

CHAPTER 18

Departure from Cordova - The Contrabandista - Jewish Cunning - Arrival at Madrid.

One fine morning, I departed from Cordova, in company with the Contrabandista; the latter was mounted on a handsome animal, something between a horse and a pony, which he called a *jaca*, of that breed for which Cordova is celebrated. It was of a bright bay colour, with a star in its forehead, with strong but elegant limbs, and a long black tail, which swept the ground. The other animal, which was destined to carry me to Madrid, was not quite so prepossessing in its appearance: in more than one respect it closely resembled a hog, particularly in the curving of its back, the shortness of its neck, and the manner in which it kept its head nearly in contact with the ground: it had also the tail of a hog, and meandered over the ground much like one. Its coat more resembled coarse bristles than hair, and with respect to size, I have seen many a Westphalian hog quite as tall. I was not altogether satisfied with the idea of exhibiting myself on the back of this most extraordinary quadruped, and looked wistfully on the respectable animal on which my guide had thought proper to place himself; he interpreted my glances, and gave me to understand that as he was destined to carry the baggage, he was entitled to the best horse; a plea too well grounded on reason for me to make any objection to it.

I found the Contrabandista by no means such pleasant company on the road as I had been led to suppose he would prove from the representation of my host of Cordova. Throughout the day he sat sullen and silent, and rarely replied to my questions, save by a monosyllable; at night, however, after having eaten well and drank proportionably at my expense, he would occasionally become more sociable and communicative. "I have given up smuggling," said he, on one of these occasions, "owing to a trick which was played upon me the last time that I was at Lisbon: a Jew whom I had been long acquainted with palmed upon me a false brilliant for a real stone. He effected it in the most extraordinary manner, for I am not such a novice as not to know a true diamond when I see one; but the Jew appears to have had two, with which he played most adroitly, keeping the valuable one for which I bargained, and substituting therefor another which, though an excellent imitation, was not worth four dollars. I did not discover the trick until I was across the border, and upon my hurrying back, the culprit was not to be found; his priest, however, told me that he was just dead and buried, which was of course false, as I saw him laughing in the corners of his eyes. I renounced the contraband trade from that moment."

It is not my intention to describe minutely the various incidents of this journey. Leaving at our right the mountains of Jaen, we passed through Andujar and Bailen, and on the third day reached Carolina, a small but beautiful town on the skirts of the Sierra Morena, inhabited by the descendants of German colonists. Two leagues from this place, we entered the defile of Despena Perros, which, even in quiet times, has an evil name, on account of the robberies which are continually being perpetrated within its recesses, but at the period of which I am speaking, it was said to be swarming with

banditti.¹ We of course expected to be robbed, perhaps stripped and otherwise ill-treated; but Providence here manifested itself. It appeared that, the day before our arrival, the banditti of the pass had committed a dreadful robbery and murder, by which they gained forty thousand rials. This booty probably contented them for a time; certain it is that we were not interrupted: we did not even see a single individual in the pass, though we occasionally heard whistles and loud cries. We entered La Mancha, where I expected to fall into the hands of Palillos and Orejita. Providence again showed itself. It had been delicious weather, suddenly the Lord breathed forth a frozen blast, the severity of which was almost intolerable; no human beings but ourselves ventured forth. We traversed snow-covered plains, and passed through villages and towns to all appearance deserted. The robbers kept close in their caves and hovels, but the cold nearly killed us. We reached Aranjuez late on Christmas Day, and I got into the house of an Englishman, where I swallowed nearly a pint of brandy; it affected me no more than warm water.²



