

THE GOLDEN APPLE

Luis Herrera Garcia is a singer, charismatic, impetuous, and very Spanish, fiercely proud of his beloved home, the enchanting island of La Gomera in the Canaries, the ancient "Fortunate Isles."

Margaret Sinclair is a quiet Scotswoman from Glasgow, lonely, divorced, working in Tenerife as a timeshare seller.

They are two people from vastly different backgrounds who, when they begin an affair, soon realise that it will be far from the conventional holiday romance. Yet neither is prepared for the extent of conflict and compromise involved in a cross cultural attachment; nor do they realise that the way they handle their relationship and how their respective families cope will have a crucial effect on its future. The Golden Apple which lovingly depicts a part of the Canary Islands few tourists see is a story of a man and woman calling to each other across an abyss of traditional differences. It was published by Century in 1990 and is ready for a new edition.

THE GOLDEN APPLE (3 extracts)

Bird, you sang so well
Upon the cypress bough
Bird, I love to hear you
Sing to me once again.

(1)

He was singing a Spanish folk song in a vibrant tenor voice with a strange passionate catch in it and accompanying himself on the guitar. She didn't understand very much of the language but one would have had to be very foolish or wilfully insensitive not to realise that he was singing about love. There was a yearning quality about the notes that soared above the staccato rhythm of the instrument and tore at the heart of any listener. No wonder the bar was full. Margaret had always been slightly ashamed of her predilection for romantic music. "Slush" Alastair had called it. He kept her CDs strictly segregated from his as though they would somehow contaminate his Mozart and Bach and Beethoven. Not that she disliked classical music, just that her tastes were more catholic than Alastair's. Depraved he called them. She

smiled bitterly at the memory of how he had sorted the CDs into two piles, so petulantly, so angrily.

“Mine” he kept saying and “Yours” slapping the boxes down in a big untidy heap. “Mine, mine. Oh Christ. Most definitely yours.”

The insistent sensual tones of this Spanish singer recalled her to her surroundings. He seemed so very different from the multitude of bar vocalists. He had not made the mistake of using too much amplification as so many of the restaurant singers did, hoping to disguise any vocal inadequacies by sheer volume. He did not need to. He had a simple Spanish guitar and the arresting beauty of his own voice.

(2)

Whenever Luis felt that he had had enough or perhaps too much female company in the little house where he was brought up, he would go off with his father fishing for mackerel in the little boat they kept, or walking through the mountains to meet with Eduardo’s friend Pedro – “Peiro” they pronounced it on the island – who kept a small herd of goats near Alajero. Pedro was a mountain man and a *silbador* who knew the old whistled language of La Gomera. The old Gomeros had used the language – the *silbido* – to call to each other across the steep-sided *barrancos* or gorges of the island. Pedro seemed to have an astonishingly wide range of notes which he formed by placing his fingers in different ways in his mouth and he taught Luis all kinds of useful whistled phrases such as “when are you coming over?” and “your dinner is ready and the bottle of wine is open.”

Sometimes, amid the holiday crowds of Los Christianos, who jabbered away in the alien tongues of English or German, expecting him always to understand them but never attempting to understand him, Luis would be transported back to that springtime hillside on La Gomera: sitting on low stones among the palms, the starry tabaiba, the spiky aloes; resting beneath a moss-bearded almond tree, with pale petals drifting down on to his dark head; eating lumps of *gofio amasado*, toasted maize meal kneaded into a stiff paste in an old goatskin bag (“the older the better” said Pedro) with the little dark man whistling like a bird and showing him how to put his grimy fingers this way and that in his mouth. Luis remembered vividly the taste of his own

fingers, slightly gritty from the rocks and nutty from the *gofio*. And he remembered too the deep vein of silence that ran beneath his own first feeble attempts at the strange language, the bleating of goats, the flat clank-clank of their bells and the more distant village sounds of dog and cockerel and crying baby.

Pedro was not young even then. He had been of the generation before Luis's own father Eduardo. He still used the traditional *astia*, the long pointed pole, with the aid of which he could leap about the barrancos like one of his own goats. When Luis grew tired of the *silbido* and when the men were engrossed in talk of their own, he would take the *astia* and practise with it, falling often but always getting up and trying again. And Pedro would clap his hands and say "Bravo! – bravo my little Luis! Bravo my little man!" and he would glow with pride, knowing that he was right not to cry, feeling manly and grown up and full of his own importance.

