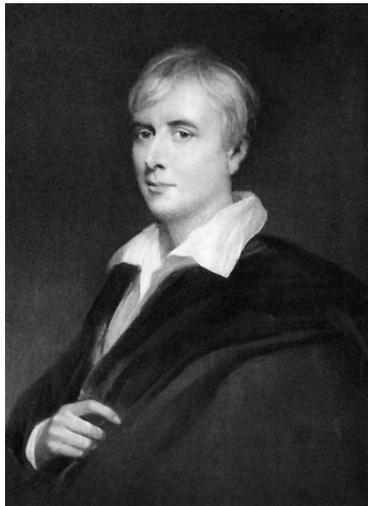


CHAPTER 8

Elvas - Extraordinary Longevity - The English Nation - Portuguese Ingratitude - Illiberality - Fortifications - Spanish Beggar - Badajoz - The Custom House.

Arrived at the gate of Elvas, an officer came out of a kind of guard house, and, having asked me some questions, despatched a soldier with me to the police office, that my passport might be vised, as upon the frontier they are much more particular with respect to passports than in other parts. This matter having been settled, I entered an hostelry near the same gate, which had been recommended to me by my host at Vendas Novas, and which was kept by a person of the name of Joze Rosado. It was the best in the town, though, for convenience and accommodation, inferior to a hedge alehouse in England.¹ The cold still pursued me, and I was glad to take refuge in an inner kitchen, which, when the door was not open, was only lighted by a fire burning somewhat dimly on the hearth. An elderly female sat beside it in her chair, telling her beads: there was something singular and extraordinary in her look, as well as I could discern by the imperfect light of the apartment. I put a few unimportant questions to her, to which she replied, but seemed to be afflicted to a slight degree with deafness. Her hair was becoming grey, and I said that I believed she was older than myself, but that I was confident she had less snow on her head.²



*8.1 George Borrow in the mid 1840s by Henry Wyndham Phillips
(note the perfectly silver-grey hair)*

¹ In 1846, Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 15, 231] stayed in this same inn, still run by José Rosada, ‘just inside the Badajoz gate, nearly in front of the guard house’. He agreed that it was ‘the best that the town contained’, although it was ‘inferior in accommodation to the most wretched English ale-house’. In the choice of words one sees that - much as Hughes despised Borrow - he drank deeply from the hated source...

² Borrow was born on 4 July 1803. Although he was only 32 years old at this time, his hair had turned perfectly silver-grey when he was in his 20s.

"How old may you be, cavalier?" said she, giving me that title which in Spain is generally used when an extra-ordinary degree of respect is wished to be exhibited. I answered that I was near thirty. "Then," said she, "you were right in supposing that I am older than yourself; I am older than your mother, or your mother's mother: it is more than a hundred years since I was a girl, and sported with the daughters of the town on the hillside." "In that case," said I, "you doubtless remember the earthquake." "Yes," she replied, "if there is any occurrence in my life that I remember, it is that: I was in the church of Elvas at the moment, hearing the mass of the king, and the priest fell on the ground, and let fall the Host from his hands. I shall never forget how the earth shook; it made us all sick; and the houses and walls reeled like drunkards. Since that happened I have seen fourscore years pass by me, yet I was older then than you are now."

I looked with wonder at this surprising female, and could scarcely believe her words. I was, however, assured that she was in fact upwards of a hundred and ten years of age, and was considered the oldest person in Portugal. She still retained the use of her faculties in as full a degree as the generality of people who have scarcely attained the half of her age. She was related to the people of the house.



8.2 The square of Elvas in 1838

As the night advanced, several persons entered for the purpose of enjoying the comfort of the fire and for the sake of conversation, for the house was a kind of news room, where the principal speaker was the host, a man of some shrewdness and experience, who had served as a soldier in the British army. Amongst others was the officer who commanded at the gate. After a few observations, this gentleman, who was a good-looking young man of five-and-twenty, began to burst forth in violent declamation against the English nation and government, who, he said, had at all times proved themselves selfish and deceitful, but that their present conduct in respect to Spain was particularly infamous, for though it was in their power to put an end to the war at once,

