



PETER KERR

Bestselling author of *Snowball Oranges* and *Mañana Mañana*



FROM PAELLA TO PORRIDGE

A Farewell to Mallorca and a Scottish Adventure

FROM PAELLA TO PORRIDGE

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A Farewell to Mallorca and a Scottish Adventure

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

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Mañana Mañana

Thistle Soup

Viva Mallorca!

A Basketful of Snowflakes

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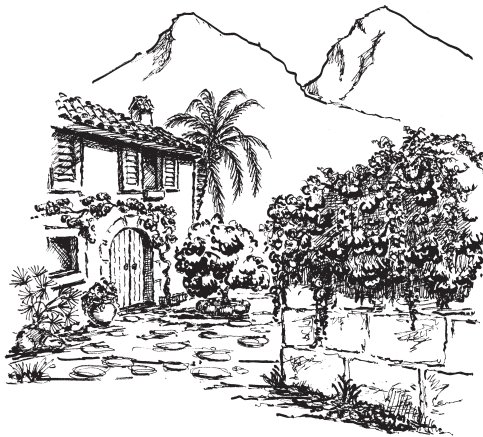
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*'But pleasures are like poppies spread:
You seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white – then melts forever.'*

From 'Tam o' Shanter' by Robert Burns (1759–96)



— ONE —

OUT FOR A DUCK

‘The smallest pot always contains the sweetest jam,’ said old Maria.

‘Sí,’ old Pep grunted, ‘but an empty sack cannot stand upright.’

‘Better to own a little that is dear to you than have all the potato fields of Sa Pobra,’ Maria countered.

Pep inclined his head backwards and squinted at her from beneath the overhang of his black beret. With the work-gnarled little finger of his right hand delicately raised, he plucked a misshapen *cigarrillo* from the corner of his mouth, remained ominously silent for a few moments, then drawled, ‘Women have long hair and short brains!’

Maria gave a little snort of umbrage, then came back with, ‘When a man’s teeth fall out, his tongue wags loose!’

The self-satisfied smirk that had been wrinkling Pep's scraggy features since delivery of his last riposte was promptly converted into a pucker of pique. This, I suspected, was just as much to hide his generously-spaced graveyard of dental tombstones as to convey his annoyance at what Maria doubtless felt had been her *coup de grâce*. Pep's little black eyes narrowed as he replaced his hand-rolled cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He took care, I noticed, not to open his lips any more than was absolutely necessary to accommodate the *cigarrillo's* soggy butt. Applying the same technique to the opposite corner of his mouth, he muttered, ventriloquist-style, 'And when a woman's teeth fall out, her brains soon follow.'

I could sense that Maria was about to take a swipe at Pep with her trusty mattock hoe, being sensitive, no doubt, to the fact that her own surviving teeth were arranged in a neat two-up, three-down formation. I had always thought that this gave her the appearance of a mischievous little elf when she smiled, but the look on her face now was more akin to that of a homicidal hobgoblin in a straw hat and black frock.

Pep continued to eyeball her inscrutably as sparks began to pop and crackle from the end of his cigarette. Time for a peace-making interjection, I reckoned.

'*Buen tiempo para el campo ayer, no?*' I said with a nervous little laugh. 'Good weather for the fields yesterday, no?'

But the British custom of bringing up the subject of the weather during any conversational hiatus cut no ice with this pair of crotchety old Mallorcan worthies – despite my picking a saying often used in rural Spain after unseasonable downpours like the one we'd experienced the previous day.

‘Y *tambien para los patos*. And for the ducks as well,’ Pep mumbled disinterestedly. His eyes remained fixed on Maria, and on her cocked hoe in particular.

‘Anyway, Pep and Maria, about the price of land,’ I said in an effort to steer the conversation back to where it had started before they’d engaged in their battle of Mallorcan proverbs. ‘Is it still possible to buy good farmland at a fair agricultural value on a holiday island like this?’

‘I am one duck short,’ Maria piped up. She glowered accusingly at Pep.

‘That’s all right, Maria,’ I quickly put in, before Pep could grab the opportunity to continue his female-brains theme by telling her that a duck wasn’t all she was short of. ‘I’ll give you a hand to look for it, never fear.’

