

## CHAPTER 23

**Astorga - The Inn - The Maragatos - The Habits of the Maragatos - The Statue.**



*23.1 The Plaza and town hall of Astorga*

We went to a posada in the suburbs, the only one, indeed, which the place afforded. The courtyard was full of arrieros and carriers, brawling loudly; the master of the house was fighting with two of his customers, and universal confusion reigned around. As I dismounted I received the contents of a wineglass in my face, of which greeting, as it was probably intended for another, I took no notice. Antonio, however, was not so patient, for on being struck with a cudgel, he instantly returned the salute with his whip, scarifying the countenance of a carman. In my endeavours to separate these two antagonists, my horse broke loose, and rushing amongst the promiscuous crowd, overturned several individuals and committed no little damage. It was a long time before peace was restored: at last we were shown to a tolerably decent chamber. We had, however, no sooner taken possession of it, than the waggon from Madrid arrived on its way to Coruna, filled with dusty travellers, consisting of women, children, invalid officers and the like. We were now forthwith dislodged, and our baggage flung into the yard. On our complaining of this treatment, we were told that we were two vagabonds whom nobody knew; who had come without an arriero, and had already set the whole house in confusion. As a great favour, however, we were at length permitted to take up our abode in a ruinous building down the yard, adjoining the stable, and filled with rats and vermin. Here there was an old bed with a tester, and with this wretched accommodation we were glad to content ourselves, for I could proceed no farther, and was burnt with fever. The heat of the place was intolerable, and I sat on the staircase with my head between my hands, gasping for breath: soon appeared Antonio with vinegar and water, which I drank and felt relieved.

We continued in this suburb three days<sup>1</sup>, during the greatest part of which time I was stretched on the tester bed. I once or twice contrived to make my way into the town, but found no bookseller, nor any person willing to undertake the charge of disposing of my Testaments. The people were brutal, stupid, and uncivil, and I returned to my tester bed fatigued and dispirited. Here I lay listening from time to time to the sweet chimes which rang from the clock of the old cathedral. The master of the house never came near me, nor indeed, once inquired about me. Beneath the care of Antonio, however, I speedily waxed stronger. "MON MAITRE," said he to me one evening, "I see you are better; let us quit this bad town and worse posada to-morrow morning. *Allons, mon maitre! Il est temps de nous mettre en chemin pour Lugo et Galice.*"

Before proceeding, however, to narrate what befell us in this journey to Lugo and Galicia, it will perhaps not be amiss to say a few words concerning Astorga<sup>2</sup> and its vicinity. It is a walled town, containing about five or six thousand inhabitants, with a cathedral and college, which last is, however, at present deserted. It is situated on the confines, and may be called the capital of a tract of land called the country of the Maragatos, which occupies about three square leagues, and has for its north-western boundary a mountain called Telleno<sup>3</sup>, the loftiest of a chain of hills which have their origin near the mouth of the river Minho, and are connected with the immense range which constitutes the frontier of the Asturias and Guipuscoa.



23.2 Maragato couple in traditional costume

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<sup>1</sup> The morning after their arrival in Astorga was, in fact, July 5<sup>th</sup>, Borrow's 34<sup>th</sup> birthday.

<sup>2</sup> Astorga is a very ancient town. The Romans formally founded it – as Asturica Augusta - shortly after the Cantabrian War (25 B.C.). 'Asturica' derives from the nation of the Astures whose memory is likewise perpetuated in the province 'Asturias' on the north coast. There was, however, already a much older settlement on the spot - sometimes thought to be Phoenician (!) in origin – which is reflected in the mythological story of foundation by Astur, son of Memnon [Burke, footnote to 318]. This notion is less outrageous as it appears at first sight: in the late 1950s, Dr. Julio Carro discovered a Punic necropolis at the nearby village of Santa Colomba de Somoza, whose presence so far inland is hard to explain.

<sup>3</sup> This description corresponds rather to the *Montes de Leon*. The Teleno mountain, and the *Sierra de Teleno* of which it forms the top, lie over to the *southwest* of Astorga.

The land is ungrateful and barren, and niggardly repays the toil of the cultivator, being for the most part rocky, with a slight sprinkling of red brick earth.