by sending a large army thither, they preferred sending a handful of troops, in order that the war might be prolonged, for no other reason than that it was of advantage to them. Having paid him an ironical compliment for his politeness and urbanity, I asked whether he reckoned amongst the selfish actions of the English government and nation, their having expended hundreds of millions of pounds sterling, and an ocean of precious blood, in fighting the battles of Spain and Portugal against Napoleon. "Surely," said I, "the fort of Elvas above our heads, and still more the castle of Badajoz over the water, speak volumes respecting English selfishness, and must, every time you view them, confirm you in the opinion which you have just expressed."³ And then, with respect to the present combat in Spain, the gratitude which that country evinced to England after the French, by means of English armies, had been expelled, - gratitude evinced by discouraging the trade of England on all occasions, and by offering up masses in thanksgiving when the English heretics quitted the Spanish shores, - ought now to induce England to exhaust and ruin herself, for the sake of hunting Don Carlos out of his mountains. In deference to your superior judgment," continued I to the officer, "I will endeavour to believe that it would be for the advantage of England were the war prolonged for an indefinite period; nevertheless, you would do me a particular favour by explaining by what process in chemistry blood shed in Spain will find its way into the English treasury in the shape of gold."

As he was not ready with his answer, I took up a plate of fruit which stood on the table beside me, and said, "What do you call these fruits?" "Pomegranates and bolotas,"⁴ he replied. "Right," said I, "a home-bred Englishman could not have given me that answer; yet he is as much acquainted with pomegranates and bolotas as your lordship is with the line of conduct which it is incumbent upon England to pursue in her foreign and domestic policy."

This answer of mine, I confess, was not that of a Christian, and proved to me how much of the leaven of the ancient man still pervaded me; yet I must be permitted to add, that I believe no other provocation would have elicited from me a reply so full of angry feeling: but I could not command myself when I heard my own glorious land traduced in this unmerited manner. By whom? A Portuguese! A native of a country which has been twice liberated from horrid and detestable thralldom by the hands of Englishmen. But for Wellington and his heroes, Portugal would have been French at this day; but for Napier and his mariners, Miguel would now be lording it in Lisbon. To return, however, to the officer; every one laughed at him, and he presently went away.

³ The English Expeditionary Army under John Moore and Wellington defended Portugal against three major attacks of Napoleon's armies, and from there battled its way into Spain in 1812. Both Elvas and Badajoz, the two main frontier fortresses, saw very heavy fighting during that period. Burke [footnote to 96] specifies: 'During the Peninsular war, Badajoz was besieged by the French in 1808 and in 1809, and again in 1811, when it surrendered, March 11, to Soult. It was thrice besieged by Wellington; first on April 20, 1811; next in May and June of the same year; and thirdly, in the spring of 1812, when he captured the city by storm, on the night of April 6, after a murderous contest, and a loss, during the twenty days' siege, of 72 officers and 963 men killed, and 306 officers and 3483 men wounded.'

⁴ *Bolota* is the Portuguese word for acorn. Although acorns can be eaten if well prepared, it is a mystery why an inn keeper would put acorns in a fruit bowl.

The next day I became acquainted with a respectable tradesman of the name of Almeida, a man of talent, though rather rough in his manners. He expressed great abhorrence of the papal system, which had so long spread a darkness like that of death over his unfortunate country, and I had no sooner informed him that I had brought with me a certain quantity of Testaments, which it was my intention to leave for sale at Elvas, than he expressed a great desire to undertake the charge, and said that he would do the utmost in his power to procure a sale for them amongst his numerous customers. Upon showing him a copy, I remarked, your name is upon the title page; the Portuguese version of the Holy Scriptures, circulated by the Bible Society, having been executed by a Protestant of the name of Almeida⁵, and first published in the year 1712; whereupon he smiled, and observed that he esteemed it an honour to be connected in name at least with such a man⁶. He scoffed at the idea of receiving any remuneration, and assured me that the feeling of being permitted to co-operate in so holy and useful a cause as the circulation of the Scriptures was quite a sufficient reward.



8.3 Fort de Lippe

⁵ In the early 19th century there were two Portuguese translations of Scripture available: the 23-volume edition of Antonio Pereira de Figueiredo from the 1780s (see footnote 27 to chapter 1 above) and the earlier one by João Ferreira de Almeida (1628-1691). Almeida, who moved to Holland at an early age and converted to Protestantism at age 14, was for many years a missionary in Asia. His translation took decades to make, was sent up and down various times between the Netherlands and Asia, and was revised by a number of Dutch scholars before finally being printed in Amsterdam in 1712. The Bible Society, when setting out to publish a Portuguese version of scripture in the first decade of the 19th century, chose the Almeida text. They soon rued this decision because of its many inaccuracies. Consequently a reprint of Pereira's translation was undertaken in its place in 1818 and again 1821. But Borrow's remarks here show that the Almeida edition of 1810 was still in circulation. [For information on Almeida see Ventura, 87, note 132; also Burke, footnotes to page 11 and page 98; Robertson, *Portugal*, 19; and Menendez Pelayo, vol. 2, 138f].

