

THE SLEEPY PIANO PLAYER

THE laziest man I have ever known was Sebastiano, a Spanish pianist from Algeciras, who joined our four-man orchestra aboard the French Line steamer *La Bourdonnais* for one voyage, in August, 1928. On sailing day, Dimitrij, our regular piano player, explained in a laconic *lettre pneumatique* addressed to Maurice, our *chef d'orchestre*, that "for personal reasons" he was unable to leave Paris. The personal reasons were, as we found out later, a *vendeuse* from the *Galleries La Fayette*, fourth floor, *caleçons, peignoirs*, ladies' underwear. Fortunately, Maurice ran into Sebastiano at the *Café des Quat'z' Arts*, the musicians' exchange, three hours before the departure of our train for Bordeaux, and hired him at once.

Maurice had worked with Sebastiano at the *Rendezvous des Américains*, a tiny, permanently overcrowded *boîte* in a side street off the *Boulevard Raspail* on *Montparnasse*, where the customers literally sat on one another's laps and the lights were so dim that no one was able to read *l'addition*. In the *Rendezvous*, Sebastiano sat behind an upright Pleyel piano in a corner, concealed from the rest of the *boîte* by a heavy velvet curtain, his job being to create what Monsieur Boniface, the proprietor, referred to as "*l'atmosphère—c'est tout.*" He played soft, subdued, intimate piano music, *en sourdine*. On Saturdays, he would be joined by a violinist and a 'cellist and it was on such an occasion that he met Maurice.

The atmosphere at the *Rendezvous des Américains* was anything but American, Monsieur Boniface having never seen more of America than the United States Treasury on the back of a ten-dollar bill. The bartender was from Rouen and the headwaiter from Corsica, and Sebastiano, a pupil of Albéniz, played mostly Spanish music—Granados, de Falla, Albéniz. He was a short fellow with thin shoulders. He had beautiful dark hair, always uncombed and falling down over his forehead; prominent cheekbones, black eyes, and a colorless complexion.

Sebastiano was unbelievably lazy. He said he could sleep twenty-four hours a day for four days in a row, and I don't think that he exaggerated. He liked to point out, however, that in Algeciras he was not known as an especially lazy type. "You should see my father," he once told me. "Never gets out of bed. On Easter Sunday, Mother, my eleven

brothers and sisters, and I have to work for an hour before we get him dressed and drag him all the way to church. There he falls asleep at once. *C'est la vie.*" Sebastiano shrugged and fell asleep himself.

Sebastiano had a tiny room at a little hotel near the *Panthéon*. The room was on the fourth floor and Sebastiano hated climbing up the narrow, winding stairway. Often he would sit down on the stairs between the second and third floors and fall asleep. Mademoiselle Renée, a pretty, dark-haired girl, who lived next to him, would go down and call the *patron* and his wife, and the three of them would drag Sebastiano up to his room. Renée was crazy about Sebastiano, but he was indifferent and resented her hanging up her washed panties and stockings on a string across her window. "She's frivolous," he used to say. "Most girls are. *C'est la vie.*"

He got so tired of climbing the four flights that one day he decided that from then on he would stay at the *Rendezvous* and sleep under the piano. He took two plush seat covers and placed them on the floor in front of the piano. He hung his tuxedo across a chair and slipped into his pajamas, which he had brought from his room, and slept all day long. The place was being cleaned, and Monsieur Boniface carried on noisy discussions with wine salesmen, and once the headwaiter from Corsica almost stabbed the cook to death with a fruit knife, but Sebastiano slept peacefully and undisturbed. Around eight-thirty that evening, the headwaiter, aided by the entire staff, started to wake up Sebastiano. By nine-thirty the pianist was ready to get up. He changed into his tuxedo, had a glass of dry sherry, and sat down at the piano. His fingers worked automatically, though his mind was still in a deep trance.

