

CHAPTER 6

Cold of Portugal - Extortion prevented - Sensation of Loneliness - The Dog - The Convent - Enchanting Landscape - Moorish Fortresses - Prayer for the Sick.



6.1 Montemor Castle in the old days

About a fortnight after my return from Evora, having made the necessary preparations, I set out on my journey for Badajoz, from which town I intended to take the diligence to Madrid.¹ Badajoz lies about a hundred miles distant from Lisbon, and is the principal frontier town of Spain in the direction of the Alemtejo. To reach this place, it was necessary to retravel the road as far as Monte Moro, which I had already passed in my excursion to Evora; I had therefore very little pleasure to anticipate from novelty of scenery. Moreover, in this journey I should be a solitary traveller, with no other companion than the muleteer, as it was my intention to take my servant no farther than Aldea Gallega, for which place I started at four in the afternoon. Warned by former experience, I did not now embark in a small boat, but in one of the regular passage felouks, in which we reached Aldea Gallega, after a voyage of six hours; for the boat was heavy, there was no wind to propel it, and the crew were obliged to ply their huge oars the whole way. In a word, this passage was the reverse of the first, - safe in every respect, - but so sluggish and tiresome, that I a hundred times wished myself again under the guidance of the wild lad, galloping before the hurricane over the foaming billows. From eight till ten the cold was truly terrible, and though I was closely wrapped in an excellent fur "shoob,"² with which I had braved the frosts of Russian winters, I shivered in every limb, and was far more rejoiced when I again set my foot on the Alemtejo, than when I landed for the first time, after having escaped the horrors of the tempest.

¹ Borrow's date of departure from Lisbon, based on his statements of the length of his travels to Badajoz and the date of arrival there, is usually taken as 1 January 1836 [Knapp, I : 239; Darlow, 143; Collie, 112]. The reconstruction is not beyond all doubt, however, and he may have left considerably earlier. For this problem see footnote 16 at the end of this chapter.

² Russian 'Shuba', fur coat. [Burke, Glossary]

I took up my quarters for the night at a house to which my friend who feared the darkness had introduced me on my return from Evora, and where, though I paid mercilessly dear for everything, the accommodation was superior to that of the common inn in the square. My first care now was to inquire for mules to convey myself and baggage to Elvas, from whence there are but three short leagues to the Spanish town of Badajoz. The people of the house informed me that they had an excellent pair at my disposal, but when I inquired the price, they were not ashamed to demand four moidores. I offered them three, which was too much, but which, however, they did not accept, for knowing me to be an Englishman, they thought they had an excellent opportunity to practise imposition, not imagining that a person so rich as an Englishman **MUST** be, would go out in a cold night for the sake of obtaining a reasonable bargain. They were, however, much mistaken, as I told them that rather than encourage them in their knavery, I should be content to return to Lisbon; whereupon they dropped their demand to three and a half, but I made them no answer, and going out with Antonio, proceeded to the house of the old man who had accompanied us to Evora. We knocked a considerable time, for he was in bed; at length he arose and admitted us, but on hearing our object, he said that his mules were again gone to Evora, under the charge of the boy, for the purpose of transporting some articles of merchandise. He, however, recommended us to a person in the neighbourhood who kept mules for hire, and there Antonio engaged two fine beasts for two moidores and a half. I say he engaged them, for I stood aloof and spoke not, and the proprietor, who exhibited them, and who stood half-dressed, with a lamp in his hand and shivering with cold, was not aware that they were intended for a foreigner till the agreement was made, and he had received a part of the sum in earnest. I returned to the inn well pleased, and having taken some refreshment went to rest, paying little attention to the people, who glanced daggers at me from their small Jewish eyes.



6.2 Montemor Castle today

At five the next morning the mules were at the door; a lad of some nineteen or twenty years of age attended them; he was short but exceedingly strong built, and possessed the largest head which I ever beheld upon mortal shoulders; neck he had none, at least I could discern nothing which could be entitled to that name. His features were hideously ugly, and upon addressing him I discovered that he was an idiot. Such was my intended companion in a journey of nearly a hundred miles, which would occupy four days, and which lay over the most savage and ill noted track in the whole kingdom. I took leave of my servant almost with tears, for he had always served me with the greatest fidelity, and had exhibited an assiduity and a wish to please which afforded me the utmost satisfaction.

We started, my uncouth guide sitting tailor-fashion on the sumpter mule upon the baggage. The moon had just gone down, and the morning was pitchy dark, and, as usual, piercingly cold. He soon entered the dismal wood, which I had already traversed, and through which we wended our way for some time, slowly and mournfully. Not a sound was to be heard save the trampling of the animals, not a breath of air moved the leafless branches, no animal stirred in the thickets, no bird, not even the owl, flew over our heads, all seemed desolate and dead, and during my many and far wanderings, I never experienced a greater sensation of loneliness, and a greater desire for conversation and an exchange of ideas than then. To speak to the idiot was useless, for though competent to show the road, with which he was well acquainted, he had no other answer than an uncouth laugh to any question put to him. Thus situated, like many other persons when human comfort is not at hand, I turned my heart to God, and began to commune with Him, the result of which was that my mind soon became quieted and comforted.

