The Almond Blossom Appreciation Society

Chris Stewart

Published by Sort of Books

Extract

PROLOGUE

On Closer Examination of a Dung Beetle

At the beginning of this year, my daughter Chloë and I decided that we had to get fit, and that the best way to do this would be to create a running track in the riverbed. We go there every evening now and our pounding feet have marked out a fairly clear circuit.

The grass is long and makes a pleasant thripping noise as you race along, and in spring the ground is sprinkled with dandelions and daisies which grow so dense that, through half-shut eyes, you might be running through a field of cream. The track, however, remains just a bit too rustic for

a good sprint. You have to be careful to hop over the thistles, skip to avoid an ankle-cracker of a stone, and cut in close to the gayomba, or Spanish broom, on the third turn, while ducking your head to avoid a poke in the eye. The second turn is between the third and fourth euphorbia bush and the start and finish is at the tamarisk tree where we hang our sweaters, and afterwards, if it's sunny, rest in the wispy shade. The going is soft sandy turf and sheep turds.

As we returned from our run the other night Chloë called me excitedly to the gate: 'Quick, Dad! Come and have a look at this!' I turned back and looked where she was pointing. There, battling its way across the track was a dung beetle doing what dung beetles do, rolling a ball of dung. I was instantly captivated: a dung beetle is one of the great sights of the insect world, the determination and purpose of its Sisyphean labour putting you in mind of the crazed industry of ants, except that Scarabaeus semipunctatus operates in pairs or alone.

This particular beetle had lost its jet-black shine under a thick covering of dust. It was steering the ball with its back legs, while it scrabbled for purchase with its horny front legs. Progress was unthinkably difficult as the ground was rough, and, of course, it was quite unable to see where it was going, head down, facing away from the desired direction of travel, with a huge ball of shit in the way. The ball kept going out of control and rolling over the poor creature, yet without so much as a moment to dust itself down, the beetle picked itself up and patiently resumed rolling on its intended course. Chloë and I marvelled at its dogged persistence, and felt sorry for it, and tried to suppress our giggles when the dung ball rolled over it time and again.

Now the presence of a dung beetle in our valley is a

matter of some symbolic importance, being a direct result of our policy not to worm the sheep more than absolutely necessary. The sheep are fine; they have a few intestinal parasites – all such organisms do – but they live with them in a reasonably harmonious symbiotic state and as a result produce dung that's safe enough for the humble beetle to deposit its eggs in.

I know about this because I once had the privilege of chatting with a world expert on dung beetles – Jan Krikken, a Dutch entomologist whom I happened to bump into one afternoon in the valley while he was staying in our neighbour's cottage. He had been creeping along on all fours by the edge of our acequia, the irrigation channel, stopping from time to time to suck on his pooter – a strange device like a jamjar with two tubes sticking out of it, one with gauze at the end which you put in your mouth, and the other an open tube which you place above an insect under study. By giving the first a spirited suck, the specimen is whooshed painlessly and undamaged (if a little surprised) into the jamjar to be examined at leisure. Suck on the second, however, and the surprise is all yours.

Dr Krikken had been employed some years earlier by the Australian government to reintroduce dung beetles after decades of excessive sheep worming had all but eradicated them. There was a fear that without the beetles' help in rolling and burying the dung, it would fail to decompose and the continent would become caked in a mat of excrement. Fortunately, he had been able to save the Antipodeans from this fate. 'If you ever doubt the importance of organic farming,' he suggested to me, 'just spend some time looking at dung beetles.'

It seemed good advice, and I follow it as often as I can –

and, indeed, here I was, head down and deep in contemplation. Yet, the longer I looked at our specimen, the more it seemed that something wasn't quite right. I thought about it for a bit and then the full, astonishing truth dawned on me. 'You know what, Chloë?' I announced. 'That ball is not a ball of dung at all. It's a squash ball.' I paused to let this dramatic revelation sink in.

'What's a squash ball?' she asked.

'Well, it's a ball you play squash with.'

'Yes, but what's squash?' she persisted, as any Spanish schoolgirl might.

'It's a game, where you hit a ball… with a racket… in a court… and it bounces off these three walls…'

It was at this point that I started to realise the utter fatuousness of my conjecture. The nearest squash court would probably be two hundred miles away in Marbella or Sotogrande. How, then, did a squash ball come to be rolling around in our valley propelled by a dung beetle? It made no sense. However, I'd got started on this tack now, and I wasn't about to stop. I dug down deeper into my hole.