One day Sebastiano's tuxedo was stolen while he was sleeping under the piano. That night he had to play in his pajamas. He didn't mind. He hated to dress and the place was always overheated, and he was safe anyway behind the velvet curtain. At two in the morning, two American tourists discovered him in his odd attire. They pushed him out onto the floor, where he was an instant success. Everybody agreed that wearing nothing but pajamas was a great idea. The two Americans jumped into a taxicab, went to their hotel, and came back in their pajamas. Every-

body bought drinks for everybody else. The idea caught on, and three or four evenings later all habitués of the *Rendezvous des Américains* arrived at the place in their pajamas, over which they had put on their overcoats and furs. Monsieur Boniface, a man of sound business principles, increased the prices of liquor fifty per cent and put out more lights. The son of the Corsican headwaiter was posted as guard in front of the entrance, and a small sign, "MEMBERS ONLY," printed in English, was hung on the door. Only people dressed properly—i.e., in pajamas—were allowed to come in.

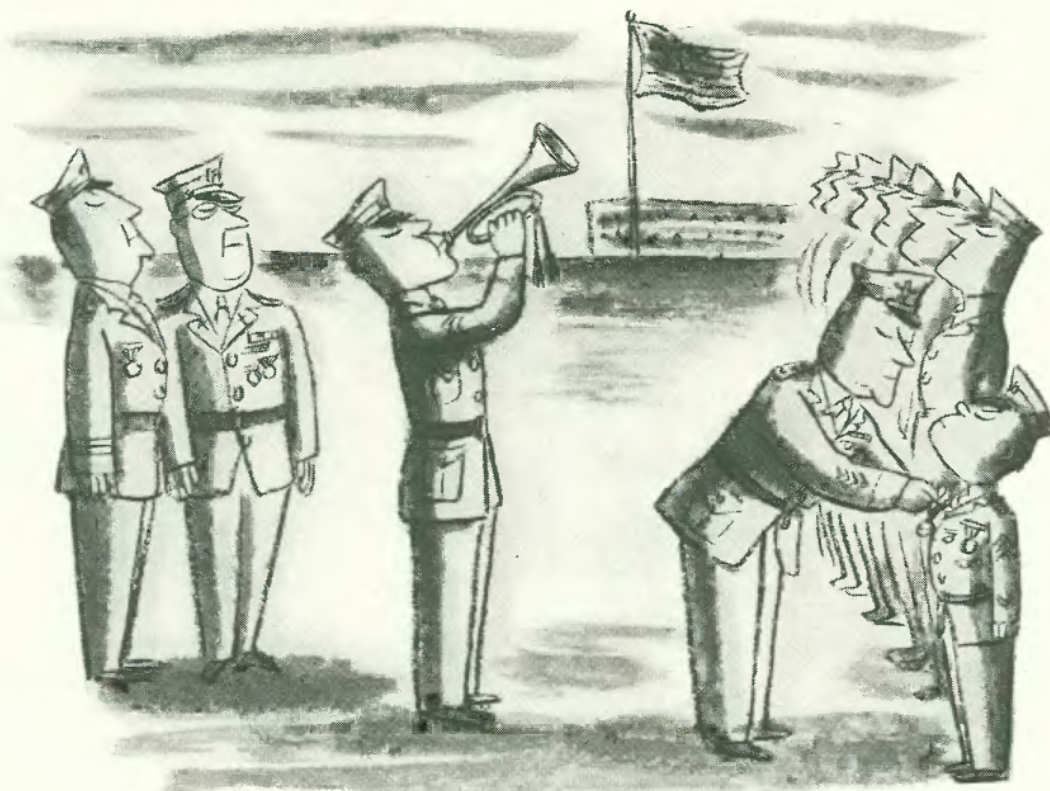
Sebastiano, never given to loose talk, was particularly reticent about the weeks that followed. That epoch was, he indicated, characterized by cheerful abandon and wonderfully large tips. Then the cook, who was carrying on a vendetta with the Corsican headwaiter, got fired and went to the police. The agents raided the place and that was the end. "*C'est la vie,*" Sebastiano concluded gloomily.

The *agents de police* tactfully suggested that Sebastiano find himself employment outside of France or they would have to ship him back to Algeciras. Sebastiano hopefully went to the *Café des Quat'z' Arts* and happened on the job aboard *La Bourdonnais*.