Maria had this quirky little habit of conducting her conversations in backflips – picking up on the last-but-one topic being discussed. You had to keep your wits about you when she was in this mode, which was almost permanently these days. Knee-high to a fruit fly and ninety if she was a day, Maria still had a mind as sharp as a razor, however – no matter what Pep suggested to the contrary. And there wasn’t a single detail of the day-to-day state of the orchards, crops and livestock on her little *finca* of which she wasn’t totally aware, as Jaume, her long-suffering son-in-law and general farm factotum, would ruefully affirm.

Maria’s *finca*, given over mainly to lemon trees, was the next one up the valley from our own, on which oranges were the main crop. The two little farms were separated by a crumbling drystone wall. Along its base grew tall clumps of wild fennel, intertwined here and there by rambling

grapevines growing from stubby, contorted rootstock that had been planted there who knows when and by who knows whom. Maria once told me that they'd been there for as long as she could remember, and, despite her diminutive size, she had the memory of an elephant. Even now, though, those old vines, with the encouragement of a little pruning, produced enough plump grapes to fill the fruit bowl on our kitchen table for many an autumn week.

Pep and Maria had known each other all of their lives, as both were natives of the valley, and Pep's *finca* was located just over the lane from hers and ours. The apparently hostile attitude that they showed towards each other was, I suspected, a bit of a sham – something of an act that, for reasons known only to themselves, they liked to carry out in front of anyone they thought might be taken in by it. As I was, in their eyes, a *loco extranjero* – a crazy foreigner – I fitted the bill just fine. But, despite both of them being capable of genuinely cantankerous behaviour at times, we'd come to know Pep and Maria as good, kind and generous neighbours.

We (that's my wife Ellie and I, along with our two sons – Sandy, now nineteen, and Charlie, seven years his junior) had come to live in this lush valley, hidden away in the Tramuntana Mountains of Mallorca, almost two years earlier. We'd bought the small orange farm of Ca's Mayoral on an impulse, after stumbling upon it as a result of taking a wrong turn on a holiday drive through the mountains. No doubt, if we'd spared the time to think seriously about what we were doing, we'd never have risked committing ourselves, our sons and everything we had to a type of farming we knew

nothing about – and in a foreign land to boot. But, enchanted by the place almost as soon as we set eyes on it, Ellie and I had decided to sell up back home and take the plunge.

‘Home’ was the agricultural county of East Lothian in the south of Scotland, where we’d been growing barley and raising beef cattle on a fifty-acre spread near the historic market town of Haddington. We loved the area, justifiably known as the Garden of Scotland, not so much for its pastoral beauty – stunning though it is – as for the fertility of its gently rolling landscape. We also loved our home, the little farm of Cuddy Neuk, set on a hillside with uninterrupted views over the wide waters of the Firth of Forth and beyond to the chequered fields and undulating skyline of the ancient Kingdom of Fife.

In truth, I suppose we would never have dreamed of leaving that place, given a choice. However, in the big-is-beautiful and bigger-still-is-even-more-beautiful climate that had been developing over the years in British farming, we were facing a future in which fifty acres just wasn’t going to be enough to provide us with a living any more. A farm of ten times that size would have been needed to profitably sustain the type of agriculture we were involved in. But that would have required the investment of a serious amount of capital, and a serious amount of capital we neither had nor were ever likely to have.

So, when we stumbled upon the opportunity to start afresh on an even *smaller* farm in a far-off land and involving totally unfamiliar skills of husbandry, we blithely fell into the role of *locos extranjeros* and bought the place. And ‘crazy foreigners’ is how the native Mallorcan farmers in the valley must have

regarded us at first. They were all fairly elderly, their own offspring having left their little family *fincas* one by one over the years to seek a more lucrative and ‘easier’ living in the island’s burgeoning tourist industry. And here was this greenhorn couple from far-away *Gran Bretaña*, arriving with two young sons in tow to plunge themselves into a way of life that was completely alien to them. *Locos extranjeros* indeed – and not only, as we were soon to find out, because of the ‘brave’ migratory move we had made.