⁶ The name Almeida is about as common in Portugal as Smith in England.

After having accomplished this matter, I proceeded to survey the environs of the place, and strolled up the hill to the fort on the north side of the town⁷. The lower part of the hill is planted with azinheiras, which give it a picturesque appearance, and at the bottom is a small brook, which I crossed by means of stepping stones. Arrived at the gate of the fort, I was stopped by the sentry, who, however, civilly told me, that if I sent in my name to the commanding officer he would make no objection to my visiting the interior. I accordingly sent in my card by a soldier who was lounging about, and, sitting down on a stone, waited his return. He presently appeared, and inquired whether I was an Englishman; to which, having replied in the affirmative, he said, "In that case, sir, you cannot enter; indeed, it is not the custom to permit any foreigners to visit the fort." I answered that it was perfectly indifferent to me whether I visited it or not; and, having taken a survey of Badajoz from the eastern side of the hill, descended by the way I came.

This is one of the beneficial results of protecting a nation and squandering blood and treasure in its defence. The English, who have never been at war with Portugal, who have fought for its independence on land and sea, and always with success, who have forced themselves by a treaty of commerce to drink its coarse and filthy wines, which no other nation cares to taste, are the most unpopular people who visit Portugal. The French have ravaged the country with fire and sword, and shed the blood of its sons like water; the French buy not its fruits and loathe its wines, yet there is no bad spirit in Portugal towards the French. The reason of this is no mystery; it is the nature not of the Portuguese only, but of corrupt and unregenerate man, to dislike his benefactors, who, by conferring benefits upon him, mortify in the most generous manner his miserable vanity.

There is no country in which the English are so popular as in France; but, though the French have been frequently roughly handled by the English, and have seen their capital occupied by an English army, they have never been subjected to the supposed ignominy of receiving assistance from them.

The fortifications of Elvas are models of their kind, and, at the first view, it would seem that the town, if well garrisoned, might bid defiance to any hostile power; but it has its weak point: the western side is commanded by a hill, at the distance of half a mile, from which an experienced general would cannonade it, and probably with success. It is the last town in this part of Portugal, the distance to the Spanish frontier being barely two leagues. It was evidently built as a rival to Badajoz, upon which it looks down from its height across a sandy plain and over the sullen waters of the Guadiana; but, though a strong town, it can scarcely be called a defence to the frontier, which is open on all sides, so that there would not be the slightest necessity for an invading army to approach within a dozen leagues of its walls, should it be disposed to avoid them. Its fortifications are so extensive that ten thousand men at least would be required to man them, who, in the event of an invasion, might be far better employed in meeting the enemy in the open field. The French, during their occupation of Portugal, kept a small force in this place, who, at the approach of the British, retreated to the fort, where they shortly after capitulated.

⁷ The Ford de Lippe. See note 15 to chapter 7 above.

Having nothing farther to detain me at Elvas, I proceeded to cross the frontier into Spain. My idiot guide was on his way back to Aldea Gallega; and, on the fifth of January⁸, I mounted a sorry mule without bridle or stirrups, which I guided by a species of halter, and followed by a lad who was to attend me on another, I spurred down the hill of Elvas to the plain, eager to arrive in old chivalrous romantic Spain. But I soon found that I had no need to quicken the beast which bore me, for though covered with sores, wall-eyed, and with a kind of halt in its gait, it cantered along like the wind.

