

## CHAPTER 24

**Departure from Astorga - The Venta - The By-path - Narrow Escape - The Cup of Water - Sun and Shade - Bembibre - Convent of the Rocks - Sunset - Cacabelos - Midnight Adventure - Villafranca.**

It was four o'clock of a beautiful morning when we sallied from Astorga, or rather from its suburbs, in which we had been lodged: we directed our course to the north, in the direction of Galicia. Leaving the mountain Telleno on our left, we passed along the eastern skirts of the land of the Maragatos, over broken uneven ground, enlivened here and there by small green valleys and runnels of water. Several of the Maragatan women, mounted on donkeys, passed us on their way to Astorga, whither they were carrying vegetables. We saw others in the fields handling their rude ploughs, drawn by lean oxen. We likewise passed through a small village, in which we, however, saw no living soul. Near this village we entered the high road which leads direct from Madrid to Coruna<sup>1</sup>, and at last, having travelled near four leagues, we came to a species of pass<sup>2</sup>, formed on our left by a huge lumpish hill (one of those which descend from the great mountain Telleno), and on our right by one of much less altitude. In the middle of this pass, which was of considerable breadth, a noble view opened itself to us. Before us, at the distance of about a league and a half, rose the mighty frontier chain, of which I have spoken before; its blue sides and broken and picturesque peaks still wearing a thin veil of the morning mist, which the fierce rays of the sun were fast dispelling. It seemed an enormous barrier, threatening to oppose our farther progress, and it reminded me of the fables respecting the children of Magog, who are said to reside in remotest Tartary, behind a gigantic wall of rocks, which can only be passed by a gate of steel a thousand cubits in height.<sup>3</sup>

We shortly after arrived at Manzanal, a village consisting of wretched huts, and exhibiting every sign of poverty and misery. It was now time to refresh ourselves and horses, and we accordingly put up at a venta, the last habitation in the village, where,

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Camino Real*, or Royal Highway, part of the scanty, but all-important system of eight highways built under Carlos III in the mid 18th-century to improve communications between Madrid and the rich, peripheral regions of the land. Their width was at best 4 meters, but they were designed to remain high, dry and negotiable during most of the year. All other roads were pools of mud or dirt tracks. The one from Madrid to Coruña – highway n° 7 – mostly followed the course of the present N-VI national road, and was, according to Ford [*HB*, 21] an excellent one, which ‘especially after entering Leon, will stand comparison with any in Europe’.

<sup>2</sup> The *Puerta de Manzanal*

<sup>3</sup> Gog and Magog figure in innumerable legends of great antiquity – ranging from Ireland to Russia to India – as kings, tribes or lands who will fight it out with the forces of righteousness during a doomsday Armageddon battle. The notion that a heroic benefactor built a massive wall with an iron gate between two mountains (sometimes thought to be located in the Caucasus) to contain the giants until that day, is found both in the Kuran and in the so-called ‘Alexander Romance’. Burke [footnote to 327] points out that Gog (a Persian word) means ‘mountain’; while Magog (which prefixes the Sanskrit word Mah, ‘great’) means ‘great mountain’. Naturally, the Chinese Wall was often thought to be the barricade in question.

though we found barley for the animals, we had much difficulty in procuring anything for ourselves. I was at length fortunate enough to obtain a large jug of milk, for there were plenty of cows in the neighbourhood, feeding in a picturesque valley which we had passed by, where was abundance of grass, and trees, and a rivulet broken by tiny cascades. The jug might contain about half a gallon, but I emptied it in a few minutes, for the thirst of fever was still burning within me, though I was destitute of appetite. The venta had something the appearance of a German baiting-house. It consisted of an immense stable, from which was partitioned a kind of kitchen and a place where the family slept. The master, a robust young man, lolled on a large solid stone bench, which stood within the door. He was very inquisitive respecting news, but I could afford him none; whereupon he became communicative, and gave me the history of his life, the sum of which was, that he had been a courier in the Basque provinces, but about a year since had been dispatched to this village, where he kept the post-house. He was an enthusiastic liberal, and spoke in bitter terms of the surrounding population, who, he said, were all Carlists and friends of the friars. I paid little attention to his discourse, for I was looking at a Maragato lad of about fourteen, who served in the house as a kind of ostler. I asked the master if we were still in the land of the Maragatos; but he told me that we had left it behind nearly a league, and that the lad was an orphan and was serving until he could rake up a sufficient capital to become an arriero. I addressed several questions to the boy, but the urchin looked sullenly in my face, and either answered by monosyllables or was doggedly silent. I asked him if he could read. "Yes," said he, "as much as that brute of yours who is tearing down the manger."