SEBASTIANO began his career as ship's musician promisingly by missing the 9 P.M. train, which he had been ordered to take with the rest of us. He told us later that he took a taxi to the station and fell asleep. The cabdriver, unable to wake him up, took him to the nearest police station, where they managed to shake him out of his trance, but by that time our train had left. He took the midnight train and came aboard the following morning with the last group of first-class passengers. He had on his tuxedo, a yellow camel's-hair overcoat, and no hat. He had no baggage whatsoever and looked so bored and genuinely expensive that the *maître d'hôtel*, who took pride in his infallible judgment of his fellow-men, made his de-luxe bow and asked him for the number of his stateroom on A Deck. Two smart, tall Vassar girls, returning from their European vacation, gave him a wistful look, and a vivacious divorcée from Boston, reclining in a deck chair, put down her Michael Arlen story and stared at him in fascination.

Sebastiano was much too sleepy to return her stare. I took him down to the two connecting staterooms where





Wm. Steig

DREAMS OF GLORY

the orchestra slept. Maurice started a noisy tirade. Sebastiano, his eyes half closed, dreamily inquired which of the four berths was his. He took off his overcoat, lay down in his tuxedo, and in four seconds was sound asleep. Baggage porters bumped into the door and uttered pungent *bordelais* oaths, women came into our stateroom looking for their husbands and husbands came in looking for their wives, a steward swung his bell ("Visitors ashore, all visitors ashore"), the siren wailed, but Sebastiano slept peacefully through all the excitement that preceded the sailing and we had to pour half a glass of ice water into his open mouth to get him up on deck in time for the national anthems, which were always played as the ship was being towed away from the pier. After the last note of the "Marseillaise," he went back to bed again.

The eleven days that followed, en route to New York, were a nightmare. Sebastiano kept the three other musicians—Maurice; Lucien, who was our French first violinist; and myself, the second violin—in a perpetual state of nervous tension. We had fairly easy working hours aboard *La Bourdonnais*. There was an apéritif concert on deck, between 11 A.M. and noon; a concert

in the tourist-class dining saloon from 3 to 4 P.M., which was merely a rehearsal for the afternoon concert in the first-class saloon from four to five; and a concert, after dinner, from eight-thirty to nine-thirty, either in the saloon or outside on deck, depending on the weather. From ten to eleven, we played dance music. All in all, it was only five hours' work a day.

From the very first day, Sebastiano never showed up in time for work. As long as he was asleep in our rooms, we didn't mind so much. You could always go down, pour some ice water into his mouth, and drag him upstairs. But he got tired of drinking ice water and began to hide. Twenty minutes before concert time, someone would discover that Sebastiano had vanished and there would be a mad scramble for our piano player. You can play without your second violinist or your 'cellist, but you have to have your pianist. The first few days, we found him in fairly accessible places: lifeboats, heaps of rope on deck, the benches on the sun deck, the hospital, the tourist-class saloon. As the days went on, however, Sebastiano became more ingenious. He vanished behind stacks of breakfast-food boxes in the kitchen, in a corner of the wireless room, in the engine room, in the office

of *l'imprimeur*. We had ingenious helpers in all departments of the ship and so we always found him, though sometimes rather late.

Things started to get really tough when Sebastiano began to vanish in the staterooms of the passengers. First he vanished under the bed of Mr. Wayne, a real-estate broker from New Jersey, who had Cabin No. 7 and spent all his days on deck playing shuffleboard. Fortunately, the cabin steward discovered him before Mr. Wayne, a tough character with a top kick's voice, could raise hell. Next, Sebastiano was found hiding in Cabin No. 4, which belonged to a Mr. Rhys Price, Mr. Wayne's English shuffleboard partner and an outdoor man too. One evening Sebastiano went into Cabin No. 35B, where the two Vassar girls lived. It was dinnertime for the first-class passengers and Sebastiano thought the young ladies were in the dining saloon, but they were in their stateroom, and not by themselves either, and they'd

forgotten to lock the door. Sebastiano's face was still red as he tried to reconstruct the scene for us. "I said I was sorry, but the two men looked at me as though they were thinking of murder." He thought for a minute and then added, "And they were, I'm sure. They had that look in their eyes. I was frightened to death. I turned around and ran. *C'est la vie, mes amis*. All you want is some sleep and what do you get? Murder."