In little more than half an hour we arrived at a brook, whose waters ran vigorously between steep banks. A man who was standing on the side directed me to the ford in the squeaking dialect of Portugal; but whilst I was yet splashing through the water, a voice from the other bank hailed me, in the magnificent language of Spain, in this guise: "*O señor caballero, que me de usted una limosna por amor de dios, una limosnita para que io me compre un traguillo de vino tinto*" (Charity, Sir Cavalier, for the love of God, bestow an alms upon me, that I may purchase a mouthful of red wine). In a moment I was on Spanish ground, as the brook, which is called Acaia⁹, is the boundary here of the two kingdoms, and having flung the beggar a small piece of silver, I cried in ecstasy "SANTIAGO Y CIERRA ESPANA!"¹⁰ and scoured on my way with more speed than before, paying, as Gil Blas¹¹ says, little heed to the torrent of blessings which the

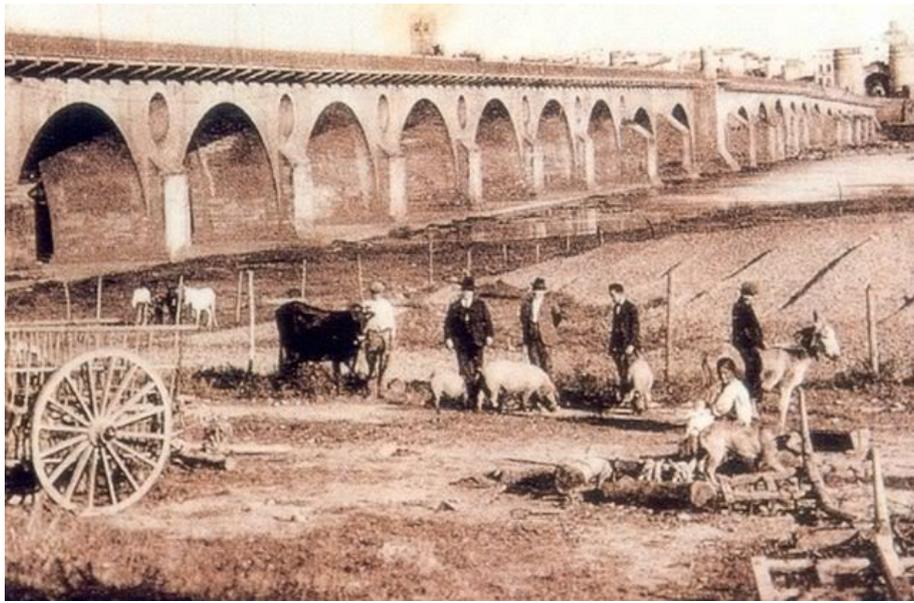
⁸ The date may be wrong. In *Zincali* [part 2, chapter 1] Borrow says it was a day later: Wednesday 6 January 1836 at twelve noon (see the quote below). In the original version of that text, sent to Brandram with his letter of 19 July 1836 from Madrid [Darlow, 166], he mentions the same date as here for his entrance into Badajoz: 'about one o'clock in the afternoon of the 6th of January, 1836'; there, however, he changes the hour!

⁹ More correctly: The *Caya* [Robertson, *Portugal*, 12]. The "a" which Borrow writes here as part of the name may well have been the definite fem. sing. article 'a' in Portuguese, brought on by the fact that the eastern Portuguese were in the habit of referring to their rivers and brooks with the feminine 'ribeira' rather than the masculine 'rio', as Ventura [88, note 134] observes. In the absence of a map, Borrow would have interpreted the resultant 'a Caya', i.e. 'the Caya', as the name in full. Knapp [I: 240], springing to the defence of his hero, does however give an old instance of the name being indeed written 'Acaya', from 1606! Note that Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 15, p. 227] was less impressed with the boundary river between Spain and Portugal. He writes that it was a stream 'which needed no bridge, and which we did not even require to ford, for the pebbles by which we passed it were scarcely ever damp with water.' He admits, however, that in the rainy season it had to be crossed by boat.

¹⁰ 'Santiago and Secure Spain!', the old Christian battle-cry during the *Reconquista* against its Muslim rulers. Santiago is Saint James, patron saint of the country, and protector of the *Reconquista* effort, who is said on several occasions to have appeared on battlefields to change the course of a lost battle.

¹¹ *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, a famous novel by the French author Alain-René Le Sage or Lesage (1668 - 1747), published in many volumes between 1715 and 1747, and one of Borrow's favourite books. Gil Blas is something of a knight-errant, from Santillana in Cantabria, who has endless adventures in the Spain of his day. The episode to which Borrow here refers is probably the one in volume 1, chapter 2, when young Gil Blas, fresh on the road, gets asked for alms by a crippled soldier who at the same time just happens to point a musket at him. When he throws some *reales* into the hat standing ready for the purpose, the soldier 'poured as many blessings on my head as I gave kicks to the mule to abandon him quickly.'

mendicant poured forth in my rear: yet never was charity more unwisely bestowed, for I was subsequently informed that the fellow was a confirmed drunkard, who took his station every morning at the ford, where he remained the whole day for the purpose of extorting money from the passengers, which he regularly spent every night in the wine-shops of Badajoz. To those who gave him money he returned blessings, and to those who refused, curses; being equally skilled and fluent in the use of either.