Quitting Manzanal, we continued our course. We soon arrived at the verge of a deep valley amongst mountains, not those of the chain which we had seen before us, and which we now left to the right, but those of the Telleno range, just before they unite with that chain. Round the sides of this valley, which exhibited something of the appearance of a horse-shoe, wound the road in a circuitous manner; just before us, however, and diverging from the road, lay a footpath which seemed, by a gradual descent, to lead across the valley, and to rejoin the road on the other side, at the distance of about a furlong<sup>4</sup>; and into this we struck in order to avoid the circuit.

We had not gone far before we met two Galicians, on their way to cut the harvests of Castile.<sup>5</sup> One of them shouted, "Cavalier, turn back: in a moment you will be amongst precipices, where your horses will break their necks, for we ourselves could scarcely

---

<sup>4</sup> Some 225 meters. As the name shows, it was originally the length of the furrow in an arable field. This adventure must have taken place somewhere between Manzanal and Silva, or between Silva and Albares.

<sup>5</sup> Galician migrant workers. They moved from Galicia to Castile, where the wheat ripened earlier, in early summer, then returned home to bring in their own harvests in Galicia. By the looks of it, many then moved to northern Portugal to assist at the Duero wine-harvest, treading out the grapes for 18 hours a day [Carnarvon, chapter 3, 56]. Estimates are that some 40,000 men moved to Castile each year, and 10,000 to Portugal. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Galician immigration changed nature, the men going off for Cuba and Venezuela for many decades at a time, trying to make their fortune. Many succeeded, and returned relatively rich to their native villages; only to discover that their wives had managed quite well by themselves, and had often born children in their absence. This is supposedly one of the origins of the great independence and emancipation of present-day Galician women.

climb them on foot." The other cried, "Cavalier, proceed, but be careful, and your horses, if sure-footed, will run no great danger: my comrade is a fool." A violent dispute instantly ensued between the two mountaineers, each supporting his opinion with loud oaths and curses; but without stopping to see the result, I passed on, but the path was now filled with stones and huge slaty rocks, on which my horse was continually slipping. I likewise heard the sound of water in a deep gorge, which I had hitherto not perceived, and I soon saw that it would be worse than madness to proceed. I turned my horse, and was hastening to regain the path which I had left, when Antonio, my faithful Greek, pointed out to me a meadow by which, he said, we might regain the high road much lower down than if we returned on our steps. The meadow was brilliant with short green grass, and in the middle there was a small rivulet of water. I spurred my horse on, expecting to be in the high road in a moment; the horse, however, snorted and stared wildly, and was evidently unwilling to cross the seemingly inviting spot. I thought that the scent of a wolf, or some other wild animal might have disturbed him, but was soon undeceived by his sinking up to the knees in a bog. The animal uttered a shrill sharp neigh, and exhibited every sign of the greatest terror, making at the same time great efforts to extricate himself, and plunging forward, but every moment sinking deeper. At last he arrived where a small vein of rock showed itself: on this he placed his fore feet, and with one tremendous exertion freed himself, from the deceitful soil, springing over the rivulet and alighting on comparatively firm ground, where he stood panting, his heaving sides covered with a foamy sweat. Antonio, who had observed the whole scene, afraid to venture forward, returned by the path by which we came, and shortly afterwards rejoined me. This adventure brought to my recollection the meadow with its footpath which tempted Christian from the straight road to heaven, and finally conducted him to the dominions of the giant Despair.<sup>6</sup>



24.1 Galician migrant 'Segadores'

---

<sup>6</sup> See Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress*, paragraph 276.