'You see, Chloë,' I continued, 'this particular ball is just too perfect to be the work of a beetle. Look, it's absolutely spherical and perfectly uniform in colour and texture. How is a creature as ungainly as that going to create a thing so perfect from a heap of sheep shit? You tell me that. It's a rubber ball.'

Chloë looked closely at the beetle and its ball.

'It's dung, Dad. I'm sure it is. I know dung when I see it.'

'No, it's a rubber ball, child. And the awful thing is that, when this poor benighted bicho gets its ball home, after all that terrible effort, it's going to find that it's made of rubber and not dung, so it will neither be able to form it into a pear

shape, scoop out a hollow and lay its eggs in it, which is what they do, nor eat it. It's going to break its little heart.'

'It'll be alright, Dad. It's dung, really,' Chloë reassured me. 'It's not what you think it is. Its little heart will be fine.'

I had to differ. 'No, Chloë, I know I'm right and I'm not just going to sit here and watch the poor thing being deceived like this. I'm going to take its ball away. At least then it will still have the time and energy to make itself a proper ball and get the job finished.'

Chloë was appalled. 'Don't do that, you can't do that. The poor thing will be devastated if you take it.'

'It'll be a lot less so now than after all that futile effort of rolling the cussed thing home,' I insisted.

'Dad – don't!' cried Chloë, as I crouched down next to the insect and its ball.

But I, with my fifty years of experience of the world, was adamant. I reached out a hand to pick up the dusty squash ball… and my fingers sank into the soft dung.

'Oh God, it is dung.'

'I told you so. Now look what you've done! You've gone and ruined it.'

I looked at the once-perfect dung ball. It was split right open, the moist dung in the centre temptingly displayed. It looked like one of those delicious chocolate-dusted truffles, with a moist greenish filling. I tried to mould it back to its earlier shape, to emulate the beetle's perfect craftsmanship, but to no avail.

'Put it back, Dad. You're only making it worse.'

I was filled with a terrible remorse. The tiny creature looked up at me disconsolately from way down on the ground. Chloë stared at me as if I were some sort of half-wit.

Gingerly I returned the squidged mound of dung to the beetle and straightened up. There was an awkward silence.

'Why?' I asked, falling back on a little wordplay to try and defuse the tension. 'Why is a beetle called escarabajo in Spanish?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why is an escarabajo called escarabajo?'

'I don't know. I thought "scarab" was a really old name for beetles. Why do you ask?'

'Because it's es cara bajo – it's face down.'

My daughter considered me thoughtfully for a moment, shook her head and set off up the hill to the house, no doubt to tell her mother.

The Bostonians

One of the great cultural contributions given by Spain to the world is the carmen. Now a true carmen is an enclosed patio garden on the hill of the Albaicín in Granada, and to qualify for the name it must have a view of the Alhambra and the peaks of the Sierra Nevada beyond. Apart from that, a number of essential elements can be deployed more or less at random: these include grapevines, tall slender cypresses, orange and lemon trees, a persimmon or two, perhaps a pomegranate, and myrtle – whose scent was believed by the Moors to embody the very essence of love.

The surface of a carmen should be cobbled in the style known as el empedrado Granadino – a grey and white pattern, again devised by the Moors, using the river stones that occur in abundance throughout the province. There should also be a fountain and a pool and preferably a number of runnels

and rills leading the water hither and thither in a fashion perfectly conceived to make you feel cool and contemplative on a hot summer's day. If the thing has been done right, the interplay between light and shade, the mingling scents of the flowers and the chuckling of the water in its channels will induce a profound contentment and sense of peace as you wander the cobbled paths, perhaps hand in hand with a good friend, musing playfully, the pair of you, upon the mysteries of the universe.

If you are really fortunate, a nightingale will come and nest in your cypress tree and then the pleasure becomes sublime. But that can't be counted on, so most carmen owners make do with a canary in a cage. I personally rather like the sound of caged canaries – it is one of the essentials of a Spanish street – but it hardly compares to the nightingales and, besides, the song of the caged bird should be more a source of distress than pleasure to sensitive, modern man.

