

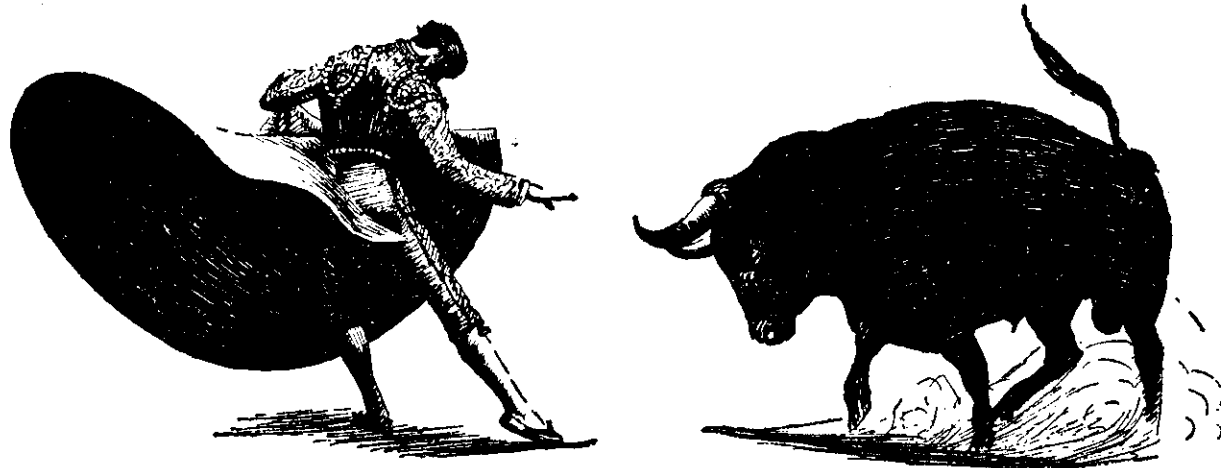
La Corrida

by JOHN BUCKLEY

ALTHOUGH I spent the Basque holiday at Zarauz I frequently visited San Sebastián. The beach is perfect, a natural playground in the shape of a shell. It is, indeed, called "La Concha." Santa Clara Island protects the bathers from the light Atlantic breeze. In the town, people turn out hand-worked jewellery, carved furniture, typewriters, sewing machines and shot-guns. They have unreliable telephones, go to Mass every day and pierce the ears of their pretty little dark two-year-old daughters and insert tiny gold earrings. When a daughter reaches teen age she prayerfully expects the top matador to present her some day with the warm, freshly-cut ears of his latest bull.

One Sunday I travelled to San Sebastián third class from Zarauz to see the Corrida. Beside me on the carriage seat were a pair of live hens trussed together. The Plaza de Toros is on the plan of the Colosseo at Rome. It takes more than 2000 years to convince the Spanish of the necessity of altering a design which has been found satisfactory. I lunched at the Hotel Maria Christina at 3.30 p.m., and satisfied myself that its restaurant was adequate—one test is the presence of a waiter behind each guest, and this test was passed. A good lunch and a bottle of *rioja alta* and a stroll out to the front found two young boys, brothers, about 12 and 10, fair headed and cheeky. They exchanged chaff with the head porter. I engaged them in conversation and they replied in English. Said I at their obvious Irish accent:

"You boys come from Dublin?"



"We do," said the elder, "we have been in Dublin 18 months."

"What is your name, then?" I asked, thinking to hear O'Donnell or Coyle, or suchlike.

"Francisco Xavier de Jala y Gomez, etc., etc., etc.," he answered, reeling off half a dozen of the Conquistadores.

It is the custom for Spanish parents to send their children to Dublin for practice in learning English. They know that an Irish accent is acquired, but almost all the English in Spain are Irish. They assure Spanish parents that the Irish accent (whether of Dublin, Kerry, Cork or Galway) is the very sweetest way in the world of speaking English. I believe they are right. The boys earnestly advised me to acquire tickets for the Corrida from their friend the Head Porter. There were to be six bulls. I bowed to this Functionary to show that I agreed with the compliments passed in his presence. (Indeed, I think Continental Head Porters the craftiest, subtlest and most resourceful of mankind.) Finally I was sold tickets ("El sombra," of course, and next the Presidential box).

I thanked all for their assistance and headed off for the Plaza as it was now

approaching 5.30 p.m. The Corrida starts with the procession. The "clerks of the course" wear black 17th Century costume with white ruffs and broad plumed hats. All make their bow to the President. The matadors in gleaming satin, heavily embroidered, carry cloaks, red with yellow reverse. After this formal mediaeval pageantry the first bull is released. He rushes out at a furious gallop, circles the ring and savages the barrier. He is played by the matador who, motionless and facing him, takes the animal close past his body—a full veronica. The bull turns and charges again quickly. Pass follows pass.