‘Your orchards are riddled with disease, Don Pedro,’ was how old Jaume, Maria’s rotund and avuncular son-in-law, had broken the news to me shortly after our arrival. The trees had been neglected for years, he’d added, before telling me that, as a retired waiter, his knowledge of fruit trees was fairly limited. However, even someone as inexperienced as he could tell a mile away that our orange groves needed urgent and extensive tree-doctoring if they were ever to be restored to reasonable productivity. Such treatment by a tree maestro would cost us, but the alternative, he predicted, would be to face ruination – and soon.

Even the quiet kick I’d got from being addressed as *Don Pedro*, no matter how waggishly Jaume had used this most deferential of Spanish handles, couldn’t allay the feeling of panicky disillusionment that swept over me then. In our starry-eyed ignorance, we’d been sold a lemon of an orange farm by Francisca and Tomàs Ferrer, the charming but wily Mallorcan couple who were the previous owners of Ca’s Mayoral. But there could be no going back now, so we simply had to make the best of it, roll up our sleeves and try, somehow, to turn the little farm’s fortunes around. And, thanks to the ungrudging advice

and help of good people like Maria, Pep and other kind-hearted Mallorcan country folk, we'd succeeded in doing just that. We were making ends meet, though only just. But at least all the hard work and money that we'd invested in Ca's Mayoral was showing signs of paying off. The gamble we'd taken in turning our backs on everything we were familiar with in order to start a new life in a Mediterranean 'paradise' had turned out to be worth it after all – even after such a potentially disastrous start.

Then Spain joined the European Union. It wasn't long before rumours of a glut of citrus fruit were rife. Forecasts were being made of an orange surplus to rival the wheat mountains and wine lakes that already existed in Europe's ever-growing community of free-trading countries. There were even reports of thousands of tons of the fruit being bulldozed into the sea in the Valencia area of mainland Spain, as a mark of protest by growers who were seeing their already modest profit margins being squeezed even further by a rise in bureaucratic regulations and a fall in prices. And, as Valencia is one of the leading orange-producing regions in Europe, these were growers with much larger enterprises than ours. 'Big is beautiful' and 'bigger still is even more beautiful' were going to be the maxims for this type of farming in Spain, just as they'd already become for cereal and beef producers in Britain. The writing was on the wall for little *fincas* like Ca's Mayoral, and, with the benefit of hindsight gained from our previous experience in Scotland, we could read the words clearly. We'd have to expand to survive. Hence my enquiry to Pep and Maria about the availability of sensibly priced farmland here in Mallorca.

But Maria was more immediately interested in finding her lost duck, while Pep was more interested in using Maria's concern for its welfare as a means of getting one up on her.

We were standing in the lane outside the gate to Pep's ramshackle farmstead. It was a late August evening, and the sun had just begun to dip behind the Serra d'es Pinotells, the pine-fringed ridge that rises high above the western flanks of the Sa Coma valley. The day had been searingly hot, and the humidity which is a permanent feature of the island's summer climate was even heavier than normal following the recent rains. It had been one of those oppressively sultry days, when even the sparrows in the little pine grove at the side of the Ca's Mayoral farmhouse couldn't be bothered to summon up the energy to chirp. Now, as dusk sent welcome shadows creeping over the valley floor, the warm, musty air became heady with the scent of wild flowers refreshed by the falling dew.

Though dressed only in shorts and a baggy cotton shirt, I still felt as if I was standing fully-clothed in a sauna. Two years of exposure to the temperatures that turn such enclosed Mallorcan valleys into ovens in the height of summer hadn't really helped me acclimatise much at all. I was still a northern *extranjero*, with a metabolism more suited to coping with chilblains than heat exhaustion.

My two venerable Mallorcan neighbours, on the other hand, couldn't have appeared more comfortable, despite their attire. Maria, as already mentioned, was dressed in the 'uniform' of elderly ladies in rural Spain – a long, black frock that covered everything except her hands and head. And she wore no accessories, apart from the wide-brimmed straw hat that she donned whenever venturing outdoors during the

hottest months of summer. Oh, and of course she had her trusty mattock hoe, which she employed to knock out any weed that had the temerity to grow between the rows of her precious lemon trees, to act as a kind of walking stick and, as on this occasion, to threaten physical damage to anyone who got up her nose.

