

## CHAPTER 38

### The Prohibition - Gospel Persecuted - Charge of Sorcery - Ofalia.

About the middle of January a swoop was made upon me by my enemies, in the shape of a peremptory prohibition from the political governor of Madrid to sell any more New Testaments.<sup>1</sup> This measure by no means took me by surprise, as I had for some time previously been expecting something of the kind, on account of the political sentiments of the ministers then in power. I forthwith paid a visit to Sir George Villiers, informing him of what had occurred. He promised to do all he could to cause the prohibition to be withdrawn. Unfortunately at this time he had not much influence, having opposed with all his might the entrance of the moderado ministry to power, and the nomination of Ofalia to the presidency of the cabinet. I, however, never lost confidence in the Almighty, in whose cause I was engaged.

Matters were going on very well before this check. The demand for Testaments was becoming considerable, so much so, that the clergy were alarmed, and this step was the consequence. But they had previously recourse to another, well worthy of them, they attempted to act upon my fears. One of the ruffians of Madrid, called Manolos, came up to me one night, in a dark street, and told me that unless I discontinued selling my "Jewish books," I should have a knife "NAILED IN MY HEART"; but I told him to go home, say his prayers, and tell his employers that I pitied them; whereupon he turned away with an oath. A few days after, I received an order to send two copies of the Testament to the office of the political governor, with which I complied, and in less than twenty-four hours an alguazil arrived at the shop with a notice prohibiting the further sale of the work.<sup>2</sup>

One circumstance rejoiced me. Singular as it may appear, the authorities took no measures to cause my little despacho to be closed, and I received no prohibition respecting the sale of any work but the New Testament, and as the Gospel of Saint Luke, in Romany and Basque, would within a short time be ready for delivery, I hoped to carry on matters in a small way till better times should arrive.

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<sup>1</sup> In this and the following four chapters, Borrow will tell of the events which led up to his 1838 imprisonment and the prohibition of his books. The version he gives here is, however, extremely simplified so as not to give offence to the Bible Society, British politicians and fellow missionaries; and also because he liked to claim the entire martyrdom for himself. For the full, and far more complex story of the conflict between the British missionaries and the Spanish Church and Government, see the Editor's Introduction and Apology.

<sup>2</sup> The *Jefe Politico* of Madrid was Don Francisco Gamboa [Darlow, 285]. The order forbidding the sale of Spanish New Testaments was issued on the 12 January 1838 and delivered in the evening of Saturday 13 January to Pepe Calzado, Borrow's shop man [Knapp I : 276].

I was advised to erase from the shop windows the words "Despacho of the British and Foreign Bible Society." This, however, I refused to do. Those words had tended very much to call attention, which was my grand object. Had I attempted to conduct things in an underhand manner, I should, at the time of which I am speaking, scarcely have sold thirty copies in Madrid, instead of nearly three hundred.<sup>3</sup> People who know me not, may be disposed to call me rash; but I am far from being so, as I never adopt a venturesome course when any other is open to me. I am not, however, a person to be terrified by any danger, when I see that braving it is the only way to achieve an object.

The booksellers were unwilling to sell my work; I was compelled to establish a shop of my own. Every shop in Madrid has a name. What name could I give it but the true one? I was not ashamed of my cause or my colours. I hoisted them, and fought beneath them not without success.

The priestly party in Madrid, in the meantime, spared no effort to vilify me. They started a publication called THE FRIEND OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, in which a stupid but furious attack upon me appeared, which I, however, treated with the contempt it deserved.<sup>4</sup> But not satisfied with this, they endeavoured to incite the populace against me, by telling them that I was a sorcerer, and a companion of Gypsies and witches, and their agents even called me so in the streets.<sup>5</sup> That I was an associate of Gypsies and fortune-tellers I do not deny. Why should I be ashamed of their company when my Master mingled with publicans and thieves? Many of the Gypsy race came frequently to visit me; received instruction, and heard parts of the Gospel read to them in their own language, and when they were hungry and faint, I gave them to eat

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<sup>3</sup> Borrow claimed in a letter to Brandram that he had sold 'nearly 300' copies of the New Testament through the Despacho between November and mid January 1838, when he was ordered to stop the sales [Darlow 279; see also footnote 25 to chapter 36 above]. Out of caution, he closed the shop while negotiations between himself, the government and Ambassador Villiers were going on. By late April, total sales stood at 331 copies, and very few were added to that number before the Scio New Testament was definitely forbidden in late May. [Missler, *Daring Game*, 67-69.]