The Maragatos are perhaps the most singular caste to be found amongst the chequered population of Spain. They have their own peculiar customs and dress, and never intermarry with the Spaniards. Their name is a clue to their origin, as it signifies, "Moorish Goths,"<sup>4</sup> and at the present day their garb differs but little from that of the Moors of Barbary, as it consists of a long tight jacket, secured at the waist by a broad girdle, loose short trousers which terminate at the knee, and boots and gaiters. Their heads are shaven, a slight fringe of hair being only left at the lower part. If they wore the turban or barret, they could scarcely be distinguished from the Moors in dress, but in lieu thereof they wear the sombrero, or broad slouching hat of Spain. There can be little doubt that they are a remnant of those Goths who sided with the Moors on their invasion of Spain, and who adopted their religion, customs, and manner of dress, which, with the exception of the first, are still to a considerable degree retained by them<sup>5</sup>. It is, however, evident that their blood has at no time mingled with that of the wild children of the desert, for scarcely amongst the hills of Norway would you find figures and faces more essentially Gothic than those of the Maragatos. They are strong athletic men, but loutish and heavy, and their features, though for the most part well formed, are vacant and devoid of expression. They are slow and plain of speech, and those eloquent and imaginative sallies so common in the conversation of other Spaniards, seldom or never escape them; they have, moreover, a coarse thick pronunciation, and when you hear them speak, you almost imagine that it is some German or English peasant attempting to express himself in the language of the Peninsula. They are constitutionally phlegmatic, and it is very difficult to arouse their anger; but they are dangerous and desperate when once incensed; and a person who knew them well, told me that he would rather face ten Valencians, people infamous for their ferocity and blood-thirstiness, than confront one angry Maragato, sluggish and stupid though he be on other occasions.

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<sup>4</sup> This etymology is – to say the least – a little fanciful. Neither the name nor the origins of the Maragatos has yet received a satisfactory explanation. Suggestions range from Celt-Iberians to Visigoths to Phoenicians to Moriscos expelled from the Granada Alpujaras after the rebellion of the 1560s, while the name has been traced back – among many other and more fantastic explanations, such as they being the descendants of a King Mauregatus, or the deliverers of 'Maregota' fish to the Madrid market! - to the Latin *Mercator*, tradesman. For a long time modern historians and anthropologists thought that the Maragatos were the descendants of a North-African Berber or Bedouin tribe who settled in the 52 villages of the 'Somoza' (today 'the Maragateria') only after the Moorish conquest of Spain in 711, and for some reason stuck strictly to their cultural heritage for ages. Recent DNA-investigation, however, seems to exclude this scenario. Note that in Borrow's day, the Maragatos themselves admitted to having no idea of their origins [Widdrington, vol. 2, 61f & 113; Burke, footnote to 321]

<sup>5</sup> The Visigoths, who conquered Spain at the end of the Roman era, were a *Herrenvolk*, i.e. a master race that lorded it over the indigenous population. This entire ruling class was wiped out at the Battle of the Guadalete in July 711, where Tariq annihilated the King Rodrigo's Visigoth army. The few remnants were simply absorbed by the rest of the population and there is no trace of Gothic tribes or clans surviving with their social structures and separate identity in place.

The men scarcely ever occupy themselves in husbandry, which they abandon to the women, who plough the flinty fields and gather in the scanty harvests. Their husbands and sons are far differently employed: for they are a nation of arrieros or carriers, and almost esteem it a disgrace to follow any other profession. On every road of Spain, particularly those north of the mountains which divide the two Castiles, may be seen gangs of fives and sixes of these people lolling or sleeping beneath the broiling sun, on gigantic and heavily laden mutes and mules.<sup>6</sup> In a word, almost the entire commerce of nearly one half of Spain passes through the hands of the Maragatos, whose fidelity to their trust is such, that no one accustomed to employ them would hesitate to confide to them the transport of a ton of treasure from the sea of Biscay to Madrid; knowing well that it would not be their fault were it not delivered safe and undiminished, even of a grain, and that bold must be the thieves who would seek to wrest it from the far feared Maragatos, who would cling to it whilst they could stand, and would cover it with their bodies when they fell in the act of loading or discharging their long carbines<sup>7</sup>.