For his part, Pep was sporting the same clobber that he wore all year round. Scruffy as he was, though, there was still a certain dash about his presence, and he knew it. Beneath the ever-present black beret, his wiry frame was clad in a scuffed leather bomber jacket and baggy grey trousers, the latter's frayed hems bound by a liberal splattering of dried mule shit. Doubtless, beneath this outer layer, he would have been wearing what he described as his 'summer-weight' combinations, a one-piece arrangement of long-armed undervest and ankle-length drawers that he claimed never parted company with his hide ('except in emergencies') from the onset of spring until the first storms of autumn. But what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve, and Pep's outward appearance was all that mattered to him. A little red neckerchief tied jauntily below his left ear completed his unique interpretation of 'style'.

'I am a duck short,' Maria repeated.

Pep gave a guttural chortle, flashed me a wink, then proceeded to tell me how he had been assembling his little herd of sheep in his yard a few minutes earlier when he heard frantic quacking sounds coming from the lane.

'Maria's missing duck?' I asked rhetorically.

Pep arched an eyebrow, smirked, then shook his head. '*Hombre*, when did you last see a duck wearing a black dress

and a straw hat – *sí*, and toting a hoe as well? *Coño*,’ he laughed, ‘if there had been a telephone in my house, I would have sent for the men in white coats!’

I glanced at Maria, fully expecting her to exact instant revenge on Pep for this affront, but, curiously, she totally ignored it. Instead, she opted to tell me how the duck had slipped past her when she was opening her gate to let Jaume drive through in his little car. Two of its ducklings had died as a result of a soaking they’d got in yesterday’s storm, she explained. Ducklings, she sagely added, were susceptible to being fatally chilled by soakings like that. However, small as they were, they would still make a tasty stock. So, she had plucked and cleaned them right away and plopped them into the pot before going to open the gate for Jaume. It was then that the mother duck, being a stupid creature and unable to understand what had really happened, had decided to go in search of her missing babies.

I struggled to suppress a smile as the ensuing scene unfolded in my mind’s eye. ‘And that’s why you were making quacking noises as you came down the lane,’ I said as solemnly as I could. ‘You were just trying to attract your runaway duck, *correcto*?’

‘You will never be able to buy more land in this valley,’ was Maria’s response. She’d done another of her conversational backflips. ‘The *fincas* here are small enough as it is, and no farmer can afford to sell off even one square metre of his land.’

I knew this well enough already, and I understood it too. Although the younger generations had left and would never return to adopt the way of life of their forebears, the custom of parents automatically leaving their small farms to their

offspring still persisted. Very often the *finca* would then be used only as a weekend retreat by its new owners and *their* offspring. The land, and any fruit trees that it supported, would be maintained in as good heart as was feasible within the limitations of a hobby-farming regime. At least, though, the tradition of working the small family farm was being carried on, albeit on a part-time basis.

Only on the rare occasions when there was no one for the old folks to leave their property to, or if the inheritors had left the island for good, would little farms like those in the Sa Coma valley be put on the market. Then, inevitably, prices far above their agricultural value would be paid by foreigners, whose interest was limited to upgrading the house for either retirement or holiday use. Consequently, much of the land and its trees would be left to fall into a state of neglect.

That was the trend, and although I was already well aware of it, it didn't help me solve the problem of how to increase the size and long-term profitability of our own farm.

Maria, conversely, couldn't understand why I would ever want to buy more land, if to do so meant having to leave her beloved valley. Hence her quotation of the Mallorcan sayings about smallest pots containing the sweetest jam, and about the folly of coveting the wide, productive fields surrounding the town of Sa Pobla, so far away (for an immovable valley-dweller like her) on the island's central plain.

Pep's proverb, stating that an empty sack can't stand upright, was his way of showing that he at least understood that such blinkered sentiments as Maria's, no matter how cosy, wouldn't pay the bills.