<sup>4</sup> *El Amigo de la Nación Cristiana*. See Giménez, *Spanish Press*, 23 & 27-30. The anonymous article to which Borrow here refers appeared in volume 1, p. 139-158, of January 1838, under the title 'Refutation of heretical maxims, propagated by Mr George Borrow, member and agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which appeared in *El Español* last 12 November'.

<sup>5</sup> Many Spaniards indeed seem to have entertained the notion that Borrow was something of a sorcerer. In Seville, for instance, he was known as 'el Brujo', i.e. 'the Wizard' (see footnote 7 to chapter 49 below). Much of this was due to his outlandish linguistic abilities, his close familiarity with Gypsies, and the publication of the 'Gypsy Luke' in an obscure and scary language which many considered the tongue of witches. Of course, Borrow did not mind at all that his reputation was blown up to such sensational proportions. Forever looking for self-promotion, he did all he could to spread the word. In the manuscript press release which he penned in May 1838 from jail for Madrid journalists to use in their reporting he already emphasizes that 'He [Borrow himself – Ed.] has been termed by some a Russian spy, by others a Jewish Rabbi, and by the priests a sorcerer and a Gipsy.' [Fraser, *Sleeping*, Annex 3.]

and drink.<sup>6</sup> This might be deemed sorcery in Spain, but I am not without hope that it will be otherwise estimated in England, and had I perished at this period, I think there are some who would have been disposed to acknowledge that I had not lived altogether in vain (always as an instrument of the "Most Highest"), having been permitted to turn one of the most valuable books of God into the speech of the most degraded of his creatures.



38.1 *Ofalia*

In the meantime I endeavoured to enter into negotiations with the ministry, for the purpose of obtaining permission to sell the New Testament in Madrid, and the nullification of the prohibition. I experienced, however, great opposition, which I was unable to surmount. Several of the ultra-popish bishops, then resident in Madrid, had denounced the Bible, the Bible Society, and myself. Nevertheless, notwithstanding their powerful and united efforts, they were unable to effect their principal object, namely, my expulsion from Madrid and Spain. The Count Ofalia, notwithstanding he had permitted himself to be made the instrument, to a certain extent, of these people, would not consent to be pushed to such a length.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this affair, I cannot find words sufficiently strong to do justice to the zeal and interest which Sir George Villiers displayed in the cause of the Testament. He had various interviews with Ofalia on the subject, and in these he expressed to him his sense of the injustice and tyranny which had been practised in this instance towards his countryman.

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<sup>6</sup> Although the 1888 memoirs of Borrow's friend the Marques de Santa Coloma have proven to be most untrustworthy, it is not perhaps useless to record the devout Spanish nobleman's impression that: 'Borrow was excessively bigoted, and fond of attacking Roman Catholics and Catholicism,' and that Borrow '*never*, as far as he saw or could learn, spoke of religion to his Gypsy friends.' [Webster, 151f; Missler, *GBB* II : 7, 6-17.]

<sup>7</sup> Ofalia was, of course, caught between the same 'rock and a hard place' that had crushed Mendizabal and Isturitz before him. All at once, he had preserve the thin Catholic support for the liberal regime and the assistance of the British government whose contribution to the war-effort was indispensable for the survival of the liberal regime.

Ofalia had been moved by these remonstrances, and more than once promised to do all in his power to oblige Sir George; but then the bishops again beset him, and playing upon his political if not religious fears, prevented him from acting a just, honest, and honourable part. At the desire of Sir George Villiers, I drew up a brief account of the Bible Society, and an exposition of its views, especially in respect to Spain, which he presented with his own hands to the Count. I shall not trouble the reader by inserting this memorial, but content myself with observing, that I made no attempts to flatter and cajole, but expressed myself honestly and frankly, as a Christian ought. Ofalia, on reading it, said, "What a pity that this is a Protestant society, and that all its members are not Catholics."<sup>8</sup>