Pedro had lived to a great age: he was over ninety years old when he died. He had even outlived Eduardo who had died very suddenly, six years ago when Luis was thirty. When Luis returned to the island and on the few occasions when he found the time to walk in the mountains, he half expected to meet Pedro swinging over the rocks towards him, smiling his big gap-toothed smile and offered *gofio* in a crude goatskin bag. He would not have been at all surprised. Rather the surprise was that he was no longer there. His grandson herded goats in the same place but he had never bothered to learn the *silbido Gomero*. Neither did he use the *astia* and Luis was perhaps unreasonably angered by this. Here and there were still men who could and did keep up the old traditions, but they were growing older themselves and he wondered whether there would be any to take their place. He would practise the few phrases of the old language he remembered promising himself that when he came back to live on the island one day, he would learn more.

Pedro's *astia* had been given to Luis on the old man's death. It was propped up in Maria's kitchen. Occasionally Luis would threaten to use it, and his mother would say, "Mother of God, you'll break your neck, Luis. You leave it where it is." Once he took it out and his mother was right. He did nearly break his neck. He had picked himself up, deeply ashamed of himself, looking

around furtively to make sure that nobody had witnessed his fall, and after that he left the *astia* at home, regretfully, nevertheless.

(3)

The car was an elderly Seat with a slipping clutch. Luis loaded a battered sports bag into the back of it, installed Margaret in the lumpy passenger seat and drove off – competently and courteously she was pleased to note. He was right. The other drivers too were more courteous than she would ever have expected. Even the drivers of the huge banana lorries would stop on the steep winding roads to let them pass by. She could have hired a car herself and made the expedition alone.

That morning, her eyes like cinders from lack of sleep, she had showered, dressed in jeans and a cotton shirt and walked down to the restaurant on the seashore. She went with all the reluctance of a condemned woman.

“Why am I doing this?” she kept saying to herself. “I don’t need to do this. Why don’t I just go home and shut myself in my flat and forget all about it?”

But she couldn’t. The sheer bad manners involved in doing any such thing seemed impossible. The time for refusing had been last night. She had promised and, like a child, she still found a promise a solemn and binding proposition. If you broke promises things happened to you. Perhaps the sky fell on your head. In this instance it seemed possible that the sky might fall on her head whether she kept the promise or no, but still with grim determination she walked down to meet Luis Herrera Garcia.

He was early and she was a little late. He was sitting in the same place as last night, rapping his fingers on the table. He looked as nervous as she herself felt but when he saw her he leapt to his feet, all smiles. He had been wondering whether she would turn up, she realised, and anticipating hurt pride if she did not. She was glad that she had come after all.

The little car laboured up the steep side of the mountain with occasional loud revving sounds as Luis changed gear.

“Will it be alright?” she asked anxiously.

“Yes, yes” he said. “It is the clutch.”

“I can hear that.”

“It is – what do you say – slipping.”

“Yes.”

The car was very small and she was aware of his thigh, close to hers, of his brown hand as he wrestled with the obstinate gear stick, occasionally brushing her knee. Always he said an abrupt “Sorry” and she was certain that none of this contact was intentional and she was simply being hypersensitive.

“Look back now” he told her. “Los Christianos and Las Americas are one long town. I remember when there was nothing. Just the little fishing villages and the desert. They say they are making the desert bloom.”

“With concrete blocks?”

“With flowers too. It is not so bad. People make money out of you sun worshippers. That is not so bad, is it?”

“I’m not a sun worshipper” she said, defensively.

“Then what are you?” he asked, rather rudely she felt, though she doubted if it was meant and she was silent, not knowing how to reply. They drove past abandoned cultivation terraces and deserted banana plantations.

“How sad” she said.

“Perhaps – but these are only small plantations. People would have scraped a poor living from them at the most. Believe me, I know. The big plantations are still being worked. There are market gardens. They are very prosperous now. Tourists like to eat bananas and tomatoes and avocados. They like to buy roses in winter. They like to be able to come here and buy them so cheaply when it is cold grey winter at home in England. Is that not so?”

“Yes” she agreed. “Yes it is.”

Each week she paid a few pesetas for a huge bunch of tightly curled rosebuds in pink, red or yellow. After a few days and unlike winter roses at home which quickly drooped and died they would open out into beautiful ragged flowers.