On the day before we reached Halifax, *La Bourdonnais* ran into bad weather and many passengers became seasick. Some stayed in their rooms, but the majority spent the day on deck, lying in their chairs, their faces the color of long-dead halibut. The deck stewards hustled back and forth, carrying trays with consommé and crackers, taking care to keep the door to the dining saloon closed because the smell of food made some of the passengers wish they were dead. Mrs. Sloan, the divorcée from Boston, was the sickest of all. She remained on deck until midnight, and the following day she was carried up there again early in the morning. Sebastiano had his own intelligence system among the deck personnel. That afternoon he was gone. We looked for him everywhere but didn't find him.

We knocked at all the cabin doors and stammered foolish excuses when the occupants opened up and we glanced over their shoulders, trying to discover Sebastiano under a bed or behind a curtain. Some passengers got very angry and Mr. Wayne spoke his mind in unmistakable terms. We didn't find Sebastiano. There was no tourist-class concert that afternoon and no concert in the first-class saloon. We were reported to the *commandant* and he ordered a methodical search of the steamer.

They found Sebastiano at 7 P.M. He was sleeping peacefully in Mrs. Sloan's bed. He was in his underwear, his shoes were placed beside the bed, and his tuxedo was hung carefully over a chair. He explained that he didn't want to get the bed dirty. The *commandant* had us all summoned to the bridge. He was angry as never before, but Sebastiano was his old, dreamy self.

"It must be a sort of hypnosis, *mon commandant*," he said. "It overwhelms you. There's nothing you can do but lie down. It is stronger than you are."

Maurice said, "Maybe he has sleeping sickness without knowing it. Were you ever in the Belgian Congo, Sebastiano?" Maurice always tried to help us out when we got in a jam.

"What the hell has the Belgian Congo got to do with this?" the *commandant* shouted. We fell silent and looked at Sebastiano, who was standing in front of the *commandant*. The pianist's eyes were half closed and he was swaying back and forth, like a tall pine in a wind. Soon, I knew, he would be asleep.

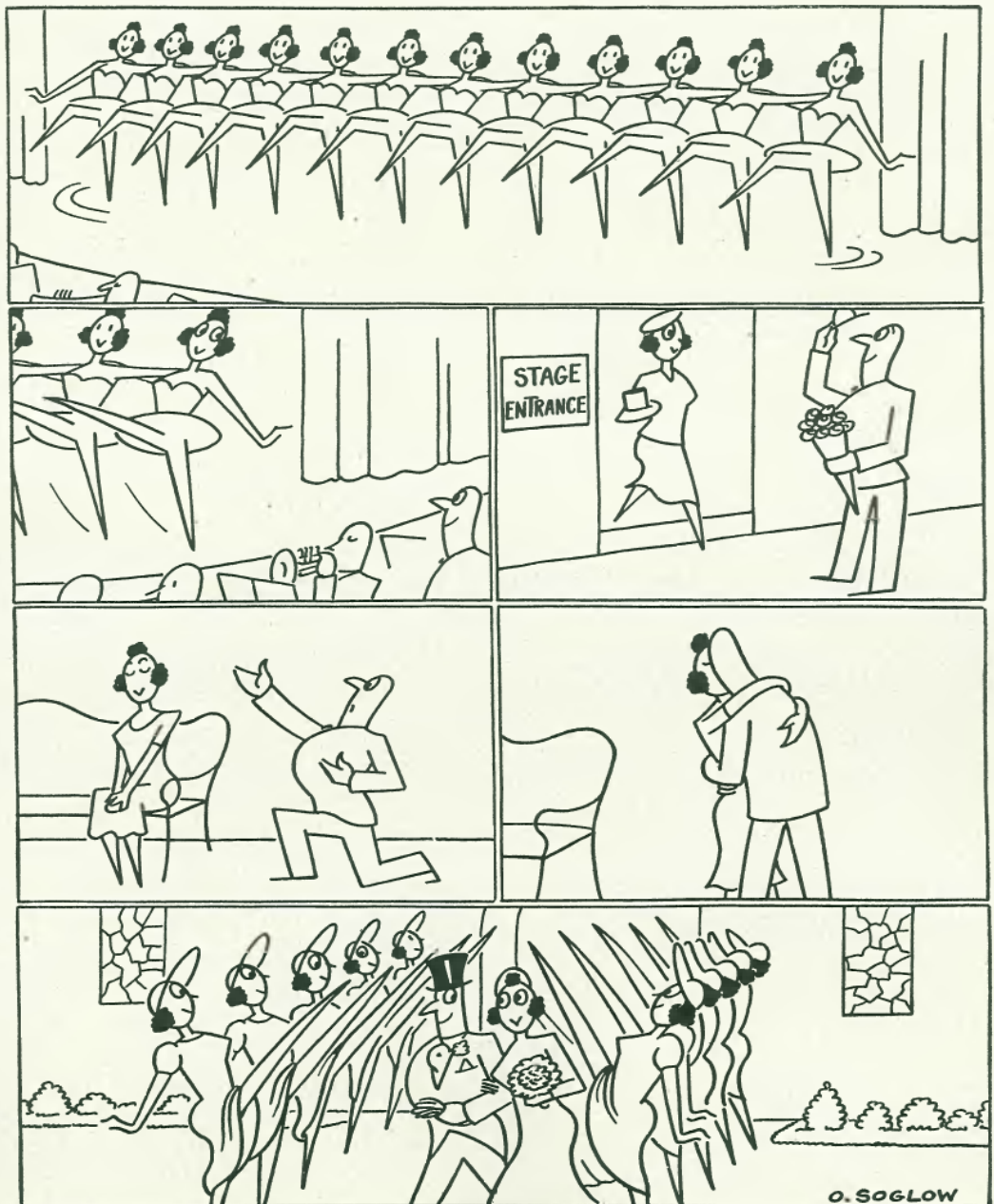
The *commandant* stared at Sebastiano, opened his mouth, shut it again, and shrugged. "Get out of here," he said. "All of you. . . No, wait, you!" He called Sebastiano back and ordered him to apologize to Mrs. Sloan for using her bed. Sebastiano went down from the bridge to the windy, isolated place on deck where Mrs. Sloan was lying in her deck chair. He kissed her hand with all his in-born Algeciras *grandezza*,

