

CHAPTER 35

Departure from Santander - The Night Alarm - The Black Pass.

I had ordered two hundred Testaments to be sent to Santander from Madrid¹: I found, however, to my great sorrow, that they had not arrived, and I supposed that they had either been seized on the way by the Carlists, or that my letter had miscarried. I then thought of applying to England for a supply, but I abandoned the idea for two reasons. In the first place, I should have to remain idly loitering, at least a month, before I could receive them, at a place where every article was excessively dear²; and, secondly, I was very unwell, and unable to procure medical advice at Santander. Ever since I left Coruna, I had been afflicted with a terrible dysentery, and latterly with an ophthalmia³, the result of the other malady. I therefore determined on returning to Madrid. To effect this, however, seemed no very easy task. Parties of the army of Don Carlos, which, in a partial degree, had been routed in Castile, were hovering about the country through which I should have to pass, more especially in that part called "The Mountains,"⁴ so that all communication had ceased between Santander and the southern districts.⁵ Nevertheless, I determined to trust as usual in the Almighty and to risk the danger. I purchased, therefore, a small horse, and sallied forth with Antonio.

¹ Borrow had high hopes for Santander. He wrote in his letter of 15 September 1837 to Brandram from Coruña [Darlow, 250]: 'Santander, being a large and flourishing town, affords me a tolerable prospect of success, and I have accordingly directed my agent at Madrid to despatch thither forthwith 150 Testaments. The intermediate country is, however, in a most distracted state, a great part of it being in the hands of the Carlists; it is therefore probable that the books may never reach me, in which event I shall have to apply to England.' Despite these misgivings, he later increased the order to 200 books. Unfortunately, the lot was only dispatched from Madrid on 30 October, the day before he returned to the capital. Despite the 'arrangement' with the booksellers he mentions below, all these copies remained unsold in Santander and were returned to Borrow in March 1839 [Darlow, 256; Missler, *Daring Game*, 55f & 124].

² Borrow explained to his employers that the cost of living in Santander amounted to nearly two pounds (i.e. 200 *reales*) *per diem*, even if he observed the strictest economy [Darlow, 257]. This was indeed a hefty sum, seeing that he calculated the daily costs on the whole northern journey for himself, Antonio and their animals at 17 shillings or 70 *reales* [Missler, *Daring Game*, 168].

³ Modern commentators sometimes object to this wording. It was, however, perfectly current in Borrow's day. In the introduction of his 1822 'Narrative of the Expedition to Dongola and Sennaar' George Bethune English writes, for instance, that the occasional briefness of his narrative was caused 'by paroxysms of a severe ophthalmia, which (...) rendered me at times incapable of writing'. [Also Ford, *HB* 91.]

⁴ Either the Cordillera Cantabrica, the formidable northern mountain range that runs parallel to the coast at some 50 km to the south, or the Sierra de Guadarrama north-west of Madrid.

⁵ At this time the area between Santander and Madrid was the scene of the withdrawal of the Carlist expedition led by Zarategui, from Segovia and Valladolid to the west of the capital, while more to the east, around Soria, the even bigger Royal Expedition, which in mid September had marched up to the walls of Madrid and there, for unclear reasons, turned around, was marching back in disorder to the Basque lands.

Before departing, however, I entered into conference with the booksellers as to what they should do in the event of my finding an opportunity of sending them a stock of Testaments from Madrid; and, having arranged matters to my satisfaction, I committed myself to Providence. I will not dwell long on this journey of three hundred miles. We were in the midst of the fire, yet, strange to say, escaped without a hair of our heads being singed. Robberies, murders, and all kinds of atrocities were perpetrated before, behind, and on both sides of us, but not so much as a dog barked at us, though in one instance a plan had been laid to intercept us. About four leagues from Santander, whilst we were baiting our horses at a village hostelry, I saw a fellow run off after having held a whispering conversation with a boy who was dealing out barley to us. I instantly inquired of the latter what the man had said to him, but only obtained an evasive answer. It appeared afterwards that the conversation was about ourselves. Two or three leagues farther there was an inn and village where we had proposed staying, and indeed had expressed our intention of doing so; but on arriving there, finding that the sun was still far from its bourne, I determined to proceed farther, expecting to meet with a resting-place at the distance of a league; though I was mistaken, as we found none until we reached Montaneda⁶, nine leagues and a half from Santander, where was stationed a small detachment of soldiers. At the dead of night we were aroused from our sleep by a cry that the factious were not far off. A messenger had arrived from the alcalde of the village where we had previously intended staying, who stated that a party of Carlists had just surprised that place, and were searching for an English spy, whom they supposed to be at the inn. The officer commanding the soldiers upon hearing this, not deeming his own situation a safe one, instantly drew off his men, falling back on a stronger party stationed in a fortified village near at hand. As for ourselves, we saddled our horses and continued our way in the dark. Had the Carlists succeeded in apprehending me, I should instantly have been shot, and my body cast on the rocks to feed the vultures and wolves. But "it was not so written," said Antonio, who, like many of his countrymen, was a fatalist.⁷