We now began to descend the valley by a broad and excellent carretera or carriage road, which was cut out of the steep side of the mountain on our right. On our left was the gorge, down which tumbled the runnel of water which I have before mentioned. The road was tortuous, and at every turn the scene became more picturesque. The gorge gradually widened, and the brook at its bottom, fed by a multitude of springs, increased in volume and in sound, but it was soon far beneath us, pursuing its headlong course till it reached level ground, where it flowed in the midst of a beautiful but confined prairie. There was something sylvan and savage in the mountains on the farther side, clad from foot to pinnacle with trees, so closely growing that the eye was unable to obtain a glimpse of the hill sides, which were uneven with ravines and gulleys, the haunts of the wolf, the wild boar, and the corso, or mountain-stag; the latter of which, as I was informed by a peasant who was driving a car of oxen, frequently descended to feed in the prairie, and were there shot for the sake of their skins, for their flesh, being strong and disagreeable, is held in no account.

But notwithstanding the wildness of these regions, the handiworks of man were visible. The sides of the gorge, though precipitous, were yellow with little fields of barley, and we saw a hamlet and church down in the prairie below, whilst merry songs ascended to our ears from where the mowers were toiling with their scythes, cutting the luxuriant and abundant grass. I could scarcely believe that I was in Spain, in general so brown, so arid and cheerless, and I almost fancied myself in Greece, in that land of ancient glory, whose mountain and forest scenery Theocritus<sup>7</sup> has so well described.



*24.2 Slate houses of the old style in the Caurel mountains*

---

<sup>7</sup> Greek poet, born in Syracuse around 308 B.C. and died circa 240 B.C., either in Alexandria, on the island Cos or in the town of his birth. He is most known for ‘The Idylls’, a collection of bucolic and pastoral verse in which imaginary shepherds enjoy stormy love affairs, sing songs, go to harvest and the like. Burke [footnote to 331] adds that Theocritus rather described the scenery of Sicily than that of Greece.

At the bottom of the valley we entered a small village, washed by the brook<sup>8</sup>, which had now swelled almost to a stream. A more romantic situation I had never witnessed. It was surrounded, and almost overhung by mountains, and embowered in trees of various kinds; waters sounded, nightingales sang, and the cuckoo's full note boomed from the distant branches, but the village was miserable. The huts were built of slate stones, of which the neighbouring hills seemed to be principally composed, and roofed with the same, but not in the neat tidy manner of English houses, for the slates were of all sizes, and seemed to be flung on in confusion.<sup>9</sup> We were spent with heat and thirst, and sitting down on a stone bench, I entreated a woman to give me a little water. The woman said she would, but added that she expected to be paid for it. Antonio, on hearing this, became highly incensed, and speaking Greek, Turkish, and Spanish, invoked the vengeance of the Panhagia<sup>10</sup> on the heartless woman, saying, "If I were to offer a Mahometan gold for a draught of water he would dash it in my face; and you are a Catholic, with the stream running at your door." I told him to be silent, and giving the woman two cuartos, repeated my request, whereupon she took a pitcher, and going to the stream filled it with water. It tasted muddy and disagreeable, but it drowned the fever which was devouring me.

We again remounted and proceeded on our way, which, for a considerable distance, lay along the margin of the stream, which now fell in small cataracts, now brawled over stones, and at other times ran dark and silent through deep pools overhung with tall willows, - pools which seemed to abound with the finny tribe, for large trout frequently sprang from the water, catching the brilliant fly which skimmed along its deceitful surface. The scene was delightful. The sun was rolling high in the firmament, casting from its orb of fire the most glorious rays, so that the atmosphere was flickering with their splendour, but their fierceness was either warded off by the shadow of the trees or rendered innocuous by the refreshing coolness which rose from the waters, or by the gentle breezes which murmured at intervals over the meadows, "fanning the cheek or raising the hair" of the wanderer. The hills gradually receded, till at last we entered a plain where tall grass was waving, and mighty chestnut trees, in full blossom, spread out their giant and umbrageous boughs. Beneath many stood cars, the tired oxen prostrate on the ground, the crossbar of the poll which they support pressing heavily on their heads, whilst their drivers were either employed in cooking, or were enjoying a delicious siesta in the grass and shade. I went up to one of the largest of these groups and demanded of the individuals whether they were in need of the Testament of Jesus Christ. They stared at one another, and then at me, till at last a young man, who was dangling a long gun in his hands as he reclined, demanded of me what it was, at the same time inquiring whether I was a Catalan, "for you speak hoarse," said he, "and are tall and fair like that family." I sat down amongst them and said that I was no Catalan, but that I came from a spot in the Western Sea, many leagues distant, to sell that book at half the price it cost; and that their souls' welfare depended on their being acquainted with it. I then explained to them the nature of the New Testament, and read to them the parable of the Sower. They stared at each other again, but said that they were poor, and

---

<sup>8</sup> La Silva, Albares or Torre del Bierzo.