We passed on our way uninterrupted; no thieves showed themselves, nor indeed did we see a single individual until we arrived at Pegoens, and from thence to Vendas Novas our fortune was the same. I was welcomed with great kindness by the people of the hostelry of the latter place, who were well acquainted with me on account of my having twice passed the night under their roof. The name of the keeper of this is, or was, Joze Dias Azido³, and unlike the generality of those of the same profession as himself in Portugal, he is an honest man, and a stranger and foreigner who takes up his quarters at his inn, may rest assured that he will not be most unmercifully pillaged and cheated when the hour of reckoning shall arrive, as he will not be charged a single ré⁴ more than a native Portuguese on a similar occasion. I paid at this place exactly one half of the sum which was demanded from me at Arroyolos, where I passed the ensuing night, and where the accommodation was in every respect inferior.⁵

³ Ventura [85, note 108] suggests that the name must have been Azedo. Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, 280] paints a sympathetic picture of – possibly - the same owner in his day (1846), who went out to hunt game for the dinner of his guests and came back frustrated at the lack of success.

⁴ Borrow meant this to be the singular of *reis*; Ventura [85, note 109] smiles at that. The singular ought to be ‘*rei*’ or ‘*real*’, and was worth roughly 1/20 of an English penny. There was no coin so small; the smallest copper piece was of 5 *reis* [Hughes, *Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 26, 452; Burke, Glossary]. The Spanish *real* was worth about 2.5 d. [Burke, Glossary].

⁵ Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 18, 283] bears this fair price out. For supper and bed he paid only a *cruzado*, or 20 pence.



6.3 The 'large tower' over the gate to Montemor castle

At twelve next day we arrived at Monte Moro, and, as I was not pressed for time, I determined upon viewing the ruins which cover the top and middle part of the stately hill which towers above the town⁶. Having ordered some refreshment at the inn where we dismounted⁷, I ascended till I arrived at a large wall or rampart, which, at a certain altitude embraces the whole hill. I crossed a rude bridge of stones, which bestrides a small hollow or trench; and passing by a large tower, entered through a portal into the enclosed part of the hill. On the left hand stood a church, in good preservation, and still devoted to the purposes of religion, but which I could not enter, as the door was locked, and I saw no one at hand to open it.⁸

⁶ The impressive ruins of the castle are still there, very much as Borrow must have seen them. Vasco da Gama is said to have drawn up the final plans for his voyage to India here, while São João de Deus (i.e. Saint John of God), born in the village at the foot of the hill, added the *Mosteiro da Nossa Senhora da Saudação* to the complex in the 16th century.

⁷ Possibly the *Posada do Tenerim* which Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 17, 273] mentions in the village below in 1846.

⁸ Except for the stone bridge over the trench, which has disappeared in subsequent renovations, the tower, the gate, the portal and the little church of Saint James are still there to be seen; the latter repaired again in the early years of the 21st century and whitewashed beyond all recognition. It is still closed to visitors.



6.4 *The Montemor chapel of Saint James (1999)*

I soon found that my curiosity had led me to a most extraordinary place, which quite beggars the scanty powers of description with which I am gifted. I stumbled on amongst ruined walls, and at one time found I was treading over vaults, as I suddenly started back from a yawning orifice into which my next step, as I strolled musing along, would have precipitated me. I proceeded for a considerable way by the eastern wall, till I heard a tremendous bark, and presently an immense dog, such as those which guard the flocks in the neighbourhood against the wolves, came bounding to attack me "with eyes that glowed and fangs that grinned." Had I retreated, or had recourse to any other mode of defence than that which I invariably practise under such circumstances, he would probably have worried me; but I stooped till my chin nearly touched my knee, and looked him full in the eyes, and as John Leyden says, in the noblest ballad which the Land of Heather has produced⁹:

"The hound he yowled and back he fled,
As struck with fairy charm."¹⁰

⁹ John Leyden (1775-1811) was an orientalist, author and poet of fame. He studied in Edinburgh, where – among others - he struck up a friendship with Walter Scott. In 1803 he sailed for India to study Eastern languages and teach at Calcutta University. He died on Java after ‘an adventurous and varied life’ as Burke put it. The Land of Heather refers to Scotland, of which Leyden was a native. [Ventura, 85f, note 112; Burke, footnote to 76.]

