

CHAPTER 4

Vexatious Delays - Drunken Driver - The Murdered Mule - The Lamentation - Adventure on the Heath - Fear of Darkness - Portuguese Fidalgo - The Escort - Return to Lisbon.



4.1 *The Evora aqueduct and an Evora calesh*

I rose at four, and after having taken some refreshment, I descended and found the strange man and his wife sleeping in the chimney corner by the fire, which was still burning; they soon awoke and began preparing their breakfast, which consisted of salt sardinhas, broiled upon the embers. In the meantime the woman sang snatches of the beautiful hymn, very common in Spain, which commences thus:-

"Once of old upon a mountain, shepherds overcome with sleep,
Near to Bethlem's holy tower, kept at dead of night their sheep;
Round about the trunk they nodded of a huge ignited oak,
Whence the crackling flame ascending bright and clear the darkness broke."¹

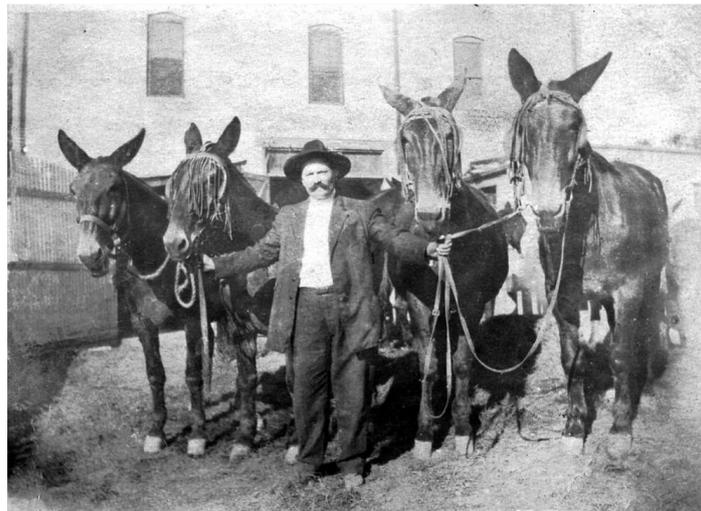
On hearing that I was about to depart, she said, "You shall have some of my husband's rosemary, which will keep you from danger, and prevent any misfortune occurring." I was foolish enough to permit her to put some of it in my hat; and the man having by this time arrived with his mules, I bade farewell to my friendly hostesses, and entered the chaise with my servant.²

¹ The first two stanzas of a poem titled '*Al nacimiento de Cristo*', by the incredibly prolific author Felix Lope de Vega (1562-1635). The original runs:

*Repastaban sus ganados a las espaldas de un monte
de la torre de Belén los soñolientos pastores,
alrededor de los troncos de unos encendidos robles,
que, restallando a los aires, daban claridad al bosque.*

² According to all the available sources, Borrow set out on his return journey on Thursday 17 December 1835, and reached Lisbon on the 19th. Why he ever bothered to return at all – except for some pressing business unknown to us – remains unclear.

I remarked at the time, that the mules which drew us were the finest I had ever seen; the largest could be little short of sixteen hands high; and the fellow told me in his bad French that he loved them better than his wife and children. We turned round the corner of the convent and proceeded down the street which leads to the south-western gate. The driver now stopped before the door of a large house, and having alighted, said that it was yet very early, and that he was afraid to venture forth, as it was very probable we should be robbed, and himself murdered, as the robbers who resided in the town would be apprehensive of his discovering them, but that the family who lived in this house were going to Lisbon, and would depart in about a quarter of an hour, when we might avail ourselves of an escort of soldiers which they would take with them, and in their company we should run no danger. I told him I had no fear, and commanded him to drive on; but he said he would not, and left us in the street. We waited an hour, when two carriages came to the door of the house, but it seems the family were not yet ready, whereupon the coachman likewise got down and went away. At the expiration of about half an hour the family came out, and when their luggage had been arranged they called for the coachman, but he was nowhere to be found. Search was made for him, but ineffectually, and an hour more was spent before another driver could be procured; but the escort had not yet made its appearance, and it was not before a servant had been twice despatched to the barracks that it arrived. At last everything was ready, and they drove off.