<sup>9</sup> Houses of this sort may still be found in the Ancares, to the north, and in the Caurel mountains south of Lugo, particularly in the charming village of Paderne do Caurel (see picture above).

<sup>10</sup> The 'All-Holy', a Greek term of adoration for the Virgin Mary [Burke, Glossary].

could not buy books. I rose, mounted, and was going away, saying to them: "Peace bide with you." Whereupon the young man with the gun rose, and saying, "*Caspita!* this is odd," snatched the book from my hand and gave me the price I had demanded.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the whole world might be searched in vain for a spot whose natural charms could rival those of this plain or valley of Bembibre, as it is called, with its wall of mighty mountains, its spreading chestnut trees, and its groves of oaks and willows, which clothe the banks of its stream, a tributary to the Minho. True it is, that when I passed through it, the candle of heaven was blazing in full splendour, and everything lighted by its rays looked gay, glad, and blessed. Whether it would have filled me with the same feelings of admiration if viewed beneath another sky, I will not pretend to determine; but it certainly possesses advantages which at no time could fail to delight, for it exhibits all the peaceful beauties of an English landscape blended with something wild and grand, and I thought within myself that he must be a restless dissatisfied man, who, born amongst those scenes, would wish to quit them. At the time I would have desired no better fate than that of a shepherd on the prairies, or a hunter in the hills of Bembibre.

Three hours passed away and we were in another situation. We had halted and refreshed ourselves and horses at Bembibre, a village of mud and slate, and which possessed little to attract attention<sup>12</sup>: we were now ascending, for the road was over one of the extreme ledges of those frontier hills which I have before so often mentioned; but the aspect of heaven had blackened, clouds were rolling rapidly from the west over the mountains, and a cold wind was moaning dismally. "There is a storm travelling through the air," said a peasant, whom we overtook, mounted on a wretched mule; "and the Asturians<sup>13</sup> had better be on the look-out, for it is speeding in their direction." He had scarce spoken, when a light, so vivid and dazzling that it seemed as if the whole lustre of the fiery element were concentrated in it, broke around us, filling the whole atmosphere, and covering rock, tree and mountain with a glare not to be described. The mule of the peasant tumbled prostrate, while the horse I rode reared himself perpendicularly, and turning round, dashed down the hill at headlong speed, which for some time it was impossible to check. The lightning was followed by a peal almost as terrible, but distant, for it sounded hollow and deep; the hills, however, caught up its voice, seemingly

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Caspita' is Spanish for 'Wonderful!' An even milder term than *Caramba*. [Burke, Glossary].

<sup>12</sup> In spite of this slightly depreciating remark, the inhabitants of Bembibre have been so grateful to Borrow for putting their village on the map that, as the one of very few municipalities in Spain, they called a street after him, the *Calle George Borrow*. [See text and photos by Dr. Alonso in *GBB* 32, 65-68.] The only 19<sup>th</sup> century building still extant in the village today enjoys the reputation of being the inn where Borrow and Antonio refreshed themselves. Burke [footnote to 333f] notes that Bembibre in his day (the early 1890s) counted 500 inhabitants, and adds that it 'lies with its old castle on the trout-streams Noceda and Boeza, amid green meadows, gardens, and vineyards, whose wines were far more fatal to Moore's soldiers than the French sabres. So much for Bembibre - *bene bibere*.' Out of respect for this tradition, the young Catalan travel writer David Fernandez de Castro got shockingly drunk here with the local historian during his research in 2005 [Fernandez de Castro, chapter 'Astorga-Bembibre; la trampa etilica', 157ff].

