

# PIO BAROJA, THE WRITER, WANDERER AND HUMBLE MAN

By MARINO GOMEZ-SANTOS

Baroja, our greatest novelist, has been a doctor, a business man and on the exchange. A few months after practising his career he realized that he had no great illusion for it and abandoned it in order to dedicate himself to literature. He knew well enough that this occupation would not be very rewarding economically, but he was ready to live modestly and with his vocation. He knows the towns of Spain well and many foreign towns also because he has been there to observe and get to know the types and customs.

To-day on the eve of his eightieth birthday his conversation is pleasant, sparkling and simple. He does not leave home now and in his corner he reads and writes with frequent lapses which he devotes to receiving his friends. He never speaks of his work unless he is expressly asked. He has never liked standing out in society on account of his talent or his apparel, his great illusion has been to pass unnoticed and to live close to picturesque and humble types.

We went to Don Pío Baroja's house; in the room the same furniture, practically the same books; the novelist in his usual clothes and his now popular beret.

"Aren't you cold without heating, Don Pío?"

"Of course I am, but I don't earn so much money that I can burn coal all day. That must cost an awful lot, at least twenty pesetas a day."

"All right, don't begin to talk about money; spend it, smoke Havana cigars if you like and you will see how much more optimism you have for everything."

"Yes, yes, but I don't know where I am going to get it all the same. People and editors think that to be a little famous and have money are the same thing. To the devil with fame! if the little that one had one could use on buying some slippers...!"

"So you haven't earned any money by writing?"

"Good heavens, a little yes; but I mean that in Spain nobody becomes rich by writing. I remember in what remained of Jacometrezo street there was a library where Galdos' *Episodios Nacionales* were sold. One day the Gallegan assistant that was there said that the editorial house considered it successful if they sold 2000 copies. Just think of that! The author could earn five hundred pesetas, that is disgusting."

"But now writing is better paid."

"Yes, but less is sold. People who bought books formerly now go to the cinema because at the same time their wives show off a new dress or some furs. Good heavens! do you know of any book of twenty years ago that has sold 10,000 copies? Before I gave you an example of Galdós; well Valera said that with what he earned he had not sufficient to buy an ordinary frock for his daughter."

"So you don't believe in the financial gain from literature?"

"Well, some people have made money, above all pamphleteers, such as Fernández and González, even though he died master, Pérez y Pérez and Felipe Trigo. They also say that in misery afterwards. But of novelists, they say Pérez Lugín succeeded in having twenty five editions of *The House of Troy* published, and of course he would earn quite a good bit with that. But beside Zola who had editions of 300,000 published..."

"But you said in your memories that with the income

from your articles and novels you travelled in Spain and abroad."

"Yes, but quite modestly, I don't know who, a few years ago, in the cafe, planned to walk to the monastery of Yuste. There were five or six who accepted it energetically. Later, as usual, they backed out. My brother Richard and I and Ciro Bayo and a painter called Leandro Oroz went. Oroz had been born in Bayonne, he had a face like a frog and was a little queer and deaf."

"Did you take provisions?"

"Yes we bought a skinny little donkey who carried everything. My brother made a tent with some canvass supported on a long pole. Leandro Oroz carried the pole because there was no way of loading it onto the beast. When we had gone twenty kilometres Oroz said he had to go back because he had some work to do."

"And the pole?"

"My brother carried the pole, but later we saw that it was no good so we threw it into a river whose name I don't remember."

"And did you continue?"

"Yes we went through Alcorcón to take the Móstoles road and then we turned off towards Villaviciosa de Odón. I remember that we went to Arenas de San Pedro and to the monastery of Yuste. On the way Ciro Bayo told us that his friends the monks would treat us as guests of honour for five or six days. We had only just arrived when a monk told us with a certain amount of distrust on seeing our clothes:

"All right, you can see the convent but you must go again at once."

"On the way we discussed strategy with Ciro Bayo. He had been in the Civil War. He was fantastic. I remember how with great solemnity he started to shout out a war dispatch:

"Captain General in charge of the rebel forces...!"

"Well I don't know I have not travelled very much, but I have been in Italy, in London, France. I remember in the summer of 1940 we were travelling through France by car with the sculptor Sebastián Miranda who frequently invited me. We were going to Marañón's house. The road was long and beautiful and had some magnificent trees. On each side there were some wheel barrows or *roulottes*, about sixty to eighty. They were shopkeepers'. War was nearby and there were no tourists on the road. We only saw lorries loaded with trunks and women and children who were emigrating. All that filled me with heaviness and sadness, and on remembering it I still see the downcast faces of the French.

"Which towns in Spain do you like most?"

"Cádiz, Puerto Santa María and Jerez. In the north it is different even though there are pretty little villages. Santiago is very decorative in Galicia; sad but picturesque. Monforte de Lemos has always seemed a very characteristic town to me. I have an idea that in this town some years ago some works by a famous Germán painter were sold. I remember there were lots of comments at the time.

"And what about your love of walking?"

"At first I had strength to walk and do a few journeys. A Germán older than I and who is still alive, and called Schmitz, and I used to go together. At that time it was the fashion in Germany to go on these excursions and we climbed several peaks among them Peñalara."

"Do you like travel books?"

"I like novels better. I prefer to make the journeys to reading them; but of course there were no companions. For example, "Azorín", take him outside Madrid, and the rest did not interest him one bit. Nobody was fond of it."

Afternoon falls. We say good bye. Somebody knocks at

the door. Don Pío looks through the peep hole and then pulls back the bolts like in a store. More people come in to pass the time of day with him. Now Don Pío will return to his armchair, wrapping himself up in his rug, will gloss over classical words; As we were saying yesterday...