pulled up another chair, and sat down next to her.

THE following evening, Sebastiano didn't take his customary nap before the concert. He came down to our cabins for a moment, put on his camel's-hair overcoat and pulled up the collar, and went out again. At eight-fifteen, I found him in the chair beside Mrs. Sloan. I said I was sorry, but it was time for the evening concert. He nodded and helped Mrs. Sloan out of her covers and gallantly escorted her to the music saloon. I walked behind them. They called one another "Sebbie" and "Kathie." Mrs. Sloan was still pale and somewhat weak, but there was a light in her eyes as she sat down in the music saloon not far from the piano. She was a pretty woman, dark-haired and a little taller than Sebastiano. She seemed rest-

less and excited. She watched Sebastiano. He played very well that evening. He asked Maurice to let him play a few solo numbers, and he played two Chopin études, a piece by Debussy, and a Brahms waltz. After every piece he turned around and smiled at Mrs. Sloan. It was the first time I had seen him make a movement that was not absolutely necessary. I looked at Maurice and Maurice looked at me, and we must have had the same thought because we both forgot to close our mouths.

After the concert, Mrs. Sloan invited the members of the orchestra to the bar for a drink. It was cool and she shivered, so Sebastiano volunteered to go for her mink coat. "Sebbie is such a dear boy," she said when he had gone. "He sits next to me and I talk and he just listens." She sighed and looked down at her fingernails. "My husband never