Halfway up the Cuesta del Chápiz, between Sacromonte and the Albaicín, is the Carmen de la Victoria. Owned by the university, it is one of the prettiest carmenes in the city. I pushed open the gate and stood for a minute adjusting to the deep shade after the brightness of the street with its glaring white walls. I was passing through the city on the way home from a trip to Málaga, and had come here partly to visit the carmen – but mainly to see my friend Michael.

Michael Jacobs is an art historian, a writer, a traveller and a scholar and a formidable cook, as well as being one of the most entertaining people I know. Somewhere within the confines of the carmen he was holding court to a group of English tourists who had paid good money to be guided around the cultural monuments of Andalucía. Michael had

doubtless dazzled them that morning with his erudition and somewhat unorthodox views on the Alhambra: he likes to point out that, given how much of the Moorish palace was rebuilt after a fire at the end of the nineteenth century, it is about as authentic as the Alhambra Palace Hotel down the hill. Now there would be a slack period while they wandered among the delights of the carmen, sinking a drink or two before lunch.

I came upon Michael pacing to and fro along a rose arbour, talking agitatedly on his mobile phone. He was gesticulating wildly and occasionally clapping his free hand to his head. Some catastrophe was clearly assailing him, as it tends to do, for he is a person who hovers happily on the very verge of chaos. An ordinary mortal's carefully laid plans, meticulous organisation and unsurprising results would be hell for him – even if he were able to aspire to such a mode of existence.

I waited, sat on a bench and watched as two tiny white butterflies wove in and out of a trellis of dusty pink roses. At last Michael was finished. We embraced in a sort of manly Mediterranean bear hug – a gesture by which we seek to confound the stiffness of our Anglo-Saxon upbringings. 'Ah yes, Chris… That's w-wonderful… Just the man… It's good you're here, actually, because… W-would you like a beer, yes you must have a beer…'

We moved to the bar where I ordered a wine; I've never much liked Spanish beer. 'Well, actually,' resumed Michael, 'what I was thinking w-was… have you ever been on one of those… it's just that… I know there are people who… w-why don't you?' He was saved from having to commit himself to anything more substantial by the ringing of his phone. 'Excuse me, Chris' – he looked at the screen – 'Ah,

it's Jeremy again. Ah… H-hallo, Jeremy… Yes Jeremy…' There followed a conversation if possible even more inconclusive than the one I had just been involved in.

Michael has the energy, proportionate to his size, of an insect, and races about at great speed on unpredictable courses full of hesitations and volte-faces, but somehow manages to achieve a great deal, in much the same way, I suppose, as the insect does. He has published, I think, twenty-six books, and never more than three, he says happily, with the same publisher. And all these books are the sort of books for which you need to do immense quantities of research and have reams of arcane knowledge at your disposal. He forever has some new project on the boil. As well as his copious output he has the most terrifying capacity for drinking and socialising that I have ever encountered. He will stay out carousing in bars and knocking back gargantuan quantities of wine until four or five in the morning and then wake at seven to hurl himself into the next day with not the faintest trace of a hang-over. One imagines that an organism that receives such constant and merciless battering would soon fall to bits, but no – at fifty, Michael is as vital and lively as ever.

'Ah yes… Chris, I've got a bit of a problem with this group… or not so much this group as another one. You see I'm… erm… double-booked… well, not exactly double-booked but I was supposed to stay available in case the itinerary changed and it… erm… has, and I'm… erm… not…' He looked decidedly sheepish. 'I'm booked in to lecture to a whole load of college students instead. Jeremy's having a nervous breakdown over it.'

'Who's Jeremy?'

'Ah, Jeremy… you'd like Jeremy… Well, actually he's

quite a strange sort of person… Very… erm… organised.'

'Yes, but who is he?'

'Ah yes, well, Jeremy runs these tours for well-heeled Americans…'

'Oh, I see now,' I said, although in fact I didn't.

'As a matter of fact…' said Michael, studying me with an odd intensity. 'Yes, you could be. I mean, w-why not…?'

I returned the stare, as the meaning of Michael's look and meandering words began to dawn on me. It was maybe a not very striking coincidence that we both happened to be wearing black jeans, white collarless shirts and black leather jackets that had seen better days. But the resemblance went beyond that. We both wore round glasses, both had thinning curly grey hair and rather rubicund complexions, and although Michael loomed half a head taller, we were of similar build.

