

CHAPTER 41

Maria Diaz - Priestly Vituperation - Antonio's Visit - Antonio at Service - A Scene - Benedict Mol - Wandering in Spain - The Four Evangiles.



41.1 The Carcel de Corte in the 19th century

"Well," said I to Maria Diaz on the third morning after my imprisonment, "what do the people of Madrid say to this affair of mine?"

"I do not know what the people of Madrid in general say about it, probably they do not take much interest in it; indeed, imprisonments at the present time are such common matters that people seem to be quite indifferent to them; the priests, however, are in no slight commotion, and confess that they have committed an imprudent thing in causing you to be arrested by their friend the corregidor of Madrid."

"How is that?" I inquired. "Are they afraid that their friend will be punished?"

"Not so, Señor," replied Maria; "slight grief indeed would it cause them, however great the trouble in which he had involved himself on their account; for this description of people have no affection, and would not care if all their friends were hanged, provided they themselves escaped. But they say that they have acted imprudently in sending you to prison, inasmuch as by so doing they have given you an opportunity of carrying a plan of yours into execution. 'This fellow is a bribon,' say they, 'and has commenced tampering with the prisoners; they have taught him their language, which he already speaks as well as if he were a son of the prison. As soon as he comes out he will publish a thieves' gospel, which will still be a more dangerous affair than the Gypsy one, for the Gypsies are few, but the thieves! woe is us; we shall all be Lutherized. What infamy, what rascality! It was a trick of his own. He was always eager to get into prison, and now in evil hour we have sent him there, EL BRIBONAZO; there will be no safety for Spain until he is hanged; he ought to be sent to the four hells, where at his leisure he might translate his fatal gospels into the language of the demons.' "

"I but said three words to the alcaide of the prison," said I, "relative to the jargon used by the children of the prison."

"Three words! Don Jorge; and what may not be made out of three words? You have lived amongst us to little purpose if you think we require more than three words to build a system with: those three words about the thieves and their tongue were quite sufficient to cause it to be reported throughout Madrid that you had tampered with the thieves, had learnt their language, and had written a book which was to overturn Spain, open to the English the gates of Cadiz, give Mendizabal all the church plate and jewels, and to Don Martin Luther the archiepiscopal palace of Toledo."

[From letter to Hasfelt, 20 November 1838, in: Fraser, *Hasfeld*, 27]

You heard of my imprisonment, it seems, and indeed well you might, as all the English journals teemed with it for some time¹, but perhaps you are not aware that *one* of the reasons for my imprisonment was a belief that a mysterious conspiracy was on the eve of breaking out, a conspiracy in which all the Gitanos of Spain were implicated who it was said intended to seize on the kingdom of Granada and to place me on the throne: all this alone from my having formed a little Gitano or Gipsy congregation at Madrid and translated the Gospel of Luke into their language. Nothing is too gross for the credulity of Spaniards especially where foreigners are concerned, and gipsies as well as English are so denominated in Spain.²

[Chapter 41 continued]

Late in the afternoon of a rather gloomy day, as I was sitting in the apartment which the alcaide had allotted me, I heard a rap at the door. "Who is that?" I exclaimed. "C'EST MOI, MON MAITRE," cried a well-known voice, and presently in walked Antonio Buchini, dressed in the same style as when I first introduced him to the reader, namely, in a handsome but rather faded French surtout, vest and pantaloons, with a diminutive hat in one hand, and holding in the other a long and slender cane.³

¹ Hasfeld, who lived in Petersburg, did not learn of Borrow's imprisonment from an English newspaper, but from the *Preussische Staats-Zeitung*. [Letter from Hasfeld to Borrow of September 1838, quoted in Knapp, I : 220 and Jenkins, 247]

² This remarkable anecdote, gorgeous as it may be, needs some qualification. The English newspapers did indeed report upon Borrow's imprisonment, and they also made mention of a Gypsy conspiracy to place Borrow on the throne of a new rebellious Kingdom of Granada. But as Angus Fraser has shown, they reported this because the correspondents in Spain were fed their prime material about George Borrow, the extraordinary linguist, traveller, and missionary by... George Borrow himself. There is no known outside evidence to lend any credence at all to such a story. [Fraser, *Sleeping*, 28, 32, Annex 2 and 3]