<sup>13</sup> The inhabitants of the neighbouring province of Asturias, some 50 km north of the Camino Real, beyond the mountain chains.

repeating it from summit to summit, till it was lost in interminable space. Other flashes and peals succeeded, but slight in comparison, and a few drops of rain descended. The body of the tempest seemed to be over another region. "A hundred families are weeping where that bolt fell," said the peasant when I rejoined him, "for its blaze has blinded my mule at six leagues' distance." He was leading the animal by the bridle, as its sight was evidently affected. "Were the friars still in their nest above there," he continued, "I should say that this was their doing, for they are the cause of all the miseries of the land."



24.3 *The Virgen de la Peña* (foto: David Fernandez)

I raised my eyes in the direction in which he pointed. Half way up the mountain, over whose foot we were wending, jutted forth a black frightful crag, which at an immense altitude overhung the road, and seemed to threaten destruction. It resembled one of those ledges of the rocky mountains in the picture of the Deluge, up to which the terrified fugitives have scrambled from the eager pursuit of the savage and tremendous billows, and from whence they gaze down in horror, whilst above them rise still higher and giddier heights, to which they seem unable to climb. Built on the very edge of this crag, stood an edifice, seemingly devoted to the purposes of religion, as I could discern the spire of a church rearing itself high over wall and roof. "That is the house of the Virgin of the Rocks," said the peasant, "and it was lately full of friars, but they have been thrust out, and the only inmates now are owls and ravens."<sup>14</sup> I replied, that their life in such a bleak exposed abode could not have been very enviable, as in winter they must have incurred great risk of perishing with cold. "By no means," said he; "they had the best of wood for their braseros and chimneys, and the best of wine to warm them at their meals, which were not the most sparing. Moreover, they had another convent down in the vale yonder, to which they could retire at their pleasure." On my asking him the reason of his antipathy to the friars, he replied, that he had been their vassal, and that

---

<sup>14</sup> The Convent the Virgen de la Peña. The hamlet at the foot of the hill mentioned in the sequel is Congosto. David Fernandez notes that very little has changed in the area, except that part of the Camino Real now lies submerged under the artificial lake of Bárcena. [Fernandez de Castro, chapter 'Astorga-Bembibre', 159].

they had deprived him every year of the flower of what he possessed.<sup>15</sup> Discoursing in this manner, we reached a village just below the convent, where he left me, having first pointed out to me a house of stone, with an image over the door, which, he said, once also belonged to the *canalla* (rabble) above.

The sun was setting fast, and eager to reach Villafranca, where I had determined on resting, and which was still distant three leagues and a half, I made no halt at this place. The road was now down a rapid and crooked descent, which terminated in a valley, at the bottom of which was a long and narrow bridge; beneath it rolled a river, descending from a wide pass between two mountains, for the chain was here cleft, probably by some convulsion of nature.<sup>16</sup> I looked up the pass, and on the hills on both sides. Far above, on my right, but standing forth bold and clear, and catching the last rays of the sun, was the Convent of the Precipices, whilst directly over against it, on the farther side of the valley, rose the perpendicular side of the rival hill, which, to a considerable extent intercepting the light, flung its black shadow over the upper end of the pass, involving it in mysterious darkness. Emerging from the centre of this gloom, with thundering sound, dashed a river, white with foam, and bearing along with it huge stones and branches of trees, for it was the wild Sil hurrying to the ocean from its cradle in the heart of the Asturian hills, and probably swollen by the recent rains.<sup>17</sup>

Hours again passed away. It was now night, and we were in the midst of woodlands, feeling our way, for the darkness was so great that I could scarcely see the length of a

---

<sup>15</sup> This dislike of the peasantry to ecclesiastical landowners is no exaggeration of Borrow's. Depending somewhat on the area and the particular situation, the Gallego dirt-farmer could indeed show a fierce hostility to the convents and monasteries from whom he leased his lands; the roots of the problem being that in Galicia, almost the first province to be reconquered from the Moors in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the church was by far the greatest land-owner, which lorded it over some 70 or 80 % of all arable land. Yet the picture deserves some qualification. On the one hand, the Galician peasantry was also deeply religious, as they showed during the Peninsular War, when - led by priests, friars and abbots - they rose *en masse* against the (atheist) French invader. And on the other hand, the *Desamortizacion* of the 1830s, which stripped the Church of its land and rents, did not improve the lot of the peasantry at all. It merely traded in one set of masters for another and worse one. The parasite friars, who lived next door and could occasionally be cajoled into lowering rents or be punished for disproportional harsh treatment, were merely replaced by absentee bourgeois landowners from the great industrial cities, who picked up the church-lands for a trifle, and proved much more demanding, harsher, and unmoveable than the friars had ever been. In short: not all changes are improvements.

