west, flushed and swollen. The east was beginning to bleach before the oncoming sun. Birds started chirping above our heads. I left them, but as I lay in bed, I could hear the hoarse voice of the goblin driver roaring out:

‘A mí me gusta el blanco,
¡viva lo blanco! ¡muera lo negro!’

At Nerja in an arbor of purple ipomoeas on a red jutting cliff over the beach where brown children were bathing, there was talk again of *lo flamenco*.

“In Spain,” my friend Don Diego was saying, “we live from the belly and loins, or else from the head and heart: between Don Quixote the mystic and Sancho Panza the sensualist there is no middle ground. The lowest Panza is *lo flamenco*.”

“But you do live.”

“In dirt, disease, lack of education, bestiality. . . . Half of us are always dying of excess of food or the lack of it.”

“What do you want?”

“Education, organization, energy, the modern world.”

I told him what the donkey-boy had said of America on the road down from the Alpujarras, that in America they did nothing but work and rest so as to be able to work again. And America was the modern world.

And *lo flamenco* is neither work nor getting ready to work.

That evening San Miguel went out to fetch the Virgin of Sorrows from a roadside oratory and brought her back into town in procession with candles and skyrocketes and much chanting, and as the swaying cone-shaped figure carried on the shoulders of six sweating men stood poised at the entrance to the plaza where all the girls wore jessamine flowers in the blackness of their hair, all waved their hats and cried, “¡Viva la Virgen de las Angustias!” And the Virgin and San Miguel both had to bow their heads to get in the church door, and the people followed them into the church crying “¡Viva!” so that the old vaults shivered in the tremulous candlelight and the shouting. Some people cried for water, as rain was about due and everything was very dry, and when they came out of the church they saw a thin cloud like a mantilla of white lace over the moon, so they went home happy.

Wherever they went through the narrow well-swept streets, lit by an occasional path of orange light from a window, the women left behind them long trails of fragrance from the jessamine flowers in their hair.

Don Diego and I walked a long while on the seashore talking of America and the Virgin and a certain soup called *ajo blanco* and Don Quixote and *lo flamenco*. We were trying to decide what was the peculiar quality of the life of the people in that rich plain (*vega* they call it) between the mountains of the sea. Walking about the country elevated on the small grass-grown levees of irrigation ditches, the owners of the fields we crossed used, simply because we were strangers, to offer us a glass of wine or a slice of watermelon. I had explained to my friend that in his modern world of America these same people would come out after us with shotguns loaded with rock salt. He answered that even so, the old order was changing, and that as there was nothing else but to follow the procession of industrialism it behooved Spaniards to see that their country forged ahead instead of being, as heretofore, dragged at the tail of the parade.

“And do you think it’s leading anywhere, this endless complicating of life?”

“Of course,” he answered.

“Where?”

“Where does anything lead? At least it leads further than *lo flamenco*.”

“But couldn’t the point be to make the way significant?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Work,” he said.

We had come to a little nook in the cliffs where fishing boats were drawn up with folded wings like ducks asleep. We climbed a winding path up the cliff. Pebbles scuttled underfoot; our hands were torn by thorny aromatic shrubs. Then we came out in a glen that cut far into the mountains, full of the laughter of falling water and the rustle of sappy foliage. Seven stilted arches of an aqueduct showed white through the canebrakes inland. Fragrances thronged about us; the smell of dry thyme-grown uplands, of rich wet fields, of goats, and jessamine and heliotrope, and of water cold from the snowfields running fast in ditches. Somewhere far off a donkey was braying. Then, as the last groan of the donkey faded, a man’s voice

rose suddenly out of the dark fields, soaring, yearning on taut throat-cords, then slipped down through notes, like a small boat sliding sideways down a wave, then unrolled a great slow scroll of rhythm on the night and ceased suddenly in an upward cadence as a guttering candle flares to extinction.

“Something that’s neither work nor getting ready to work,” and I thought of the *arriero* on whose donkey I had forded the stream on the way down from the Alpujarras, and his saying: “*Ca, en América no se hace na’a que trabahar y de’cansar.*”

I had left him at his home village, a little cluster of red and yellow roofs about a fat tower the Moors had built and a gaunt church that hunched by itself in a square of trampled dust. We had rested awhile before going into town, under a fig tree, while he had put white canvas shoes on his lean brown feet. The broad leaves had rustled in the wind, and the smell of the fruit that hung purple bursting to crimson against the intense sky had been like warm stroking velvet all about us. And the *arriero* had discoursed on the merits of his donkey and the joys of going from town to town with merchandise, up into the mountains for chestnuts and firewood, down to the sea for fish, to Malaga for tinware, to Motril for sugar from the refineries. Nights of dancing and guitar-playing at vintage-time, *fiestas* of the Virgin, where older, realer gods were worshipped than Jehovah and the dolorous Mother of the pale Christ, the *toros*, blood and embroidered silks aflame in the sunlight, words whispered through barred windows at night, long days of travel on stony roads in the mountains. . . . And I had lain back with my eyes closed and the hum of little fig-bees in my ears, and wished that my life were his life. After a while we had jumped to our feet and I had shouldered my knapsack with its books and pencils and silly pads of paper and trudged off up an unshaded road, and had thought with a sort of bitter merriment of that prig Christian and his damned burden.

“Something that is neither work nor getting ready to work, to make the road so significant that one needs no destination, that is *lo flamenco*,” said I to Don Diego, as we stood in the glen looking at the seven white arches of the aqueduct.

He nodded unconvinced.