

CHAPTER 46

Work of Distribution resumed - Adventure at Cobenna - Power of the Clergy - Rural Authorities - Fuente la Higuera - Victoriano's Mishap - Village Prison - The Rope - Antonio's Errand - Antonio at Mass.

In my last chapter, I stated that, immediately after my arrival at Madrid, I proceeded to get everything in readiness for commencing operations in the neighbourhood; and I soon entered upon my labours in reality. Considerable success attended my feeble efforts in the good cause, for which at present, after the lapse of some years, I still look back with gratitude to the Almighty.

All the villages within the distance of four leagues to the east of Madrid, were visited in less than a fortnight, and Testaments to the number of nearly two hundred disposed of. These villages for the most part are very small, some of them consisting of not more than a dozen houses, or I should rather say miserable cabins. I left Antonio, my Greek, to superintend matters in Madrid, and proceeded with Victoriano, the peasant from Villa Seca, in the direction which I have already mentioned. We, however, soon parted company, and pursued different routes.



46.1 Traditional costume of a Segovia peasant (1801)

The first village at which I made an attempt was Cobenna, about three leagues from Madrid. I was dressed in the fashion of the peasants in the neighbourhood of Segovia, in Old Castile; namely, I had on my head a species of leather helmet or montera, with a jacket and trousers of the same material. I had the appearance of a person between sixty and seventy years of age, and drove before me a borrico with a sack of Testaments lying across its back. On nearing the village, I met a genteel-looking young woman leading a little boy by the hand: as I was about to pass her with the customary salutation of VAYA USTED CON DIOS, she stopped, and after looking at me for a moment, she said: "Uncle (TIO), what is that you have got on your borrico? Is it soap?"

"Yes," I replied: "it is soap to wash souls clean."

She demanded what I meant; whereupon I told her that I carried cheap and godly books for sale. On her requesting to see one, I produced a copy from my pocket and handed it to her. She instantly commenced reading with a loud voice, and continued so for at least ten minutes, occasionally exclaiming: "QUE LECTURA TAN BONITA, QUE LECTURA TAN LINDA!" What beautiful, what charming readings!" At last, on my informing her that I was in a hurry, and could not wait any longer, she said, "true, true," and asked me the price of the book: I told her "but three reals," whereupon she said, that though what I asked was very little, it was more than she could afford to give, as there was little or no money in those parts.¹ I said I was sorry for it, but that I could not dispose of the books for less than I had demanded, and accordingly, resuming it, wished her farewell, and left her. I had not, however, proceeded thirty yards, when the boy came running behind me, shouting, out of breath: "Stop, uncle, the book, the book!" Upon overtaking me, he delivered the three reals in copper, and seizing the Testament, ran back to her, who I suppose was his sister, flourishing the book over his head with great glee.



46.2 The Plaza of Cobeña

On arriving at the village, I directed my steps to a house, around the door of which I saw several people gathered, chiefly women. On my displaying my books, their curiosity was instantly aroused, and every person had speedily one in his hand, many reading aloud; however, after waiting nearly an hour, I had disposed of but one copy, all complaining bitterly of the distress of the times, and the almost total want of money, though, at the same time, they acknowledged that the books were wonderfully cheap, and appeared to be very good and Christian-like. I was about to gather up my merchandise and depart, when on a sudden the curate of the place made his appearance. After having examined the book for some time with considerable attention, he asked me the price of a copy, and upon my informing him that it was three reals, he replied that the binding was worth more², and that he was much afraid that I had stolen the books, and that it was perhaps his duty to send me to prison as a suspicious character; but

¹ Three reales was very cheap indeed, the cheapest books on the market costing some 6 to 8 reales, a normal book between 25 and 30, and the cost price of the New Testament being roughly 18 [Missler, *Daring Game*, 13]. However: 3 reales represented almost a working man's daily wages in the 1830s, while peasants practically never saw money at all.

² The good curate knew his business: the binding of the Scio New Testament, according to the bill of the Borrego's print shop, cost of 4,5 reales per copy. [Missler, *Daring Game*, 9 & 165.]

added, that the books were good books, however they might be obtained, and concluded by purchasing two copies. The poor people no sooner heard their curate recommend the volumes, than all were eager to secure one, and hurried here and there for the purpose of procuring money, so that between twenty and thirty copies were sold almost in an instant. This adventure not only affords an instance of the power still possessed by the Spanish clergy over the minds of the people, but proves that such influence is not always exerted in a manner favourable to the maintenance of ignorance and superstition.