The picador on horseback armed with lance with a short strong point, and a guard, rides in the direction of the bull. He sees and charges, but the horse's flanks are heavily protected with strong felted pads reaching almost to the ground, and the picador, rising in his stirrups, pricks him in the thick neck muscles as he attempts to toss the horse. Then comes the banderillero, who has a gaily coloured dart in each hand. They have points about an inch long with a barb. He has no muleta or cape. He

must rely on his speed and agility. As the bull charges him he rises on tip-toe, evading the toss of the swinging horn and plants a dart with each hand in the neck muscles.

The matador resumes: a valencia follows a half valencia (taken in profile). Then other passes, the pass of punishment and the aruzina. Closer and closer to his body he plays the dangerous horns. At each good pass the crowd roars with one voice "Olé," but his body dissolves like smoke when the bull attempts to reach it. The bull stands a moment puzzled, facing the matador. He turns, kneels to face the crowd, his back to the bull, his hand on the boss of the bristly forehead. For one moment there is a deathly hush while he is at the mercy of the animal. Another instant and all is furious action again. At last the estocada—the death thrust—the bull squares, or is squared (cuadrado), faces his tormentor ready to charge—the matador sights carefully down the blade—it is of Toledo steel, triangular in section with a curve near the tip. The bull charges, receives the sword between the shoulders, buried up to the hilt. He rocks and settles over and dies. A good beast well fought and both ears are awarded to the swordsman.

Altogether I saw 34 bulls killed in San Sebastián or in Madrid. It is not true that the matador runs no risk. In one afternoon at Las Ventas, Madrid, I saw three matadors hurt and one banderillero. Courage is required as well as great skill and grace.

All the bulls were named—Ginger, Blackie, Smoky or Rascal, etc. The Studmaster received a special ovation to himself after a really splendid corrida. But when the matador is inexperienced he is barracked and abused and called "butcher." If, on the other hand, it has been a good corrida, he slowly circles the arena, doffing his hat in answer to the shouts of applause—purses are thrown down, men's hats, girls' shoes and flowers. The President awards him the ears; one or both, and later the newspapers liken him to Belmonte. This is about all one can gather, however, from the sports writer's accounts, for they are written in allusive and colloquial jargon and are as difficult to understand as a baseball story.

After the show I caught the train again to Zarauz, skirting the swift Pyrenean River, the Basque churches with notices forbidding small boys to play pelota against them, and the green and pleasant province of Guipuzcoa.

THE ILLUSTRATION reproduced at the top of this page is by Barnaby Conrad, and is from his book *Death of a Matador* (Michael Joseph).

(Solution to No. 740)

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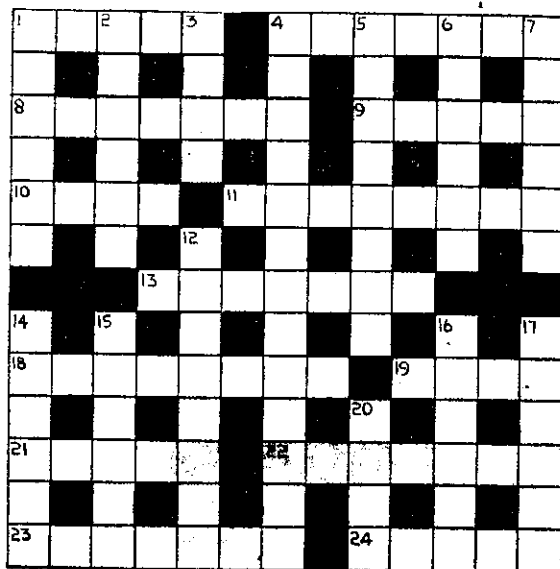
Clues Across

- Attack with a stone.
- Mum precedes the business representative beginning to end in a colourful battle.
- Time for a gift.
- One of nine to entertain?
- Found in steel safe-deposits? Decidedly fishy!
- The saint is put out and undecided.
- Here you find me having swallowed some broken china, sewing, perhaps?

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- A motor vehicle with us and a famous cricket team is forced to give way.
- Poison from a bean.
- Scene of action.
- He could be married, in which case do not encourage him.
- Some day will bring you a dog.
- Duck down?
- Cars make me yell.
- This city is half insane.
- It's a mistake to behead this fright.
- The kindly pirate in "Peter Pan" apparently announces himself.

No. 741 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Clues Down

- So upset over a victim? Would this be a feather in her cap?
- Maritime dandies.
- Restricted by a change of diet.
- Her pet went hungry (6, 7).
- Treading in confusion, because of the slope?
- Watch Aunt go for the candy!
- Wards off.
- Wholesome, but largely sultry.
- Literary attempts.