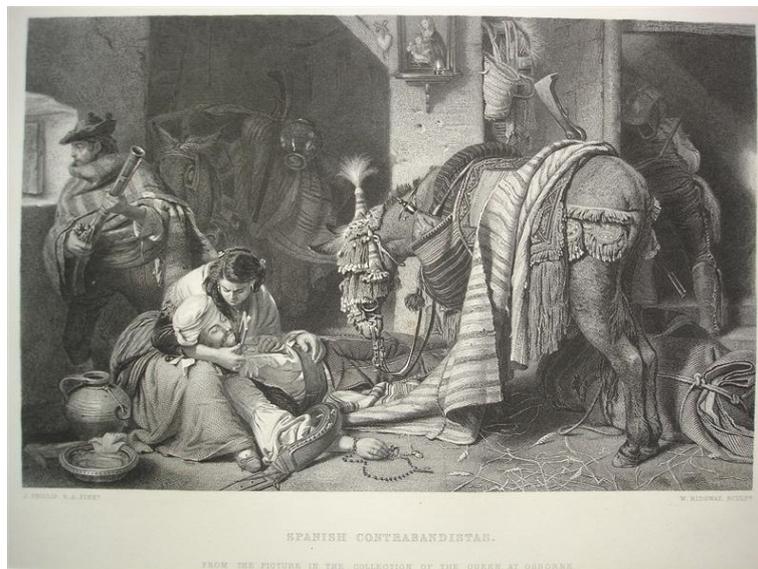
*18.1 La Carolina
(picture by David Fernandez de Castro)*

¹ For a description of bandit activity in the Despeñaperros defile in the years just before the Carlist civil war, see Cook, *Sketches*, vol. 2, chapter 1.

² This probably was the *Fonda de los Cuatro Naciones* run by the Englishman John Stradwick and his French wife [Robertson, *Ford*, 55 note 26], which according to Richard Ford [*HB* 1269] was ‘not distinguished either by civil treatment or moderate prices’. (In a later edition of the *Hand-Book*, however, Ford noted some considerable improvements). In his letter of 26 December 1836 from Madrid [Darlow, 194], little more than a day after the event, Borrow wrote – probably more truthfully – that he swallowed ‘two bottles of brandy’; quite a feat for one who elsewhere claims never to touch hard liquor! [Compare his conversation with the priest of Pitiega in chapter 21 below, and Missler, *GBB* 26, 83-86].

On the following day we arrived at Madrid, where we had the good fortune to find everything tranquil and quiet. The Contrabandista continued with me for two days, at the end of which time he returned to Cordova upon the uncouth animal on which I had ridden throughout the journey. I had myself purchased the jaca, whose capabilities I had seen on the route, and which I imagined might prove useful in future journeys.³ The Contrabandista was so satisfied with the price which I gave him for his beast, and the general treatment which he had experienced at my hands during the time of his attendance upon me, that he would fain have persuaded me to retain him as a servant, assuring me that, in the event of my compliance, he would forget his wife and children and follow me through the world. I declined, however, to accede to his request, though I was in need of a domestic; I therefore sent him back to Cordova, where, as I subsequently learned, he died suddenly, about a week after his return.

The manner of his death was singular: one day he took out his purse, and, after counting his money, said to his wife, "I have made ninety-five dollars by this journey with the Englishman and by the sale of the jaca; this I could easily double by one successful venture in the smuggling lay. To-morrow I will depart for Lisbon to buy diamonds. I wonder if the beast requires to be shod?" He then started up and made for the door, with the intention of going to the stable; ere, however, his foot had crossed the threshold, he fell dead on the floor. Such is the course of the world. Well said the wise king: Let no one boast of the morrow.⁴



18.2 Death of a Contrabandista

³ In his letter to Brandram of 14 January 1837, Borrow describes this horse as ‘an exceedingly strong, useful animal, and as I had seen what it is capable of performing, I gave [the Contrabandista] the price which he demanded (about £ 11, 17s.). It will go twelve leagues a day with ease, and carry three hundred-weight on its back.’ [Darlow, 200; Missler, *Daring Game*, 166 and *GBB* 40, 59].

⁴ I.e. King Solomon, in Proverbs 27 : 1.