¹⁰ Burke [footnote to 76] says that the lines, ‘which Borrow, quoting from memory, has not given quite accurately’, occur in the 16th stanza of ‘The Count of Keilder’. They run:

*‘The hounds they howled and backward fled
As struck by Fairy charm.’*

It is a fact known to many people, and I believe it has been frequently stated, that no large and fierce dog or animal of any kind, with the exception of the bull, which shuts its eyes and rushes blindly forward, will venture to attack an individual who confronts it with a firm and motionless countenance. I say large and fierce, for it is much easier to repel a bloodhound or bear of Finland in this manner than a dunghill cur or a terrier, against which a stick or a stone is a much more certain defence. This will astonish no one who considers that the calm reproving glance of reason, which allays the excesses of the mighty and courageous in our own species, has seldom any other effect than to add to the insolence of the feeble and foolish, who become placid as doves upon the infliction of chastisements, which if attempted to be applied to the former would only serve to render them more terrible, and like gunpowder cast on a flame, cause them in mad desperation to scatter destruction around them.¹¹

The barking of the dog brought out from a kind of alley an elderly man, whom I supposed to be his master, and of whom I made some inquiries respecting the place. The man was civil, and informed me that he served as a soldier in the British army, under the "great lord," during the Peninsular war¹². He said that there was a convent of nuns a little farther on, which he would show me, and thereupon led the way to the south-east part of the wall, where stood a large dilapidated edifice¹³.

We entered a dark stone apartment, at one corner of which was a kind of window occupied by a turning table, at which articles were received into the convent or delivered out. He rang the bell, and, without saying a word, retired, leaving me rather perplexed; but presently I heard, though the speaker was invisible, a soft feminine voice demanding who I was, and what I wanted. I replied that I was an Englishman travelling into Spain, and that passing through Monte Moro I had ascended the hill for the purpose of seeing the ruins. The voice then said, "I suppose you are a military man going to fight against the king¹⁴, like the rest of your countrymen." "No," said I, "I am not a military man, but a Christian, and I go not to shed blood but to endeavour to introduce the gospel of Christ into a country where it is not known;" whereupon there was a stifled titter, I then inquired if there were any copies of the Holy Scriptures in the convent, but the friendly voice could give me no information on that point, and I scarcely believe that its

¹¹ For all this impressive zoo-philosophy, the worst thing man, dog or other animal can do when facing a dominant, aggressive dog is to look it straight in the eye, since among canines this is the customary sign of defiance and the invitation to a duel. It might be better to say that in most agricultural areas dogs that bark are welcome, while those that bite humans or cattle are quickly dispatched, which in the long run has its benign effects on the character of the local species. In the experience of the editor, Portuguese dogs especially are of an extremely sleepy, languid disposition. Not to say that they usually look quite dead.

¹² The Duke of Wellington.

¹³ In reality, Borrow must already have circled the Convent as he entered the gates and proceeded past the chapel of Saint James to the eastern walls. The building of the convent occupies – in a now much altered shape – the whole central top of the hill.

¹⁴ I.e. Don Carlos, the *rightful* king of Spain in the eyes of devout Catholics. England aided the cause of the child-queen Isabella II, with both warships and the English Legion under Sir Lacy Evans, an expeditionary army that fought in the Basque countries (see footnote to chapter 10).

possessor understood the purport of my question. It informed me, that the office of lady abbess of the house was an annual one, and that every year there was a fresh superior; on my inquiring whether the nuns did not frequently find the time exceedingly heavy on their hands, it stated that, when they had nothing better to do, they employed themselves in making cheesecakes, which were disposed of in the neighbourhood. I thanked the voice for its communications, and walked away. Whilst proceeding under the wall of the house towards the south-west, I heard a fresh and louder tittering above my head, and looking up, saw three or four windows crowded with dusky faces, and black waving hair; these belonged to the nuns, anxious to obtain a view of the stranger. After kissing my hand repeatedly, I moved on, and soon arrived at the south-west end of this mountain of curiosities. There I found the remains of a large building, which seemed to have been originally erected in the shape of a cross¹⁵. A tower at its eastern entrance was still entire; the western side was quite in ruins, and stood on the verge of the hill overlooking the valley, at the bottom of which ran the stream I have spoken of on a former occasion.