³ The ease with which all sorts of visitors were admitted to Borrow's cell is a measure of the velvet gloves with which he was handled by the authorities. His servant, his landlady, her assistants, Antonio Buchino and even the Swiss treasure hunter are merely those whom Borrow chose to mention. He was also visited by the renegade priest Pascual Marin [Darlow, 302], by Villiers' butler and his personal secretary, and according to a letter to his mother, by Antonio Quiroga Hermida, the Captain-General of Madrid. The only ones refused entry were the Gypsies, who likewise presented themselves. [Jenkins, 236; Fraser, *Sleeping*, 40.]

"BON JOUR, MON MAITRE," said the Greek; then glancing around the apartment, he continued, "I am glad to find you so well lodged. If I remember right, mon maitre, we have slept in worse places during our wanderings in Galicia and Castile."

"You are quite right, Antonio," I replied; "I am very comfortable. Well, this is kind of you to visit your ancient master, more especially now he is in the toils; I hope, however, that by so doing you will not offend your present employer. His dinner hour must be at hand; why are not you in the kitchen?"

"Of what employer are you speaking, mon maitre?" demanded Antonio.

"Of whom should I speak but Count -, to serve whom you abandoned me, being tempted by an offer of a monthly salary less by four dollars than that which I was giving you."

"Your worship brings an affair to my remembrance which I had long since forgotten. I have at present no other master than yourself, Monsieur Georges, for I shall always consider you as my master, though I may not enjoy the felicity of waiting upon you."

"You have left the Count, then," said I, "after remaining three days in the house, according to your usual practice."

"Not three hours, mon maitre," replied Antonio; "but I will tell you the circumstances. Soon after I left you I repaired to the house of Monsieur le Comte; I entered the kitchen, and looked about me. I cannot say that I had much reason to be dissatisfied with what I saw; the kitchen was large and commodious, and every thing appeared neat and in its proper place, and the domestics civil and courteous; yet I know not how it was, the idea at once rushed into my mind that the house was by no means suited to me, and that I was not destined to stay there long; so hanging my haversac upon a nail, and sitting down on the dresser, I commenced singing a Greek song, as I am in the habit of doing when dissatisfied. The domestics came about me asking questions; I made them no answer, however, and continued singing till the hour for preparing the dinner drew nigh, when I suddenly sprang on the floor and was not long in thrusting them all out of the kitchen, telling them that they had no business there at such a season; I then at once entered upon my functions. I exerted myself, mon maitre, I exerted myself, and was preparing a repast which would have done me honour; there was, indeed, some company expected that day, and I therefore determined to show my employer that nothing was beyond the capacity of his Greek cook. EH BIEN, mon maitre, all was going on remarkably well, and I felt almost reconciled to my new situation, when who should rush into the kitchen but LE FILS DE LA MAISON, my young master, an ugly urchin of thirteen years or thereabouts; he bore in his hand a manchet of bread, which, after prying about for a moment, he proceeded to dip in the pan where some delicate woodcocks were in the course of preparation. You know, mon maitre, how sensitive I am on certain points, for I am no Spaniard but a Greek, and have principles of honour. Without a moment's hesitation I took my young master by the shoulders, and hurrying him to the door, dismissed him in the manner which he deserved; squalling loudly, he hurried away to the upper part of the house. I continued my labours, but ere three minutes had elapsed, I heard a dreadful confusion above stairs, ON FAISOIT UNE HORRIBLE TINTAMARRE, and I could occasionally distinguish oaths and