A few days subsequently, to my great astonishment, he sent a message to me by a friend, requesting that I would send him a copy of my Gypsy Gospel. I may as well here state, that the fame of this work, though not yet published, had already spread like wildfire through Madrid, and every person was passionately eager to possess a copy; indeed, several grandees of Spain sent messages with similar requests, all of which I however denied. I instantly resolved to take advantage of this overture on the part of Count Ofalia, and to call on him myself. I therefore caused a copy of the Gospel to be handsomely bound, and proceeding to the palace, was instantly admitted to him. He was a dusky, diminutive person, between fifty and sixty years of age, with false hair and teeth, but exceedingly gentlemanly manners. He received me with great affability, and thanked me for my present; but on my proceeding to speak of the New Testament, he told me that the subject was surrounded with difficulties, and that the great body of the clergy had taken up the matter against me; he conjured me, however, to be patient and peaceable, in which case he said he would endeavour to devise some plan to satisfy me. Amongst other things, he observed that the bishops hated a sectarian more than an Atheist. Whereupon I replied, that, like the Pharisees of old, they cared more for the gold of the temple than the temple itself. Throughout the whole of our interview he evidently laboured under great fear, and was continually looking behind and around him, seemingly in dread of being overheard, which brought to my mind an expression

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<sup>8</sup> This memorandum is reproduced verbatim in Darlow, 285-288. On 23 February, Borrow forwarded it to Villiers, who passed it on to Ofalia. Essentially, it explained the innocent nature and modest ambitions of the British & Foreign Bible Society, and among many, many, *many* other things stated that 'the mightiest of earthy monarchs, the late Alexander of Russia, was so convinced of the single-mindedness and integrity of the British and Foreign Bible Society, that he promoted their efforts within his own dominions to the utmost of his ability.' The, after this glowing example from half-barbaric lands, he continues that Spain in her turn is 'a country which perhaps most of any in the world is in need of the assistance of the Christian philanthropist, as it is overspread with the thickest gloom of heathenish ignorance beneath which the fiends and demons of the abyss seem to be holding their ghastly revels; a country in which all sense of right and wrong is forgotten, and where every man's hand is turned against his fellow to destroy or injure him, where the name of Jesus is scarcely ever mentioned but in blasphemy, and His precepts [are] almost utterly unknown. In this unhappy country the few who are enlightened are too much occupied in the pursuit of lucre, ambition, or ungodly revenge to entertain a desire or thought of bettering the moral state of their countrymen.' All of which was probably true, but it was neither complimentary to the country that hosted him, nor likely to convince Ofalia that the whole big trouble might be solved by letting uneducated folks read ancient and enigmatic books of religion in their own language. For all his repeated pretence of being One With The Noble Savages, Borrow could be remarkably blind to national sensitivities.

of a friend of mine,<sup>9</sup> that if there be any truth in metempsychosis, the soul of Count Ofalia must have originally belonged to a mouse. We parted in kindness, and I went away, wondering by what strange chance this poor man had become prime minister of a country like Spain.

[From: *The Zincali*, Part 2, chapter 4.]

It was at Madrid one fine afternoon in the beginning of March 1838<sup>10</sup>, that, as I was sitting behind my table in a cabinet, as it is called, of the third floor of No. 16, in the Calle de Santiago, having just taken my meal, my hostess entered and informed me that a military officer wished to speak to me, adding, in an undertone, that he looked a STRANGE GUEST. I was acquainted with no military officer in the Spanish service; but as at that time I expected daily to be arrested for having distributed the Bible, I thought that very possibly this officer might have been sent to perform that piece of duty. I instantly ordered him to be admitted, whereupon a thin active figure, somewhat above the middle height, dressed in a blue uniform, with a long sword hanging at his side, tripped into the room. Depositing his regimental hat on the ground, he drew a chair to the table, and seating himself, placed his elbows on the board, and supporting his face with his hands, confronted me, gazing steadfastly upon me, without uttering a word. I looked no less wistfully at him, and was of the same opinion as my hostess, as to the strangeness of my guest. He was about fifty, with thin flaxen hair covering the sides of his head, which at the top was entirely bald. His eyes were small, and, like ferrets', red and fiery. His complexion like a brick, a dull red, checkered with spots of purple. 'May I inquire your name and business, sir?' I at length demanded.

