

## THE CONVENT AND PASS OF ONÁ

It was early in the autumn of 183-, that a regiment of Cavalry was ordered from the northern provinces of Spain to join headquarters at Logrono,\* on the Ebro, the then centre of the operations of the Commander-in-Chief, Espartero. My regiment was fortunately the one picked out for this service, and accordingly one afternoon, we, the subs, were not a little astounded to hear that the morrow was to see us horsed and en route for the milder and more delicious climate of the "Rioja," as the beautiful valley bordering on the Ebro is called, connecting the provinces of Navarre and Castile, and following the meandering course of that river downwards. It was a fine September morning that found us on the high road to the South. The regiment was in good order, and with about as gay a body of men as ever were mounted, the greater part of whom were young and fresh, and up to anything, and with spirits overflowing with the prospects of a southern campaign. Our first day's march was short and not very interesting. The country being rather flat did not exhibit any of that bold and striking scenery peculiar to the northern provinces of Spain; it was, however, well cultivated, and the small farm-houses indicated an abundant harvest. Now and then a solitary and frightened hare would start up, and with anxious and astonished look bound away, amidst the jeers and shouts of our fellows—here a covey of red-legged partridges would take to wing—there the shrill but plaintive notes of the quail could be heard, calling for its little amorous mate. The midday sun shone, as it only does in Spain, clear, brilliant and oppressive, without a breath of air; the sandy road threw up clouds of sand, enveloping us in a sort of sandy mist. The horses oppressed with the heat and sand, snorted incessantly, keeping up a monotonous but not unpleasant noise. This, though a short day's march, was very fatiguing both to men and horses for the reasons above stated; and when the regiment halted on the borders of a small mountain stream, and near a tolerable "venta" (inn), answering at the same time the more useful and profitable purposes of a mill, few riders there were in that martial group who did not feel relief when the order to dismount was given. I, for one, felt as if the term of my life had been extended; my poor old charger plunged into the stream and sticking his head up to the eyes into the water, slaked his moderate thirst in a way only to be seen after such a march, and in a southern clime. I turned into a small cottage, near the venta, with my servant and horses, accompanied by the other sub. of the troop, and like true campaigners we were in a short time as comfortable as we could desire. Our old "patrona" (hostess) was an aged woman of the witch description in person, with sharp dark features and quick brilliant eyes, that seemed to read one at a glance—she was, however, like most of the peasantry in these parts of Spain, kind and hospitable, and gave us all she had with a grace that would not be met with elsewhere, under similar circumstances. We continued the route next morning by four o'clock, amid road and scenery much the same as on the previous day, till the afternoon, when we came in sight of some mountains in which lay the celebrated pass, and more celebrated Convent of Oná.† It was about six o'clock when we entered the pass, and certainly the effect was grand and sublime. The road lay in a gorge of the immense mountains that towered perpendicularly over it, meeting at times at the summit, obscuring daylight, and making everything look sombre and dismal; a company of Gue-

\* Pronounced Logronio.

† This word is pronounced Onin—the accent on the latter vowel, as the Scotch and French read the Latin tongue.