<sup>16</sup> Burke [footnote to 334] mentions that, still in the 1890s, the road did not enter the town of Ponferrada but passed it by on the north side, over the bridge that crossed the river Sil. This bridge was originally built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century for pilgrims on their way to Compostela.

<sup>17</sup> In the (undated) letter to Brandram, titled 'Journey from Astorga to Lugo' [Darlow, 240] which forms the basis of this chapter, Borrow adds here: 'Its fury, its roar, and the savage grandeur of the surrounding scenery which was worthy of the pencil of Salvator, recalled to my mind the powerful lines of Stolberg addressed to a mountain torrent -

“The pine-trees are shaken, they yield to thy shocks,  
And, crashing, they tumble in wild disarray;  
The rocks fly before thee - thou seizest the rocks  
And whirlst them, like pebbles, contemptuous away.”

yard before my horse's head. The animal seemed uneasy, and would frequently stop short, prick up his ears, and utter a low mournful whine. Flashes of sheet lightning frequently illumined the black sky, and flung a momentary glare over our path. No sound interrupted the stillness of the night, except the slow tramp of the horses' hoofs, and occasionally the croaking of frogs from some pool or morass. I now bethought me that I was in Spain, the chosen land of the two fiends, assassination and plunder, and how easily two tired and unarmed wanderers might become their victims.<sup>18</sup>

We at last cleared the woodlands, and after proceeding a short distance, the horse gave a joyous neigh, and broke into a smart trot. A barking of dogs speedily reached my ears, and we seemed to be approaching some town or village. In effect we were close to Cacabelos, a town about five miles distant from Villafranca.

It was near eleven at night, and I reflected that it would be far more expedient to tarry in this place till the morning than to attempt at present to reach Villafranca, exposing ourselves to all the horrors of darkness in a lonely and unknown road. My mind was soon made up on this point; but I reckoned without my host, for at the first posada which I attempted to enter, I was told that we could not be accommodated, and still less our horses, as the stable was full of water. At the second, and there were but two, I was answered from the window by a gruff voice, nearly in the words of the Scripture: "Trouble me not; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot arise to let you in."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, we had no particular desire to enter, as it appeared a wretched hovel, though the poor horses pawed piteously against the door, and seemed to crave admittance.

We had now no choice but to resume our doleful way to Villafranca, which, we were told, was a short league distant, though it proved a league and a half. We found it no easy matter to quit the town, for we were bewildered amongst its labyrinths, and could not find the outlet. A lad about eighteen was, however, persuaded, by the promise of a peseta, to guide us: whereupon he led us by many turnings to a bridge, which he told us to cross, and to follow the road, which was that of Villafranca; he then, having received his fee, hastened from us.

We followed his directions, not, however, without a suspicion that he might be deceiving us. The night had settled darker down upon us, so that it was impossible to distinguish any object, however nigh. The lightning had become more faint and rare. We heard the rustling of trees, and occasionally the barking of dogs, which last sound, however, soon ceased, and we were in the midst of night and silence. My horse, either

---

<sup>18</sup> In fact, that Borrow travelled unarmed says something about his confidence and his character. Ford [*HB*, 68] states categorically that even in the more quiet and peaceful Spain of the 1840s, simply *everybody* travelled armed. Hughes agreed that those on horseback, who could get away, always went around with double-barrelled rifles slung from the saddle; but he warned strongly against carrying arms in the *Diligencia*, since hold-ups were invariably performed by large numbers of bandits, and bringing out a gun was tantamount to being murdered. 'It is an infallible maxim,' he wrote, 'that if you carry pistols in Spain, they will probably shoot yourself' [Hughes, *Revelations*, vol. 1, chapter 23, 240 & chapter 35, 390].