STRANGER. - 'My name is Chaleco of Valdepenas; in the time of the French I served as bragante, fighting for Ferdinand VII.<sup>11</sup> I am now a captain on half-pay in the service of Donna Isabel; as for my business here, it is to speak with you. Do you know this book?'

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<sup>9</sup> This witty remark escaped the lips of Ambassador Villiers [Darlow 284]; something rather embarrassing in a diplomat, so that Borrow preferred to keep the rest of the world in the dark as to its author. It was not the only critical remark that Villiers ever made about Spain's new PM. When Ofalia came to power, Villiers wrote Palmerston that 'he is a man so timid and irresolute that far from taking any of the vigorous measures which the state of the country requires it will be his utmost ambition to maintain the status quo' [Fraser, *Sleeping*, 28].

<sup>10</sup> A writing mistake. Seeing that the *Gypsy Luke* was not put onto the market until the first days of April 1838, and that in the last sentence below, Borrow counts ten days between Chaleco's first appearance and his own imprisonment in the Carcel de Corte on 1 May, there is good reason to think that his first meeting with 'the Gypsy from Valdepeñas', described here, really took place a month later [Fraser, *Sleeping*, Chronology].

<sup>11</sup> It has been suggested by the Spanish author Gabino Fernandez Campos (*Alcalá y la Biblia*, Madrid 2001, 204) that this character was based on the *guerrillero* Francisco Abad Moreno, nicknamed 'El Chaleco', born likewise in Valdepeñas, who – however – was hanged in Granada on 21 September 1827 for the crime of being an active liberal. Of course, Borrow may have met an imposter.

MYSELF. - 'This book is Saint Luke's Gospel in the Gypsy language; how can this book concern you?'

STRANGER. - 'No one more. It is in the language of my people.'

MYSELF. - 'You do not pretend to say that you are a Calo?'

STRANGER. - 'I do! I am Zincalo, by the mother's side. My father, it is true, was one of the Busne; but I glory in being a Calo, and care not to acknowledge other blood.'

MYSELF. - 'How became you possessed of that book?'

STRANGER. - 'I was this morning in the Prado, where I met two women of our people, and amongst other things they told me that they had a gabicote in our language. I did not believe them at first, but they pulled it out, and I found their words true. They then spoke to me of yourself, and told me where you live, so I took the book from them and am come to see you.'



*38.2 Engraving of the 'real' Chaleco*

MYSELF. - 'Are you able to understand this book?'

STRANGER. - 'Perfectly, though it is written in very crabbed language: but I learnt to read Calo when very young. My mother was a good Calli, and early taught me both to speak and read it. She too had a gabicote, but not printed like this, and it treated of a different matter.'

MYSELF. - 'How came your mother, being a good Calli, to marry one of a different blood?'

STRANGER. - 'It was no fault of hers; there was no remedy. In her infancy she lost her parents, who were executed; and she was abandoned by all, till my father, taking compassion on her, brought her up and educated her: at last he made her his wife, though three times her age. She, however, remembered her blood and hated my father, and taught me to hate him likewise, and avoid him. When a boy, I used to stroll about the plains, that I might not see my father; and my father would follow me and beg me to look upon him, and would ask me what I wanted; and I would reply, Father, the only thing I want is to see you dead.'

MYSELF. - 'That was strange language from a child to its parent.'

STRANGER. - 'It was - but you know the couplet, which says, "I do not wish to be a lord - I am by birth a Gypsy - I do not wish to be a gentleman - I am content with being a Calo!"'

MYSELF. - 'I am anxious to hear more of your history - pray proceed.'

STRANGER. - 'When I was about twelve years old my father became distracted, and died. I then continued with my mother for some years; she loved me much, and procured a teacher to instruct me in Latin. At last she died, and then there was a pleyto (law-suit). I took to the sierra and became a highwayman; but the wars broke out. My cousin Jara, of Valdepenas, raised a troop of brigantes. I enlisted with him and distinguished myself very much; there is scarcely a man or woman in Spain but has heard of Jara and Chaleco. I am now captain in the service of Donna Isabel - I am covered with wounds - I am - ugh! ugh! ugh - !'