In another village, on my showing a Testament to a woman, she said that she had a child at school for whom she would like to purchase one, but that she must first know whether the book was calculated to be of service to him. She then went away, and presently returned with the school-master, followed by all the children under his care; she then, showing the schoolmaster a book, inquired if it would answer for her son. The schoolmaster called her a simpleton for asking such a question, and said that he knew the book well, and there was not its equal in the world (NO HAY OTRO EN EL MUNDO). He instantly purchased five copies for his pupils, regretting that he had no more money, "for if I had," said he, "I would buy the whole cargo." Upon hearing this, the woman purchased four copies, namely, one for her living son, another for her DECEASED HUSBAND, a third for herself, and a fourth for her brother, whom she said she was expecting home that night from Madrid.

In this manner we proceeded; not, however, with uniform success. In some villages the people were so poor and needy, that they had literally no money; even in these, however, we managed to dispose of a few copies in exchange for barley or refreshments. On entering one very small hamlet, Victoriano was stopped by the curate, who, on learning what he carried, told him that unless he instantly departed, he would cause him to be imprisoned, and would write to Madrid in order to give information of what was going on³. The excursion lasted about eight days. Immediately after my return, I dispatched Victoriano to Caramanchal, a village at a short distance from Madrid, the only one towards the west which had not been visited last year. He stayed there about an hour, and disposed of twelve copies, and then returned, as he was exceedingly timid, and was afraid of being met by the thieves who swarm on that road in the evening.

³ He did so, for it seems that this is the village priest of Vicalvaro whose letter was reprinted in an article called 'Sociedad Bíblica', published in the Madrid newspaper *El Nuncio de la Verdad* of February 1839, volume 2, notebook 4, pp. 202-5 [Gimenez, *Spanish Press*, page 30, n° 31]. There, the priest complains '*de la presencia en este pueblo de un hombre con traje tosco como de un jornalero, y en la plaza principal a la puerta de una posada presentando al publico para su venta ocho ejemplares del Nuevo Testamento, traducido al castellano, según se dice en la portada, por el Padre Scio, e impreso en Madrid en 1837 en la imprenta de Ibarra*', i.e. 'about the presence in this town of a man dressed in the coarse clothes of a day worker, who set up a stand on the main square before the tavern to sell eight copies of the New Testament translated into Spanish by Father Scio, and printed in May 1837 in the Ibarra printing house.' Quite probably this is the article, containing a 'letter of [a] curate', which Borrow sent to his employers in London with his letter of 20 March 1839, as an example of the ferocious attacks aimed at the Bible Society by publications 'established and supported' by 'the Cardinals of Rome' [Darlow, 403].

Shortly after these events, a circumstance occurred which will perhaps cause the English reader to smile, whilst, at the same time, it will not fail to prove interesting, as affording an example of the feeling prevalent in some of the lone villages of Spain with respect to innovation and all that savours thereof, and the strange acts which are sometimes committed by the real authorities and the priests, without the slightest fear of being called to account; for as they live quite apart⁴ from the rest of the world, they know no people greater than themselves, and scarcely dream of a higher power than their own.

I was about to make an excursion to Guadalajara⁵, and the villages of Alcarria, about seven leagues distant from Madrid; indeed I merely awaited the return of Victoriano to sally forth; I having dispatched him in that direction with a few Testaments, as a kind of explorer, in order that, from his report as to the disposition manifested by the people for purchasing, I might form a tolerably accurate opinion as to the number of copies which it might be necessary to carry with me. However, I heard nothing of him for a fortnight, at the end of which period a letter was brought to me by a peasant, dated from the prison of Fuente la Higuera⁶, a village eight leagues from Madrid, in the Campina of Alcala: this letter, written, by Victoriano, gave me to understand that he had been already eight days imprisoned, and that unless I could find some means to extricate him, there was every probability of his remaining in durance until he should perish with hunger, which he had no doubt would occur as soon as his money was exhausted. From what I afterwards learned, it appeared that, after passing the town of Alcala, he had commenced distributing, and with considerable success. His entire stock consisted of sixty-one Testaments, twenty-five of which he sold without the slightest difficulty or interruption in the single village of Arganza; the poor labourers showering blessings on his head for providing them with such good books at an easy price.