35.1 *The Puerta de Estacas de Trueba*

⁶ All place names in this section are garbled, heard perhaps once, then written down from memory. This Montaneda is probably Ontaneda, some 35 km south of Santander on the present N 623 [Robertson, *Tour*, 73, says Borrow got there by the Puente Viesgo].

⁷ Once again Borrow may have taken this phrase from the works of Count Volney, whom he disliked so much (see chapter 3, chapter 53, and note 17 to chapter 27). In a note to the 2nd chapter of Volney's classic *Meditations upon the Ruins of Empires*, we find the sentence: 'la fatalité est le préjugé universel et enraciné des Orientaux; 'cela était écrit', est leur réponse à tout.' It also figures in Borrow's letter to Brandram of 1 November 1837 [Darlow 258].

The next night we had another singular escape: we had arrived near the entrance of a horrible pass called "El puerto de la puente de las tablas," or the pass of the bridge of planks, which wound through a black and frightful mountain, on the farther side of which was the town of Onas⁸, where we meant to tarry for the night. The sun had set about a quarter of an hour. Suddenly a man, with his face covered with blood, rushed out of the pass. "Turn back, sir," he said, "in the name of God; there are murderers in that pass; they have just robbed me of my mule and all I possess, and I have hardly escaped with life from their hands." I scarcely know why, but I made him no answer and proceeded; indeed I was so weary and unwell that I cared not what became of me. We entered; the rocks rose perpendicularly, right and left, entirely intercepting the scanty twilight, so that the darkness of the grave, or rather the blackness of the valley of the shadow of death reigned around us, and we knew not where we went, but trusted to the instinct of the horses, who moved on with their heads close to the ground. The only sound which we heard was the plash of a stream⁹, which tumbled down the pass. I expected every moment to feel a knife at my throat, but "*it was not so written.*" We threaded the pass without meeting a human being, and within three quarters of an hour after the time we entered it, we found ourselves within the posada of the town of Onas, which was filled with troops and armed peasants expecting an attack from the grand Carlist army, which was near at hand.



35.2 Burgos

⁸ No such '*Puerto de la Puente de las Tablas*' is found on modern maps. But since Borrow says here that the town of 'Onis' lies on the other side, we are probably dealing with a pass through the 'Sierra de la Llana', which led to the town of Oña, some 40 km west of Miranda del Ebro and 30 km north-west of Briviesca, on the present N 232. It would seem that this nasty little pathway – which has since been replaced as the main thoroughfare from Santander to Burgos by modern national roads – followed the course of the nascent Ebro. However, it is also possible that Borrow's memory failed him and he somehow confused this stretch with the pass known as the '*Puerto de los Estacas de Trueba*' (the Pass of the Stakes of the Trueba river) which lies considerably to the north.

⁹ Probably the Rio Oca, a tributary of the Ebro.

Well, we reached Burgos in safety¹⁰; we reached Valladolid in safety¹¹; we passed the Guadarama in safety; and were at length safely housed in Madrid¹². People said we had been very lucky; Antonio said, "It was so written"; but I say, Glory be to the Lord for his mercies vouchsafed to us.

¹⁰ Robertson [*Tour*, 73]: by way of Briviesca.

¹¹ It is a little unclear why Borrow would have gone by Valladolid, a second time. The road by Aranda de Duero is shorter and quicker.

¹² Borrow and Antonio returned to Madrid on 31 October 1837 [Darlow, 256]