He had commenced coughing, and in a manner which perfectly astounded me. I had heard hooping coughs, consumptive coughs, coughs caused by colds, and other accidents, but a cough so horrible and unnatural as that of the Gypsy soldier, I had never witnessed in the course of my travels. In a moment he was bent double, his frame writhed and laboured, the veins of his forehead were frightfully swollen, and his complexion became black as the blackest blood; he screamed, he snorted, he barked, and appeared to be on the point of suffocation - yet more explosive became the cough; and the people of the house, frightened, came running into the apartment. I cries, 'The man is perishing, run instantly for a surgeon!' He heard me, and with a quick movement raised his left hand as if to countermand the order; another struggle, then one mighty throe, which seemed to search his deepest intestines; and he remained motionless, his head on his knee. The cough had left him, and within a minute or two he again looked up.

'That is a dreadful cough, friend,' said I, when he was somewhat recovered. 'How did you get it?'

GYPSY SOLDIER. - 'I am - shot through the lungs - brother! Let me but take breath, and I will show you the hole - the agujero.'

He continued with me a considerable time, and showed not the slightest disposition to depart; the cough returned twice, but not so violently; - at length, having an engagement, I arose, and apologising, told him I must leave him. The next day he came again at the same hour, but he found me not, as I was abroad dining with a friend. On the third day, however, as I was sitting down to dinner, in he walked, unannounced. I am rather hospitable than otherwise, so I cordially welcomed him, and requested him to partake of my meal. 'Con mucho gusto,' he replied, and instantly took his place at the table. I was again astonished, for if his cough was frightful, his appetite was yet more so. He ate like a wolf of the sierra; - soup, puchero,

fowl and bacon disappeared before him in a twinkling. I ordered in cold meat, which he presently despatched; a large piece of cheese was then produced. We had been drinking water.

'Where is the wine?' said he.  
'I never use it,' I replied.

He looked blank. The hostess, however, who was present waiting, said, 'If the gentleman wish for wine, I have a bota nearly full, which I will instantly fetch.'

The skin bottle, when full, might contain about four quarts. She filled him a very large glass, and was removing the skin, but he prevented her, saying, 'Leave it, my good woman; my brother here will settle with you for the little I shall use.'

He now lighted his cigar, and it was evident that he had made good his quarters. On the former occasion I thought his behaviour sufficiently strange, but I liked it still less on the present. Every fifteen minutes he emptied his glass, which contained at least a pint; his conversation became horrible. He related the atrocities which he had committed when a robber and bragante in La Mancha. 'It was our custom,' said he, 'to tie our prisoners to the olive-trees, and then, putting our horses to full speed, to tilt at them with our spears.' As he continued to drink he became waspish and quarrelsome: he had hitherto talked Castilian, but he would now only converse in Gypsy and in Latin, the last of which languages he spoke with great fluency, though ungrammatically. He told me that he had killed six men in duels; and, drawing his sword, fenced about the room. I saw by the manner in which he handled it, that he was master of his weapon. His cough did not return, and he said it seldom afflicted him when he dined well. He gave me to understand that he had received no pay for two years. 'Therefore you visit me,' thought I. At the end of three hours, perceiving that he exhibited no signs of taking his departure, I arose, and said I must again leave him. 'As you please, brother,' said he; 'use no ceremony with me, I am fatigued, and will wait a little while.' I did not return till eleven at night, when my hostess informed me that he had just departed, promising to return next day. He had emptied the bota to the last drop, and the cheese produced being insufficient for him, he sent for an entire Dutch cheese on my account; part of which he had eaten and the rest carried away. I now saw that I had formed a most troublesome acquaintance, of whom it was highly necessary to rid myself, if possible; I therefore dined out for the next nine days.

For a week he came regularly at the usual hour, at the end of which time he desisted; the hostess was afraid of him, as she said that he was a brujo or wizard, and only spoke to him through the wicket. On the tenth day I was cast into prison, where I continued several weeks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For the remainder of the episode of 'Chaleco de Valdepeñas', see the final paragraphs from *The Zincali*, part 2, chapter 4, quoted in chapter 42 below.