execrations: presently doors were flung open, and there was an awful rushing downstairs, a gallopade. It was my lord the count, his lady, and my young master, followed by a regular bevy of women and filles de chambre. Far in advance of all, however, was my lord with a drawn sword in his hand, shouting, 'Where is the wretch who has dishonoured my son, where is he? He shall die forthwith.' I know not how it was, mon maitre, but I just then chanced to spill a large bowl of garbanzos, which were intended for the puchera of the following day. They were uncooked, and were as hard as marbles; these I dashed upon the floor, and the greater part of them fell just about the doorway. EH BIEN, mon maitre, in another moment in bounded the count, his eyes sparkling like coals, and, as I have already said, with a rapier in his hand. 'TENEZ, GUEUX ENRAGÉ,' he screamed, making a desperate lunge at me, but ere the words were out of his mouth, his foot slipping on the pease, he fell forward with great violence at his full length, and his weapon flew out of his hand, COMME UNE FLECHE. You should have heard the outcry which ensued - there was a terrible confusion: the count lay upon the floor to all appearance stunned; I took no notice, however, continuing busily employed. They at last raised him up, and assisted him till he came to himself, though very pale and much shaken. He asked for his sword: all eyes were now turned upon me, and I saw that a general attack was meditated. Suddenly I took a large caserolle from the fire in which various eggs were frying; this I held out at arm's length peering at it along my arm as if I were curiously inspecting it; my right foot advanced and the other thrown back as far as possible. All stood still, imagining, doubtless, that I was about to perform some grand operation, and so I was; for suddenly the sinister leg advancing, with one rapid COUP DE PIED, I sent the caserolle and its contents flying over my head, so that they struck the wall far behind me. This was to let them know that I had broken my staff and had shaken the dust off my feet; so casting upon the count the peculiar glance of the Sceirote cooks when they feel themselves insulted, and extending my mouth on either side nearly as far as the ears, I took down my haversac and departed, singing as I went the song of the ancient Demos, who, when dying, asked for his supper, and water wherewith to lave his hands:

*Ο ήλιος έβασίλευε, κί ό Δημος διατάζει,
Σύρτε, παιδιά μου, 'σ το νερον ψωμι να φάτ' άπόψε ⁴.*

And in this manner, mon maitre, I left the house of the Count of - ."

MYSELF. - And a fine account you have given of yourself; by your own confession, your behaviour was most atrocious. Were it not for the many marks of courage and fidelity which you have exhibited in my service, I would from this moment hold no farther communication with you.

⁴ Burke [footnote to 572] translates:

*'The sun was setting, and Demos commands:
Bring water, my children, that ye may eat bread this evening.'*

The lines come from a modern Greek song called 'The Grave of Demos', written during the Greek War of Independence in the early 1820s, which Borrow had translated and published in his small book *Targum* a few years earlier.

ANTONIO. - MAIS QU' EST CE QUE VOUS VOUDRIEZ, MON MAITRE? Am I not a Greek, full of honour and sensibility? Would you have the cooks of Sceira and Stambul submit to be insulted here in Spain by the sons of counts rushing into the temple with manchets of bread. Non, non, mon maitre, you are too noble to require that, and what is more, TOO JUST. But we will talk of other things. Mon maitre, I came not alone; there is one now waiting in the corridor anxious to speak to you.

MYSELF. - Who is it?

ANTONIO. - One whom you have met, mon maitre, in various and strange places.

MYSELF. - But who is it?

ANTONIO. - One who will come to a strange end, FOR SO IT IS WRITTEN. The most extraordinary of all the Swiss, he of Saint James, - DER SCHATZ GRABER.

MYSELF. - Not Benedict Mol?

"YAW, MEIN LIEBER HERR," said Benedict, pushing open the door which stood ajar; "it is myself. I met Herr Anton in the street, and hearing that you were in this place, I came with him to visit you."⁵

MYSELF. - And in the name of all that is singular, how is it that I see you in Madrid again? I thought that by this time you were returned to your own country.

BENEDICT. - Fear not, lieber herr, I shall return thither in good time; but not on foot, but with mules and coach. The schatz is still yonder, waiting to be dug up, and now I have better hope than ever: plenty of friends, plenty of money. See you not how I am dressed, lieber herr?

And verily his habiliments were of a much more respectable appearance than any which he had sported on former occasions. His coat and pantaloons, which were of light green, were nearly new. On his head he still wore an Andalusian hat, but the present one was neither old nor shabby, but fresh and glossy, and of immense altitude of cone: whilst in his hand, instead of the ragged staff which I had observed at Saint James and Oviedo, he now carried a huge bamboo rattan, surmounted by the grim head of either a bear or lion, curiously cut out of pewter.

"You have all the appearance of a treasure seeker returned from a successful expedition," I exclaimed.