Although the expression of their conflicting, though equally well-intentioned, philosophies had then degenerated into a contest of insults, it didn't disguise the fact that both of our old neighbours were now aware of the problem I was grappling with. And, I suppose, that had really been the main reason I'd asked their advice on the subject in the first place. Neither of them, after all, would have had much knowledge, and probably less interest, in the availability and value of agricultural land anywhere beyond the valley in which their lives were cocooned – and contentedly so at that.

But our needs as a comparatively young family were different from theirs. Much as we would have preferred it to be otherwise, we either had to play the survival game according to the current rules, or risk going bust. That was the harsh reality of things. However, there was no point in labouring the subject, so I elected to change it back to the one that concerned Maria most.

'Tell you what,' I said to her, 'I'll get Sandy and Charlie to help me find that wandering duck of yours. It won't have waddled that far. Probably hasn't even ventured beyond that wet patch where the *torrente* crosses the lane just around the bend there.'

But Maria was having none of that, and she eschewed her customary verbal backflip to emphasise the fact. 'I am certain that it scurried in there.' She pointed with her hoe towards Pep's farmstead. 'She would have headed towards the sound of *his* ducks, thinking that her babies were with them.'

I could see Pep bristling, his hackles rising. Another peace-making interjection was called for. 'Well, I see what you

mean,' I said, 'but, eh, don't you think, Maria, that Pep would have noticed your duck coming into his yard when he was gathering his sheep there?'

Maria sniffed a dismissive sniff. 'Puh, there is none so blind as he who will not see.'

'*And*,' Pep indignantly snapped, 'there are three things not to be trusted – a goat's horn, a mule's hoof and a woman's tongue!'

I groaned inwardly. Not another battle of the proverbs, surely! But my concern was premature, as Pep was about to demonstrate...

He pulled himself up to his full height and puffed out his chest, his bomber jacket bursting open to expose the yellowed fabric of his upper combinations. 'I have many sheep, many goats, many geese, many hens *and* I have many ducks.' Pep was right on his high horse now. 'In fact,' he declared, 'I have more ducks than any one man could ever wish to have. Six!' With that, he turned and walked his sauntering, John Wayne walk back across the lane towards his *finca*.

I watched his deliberately stagy exit in silence, while Maria muttered a string of oaths in *mallorquín*. No sooner had Pep disappeared into the shambles of tumbledown shacks and jerry-built sheds that comprised his farmstead than a cacophony of cackling, quacking, honking, flapping, bleating, braying and barking rose into the limpid, twilight air. Normal silence was resumed as Pep reappeared, ambling back towards us with a hessian sack dangling heavily from his hand.

The sack was moving. It was also quacking. He handed it to Maria.

'Here,' he said with a casual air, 'this prize bird should more than compensate for the miserable bundle of feathers and bones

that you have mislaid.’ He winked at me again. ‘*Hombre*, no one can ever say that Pep is not a generous man, eh!’ Feeling patently pleased with himself, he then bade us *adéu* and swaggered unhurriedly back towards his farm. He had more important things to do than replace escapee ducks for senile old women, he called back over his shoulder. *Sí claro*, now that the sun had set, he had his herd of sheep to take up to the *bancales altos*, the high mountain terraces, on which he had grazing rights.

‘Well,’ I said to Maria, ‘all’s well that ends well, as the saying goes. Oh, and by the way, my offer still stands. The boys and I will go and look for your stray duck now, if you want.’

Maria looked up at me and her mouth opened into that impish, gap-toothed grin of hers. ‘And what duck would that be, *muchacho*?’

I started to laugh. ‘You don’t mean that there never was a –’
‘A lost duck?’ she tittered.

I nodded my head.

Maria released a wheezy giggle. ‘*Hombre*, nothing was lost around here tonight but Pep’s marbles.’ Delighted with herself, she thumped the blade of her hoe on the ground. ‘Me senile?’ she chuckled. ‘*Bueno*, who is a duck up and who is a duck down, eh? Just answer me that, *guapo*. *Sí*, just answer me that.’

Her laughter echoed round the valley like a chipmunk on helium as she heaved the duck-laden sack over her shoulder and shuffled off homeward. ‘And who needs all the potato fields of Sa Pobla?’ she shouted back. ‘*Sí*, just answer me that as well, *guapo*. Just answer me that.’

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