Not more than eighteen of his books remained, when he turned off the high road towards Fuente la Higuera. This place was already tolerably well known to him, he having visited it of old, when he travelled the country in the capacity of a vendor of cacharras or earthen pans. He subsequently stated that he felt some misgiving whilst on the way, as the village had invariably borne a bad reputation. On his arrival, after having put up his cavallejo or little pony at a posada, he proceeded to the alcalde for the purpose of asking permission to sell the books, which that dignitary immediately granted. He now entered a house and sold a copy, and likewise a second. Emboldened by success, he entered a third, which, it appeared, belonged to the barber-surgeon of the village. This personage having just completed his dinner, was seated in an arm chair within his doorway, when Victoriano made his appearance. He was a man about thirty-five, of a savage truculent countenance. On Victoriano's offering him a Testament, he took it in his hand to examine it, but no sooner did his eyes glance over the title-page than he burst out into a loud laugh, exclaiming:- "Ha, ha, Don Jorge Borrow, the English heretic, we have encountered you at last. Glory to the Virgin and the Saints! We have long been expecting you here, and at length you are arrived." He then inquired the

⁴ [Author's note:] Κατα τον τόπον και ó τρόπος, as Antonio said. [Editor's addition] Burke, footnote to 632, translates: 'As is the place, such is the character (of the people)'.

⁵ In the latter half of February 1839 [Darlow, 391 & 392]

⁶ Known today as Fuentelahiguera de Albatages. It had 390 inhabitants in 1842, and 130 today.

price of the book, and on being told three reals, he flung down two, and rushed out of the house with the Testament in his hand.

Victoriano now became alarmed, and determined upon leaving the place as soon as possible. He therefore hurried back to the posada, and having paid for the barley which his pony had consumed, went into the stable, and placing the packsaddle on the animal's back, was about to lead it forth, when the alcalde of the village, the surgeon, and twelve other men, some of whom were armed with muskets, suddenly presented themselves. They instantly made Victoriano prisoner, and after seizing the books and laying an embargo on the pony, proceeded amidst much abuse to drag the captive to what they denominated their prison, a low damp apartment with a little grated window, where they locked him up and left him. At the expiration of three quarters of an hour, they again appeared, and conducted him to the house of the curate, where they sat down in conclave; the curate, who was a man stone blind, presiding, whilst the sacristan officiated as secretary. The surgeon having stated his accusation against the prisoner, namely, that he had detected him in the fact of selling a version of the Scriptures in the vulgar tongue, the curate proceeded to examine Victoriano, asking him his name and place of residence, to which he replied that his name was Victoriano Lopez, and that he was a native of Villa Seca, in the Sagra of Toledo. The curate then demanded what religion he professed? and whether he was a Mohometan, or freemason? and received for answer that he was a Roman Catholic. I must here state, that Victoriano, though sufficiently shrewd in his way, was a poor old labourer of sixty-four; and until that moment had never heard either of Mahometans or freemasons. The curate becoming now incensed, called him a TUNANTE or scoundrel, and added, you have sold your soul to a heretic; we have long been aware of your proceedings, and those of your master. You are the same Lopez, whom he last year rescued from the prison of Villallos, in the province of Avila; I sincerely hope that he will attempt to do the same thing here. "Yes, yes," shouted the rest of the conclave, "let him but venture here, and we will shed his heart's blood on our stones." In this manner they went on for nearly half an hour. At last they broke up the meeting, and conducted Victoriano once more to his prison.

During his confinement he lived tolerably well, being in possession of money. His meals were sent him twice a day from the posada, where his pony remained in embargo. Once or twice he asked permission of the alcalde, who visited him every night and morning with his armed guard, to purchase pen and paper, in order that he might write to Madrid; but this favour was peremptorily refused him, and all the inhabitants of the village were forbidden under terrible penalties to afford him the means of writing, or to convey any message from him beyond the precincts of the place, and two boys were stationed before the window of his cell for the purpose of watching everything which might be conveyed to him.

It happened one day that Victoriano, being in need of a pillow, sent word to the people of the posada to send him his alforjas or saddlebags, which they did. In these bags there chanced to be a kind of rope, or, as it is called in Spanish, SOGA, with which he was in the habit of fastening his satchel to the pony's back. The urchins seeing an end of this rope, hanging from the alforjas, instantly ran to the alcalde to give him information. Late at evening, the alcalde again visited the prisoner at the head of his twelve men as usual. "BUENAS NOCHES," said the alcalde. "BUENAS NOCHES TENGA USTED," replied Victoriano. "For what purpose did you send for the sogas this afternoon?"

demanded the functionary. "I sent for no sogá," said the prisoner, "I sent for my alforjas to serve as a pillow, and it was sent in them by chance." "You are a false malicious knave," retorted the alcalde; "you intend to hang yourself, and by so doing ruin us all, as your death would be laid at our door. Give me the sogá." No greater insult can be offered to a Spaniard than to tax him with an intention of committing suicide. Poor Victoriano flew into a violent rage, and after calling the alcalde several very uncivil names, he pulled the sogá from his bags, flung it at his head, and told him to take it home and use it for his own neck.