⁵ Although there is much which looks fanciful in the following dialogue between Borrow and Benedict Mol, the essence of their meeting seems to be true. As we learn from a letter which the Santiago bookseller Rey Romero wrote in Borrow in June 1839, in August 1838 the Swiss treasure hunter personally informed him of Borrow's imprisonment four months earlier. This at least places Mol in Madrid at the time of Borrow's spell in jail. See footnote 31 to chapter 42 below for the text of the Rey Romero letter.

"Or rather," interrupted Antonio, "of one who has ceased to trade on his own bottom, and now goes seeking treasures at the cost and expense of others."

I questioned the Swiss minutely concerning his adventures since I last saw him, when I left him at Oviedo to pursue my route to Santander. From his answers I gathered that he had followed me to the latter place; he was, however, a long time in performing the journey, being weak from hunger and privation. At Santander he could hear no tidings of me, and by this time the trifle which he had received from me was completely exhausted. He now thought of making his way into France, but was afraid to venture through the disturbed provinces, lest he should fall into the hands of the Carlists, who he conceived might shoot him as a spy. No one relieving him at Santander, he departed and begged his way till he found himself in some part of Aragon, but where he scarcely knew⁶. "My misery was so great," said Bennet, "that I nearly lost my senses. Oh, the horror of wandering about the savage hills and wide plains of Spain, without money and without hope! Sometimes I became desperate, when I found myself amongst rocks and barrancos, perhaps after having tasted no food from sunrise to sunset, and then I would raise my staff towards the sky and shake it, crying, lieber herr Gott, ach lieber herr Gott, you must help me now or never; if you tarry, I am lost; you must help me now, now! And once when I was raving in this manner, methought I heard a voice, nay I am sure I heard it, sounding from the hollow of a rock, clear and strong; and it cried, 'Der schatz, der schatz, it is not yet dug up; to Madrid, to Madrid. The way to the schatz is through Madrid.' And then the thought of the schatz once more rushed into my mind, and I reflected how happy I might be, could I but dig up the schatz. No more begging, then, no more wandering amidst horrid mountains and deserts; so I brandished my staff, and my body and my limbs became full of new and surprising strength, and I strode forward, and was not long before I reached the high road; and then I begged and bittled as I best could, until I reached Madrid."



41.2 A Spanish 'barranco', or ravine

⁶ Had Mol really walked from Santander to any place in Aragon in a more or less straight line, he would have passed straight through the middle of the 'disturbed provinces' through which he was supposedly 'afraid to venture'. The tale is rather nonsensical.

"And what has befallen you since you reached Madrid?" I inquired. "Did you find the treasure in the streets?"

On a sudden Bennet became reserved and taciturn, which the more surprised me, as, up to the present moment, he had at all times been remarkably communicative with respect to his affairs and prospects. From what I could learn from his broken hints and innuendoes, it appeared that, since his arrival at Madrid, he had fallen into the hands of certain people who had treated him with kindness, and provided him with both money and clothes; not from disinterested motives, however, but having an eye to the treasure. "They expect great things from me," said the Swiss; "and perhaps, after all, it would have been more profitable to have dug up the treasure without their assistance, always provided that were possible." Who his new friends were, he either knew not or would not tell me, save that they were people in power. He said something about Queen Christina and an oath which he had taken in the presence of a bishop on the crucifix and "the four Evangiles."⁷ I thought that his head was turned, and forbore questioning. Just before taking his departure, he observed "Lieber herr, pardon me for not being quite frank towards you, to whom I owe so much, but I dare not; I am not now my own man. It is, moreover, an evil thing at all times to say a word about treasure before you have secured it. There was once a man in my own country, who dug deep into the earth until he arrived at a copper vessel which contained a schatz. Seizing it by the handle, he merely exclaimed in his transport, 'I have it'; that was enough, however: down sank the kettle, though the handle remained in his grasp. That was all he ever got for his trouble and digging. Farewell, lieber herr, I shall speedily be sent back to Saint James to dig up the schatz; but I will visit you ere I go - farewell."

⁷ Neither Queen Mother Cristina nor any ecclesiastic was involved in the Santiago treasure hunt, which by the looks of it was entirely a Ministry of Finance affair. Borrow, however, preferred suggesting the involvement of a Queen Mother he disliked and a Church he loathed. [Missler, *Treasure Hunter*, 128f.]