“You see what happens is this” he continued. “Some guy comes from London and he finds a little village. Unspoilt. So pretty. That is what he says. So poor. That is what I say. And then next year he comes back and there are hotels and apartments and he is very disappointed. Oh it is all spoilt now, he

says. We will have to find somewhere else. But he does not see that now the children are well fed and they have good clothes, that the people have televisions in their houses or perhaps they can afford to drive a car.” He slapped the steering wheel with his hand. “He does not notice any of that. So it is hard to be sad about the tourists.”

“But don’t you find them rude?” she asked, a trifle timidly. He was beginning to flash and sparkle with anger again and he made her nervous.

He laughed. “Certainly I do” he said. “They shout at me to make me understand as if I am an idiot. They expect me to speak English when not a word of my language do they know except *cerveza* or *paella* or *sangria*.” He rounded on her suddenly. “*Habla Espanol? Me comprende?*”

“A little” she said, flustered. “But I’m trying to learn more. I have books and cassettes. I listen to them every day. I do try.”

His English was becoming better as he spoke to her she noticed, as though he had once been very fluent but lacked real practice. His speaking voice like his singing voice was peculiarly attractive, contriving to be both low and light. Sometimes she found it hard to catch exactly what he was saying: the stress and intonation patterns were still not quite familiar to her. His native accent, she thought, must be quite a musical one.

“Good” he nodded approvingly and continued. “I remember I was on a bus once. It was full of tourists coming into Los Christianos from the Costa del Silencio, the big tourist development along there. “ He gestured behind them. “I had been to visit my friend who lives in Las Galletas and there was this woman on the bus. An English tourist. She got very cross with the driver because she couldn’t make him understand. ‘You’d think they’d make some effort to speak English wouldn’t you?’ she said aloud so that all the bus could hear her. ‘These foreigners.’ She was speaking to her friend but she made sure that everyone could hear her, including the driver.”

It sounded very like her sister in law Janice, thought Margaret.

“Oh dear” she said. “What did you do?”

“I leaned forward. She was in front of me. I stuck my head between the two women. I said ‘Madam – don’t you realise that it is you who are the foreigner here? Perhaps you should go to Blackpool next year. Perhaps they will be able to understand you there.’”

“Did you really?” She could feel herself squirming with embarrassment for the objectionable woman even while the laughter welled up inside her. “Oh God, did you really? And what happened then?”

“She made a strange noise like a chicken being killed. She didn’t know what to say. But there were some other English people on the bus and they clapped their hands and laughed and said ‘Quite right’ so I felt better then. Not so sorry for being rude. And after all, you may be right.”

“Right about what?”

“I don’t know if it’s better to have a little land and scrape a living from the earth in the sun like my father – or to drive drunken young men to clubs in a taxi day after day or serve them with more drinks. Or even sing to them.” He shrugged. “I don’t know which is better. These timeshare places are like little towns. Tourists come and never leave them, never shop in our shops or eat in our restaurants. Only they use our water and electricity and put nothing back. Not even their money.”

Margaret thought of the graffiti she had seen. “Timesharers go home! This is our land!” She was silent, not knowing how to reply.

Luis stopped the car and suddenly threw it into reverse. She looked behind, alarmed. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Look. This is what you have come to see.” She had been so absorbed in his conversation that she had not noticed it: – a clump of almond trees in full bloom. She caught her breath in astonishment. The blossom was delicate pink and white, even more unexpectedly fragile perhaps after the vibrant energy of the hibiscus and bougainvillea down in the town.

“Oh look” she said. “Oh Luis, just look at it.” It was the first time that she had said his name aloud though she didn’t notice it, so great was her absorption in the beauty of these trees, standing like slender girls in the hazy sunshine of the high country. He shot her a puzzled, sidelong glance, surprised at his own reaction.

“I never imagine it like this” she said.

“But you have such blossom at home. I have seen it in London. In the streets in spring.”

“Yes. There are flowering cherries. They’re lovely but they don’t look like this. I think it’s the contrast with the other flowers. This amazing delicacy.

Blossoms in the desert but not quite of the desert. I've never seen anything so beautiful."

He grinned, quietly satisfied. "Good" he said. "I'm glad you like it. But come on. First we'll see Teide and then we'll eat."