O. SOGLOW

MR. FISH CROSSES THE RIVER

Good things come out of Westchester, Putnam, and Dutchess Counties,
 Crossing the river into Rockland and Orange—
 The sunrise, for example,
 And the moonrise.
 And all night the stars pour over,
 Accompanied by the planets Mars, Jupiter, Saturn,
 Always east to west,
 This way across the Hudson.
 Otherwise there's little communication between these defiantly
 opposite shores—
 Westchester, Putnam, and Dutchess, the trimmed; Rockland
 and Orange, the ragged, wearing their slattern
 poison ivy;
 Westchester, Putnam, and Dutchess, the ready virgins;
 Rockland and Orange, the not so well spoken of.
 It was true, of course, that Ham Fish's district lapped over and
 took in Orange,
 Yet we had our pride, we of the west bank,
 And with reason, for he was not one of us.
 No. Fish belonged definitely with the embarrassed aristocracies
 to the east;
 He was theirs; he kept his *lar familiaris* in Putnam;
 And they knew it. He didn't allow them to forget it.
 He made himself their voice, their champion,
 Their front, their labelled exhibit, their incense sweet
 From chain-swung censer teeming,
 Their song, their grove, their oracle, their heat
 Of stuffed-shirt prophet dreaming of the Presidency,
 And the stench was international.
 And all their money did them no good,
 And their beautiful wives and daughters,
 And their languor and lawns and fountains,
 And their stocks and influence and complexions.
 No, we had it over them there.
 They bent their heads a bit when Ham Fish came up,
 Their handsomely barbered heads;
 They never brought up the subject themselves,
 They turned the conversation when politics was
 downwind,
 And if you looked hard at a man from Putnam or Dutchess he
 thought you were thinking about Ham Fish, and he'd
 flush and hurry on.

But all this is changed. It has all come a ruin.
 We had a cold winter, and the Congressional districts were
 reshuffled,
 And the political experts, reflecting on recent returns, came
 to whispered decisions,

And a man of Orange, looking over toward Putnam County,
 Watching the dawn,
 Saw a man six feet four, Ham Fish every inch of him and
 proud of all of it,
 Carrying a carpetbag,
 Crossing the ice with the morning,
 East to west, inevitably, like the movement of the stars,
 Talking all the time:
He was coming over to Orange to live.
He had reserved a room in a hotel.
He was not going to represent the aristocracies any more.
He was coming over to the proletariat,
To our side of the river.
He was going to represent Rockland, Orange, Sullivan,
and Delaware.
 He is to be our voice, our paraclete,
 Our twenty-stone eagle screaming,
 Our stench, our grove, our oracle, our heat
 Of bull-neck prophet dreaming of the next Presidential
 election or the one after that.
 Whether we want him or not, here he is,
 His tentacles out, his vocabulary in action, his palm extended
 to his new constituents,
 And it's all been fixed with the boys in the back room.
 It's all been arranged for us.
 His views will be ours,
 We shall pervade the earth like an attar,
 Smelling of Ham Fish,
 Smelling of Fish,
 Of propaganda written by a Hitler agent and mailed out of
 Fish's office,
 Of hail-fellow straw-hat pomposity, passing out hot dogs and
 free seeds with a glad hand,
 Of something peculiarly fulsome-noisome that empties the
 House when he begins,
 Of the Honorable Mr. Hamilton Fish.

Lift your heads, men of Putnam, Dutchess, and Westchester,
 Take pride in your spring, your lawns, your elms over the lawns
 In your matrons and maids, trimmed and ready,
 Sing with the coming of summer.
 But to us of Rockland, Orange, Sullivan, and Delaware
 comes no summer, no spring.
 For us of the west the hair shirt, the crown of poison ivy.
 The shame you wore before the city is upon us;
 Fish has come over to our side with his carpetbag, claiming to
 be a resident, stating that he has a lot of patronage to
 hand out, that he is influential on key committees,
 that he remembers long and is lavish with rewards.
 —MAXWELL ANDERSON

did that. He never listened to me. He wasn't interested in anything I said."

There was a pause, then Maurice said, "Sebastiano is a quiet man. Very quiet."

Mrs. Sloan sighed again. "He's so understanding," she said. "Dr. Wellman, my nerve specialist, always told me, 'It's hard to find an understanding person. A man who will listen to you and—'"

Sebastiano came back with her mink

coat and she stopped in the middle of her sentence. That night, after the dance, Mrs. Sloan and Sebastiano sat in the bar. She talked all the time and Sebastiano listened, motionless and rigid, like a Brahmin on the shore of the Ganges who has vowed never to move.

Sebastiano didn't make the return trip with us to Europe. Two days after our arrival in New York, he vanished again. We looked in all the staterooms, includ-

ing the *commandant's*, but there was no trace of our piano player. The next morning, Maurice got a telegram from Sebastiano. Our pianist was not coming back. He was up in Boston and he had decided to stay there for good. There was one particular sentence in Sebastiano's telegram which I remember: "Boston is a nice, quiet place," he wired, "colder than Algeciras, but a good place to sleep." —JOSEPH WECHSBERG