4.2 Mules and their driver

All this time I had seen nothing of our own coachman, and I fully expected that he had abandoned us altogether. In a few minutes I saw him staggering up the street in a state of intoxication, attempting to sing the Marseillaise hymn³. I said nothing to him, but sat observing him. He stood for some time staring at the mules and talking incoherent nonsense in French. At last he said, "I am not so drunk but I can ride," and proceeded to lead his mules towards the gate. When out of the town he made several ineffectual attempts to mount the smallest mule which bore the saddle; he at length succeeded, and

³ The singing of *La Marseillaise* identifies the man as a radical who has been living in France or with the French when they occupied Portugal; hence practically a traitor to his own country.

instantly commenced spurring at a furious rate down the road. We arrived at a place where a narrow rocky path branched off, by taking which we should avoid a considerable circuit round the city wall, which otherwise it would be necessary to make before we could reach the road to Lisbon, which lay at the north-east; he now said, "I shall take this path, for by so doing we shall overtake the family in a minute"; so into the path we went; it was scarcely wide enough to admit the carriage, and exceedingly steep and broken; we proceeded; ascending and descending, the wheels cracked, and the motion was so violent that we were in danger of being cast out as from a sling. I saw that if we remained in the carriage it must be broken in pieces, as our weight must insure its destruction. I called to him in Portuguese to stop, but he flogged and spurred the beasts the more. My man now entreated me for God's sake to speak to him in French, for, if anything would pacify him, that would. I did so, and entreated him to let us dismount and walk, till we had cleared this dangerous way. The result justified Antonio's anticipation. He instantly stopped and said, "Sir, you are master, you have only to command and I shall obey." We dismounted and walked on till we reached the great road, when we once more seated ourselves.

The family were about a quarter of a mile in advance, and we were no sooner resealed, than he lashed the mules into full gallop for the purpose of overtaking it; his cloak had fallen from his shoulder, and, in endeavouring to readjust it, he dropped the string from his hand by which he guided the large mule, it became entangled in the legs of the poor animal, which fell heavily on its neck, it struggled for a moment, and then lay stretched across the way, the shafts over its body. I was pitched forward into the dirt, and the drunken driver fell upon the murdered mule.



4.3 *Dead Mule*

I was in a great rage, and cried, "You drunken renegade, who are ashamed to speak the language of your own country, you have broken the staff of your existence, and may now starve." "Paciencia," said he, and began kicking the head of the mule, in order to make it rise; but I pushed him down, and taking his knife, which had fallen from his pocket, cut the bands by which it was attached to the carriage, but life had fled, and the film of death had begun to cover its eyes.

The fellow, in the recklessness of intoxication, seemed at first disposed to make light of his loss, saying, "The mule is dead, it was God's will that she should die, what more can be said? *Paciencia*." Meanwhile, I despatched Antonio to the town for the purpose of hiring mules, and, having taken my baggage from the chaise, waited on the roadside until he should arrive.

The fumes of the liquor began now to depart from the fellow's brain; he clasped his hands and exclaimed, "Blessed Virgin, what is to become of me? How am I to support myself? Where am I to get another mule! For my mule, my best mule is dead, she fell upon the road, and died of a sudden! I have been in France, and in other countries, and have seen beasts of all kinds, but such a mule as that I have never seen; but she is dead - my mule is dead - she fell upon the road and died of a sudden!" He continued in this strain for a considerable time, and the burden of his lamentation was always, "My mule is dead, she fell upon the road, and died of a sudden." At length he took the collar from the creature's neck, and put it upon the other, which with some difficulty he placed in the shafts.

A beautiful boy of about thirteen now came from the direction of the town, running along the road with the velocity of a hare: he stopped before the dead mule and burst into tears: it was the man's son, who had heard of the accident from Antonio. This was too much for the poor fellow: he ran up to the boy, and said, "Don't cry, our bread is gone, but it is God's will; the mule is dead!" He then flung himself on the ground, uttering fearful cries. "I could have borne my loss," said he, "but when I saw my child cry, I became a fool." I gave him two or three crowns, and added some words of comfort; assuring him I had no doubt that, if he abandoned drink, the Almighty God would take compassion on him and repair his loss. At length he became more composed, and placing my baggage in the chaise, we returned to the town, where I found two excellent riding mules awaiting my arrival at the inn. I did not see the Spanish woman, or I should have told her of the little efficacy of rosemary in this instance.