Michael was by now smiling complacently, with the look of one who has resolved a mathematical conundrum. 'You d-don't by any chance fancy spending a few days in Seville do you, Chris?' he asked, in a tone that seemed deliberately casual.

'You mean, impersonating you – and taking round one of your groups?!'

'Er… yes, that's more or less what I had in mind.'

'They'd rumble us. I mean I may look a bit like you and even dress a bit like you, but I know bugger all about art!'

'Oh, that doesn't matter a bit. I've got some books you can borrow right here in my bag and you've got all of the ones I've written on Andalucía. And there's some pamphlets about the group, too – they're inside the b-books.'

Michael's head almost completely disappeared into an ancient, scuffed leather briefcase. He emerged clutching

a couple of books, and a few nondescript twigs which he stared at in amazement and then tossed aside. 'You'll be fine,' he assured me, handing over the haul. 'You're used to giving talks and you read Spanish, don't you? So at the worst you can just translate the gallery's captions.'

There's something immensely encouraging about Michael, which makes a madcap scheme, coupled with the offer of an all-perks-included midweek break in Seville, seem oddly attractive. 'Okay,' I said. 'I'm on.'

'Well, of course you are,' he clapped me on the shoulder. 'That's w-wonderful. They'll be meeting me… um… you in the foyer at the Hotel Alfonso XIII at 10am on Monday and the first trip's to…' He rummaged among the papers. 'Ah yes, the Giralda, quite exquisite and easy to explain. You just turn up and talk about the Moors. I'll square it all with Jeremy, who'll go with you.'

And so it was that I found myself launched on a new career path, as lecturer on Andalucían art and architecture, shepherd to wealthy American art lovers, and Michael Jacobs impersonator. I strolled down the hill to the city and turned in at the doorway of the Librería Urbana to pick up the tools of my new trade.

A slight feeling of nausea crept over me there, confronted by a shelf full of art history books, but I forced myself to get a grip and limit the search to the buildings we would be visiting in Seville. I would bone up on each subject the night before – a tried and tested measure that had got me through school (though admittedly not through any actual exams). Still, I had a whole four days ahead of me to get up to speed. It would be fine. These wealthy Americans were bound to have more money than erudition. And thus I comforted myself as I drove out of Granada towards the

provincial town of Órgiva and the remote patch of mountainside that I call home.

'Who are these people, then, Chris?' asked my wife Ana, leaning over my shoulder as I pored over the brochures that had spilled from Michael's book. Porca, our parakeet and Ana's familiar, seemed to echo the question in squawks from a new perch he'd made on the top of my art history pile.

'Um, well, they're all Americans and…' I scanned the printed sheet again as if unwilling to take in the import of the words. 'Well, it seems that they're the Trustees of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Hell's teeth! And they're not just ordinary trustees either… They're a sort of elite – they all cared enough about fine art to donate over a million dollars to the museum, which is what seems to have qualified them for a place on this jaunt.'

Ana fixed me with one of her steady looks. 'You can't do it, Chris. It won't work. You'll just have to phone Michael and tell him it's impossible. You could offer to help out a bit, but you surely can't go through with this stunt!'

She was right, of course. I needed to talk to Michael, and soon. But then again, I hate to let a friend down and I really do believe that most things will work out in the end if you sit back and let them. So I put the phone call off, got on with other chores and leafed casually through the odd art book while waiting for the kettle to boil or for Chloë to get ready for school. And before I knew it Sunday night had hurtled along, leaving me with no other choice but to do some last minute homework and present myself to the

good Bostonians.

Now, I pride myself that I can absorb books as well as the next literate being. But I am constitutionally unable to swot. As soon as I have to glean information for any real purpose, my eyes glaze over or rake the room for a distraction, and before I know it I'm either asleep with my head on the book cover or replacing the strings on my guitar and tuning them up. That night it was sleep that got me and at ten o'clock Chloë took pity and woke me with tea and an offer to test me on the differences between Almoravid and Almohad motifs. However, we soon gave it up for a bad job and went out to lock up the sheep and chickens instead.

It was a beautiful night. Bumble and Big, our dogs, rocketed down to the river, barking the trail of a wild boar. The air was light and balmy and suffused with the summer scent of jasmine and wild lavender. It was a night for having not a care in the world and yet I was bowed down with foreboding. A feeling that returned with double intensity when I rose the next morning, slipped on my one respectable outfit and set off to Seville.