<sup>19</sup> A near verbatim quote from the gospel of Luke 11 : 7.

from weariness, or the badness of the road, frequently stumbled; whereupon I dismounted, and leading him by the bridle, soon left Antonio far in the rear.

I had proceeded in this manner a considerable way, when a circumstance occurred of a character well suited to the time and place.

I was again amidst trees and bushes, when the horse stopping short, nearly pulled me back. I know not how it was, but fear suddenly came over me, which, though in darkness and in solitude, I had not felt before. I was about to urge the animal forward, when I heard a noise at my right hand, and listened attentively. It seemed to be that of a person or persons forcing their way through branches and brushwood. It soon ceased, and I heard feet on the road. It was the short staggering kind of tread of people carrying a very heavy substance, nearly too much for their strength, and I thought I heard the hurried breathing of men over-fatigued. There was a short pause, during which I conceived they were resting in the middle of the road; then the stamping recommenced, until it reached the other side, when I again heard a similar rustling amidst branches; it continued for some time and died gradually away.

I continued my road, musing on what had just occurred, and forming conjectures as to the cause. The lightning resumed its flashing, and I saw that I was approaching tall black mountains.

This nocturnal journey endured so long that I almost lost all hope of reaching the town, and had closed my eyes in a doze, though I still trudged on mechanically, leading the horse. Suddenly a voice at a slight distance before me roared out, "QUIEN VIVE?"<sup>20</sup> for I had at last found my way to Villafranca. It proceeded from the sentry in the suburb, one of those singular half soldiers half guerillas, called Miguelets, who are in general employed by the Spanish government to clear the roads of robbers.<sup>21</sup> I gave the usual answer, "ESPANA," and went up to the place where he stood. After a little conversation, I sat down on a stone, awaiting the arrival of Antonio, who was long in making his appearance. On his arrival, I asked if any one had passed him on the road, but he replied that he had seen nothing. The night, or rather the morning, was still very dark, though a small corner of the moon was occasionally visible. On our inquiring the way to the gate, the Miguelet directed us down a street to the left, which we followed. The street was steep, we could see no gate, and our progress was soon stopped by houses and wall. We knocked at the gates of two or three of these houses (in the upper stories of which lights were burning), for the purpose of being set right, but we were either disregarded or not heard. A horrid squalling of cats, from the tops of the houses and dark corners, saluted our ears, and I thought of the night arrival of Don Quixote and his squire at Toboso, and their vain search amongst the deserted streets for the palace of Dulcinea.<sup>22</sup> At length we saw light and heard voices in a cottage at the other side of a kind of ditch. Leading the horses over, we called at the door, which was opened by an aged man, who appeared by his dress to be a baker, as indeed he proved, which accounted for his being up at so late an hour. On begging him to show us the way into

---

<sup>20</sup> Literally: 'Who lives?', the traditional Spanish way of demanding 'Who goes there?'

<sup>21</sup> For these Miqueletes, see the pertinent footnote to chapter 26.

<sup>22</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, part 2, chapter 9 [Burke, footnote to 341].

the town, he led us up a very narrow alley at the end of his cottage, saying that he would likewise conduct us to the posada.

The alley led directly to what appeared to be the market- place, at a corner house of which our guide stopped and knocked. After a long pause an upper window was opened, and a female voice demanded who we were. The old man replied, that two travellers had arrived who were in need of lodging. "I cannot be disturbed at this time of night," said the woman; "they will be wanting supper, and there is nothing in the house; they must go elsewhere." She was going to shut the window, but I cried that we wanted no supper, but merely resting place for ourselves and horses - that we had come that day from Astorga<sup>23</sup>, and were dying with fatigue. "Who is that speaking?" cried the woman. "Surely that is the voice of Gil, the German clockmaker from Pontevedra. Welcome, old companion; you are come at the right time, for my own is out of order. I am sorry I have kept you waiting, but I will admit you in a moment."

The window was slammed to, presently a light shone through the crevices of the door, a key turned in the lock, and we were admitted.

---

<sup>23</sup> Nearly 75 km away, while a march of 50 km was already considered a long day for travellers.