I have known several drunkards amongst the Portuguese, but, without one exception, they have been individuals who, having travelled abroad, like this fellow, have returned with a contempt for their own country, and polluted with the worst vices of the lands which they have visited.

I would strongly advise any of my countrymen who may chance to read these lines, that, if their fate lead them into Spain or Portugal, they avoid hiring as domestics, or being connected with, individuals of the lower classes who speak any other language than their own, as the probability is that they are heartless thieves and drunkards. These gentry are invariably saying all they can in dispraise of their native land; and it is my opinion, grounded upon experience, that an individual who is capable of such baseness would not hesitate at the perpetration of any villainy, for next to the love of God, the love of country is the best preventive of crime. He who is proud of his country, will be particularly cautious not to do anything which is calculated to disgrace it.

We now journeyed towards Lisbon, and reached Monte Moro about two o'clock. After taking such refreshment as the place afforded, we pursued our way till we were within a quarter of a league of the huts which stand on the edge of the savage wilderness we had before crossed. Here we were overtaken by a horseman; he was a powerful, middle-sized man, and was mounted on a noble Spanish horse. He had a broad, slouching sombrero on his head, and wore a jerkin of blue cloth, with large bosses of silver for buttons, and clasps of the same metal; he had breeches of yellow leather, and immense jack-boots: at his saddle was slung a formidable gun. He inquired if I intended to pass the night at Vendas Novas, and on my replying in the affirmative, he said that he would avail himself of our company. He now looked towards the sun, whose disk was rapidly sinking beneath the horizon, and entreated us to spur on and make the most of its light, for that the moor was a horrible place in the dusk. He placed himself at our head, and we trotted briskly on, the boy or muleteer who attended us running behind without exhibiting the slightest symptom of fatigue⁴.

We entered upon the moor, and had advanced about a mile when dark night fell around us; we were in a wild path, with high brushwood on either side, when the rider said that he could not confront the darkness, and begged me to ride on before, and he would follow after: I could hear him trembling. I asked the reason of his terror, and he replied that at one time darkness was the same thing to him as day, but that of late years he dreaded it, especially in wild places. I complied with his request, but I was ignorant of the way, and as I could scarcely see my hand, was continually going wrong. This made the man impatient, and he again placed himself at our head. We proceeded so for a considerable way, when he again stopped, and said that the power of the darkness was too much for him. His horse seemed to be infected with the same panic, for it shook in every limb. I now told him to call on the name of the Lord Jesus, who was able to turn the darkness into light, but he gave a terrible shout, and, brandishing his gun aloft, discharged it in the air. His horse sprang forward at full speed, and my mule, which was one of the swiftest of its kind, took fright and followed at the heels of the charger. Antonio and the boy were left behind. On we flew like a whirlwind, the hoofs of the animals illuming the path with the sparks of fire they struck from the stones. I knew not whither we were going, but the dumb creatures were acquainted with the way, and soon brought us to Vendas Novas, where we were rejoined by our companions.

I thought this man was a coward, but I did him injustice, for during the day he was as brave as a lion, and feared no one. About five years since, he had overcome two robbers who had attacked him on the moors, and, after tying their hands behind them, had delivered them up to justice; but at night the rustling of a leaf filled him with terror. I have known similar instances of the kind in persons of otherwise extraordinary resolution. For myself, I confess I am not a person of extraordinary resolution, but the dangers of the night daunt me no more than those of midday. The man in question was a farmer from Evora, and a person of considerable wealth.

⁴ Horse-hire in the mid 19th century was a risky and delicate trade. So as to avoid that the client took off with the cherished possession and to lead the horse back to its owner, a servant was usually sent along on the journey; without, however, being himself mounted.