The Hotel Alfonso XIII, I portentously explained to my car windscreen, is a somewhat overblown nineteenth-century building in the neo-Mauresque style – as evidenced by the blue tilework juxtaposed with the fancy bricks. It is also one of the most expensive hotels in Spain, and as I pulled into the forecourt, and stated my purpose, I began to feel sweaty, sticky and distinctly out of place. All the more so as I walked around to the imposing front entrance, where a group of hoods in shades and dark suits milled around a

fleet of black Mercedes with smoked windows, waiting for a meeting of Andalucían captains of industry to end.

There seemed an edginess to this gathering – a visible hint of the murky underworld that supports the super-rich. Shuffling through them I was nearly at the steps when something small and white caught my eye. There on the ground, between two gleaming black Mercedes, lay a tiny white pigeon. Some of the hoods were peering down at the bird, not at all sure what to make of it. One of them fidgeted beneath his sharp suit jacket, perhaps itching to whip out his revolver and take a pot shot.

Somehow the plight of the creature resonated with my own predicament, so I muscled my way nonchalantly in amongst the heavies and demanded to know what was going on.

'It's a baby. Fallen off a roof. Can't fly.'

'Well… what are you going to do about it?' I asked, fixing the nearest hood with a stern eye.

'Nothing,' he said. 'The cats can get it, or Tonio can run it over for us when he pulls out.' He sniggered nastily.

'Oh, come on now!' I expostulated. 'Have you no hearts? Look at the poor little thing shivering with fear.'

The hood looked nervously at his colleagues and shrugged, nonplussed perhaps as much by hearing a foreigner speak with a strong country accent as by my championing of the bird. I stooped to gather up the terrified creature in my cupped hands.

'You really don't want to do that,' suggested one of the suits, who had crowded around, eager to see what was going on.

'And why not?' I proferred pugnaciously, holding up the bird so everyone could see. I felt pretty good – sort of heroic

– amid this assembly of gangsters.

'They got diseases – and fleas. Aerial rats they are, pigeons. And the little babies are just as bad.'

'Nonsense,' I said, but looked cautiously down at the tiny creature in my hands, all the same. Sure enough, on each wrist was an army of the most infinitesimal insects imaginable, swarming in their thousands up my wrists, heading for my shirt cuffs and the warmer parts of my body. I suppose they had figured that their previous host's number was up and now would be a good time to jump ship. I yelped and ran over to the garden, where I dumped the pigeon in a flowerbed. Sure as hell the cats would get it there, but it was, after all, only an aerial rat, and I needed to get something done about these lice, and quick.

I barged through the throng of sniggering hoods and raced up the marble stairs three at a time. The lice were moving faster now. I shot past the top-hatted flunky, spun through the revolving door, and hurtled across the vestibule. There, arrayed before me like a wedding line, exquisitely groomed and composed and shining with expensive unguents, were my Bostonians. I stopped in mid-flight, raised my seething hands and opened my mouth, but the right words eluded me. With a strangled croak, I continued my headlong dash to the cloakroom.

Once inside I tried to calm myself down by focusing on the task at hand. The first thing was to try and scrub myself down, then make some attempt to dry shirtsleeves that were actually dripping. And finally, I needed to psych myself into the infinitely knowledgeable, professorial persona of Michael Jacobs.

I managed the scrubbing part, at least, and emerged from the cloakroom more or less devoid of insect life. I smiled

at the assembled Bostonians, who had turned towards me with a look of surprised but good-natured enquiry. I decided not to offer an explanation of my unorthodox entrance and sopping cuffs. 'And you must be…?' – the tall lady at the front of the group asked with a slight tilt of her well-coiffured head.

'Erm, I'm, erm…' I had rehearsed this part of the proceedings hundreds of times but instead of answering I just stood there mouthing silently like a dying cod. It was the sight of a tall, curly-haired, bespectacled man striding towards me across the lobby that had provoked this apparent identity crisis. He bore an uncanny resemblance to Michael Jacobs.

'Ah – Chris,' Michael shouted across the remaining expanse of carpet. 'This is Chris Stewart, everyone!' he announced. 'That's w-wonderful, you've come early. Chris is leading the group this afternoon and I'm going to join you all at dinner at the Torre del Oro – sumptuous fare.' There were pleasant smiles of approbation all round. 'Just one word, Chris.' And he neatly spun me to one side just out of view.