23.3 *The statue on the Astorga cathedral*

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<sup>6</sup> Burke [footnote to 323]: ‘A mute is the offspring of a stallion and a she-ass, a mule of a jackass and a mare.’

<sup>7</sup> The Maragatos maintained their dominance of the carrier-trade until the introduction of the railways in the 1840s. Thereafter, their mule-caravans gradually disappeared. All over the north of Spain – including in Madrid – there were Casas de Maragatos, Maragato Inns, where the muleteers stayed, and where clients might bring wares to be transported or hire a maragato and his animals as guide and carrier. The famous *Casa del Maragato* on Madrid’s Puerto del Sol was, however, a completely different thing [Cayley, *Bridle Roads of Spain*, 182] only so called because the enterprise was built and set up by a wealthy Maragato called Santiago Alonso Cordero, who had made his fortune by transporting King Ferdinand VII’s treasure up and down the Peninsula during that ruler’s chaotic reign [Widdrington, vol. 2, 64].

But they are far from being disinterested, and if they are the most trustworthy of all the arrieros of Spain, they in general demand for the transport of articles a sum at least double to what others of the trade would esteem a reasonable recompense: by this means they accumulate large sums of money, notwithstanding that they indulge themselves in far superior fare to that which contents in general the parsimonious Spaniard; - another argument in favour of their pure Gothic descent; for the Maragatos, like true men of the north, delight in swilling liquors and battenning upon gross and luscious meats, which help to swell out their tall and goodly figures. Many of them have died possessed of considerable riches, part of which they have not unfrequently bequeathed to the erection or embellishment of religious houses.

On the east end of the cathedral of Astorga, which towers over the lofty and precipitous wall, a colossal figure of lead may be seen on the roof. It is the statue of a Maragato carrier who endowed the cathedral with a large sum. He is in his national dress, but his head is averted from the lands of his fathers, and whilst he waves in his hand a species of flag, he seems to be summoning his race from their unfruitful region to other climes, where a richer field is open to their industry and enterprise.<sup>8</sup>



23.4 The statue on the Astorga cathedral (detail)

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<sup>8</sup> The statue is in fact of the legendary Pedro Mato, who supposedly fought next to Saint James at the famous - though probably fabled - battle of Clavijo in 844, where Spain's Patron Saint appeared miraculously to turn a battle lost for the Christians into a smashing victory by chopping off great numbers of Moorish heads. The statue (which Burke, footnote to 324, says is made of wood) may, of course, have been *donated* by a rich Maragato merchant.

I spoke to several of these men respecting the all- important subject of religion; but I found "their hearts gross, and their ears dull of hearing, and their eyes closed."<sup>9</sup> There was one in particular to whom I showed the New Testament, and whom I addressed for a considerable time. He listened or seemed to listen patiently, taking occasionally copious draughts from an immense jug of whitish wine which stood between his knees. After I had concluded he said, "To-morrow I set out for Lugo, whither, I am told, yourself are going. If you wish to send your chest, I have no objection to take it at so much (naming an extravagant price).<sup>10</sup> As for what you have told me, I understand little of it, and believe not a word of it; but in respect to the books which you have shown me, I will take three or four. I shall not read them, it is true, but I have no doubt that I can sell them at a higher price than you demand."

So much for the Maragatos.



*23.5 Maragato carrier by Gustave Doré*

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<sup>9</sup> Biblical quote, from Acts 28 : 27 and Matthew 13:15. See also Isaiah 6 : 10.

<sup>10</sup> This is the only clear indication that Borrow sent his large stock of books ahead of him by courier in a chest at every leg of his journey. Here in Astorga, he had only 30 or 35 copies left, which – at 472 grams per copy - weighed a mere 15 kilos; but at the outset of his trip, he had to transport 200 books, weighing almost 100 kilos, which – in the absence of a pack-animal - would have been suicidal to carry along on the backs of the two horses [Missler, *GBB* 40, 61-64 and *Daring Game*, 20-27]. As for the ‘extravagant price’, Borrow seems to have overlooked that the rich Maragato caravans were favourite prey of the Carlist bandits who infested the Royal Highway between Astorga and Coruña at this time. Hence the outrageous price may have reflected risk rather than avarice. Widdrington [vol. 2, 36 & 63] records a similar instance five years later, and clarifies that it was the price paid for security, which was never lowered or haggled over.