I found the inn at Vendas Novas thronged with people, and had some difficulty in obtaining accommodation and refreshment. It was occupied by the family of a certain Fidalgo, from Estremoz; he was on the way to Lisbon, conveying a large sum of money, as was said - probably the rents of his estates. He had with him a body guard of four-and-twenty of his dependants, each armed with a rifle; they consisted of his swineherds, shepherds, cowherds, and hunters, and were commanded by two youths, his son and nephew, the latter of whom was in regimentals; nevertheless, notwithstanding the number of his troop, it appeared that the Fidalgo laboured under considerable apprehension of being despoiled upon the waste which lay between Vendas Novas and Pegoens, as he had just requested a guard of four soldiers from the officer who commanded a detachment stationed here: there were many females in his company, who, I was told, were his illegitimate daughters - for he bore an infamous moral character, and was represented to me as a staunch friend of Don Miguel. It was not long before he came up to me and my new acquaintance, as we sat by the kitchen fire: he was a tall man of about sixty, but stooped much. His countenance was by no means pleasing: he had a long hooked nose, small twinkling cunning eyes, and, what I liked worst of all, a continual sneering smile, which I firmly believe to be the index of a treacherous and malignant heart. He addressed me in Spanish, which, as he resided not far from the frontier, he spoke with fluency, but contrary to my usual practice, I was reserved and silent.

On the following morning I rose at seven, and found that the party from Estremoz had started several hours previously. I breakfasted with my acquaintance of the preceding night, and we set out to accomplish what remained of our journey. The sun had now arisen; and all his fears had left him - he breathed defiance against all the robbers of the Alemtejo. When we had advanced about a league, the boy who attended us said he saw heads of men amongst the brushwood. Our cavalier instantly seized his gun, and causing his horse to make two or three lofty bounds, held it in one hand, the muzzle pointed in the direction indicated, but the heads did not again make their appearance, and it was probably but a false alarm.

We resumed our way, and the conversation turned, as might be expected, upon robbers. My companion, who seemed to be acquainted with every inch of ground over which we passed, had a legend to tell of every dingle and every pine-clump. We reached a slight eminence, on the top of which grew three stately pines: about half a league farther on was another similar one: these two eminences commanded a view of the road from Pegoens and Vendas Novas, so that all people going and coming could be descried, whilst yet at a distance. My friend told me that these heights were favourite stations of robbers. Some two years since, a band of six mounted banditti remained there three days, and plundered whomsoever approached from either quarter: their horses, saddled and bridled, stood picqueted at the foot of the trees, and two scouts, one for each eminence, continually sat in the topmost branches and gave notice of the approach of travellers: when at a proper distance the robbers below sprang upon their horses, and putting them to full gallop, made at their prey, shouting RENDETE, PICARO! RENDETE, PICARO! (Surrender, scoundrel, surrender!) We, however, passed unmolested, and, about a quarter of a mile before we reached Pegoens, overtook the family of the Fidalgo.

Had they been conveying the wealth of Ind through the deserts of Arabia, they could not have travelled with more precaution. The nephew, with drawn sabre, rode in front; pistols at his holsters, and the usual Spanish gun slung at his saddle. Behind him tramped six men in a rank, with muskets shouldered, and each of them wore at his girdle a hatchet, which was probably intended to cleave the thieves to the brisket should they venture to come to close quarters. There were six vehicles, two of them calashes, in which latter rode the Fidalgo and his daughters; the others were covered carts, and seemed to be filled with household furniture; each of these vehicles had an armed rustic on either side; and the son, a lad about sixteen, brought up the rear with a squad equal to that of his cousin in the van. The soldiers, who by good fortune were light horse, and admirably mounted, were galloping about in all directions, for the purpose of driving the enemy from cover, should they happen to be lurking in the neighbourhood.

I could not help thinking as I passed by, that this martial array was very injudicious, for though it was calculated to awe plunderers, it was likewise calculated to allure them, as it seemed to hint that immense wealth was passing through their territories. I do not know how the soldiers and rustics would have behaved in case of an attack; but am inclined to believe that if three such men as Richard Turpin had suddenly galloped forth from behind one of the bush-covered knolls, neither the numbers nor resistance opposed to them would have prevented them from bearing away the contents of the strong box jingling in their saddle-bags.

From this moment nothing worthy of relating occurred till our arrival at Aldea Gallega, where we passed the night, and next morning at three o'clock embarked in the passage-boat for Lisbon, where we arrived at eight - and thus terminates my first wandering in the Alemtejo.