I felt my body sag with relief. 'You haven't introduced yourself to anyone yet, have you?' Michael whispered. 'Thank God for that! Jeremy threw an absolute f-fit when I told him our plan, but he's squared it with everyone now, and the great news is that you can guide them around as yourself. They've all been most w-wonderfully sympathetic, and curious – I've been handing out that book of your's to them.'

'You mean I do the tour of the Giralda and Museo de

Bellas Artes as me?' I asked, amazed that they'd actually want such a dilettante at the helm.

'Er… no. Jeremy managed a change of schedule. You're taking them to the carriage museum. You can do carts and horses, can't you?' he asked, suddenly anxious again. I could – but perverse as this might sound, I was rather deflated by the idea.

We rejoined the reception. It seemed as if there were Bostonians everywhere: a murmur of cultured American tones filled the room along with the rustle of expensive clothes and the clink of ice in glasses. Throughout that day, the Bostonians were continuing to gather; private jets touched down at Seville's airport; long limousines sped into the city.

A luxury bus, the size of a smallish aeroplane, pulled up at twelve to herd us all to the carriage museum. I don't think I'd ever been in such a plush, well-upholstered vehicle before, or one with such ferocious air-conditioning. Cardigans, if not fleeces, were essential rig for travelling round Seville on that summer's day.

Jeremy joined the group just before we set off. He waited a respectful step or two to one side before springing up, checking surreptitiously that no one had been kidnapped on the walk from the kerb, and sat beside me. A suntanned man with impeccable white hair, he wore a dark blazer, quiet silk tie and smiled with great ease. But you could tell he was nervous.

'Things have to be got right,' he muttered to me as the bus moved gently into the flow of traffic. 'Just one call to a

lawyer and we'd be done for. Can you imagine if they heard about that stunt Michael was planning to pull!' And he leaned forward with eyes closed and rubbed his temples. Apparently it helps with the frown lines.

At the museum the idea was to drink fizzy wine, eat tapas, get addressed by local dignitaries and, time permitting, look at some of the exhibits before departing again for lunch. 'All you have to do, Chris,' explained Jeremy, 'is keep things pleasant, and if they want to know anything about Spain and the Spanish, you tell them. Okay? And, oh-dear-lord, can you do anything about those shirt cuffs?'

Apart from the cuffs it was an easy enough task. These were people groomed in the well-bred, polished manners of Boston's patrician class and keeping them pleasant was a bit like asking a group of teenagers to be moody. They even smiled graciously while I paraphrased and embellished captions they had already just translated perfectly competently for themselves. To be honest, I couldn't work up too much enthusiasm for the horse-drawn coaches; it was nice that somebody was keeping them polished, but the truth is that Americans do that sort of thing much better than anybody else.

Later that evening the luxury bus was again purring outside the hotel, waiting to drive us a half-dozen blocks to our destination for dinner. I suggested we left it where it was and made use of the beautiful night to work up an appetite. Everybody enthusiastically agreed and we set off, in one of the most improbable crocodiles I've ever been part of, along the palm-lined river bank of the Guadalquivir, marvelling at the luminous glow of leaves in the light of the streetlamps. 'Now this is a worry,' whispered Jeremy, through the corner of his mouth. 'If someone so much as

loses a heel or steps in donkey shit, we could be in serious trouble, you know!' But I could tell that even he was starting to relax a bit, swinging his blazer over his shoulder.

Michael managed to join us for the tail-end of our dinner in the courtyard of a fabulously furnished sixteenth-century palacete or mansion. Just as the waiters were circulating with plates of petits fours, he burst in and, hovering around the tables with the trajectory of a bee in a lavender bush, plonked himself on a chair beside me.

'Ah, Chris,' he intoned, craning his neck to study the beautifully carved marble fountains and scan the aftermath of the feast, 'what a sybarite you've become!'

It turned out that he had hot-footed it from dinner with the university students. In fact, he had been on a binge of double booking all day: two large meals and as many pre- and post-prandial drinks as could mathematically be accommodated. A lesser man would have gone under, but Michael was in his element. Indeed, as the Bostonians were seen safely back to the Alfonso XIII, he clearly felt the night was young. 'W-what we need, Chris, is to w-wind d-down a bit. An extra glass or two would do us good.'