8.4 *The Puente de Palmas over the Guadiana at Badajoz*

Badajoz was now in view, at the distance of little more than half a league. We soon took a turn to the left, towards a bridge of many arches across the Guadiana, which, though so famed in song and ballad, is a very unpicturesque stream, shallow and sluggish, though tolerably wide; its banks were white with linen which the washer-women had spread out to dry in the sun, which was shining brightly; I heard their singing at a great distance, and the theme seemed to be the praises of the river where they were toiling, for as I approached, I could distinguish Guadiana, Guadiana, which reverberated far and wide, pronounced by the clear and strong voices of many a dark-cheeked maid and matron. I thought there was some analogy between their employment and my own: I was about to tan my northern complexion by exposing myself to the hot sun of Spain, in the humble hope of being able to cleanse some of the foul stains of Popery from the minds of its children, with whom I had little acquaintance, whilst they were bronzing themselves on the banks of the river in order to make white the garments of strangers: the words of an eastern poet returned forcibly to my mind.

"I'll weary myself each night and each day,
To aid my unfortunate brothers;
As the laundress tans her own face in the ray,
To cleanse the garments of others."

[From: *The Zincali*, part 2, chapter 1]

About twelve in the afternoon of the 6th of January 1836, I crossed the bridge of the Guadiana, a boundary river between Portugal and Spain, and entered Badajoz, a strong town in the latter kingdom, containing about eight thousand inhabitants, supposed to have been founded by the Romans. I instantly returned thanks to God for having preserved me in a journey of five days through the wilds of the Alemtejo, the province of Portugal the most infested by robbers and desperate characters, which I had traversed with no other human companion than a lad, almost an idiot, who was to convey back the mules which had brought me from Aldea Gallega. I intended to make but a short stay, and as a diligence would set out for Madrid the day next but one to my arrival, I purposed departing therein for the capital of Spain.¹²

[Chapter 8 continued]

Having crossed the bridge, we arrived at the northern gate, when out rushed from a species of sentry box a fellow wearing on his head a high-peaked Andalusian hat, with his figure wrapped up in one of those immense cloaks so well known to those who have travelled in Spain, and which none but a Spaniard can wear in a becoming manner: without saying a word, he laid hold of the halter of the mule, and began to lead it through the gate up a dirty street, crowded with long-cloaked people like himself. I asked him what he meant, but he deigned not to return an answer, the boy, however, who waited upon me said that it was one of the gate-keepers, and that he was conducting us to the Custom House or Alfundega, where the baggage would be examined. Having arrived there, the fellow, who still maintained a dogged silence, began to pull the trunks off the sumpter mule, and commenced uncording them. I was about to give him a severe reproof for his brutality, but before I could open my mouth a stout elderly personage appeared at the door, who I soon found was the principal officer. He looked at me for a moment and then asked me, in the English language, if I was an Englishman. On my replying in the affirmative, he demanded of the fellow how he dared to have the insolence to touch the baggage, without orders, and sternly bade him cord up the trunks again and place them on the mule, which he performed without uttering a word. The gentleman then asked what the trunks contained: I answered clothes and linen; when he begged pardon for the insolence of the subordinate, and informed him that I was at liberty to proceed where I thought proper. I thanked him for his exceeding politeness, and, under guidance of the boy, made the best of my way to the Inn of the Three Nations¹³, to which I had been recommended at Elvas.

¹² I.e. Friday 8 January if Borrow arrived in Badajoz on the 6th; or Thursday 7 if he arrived a day earlier.

¹³ The *Fonda de las Tres Naciones*, in the Calle de Moraleja, n° 30 [Ford, *HB* 779; Knapp, I : 240; Robertson, *Portugal*, 20]. Hughes [*Overland*, vol. 2, chapter 12, 195 & 216] calls it 'the best but most extortianate Fonda in the town', i.e. a fine hotel with a good kitchen, but extremely expensive. The inn was run by a 'dark-faced Boniface' (a mere nickname for any inn-keeper), who charged Hughes a dollar per day for dinner, which were Madrid prices [compare Ford, *HB* 1,084].