At length the people of the posada took pity on the prisoner, perceiving that he was very harshly treated for no crime at all; they therefore determined to afford him an opportunity of informing his friends of his situation, and accordingly sent him a pen and inkhorn, concealed in a loaf of bread, and a piece of writing paper, pretending that the latter was intended for cigars. So Victoriano wrote the letter; but now ensued the difficulty of sending it to its destination, as no person in the village dare have carried it for any reward. The good people, however, persuaded a disbanded soldier from another village, who chanced to be at Fuente la Higuera in quest of work, to charge himself with it, assuring him that I would pay him well for his trouble. The man, watching his opportunity, received the letter from Victoriano at the window: and it was he who, after travelling on foot all night, delivered it to me in safety at Madrid.

I was now relieved from my anxiety, and had no fears for the result. I instantly went to a friend who is in possession of large estates about Guadalajara⁷, in which province Fuente la Higuera is situated, who furnished me with letters to the civil governor of Guadalajara and all the principal authorities; these I delivered to Antonio, whom, at his own request, I despatched on the errand of the prisoner's liberation. He first directed his course to Fuente la Higuera, where, entering the alcalde's house, he boldly told him what he had come about. The alcalde expecting that I was at hand, with an army of Englishmen, for the purpose of rescuing the prisoner, became greatly alarmed, and instantly despatched his wife to summon his twelve men; however, on Antonio's assuring him that there was no intention of having recourse to violence, he became more tranquil. In a short time Antonio was summoned before the conclave and its blind sacerdotal president. They at first attempted to frighten him by assuming a loud bullying tone, and talking of the necessity of killing all strangers, and especially the detested Don Jorge and his dependents. Antonio, however, who was not a person apt to allow himself to be easily terrified, scoffed at their threats, and showing them his letters to the authorities of Guadalajara, said that he should proceed there on the morrow and denounce their lawless conduct, adding that he was a Turkish subject, and that should they dare to offer him the slightest incivility, he would write to the sublime Porte, in comparison with whom the best kings in the world were but worms, and who would not fail to avenge the wrongs of any of his children, however distant, in a manner too terrible to be mentioned. He then returned to his posada. The conclave now proceeded to deliberate amongst themselves, and at last determined to send their prisoner on the morrow to Guadalajara, and deliver him into the hands of the civil governor.

⁷ This friend remains to be identified, but it may have been the Marquis de Santa Coloma, one of the very few Spanish aristocrats with whom Borrow ever mingled (footnote 10 to chapter 15).

Nevertheless, in order to keep up a semblance of authority, they that night placed two men armed at the door of the posada where Antonio was lodged, as if he himself were a prisoner. These men, as often as the clock struck the hour, shouted "Ave Maria! Death to the heretics." Early in the morning the alcalde presented himself at the posada, but before entering he made an oration at the door to the people in the street, saying, amongst other things, "Brethren, these are the fellows who have come to rob us of our religion." He then went into Antonio's apartment, and after saluting him with great politeness, said, that as a royal or high mass was about to be celebrated that morning, he had come to invite him to go to church with him. Whereupon Antonio, though by no means a mass-goer, rose and accompanied him, and remained two hours, as he told me, on his knees on the cold stones, to his great discomfort; the eyes of the whole congregation being fixed upon him during the time.



46.3 *The parish church of Fuentelahiguera*

After mass and breakfast, he departed for Guadalajara, Victoriano having been already despatched under a guard. On his arrival, he presented his letters to the individuals for whom they were intended. The civil governor was convulsed with merriment on hearing Antonio's account of the adventure. Victoriano was set at liberty, and the books were placed in embargo at Guadalajara; the governor stating, however, that though it was his duty to detain them at present, they should be sent to me whenever I chose to claim them; he moreover said that he would do his best to cause the authorities of Fuente la Higuera to be severely punished, as in the whole affair they had acted in the most cruel tyrannical manner, for which they had no authority. Thus terminated this affair, one of those little accidents which chequer missionary life in Spain.

[From: Letter to Brandram of 5 March 1839 from Naval Carnero, in: Darlow, 398]

Vitoriano is now with me at Naval Carnero, as he begged me almost on his knees to be permitted to attend me and to be employed as before. At his imprisonment he smiles. Antonio and myself have lately been very successful at Madrid, having sold considerably upwards of a hundred Testaments and several Bibles. It is with deep gratitude I state that the poor of Madrid receive the Scripture with gladness: to the rich I offer it not, their hearts are hard. I am writing a journal of the present expedition.