Michael knew Seville well: he'd lived for years in the city and had many friends. We drank with most of them that night, in the sort of bars you'd never normally find – let alone go into. Returning to the Alfonso XIII at five in the morning, I stood in the bathroom, swaying slightly and trying to focus on the haggard face staring back at me through rheumy eyes. It looked sorely in need of some plain country living.

Next morning Michael seemed, if anything, rejuvenated, and as we arrived at the Bellas Artes museum, slipped back into the persona of art expert. In we trooped, about twenty of us, our rubbery trainers squeaking on the marble floors, as he hurried us at great speed through room after room – 'You don't want to b-bother with any of this stuff – constipated, sycophantic, depressingly conventional' – until at last we reached a sculpture or painting he thought worthy of our attention.

It was a figure of a kneeling Saint Jerome, carved by Torrigiani. Michael then launched into a virtuoso display of art lore and gossip ('…and to think that the man who sculpted these delicate features should have broken the nose of Michelangelo and been hounded from Florence!') before whisking us upstairs to admire Zurbaran's panel of Saint Hugo presenting a joint of lamb to Carthusian monks. 'The world's first icon of vegetarianism,' Michael declared, pointing out how the lamb had spontaneously combusted to prevent the monks breaking their vow to eschew the eating of meat.

It was a real tour de force and I felt privileged to be a part of it. But it was the evening's visit to Seville's massive cathedral that most strongly encapsulated the trip. The cathedral's builders boasted that successive generations would regard them as mad, in their ambition of scale. But they could not have imagined the true strangeness of the scene that was to unfold. As we arrived at the northwest gate, where a stuffed crocodile known as the Apothecary's Lizard hangs from the rafters, it took a while to grasp that uniformed security guards were actually clearing the public from the building. Shortly, one of the guards came over and addressed us in deferential English: 'If you'd like to come

this way, please…' The cathedral authorities had emptied the building, the largest church in Europe after St Peter's in Rome, for less than two dozen visitors. I wondered just what sort of donation Jeremy must have put in the poor-box.

The emptiness was all the more disorientating when we were assembled in the choir stalls, and the cathedral organist, dressed impeccably in a grey suit, stepped across the marble tiles to put his instrument through its paces. 'This is the highest note – that little pipe up there,' he told us, pointing to a tiny pipe nestling miles above among at least four thousand others. He pressed the key and from the tiny pipe came a peep so high and thin that you'd imagine only the keenest-eared bat could appreciate it. 'And this is the lowest…' It seemed that the very chasms of the earth were being sundered open somewhere deep in the crypt.

Then he played a few pieces, doubtless full of nuance and emotion, though I couldn't really enjoy them. Organ recitals remind me inescapably of school: first they depress me a little, then send me into an uneasy doze. The Bostonians, too, began dropping off in ones and twos, and it was a relief to be suddenly jarred awake by the organ's last shuddering bass notes and to be ushered out again into the fresh air and light, by our secret entrance. Looking back I noticed the congregation reforming to take up their private devotions again, while tourists streamed along the main aisles. It was good to be back amid the bustle of the Sevillian throng ourselves, off in search of an evening's pleasure.

Against my fears and expectations, my role as tour guide had been an easy one – Michael had miraculously appeared for all the big numbers and had managed to appear at all the dinners. However, the final evening set a challenge even

he could not defy. We were to be treated to the best seats in the house for the Seville Opera, to see La Traviata. But the musicians had gone on strike. They did so at the last minute, so there we were, the Bostonians in their evening wear, all dressed up, with nowhere to go.

'W-well, this is an opportunity,' declared Michael to everyone. 'We can't have opera, but we can have literature. Chris has most kindly agreed to read to you from his m-marvellous book.' It was hardly on a par with Puccini, I felt, and nor did it seem right, somehow, to be offering this black-leg labour. But we headed to a bar in the Barrio Santa Cruz, ordered a dozen bottles of house wine, and had a genuinely jolly evening of it.

We read the next morning, however, that the conductor at the Opera, exasperated by the intransigence of the musicians, had walked onto the stage, swished his tails over the edge of the piano stool and played the entire work of La Traviata as a solo piano recital. The crowd were ecstatic and the press proclaimed it one of the city's greatest ever cultural events. I don't think I was the only one who felt a bit short-changed.