rillas at any given point would have been sufficient to retard the progress of a large army. The road was barely sufficiently wide to admit two well packed mules abreast; and to see a column winding its way through this pass, and at a distance, would remind one of a huge serpent creeping slowly along and eventually emerging with difficulty from the bosom of the vast mountains. At the southern side of these, and almost at the extremity of the pass, lay a beautiful valley, rich in everything that nature could bestow. Protected by the huge mountains that surrounded it from the keen blasts of the North and from the Atlantic seaboard, it enjoyed a climate peculiar to the spot and generally unknown in that part of Spain. In this valley, and occupying almost the whole area, lay the once celebrated convent of Oná, the pride of that part of the kingdom. It was about an hour before twilight, when we presented ourselves before the massive portals of the Convent, and as the whole space occupied by the Convent and grounds was well walled, answering the double purpose of seclusion and defence in this ever-stirring and ever-agitated country, it was sometime before we gained admittance, and even then not without an attitude of precaution and defence on the part of the jolly monks inside. To the twenty or thirty "quen vica's" that echoed round the ivy-mantled walls, "La Reina" we found was a passport; and a short interval introduced us into the "sanctum sanctorum" of the jolly but holy fraternity. We entered into the well-paved court yard, and the regiment formed up, fronting the magnificent chapel of the Convent, of the purest Gothic style. The holy brothers were at that moment engaged in performing their "Tenebras," and as the sounds of the organ and the fine crash of vocal music reached us in swelling and melting tones, each rider seemed at once impressed with the same sentiment, and unitedly echoed these divine strains in their souls. I was delighted with the music, and certainly the chanting of these monks was magnificent; and as at that moment a little less than two hundred of the fraternity were mingling their musical voices together, the reader can imagine the effect where, as in these soft climes of the olive and the dove, music has lent her magic aid to soften and harmonize the picture more exquisitely. As the superior was engaged in these holy offices, we remained on horse till the service was over, and till our chief had communicated with him in reference to our night's lodging. Pious reader! be not startled at the distribution, for such things have been of frequent occurrence in Spain, from necessity. They were, for want of better accommodation, turned into the chapel as a stable, and a beautiful one it made; and having placed a strong guard near the altar, from fear of the propensity of soldiers in campaign—that of enlisting everything into the service; and having besides placed the proper stable guards, we, the subs, having seen the horses "fed and rubbed down," and I was going to add, "bedded," (I hoped they might get it) sallied out to see the wonders of Oná, and also to find out our own quarters for the night. On this last point we were amply provided, as the good brothers had given up their cells and beds to the officers, and besides had, much to our joy, invited us all to "cinar" (supp) with them. We sauntered over the beautiful grounds or rather gardens of the Convent, and as a young cornet remarked, if father Adam had been turned out of such a garden as that, it was no wonder he was sorry for it. Here in this valley and garden were all the fruits of the peninsula, all the vegetables, and I would add, all the flowers that could be collected; as also various descriptions of trees, from the hazel to the pine. The walks were beautifully gravelled, and the place was intersected by various little canals, conducting water from the mountain streams to several reservoirs or

tanks containing fish of different sorts. The walks were lined with various descriptions of the vine, loaded down to the ground with the delicious grape, which here grows to perfection: beautiful arbours were here and there constructed and enveloped with the vine and honeysuckle. The mulberry spread its wide and purple-loaded branches to screen you from the midday sun, whilst clusters of almond trees formed shady walks under which the holy brothers were wont to stroll, and con over their beads, and mayhap plot and intrigue secretly for the chances of the then contested crown. Statues too were not wanting to remind the brothers of the other good things that their vows had for ever excluded from within those walls. I could have remained in such a spot for ever, and would not have coveted either riches or grandeur, but I fancy this was not the case with some of the stout and able-bodied brothers, who from the various questions put to us, and the free and easy intercourse formed at once with the younger men of the regiment, told a tale that needs no comment. We strolled about till the Convent bell pealed a summons which we were glad to hear was for the "Cena" (supper): it was a peal and an appeal which, once heard, could not be forgotten. We started off in full trot for the Convent, and having performed a hasty toilet, were summoned and ushered into the "Sala," or refectory, which was an immense room lined with oak carved into various grotesque forms and shapes. An immense oaken table occupied the centre of the room, beautifully polished. The oaken panelled walls were here and there painted in fresco, with devils and archangels fighting, and other similar souvenirs of bygone celestial feuds. And certainly the painter had not flattered either one or the other, as I could have defied poor mortality to have distinguished one from the other, except from the color. The devils were really getting the worst of it, and looked very blue indeed. I sat at the end of the table, between an old and a very young monk, and after a few preliminaries, and after having said grace and duly crossed ourselves, we commenced to do justice to as good a supper as ever was put before a hungry dragoon; one would have imagined all the viands in the world had been selected for our particular entertainment and the wines of the choicest and rarest kind, from Imperial Tokay and Val de Penas\* to every other description ordinarily met with. My companions pled me well with the juice of different grapes, and as we pledged and quaffed in horn tumblers, (the brotherhood did not indulge in glass from the severity of the discipline in the establishment) gentle reader, you may imagine that my head became a little dizzy, and that my heart was more than happy. The President, the superior of the convent, had before him a huge silver goblet, which every now and then was passed from one end of the table to the other as a token of his condescension, and which etiquette compelled you to drain to the dregs. This goblet was the terror of the whole of us, and my companions told me that the passage of the goblet to any particular part of the table was usually looked upon as the *quitus* of the party who undertook to drain it; and no wonder! Fortunately our insignificance saved our part of the table, but proved to some others already, that the honor had been too great, and that they were overcome with it. I never was happier in my life, and the thoughts of war and charges had been completely lulled in my bosom. We quaffed and we quaffed again; and though the silver goblet had not reached us, still the horn was doing its work in a less ostentatious, but as sure a manner. I became at last—gentle reader, do not be disgusted with me—very, very tipsy indeed. Now and then I fancied myself a bishop; then a general; then set-

\* Pronounced Penas, for the reason already given.