The day was intensely hot, notwithstanding the coldness of the preceding nights; and the brilliant sun of Portugal now illumined a landscape of entrancing beauty. Groves of cork trees covered the farther side of the valley and the distant acclivities, exhibiting here and there charming vistas, where various flocks of cattle were feeding; the soft murmur of the stream, which was at intervals chafed and broken by huge stones, ascended to my ears and filled my mind with delicious feelings. I sat down on the broken wall and remained gazing, and listening, and shedding tears of rapture; for, of all the pleasures which a bountiful God permitteth his children to enjoy, none are so dear to some hearts as the music of forests, and streams, and the view of the beauties of his glorious creation. An hour elapsed, and I still maintained my seat on the wall; the past scenes of my life flitting before my eyes in airy and fantastic array, through which every now and then peeped trees and hills and other patches of the real landscape which I was confronting; the sun burnt my visage, but I heeded it not; and I believe that I should have remained till night, buried in these reveries, which, I confess, only served to enervate the mind, and steal many a minute which might be most profitably employed, had not the report of the gun of a fowler in the valley, which awakened the echoes of the woods, hills, and ruins, caused me to start on my feet, and remember that I had to proceed three leagues before I could reach the hostelry where I intended to pass the night.

I bent my steps to the inn, passing along a kind of rampart: shortly before I reached the portal, which I have already mentioned, I observed a kind of vault on my right hand, scooped out of the side of the hill; its roof was supported by three pillars, though part of it had given way towards the farther end, so that the light was admitted through a chasm in the top. It might have been intended for a chapel, a dungeon, or a cemetery, but I should rather think for the latter; one thing I am certain of, that it was not the work of Moorish hands, and indeed throughout my wanderings in this place I saw nothing which reminded me of that most singular people. The hill on which the ruins stand was doubtless originally a strong fortress of the Moors, who, upon their first irruption into the peninsula, seized and fortified most of the lofty and naturally strong positions, but they had probably lost it at an early period, so that the broken walls and edifices, which at present cover the hill, are probably remains of the labours of the Christians after the

¹⁵ The remnants of the actual castle of Montemor.

place had been rescued from the hands of the terrible enemies of their faith. Monte Moro will perhaps recall Cintra to the mind of the traveller, as it exhibits a distant resemblance to that place; nevertheless, there is something in Cintra wild and savage, to which Monte Moro has no pretension; its scathed and gigantic crags are piled upon each other in a manner which seems to menace headlong destruction to whatever is in the neighbourhood; and the ruins which still cling to those crags seem more like eagles' nests than the remains of the habitations even of Moors; whereas those of Monte Moro stand comparatively at their ease on the broad back of a hill, which, though stately and commanding, has no crags nor precipices, and which can be ascended on every side without much difficulty: yet I was much gratified by my visit, and I shall wander far indeed before I forget the voice in the dilapidated convent, the ruined walls amongst which I strayed, and the rampart where, sunk in dreamy rapture, I sat during a bright sunny hour at Monte Moro.

I returned to the inn, where I refreshed myself with tea and very sweet and delicious cheesecakes, the handiwork of the nuns in the convent above. Observing gloom and unhappiness on the countenances of the people of the house, I inquired the reason of the hostess, who sat almost motionless, on the hearth by the fire; whereupon she informed me that her husband was deadly sick with a disorder which, from her description, I supposed to be a species of cholera; she added, that the surgeon who attended him entertained no hopes of his recovery. I replied that it was quite in the power of God to restore her husband in a few hours from the verge of the grave to health and vigour, and that it was her duty to pray to that Omnipotent Being with all fervency. I added, that if she did not know how to pray upon such an occasion, I was ready to pray for her, provided she would join in the spirit of the supplication. I then offered up a short prayer in Portuguese, in which I entreated the Lord to remove, if he thought proper, the burden of affliction under which the family was labouring.

The woman listened attentively, with her hands devoutly clasped, until the prayer was finished, and then gazed at me seemingly with astonishment, but uttered no word by which I could gather that she was pleased or displeased with what I had said. I now bade the family farewell, and having mounted my mule, set forward to Arroyolos¹⁶.

¹⁶ This is Borrow's own swift reconstruction of the road he took. There is, however, a possibility that he left a few things out of the narrative so as not to repeat himself too much. Whereas here in *The Bible in Spain* he says that he went directly from Montemor to Arraiolos, he may have made a D-tour to the south-east and stayed once again in Evora over Christmas 1835. There are two letters extant which speak in favour of such a reconstruction: a first one to his good friend John Hasfeld in St Petersburg, dated 'Evora in the Alemtejo Portugal 24 Decr 1835' [Fraser, *Hasfeld*, 15f]; the other to his old friend and future foe Sir John Bowring (the 'old Radical' used for a punching bag in the infamous *Appendix to The Romany Rye*), begging for letters of introduction to high-placed people in Lisbon and Madrid, and dated 'Evora in the Alemtejo 27 Decr. 1835' [Shorter, chapter 18; but compare Knapp, II : 282]. Both itineraries cannot possibly be true, since an Evora stop-over implies that Borrow left Lisbon much earlier than 1 January 1836 (see above, footnote 1). Robertson [*Portugal*, 17] favours the idea that Borrow wrote the letters in Lisbon but misdated them on purpose to impress his friends with the exotic spot where he found himself.