

EL ALCALDE DE MÓSTOLES¹

BY R. B. CUNNINGHAME GRAHAM

IN the year 1808 Napoleon was at the height of his renown. All Europe lay beneath his feet. England and Russia alone were still unconquered; but in due course he hoped to deal with them. Austria, Prussia, Holland, and Italy were provinces of France. Spain, which had for centuries been inaccessible to conquerors, had been beaten to her knees. His brother Joseph, known to the Spaniards by the name of Pepe Botellas, held his court in Madrid, surrounded by a few sycophants and renegades. All patriotism seemed dead. Murat and his Mamelukes kept down the city with an iron hand. Goya was taking notes of everything, crystallizing the odious tyranny of the French in his immortal *Horrors of War*, horrors that have never been surpassed, either in reality or paint.

The country, delivered over to the mercies of the invading troops, was seething with revolt, but wanted someone to stand out and lead. Only the partisan El Empecinado was in arms in Navarre and the Basque provinces. For all that, no Frenchman's life was worth ten minutes' purchase outside cantonments or the camp. The country people cut their throats like sheep with their long knives, and often threw their bodies into their wine vats to get rid of them. In after days, to say a wine had a French tang was long a jest among the peasantry. Still they went on, stabling their horses in the churches, violating nuns, and stealing priceless ornaments

from the cathedrals and the monasteries. Spain stirred convulsively under the heel of the detested Gabacho, as the people liked to call the French. That which was to prove her strength, and had done so in ages past, was now her weakness, for the intensely local patriotism had formed each town and village into a community apart, slow to combine with one another. '*Mi tierra*' meant for them, not Spain, but every separate village and a few miles around.

At last the turbulent populace of Madrid, irritated past bearing by the Mamelukes, who represented to them, not the French only, but also their hereditary enemies, the Moors, rose in revolt. Armed with their knives alone, they fell upon the Mamelukes in a narrow street, stabbing their horses and butchering the riders when they fell. Two heroic officers of artillery, Velarde and Daoiz, opened fire with a piece of cannon on the French. Their heroism was wasted, — that is, if sacrifice is ever wasted, — and the revolt was crushed that very afternoon, in what Murat referred to as a 'bath of blood.' The two young officers were shot, and by their death secured their immortality in Spain. Madrid was stunned, but the news was soon carried to the neighboring little towns, by men escaping from the massacre.

Out on the Castilian steppes, fifteen or sixteen miles from Madrid, there lies a little town called Móstoles. It lies, almost as one might say, *à fleur d'eau* on the great brown plain. The highroad to Portugal passes down its long main

¹ From the *Saturday Review* (London Tory weekly), January 2

street. Even to-day it has but thirteen hundred citizens. In summer the houses, built of sun-dried bricks, covered with plaster, are calcined by the sun. The winter winds, sweeping down from La Sierra de Guadarrama, scourge it pitilessly. For nine months of the year dust covers everything, falling on man and beast, on the few moribund acacias in the plaza, turning all to the color of a rabbit's back. During the other three it is a slough of mud that wheel-borne traffic and the long strings of donkeys and mules straggle through painfully. Far off the Sierra of Guadalupe and the Gredos are just visible as faint blue lines hardly to be picked out from the clouds, except in certain states of atmosphere. In the short, fierce summer the mirage spreads illusory pools over the surface of the plain, and in the winter mornings, after a sharp frost, the woods along the foothills of the Guadarrama hang upside down upon the sky. Along the road are dotted many other little dusty towns, each with its little plaza and its great church, — big enough for larger congregations than it ever holds, — its apothecary's shop with leeches in a glass jar at the door and fly-blown patent medicines in the window, and its barber's shop, which serves as a news-exchange.

Upon the second of May of the year 1808 news filtered through to Móstoles that there had been a massacre in the capital. The seventeen kilometres of highroad could easily be covered on a good horse within two hours, and it is not to be supposed the rider spared the spur.

As it was written, one Andrés Torrejón happened to be Alcalde of the place. An honest countryman of six and sixty years of age, in all his life he had never had occasion to show what he was worth. What he was like to the outward visible eye is but a matter of

conjecture. Most probably a square-built, round-faced Castilian farmer, his cheeks stubbly with a week's growth of beard, — the village barber shore but on a Sunday morning, — sparing of speech, yet full of sayings fitted to every accident of life; his dress, which has but little varied, even to-day, knee-breeches of dark cloth, his jacket short, showing a double-breasted flowered waistcoat of a sprigged pattern, his linen dazzlingly white, a black-silk handkerchief bound like a turban round his head, the whole surmounted by a hard-brimmed black-felt hat, kept in place underneath his chin by a broad band of silk. His interior grace, his honesty, tenacity of purpose, and his enthusiasm, slow to be excited, but, when once moved, as irresistible as a landslide after rain, he has left stamped upon Castile. It will endure as long as her vast plains wave green with corn in spring, turn leather-colored under the fierce sun of summer, and in the winter, when the keen frost burns up all vegetation, stretch out desolate, with but the withered stalks of thistles standing up ghostlike in the waste.

The nerves of all true patriots were on edge. Never since the days of the Saracens had the invader's foot trodden Castilian soil. The news of the last outrage brought all the people out into the plaza before the parish church of the Ascension — a mosque, tradition says, in the days Spanish peasants always refer to as 'the time of the Moors.' All over Spain the people's nerves were twitching, but yet the heavy hand of Murat had deprived them of all spirit of revolt.

It happened, luckily for Andrés Torrejón, that the ex-Secretary of the Admiralty under Charles IV, Juan Perez Vilamil, was living in the town, having refused to recognize King Joseph and his usurping court. Long did the Alcalde and Vilamil talk over

what was the best course to pursue. Then, after praying in the church, the Alcalde called a meeting of his rustic senators. The people thronged outside the council-room — the very room in which to-day is set into the wall the tablet that commemorates what was resolved on that eventful afternoon in May. The peasant councilors sat round the council board, with their Alcalde in the chair. Perez and Gomez, Camacho, Lopez and Galván, all peasants, their hands furrowed with toil and weather, their shoulders rounded with the plough, their faces tanned to a deep brown by the hard climate of Castile, and their eyes twinkling deeply in their sockets, like the eyes of mariners, of Arabs, and of all those who pass their lives upon illimitable plains, scorched by the wind and sun, all waited for what 'Uncle Andrés' would say.

Rising with due deliberation from his seat, after having taken off his hat and placed it carefully beside him on the table, the Alcalde told of what had happened in Madrid. His actual words are not recorded, only the substance of his speech. As he spoke of the massacre, the shooting down of women and of children in the streets, the execution of the prisoners drawn up opposite a wall, and of the people who had died trampled beneath the horses of the Mameluke infidel, his hearers' hands stole to their sashes, and muttering, 'Death to the Gabacho,' they spat upon the floor. Sitting impassively like figures carved in walnut wood, the peasant council listened to their Alcalde as he told of how the country suffered under Napoleon's heel. Now and again one of them would assent in a half-grunt, and anyone who did not know them might have thought they were unmoved. As they sat with their heads a little sideways, their mouths half open, and their breath coming in short gusts that heaved their chests under their heavy rustic clothes,

just as a barge heaves on a canal after a steamer passes, they seemed like animals about to spring upon their prey. The Alcalde recapitulated all their country's wrongs — the cuckold Charles IV. a prisoner in France, the queen a harlot under the dominion of her lover of the day, the troops left without pay and led by officers who did not know their duty, and, most of all, the miserable French puppet king, lording it on the throne of Charles V. 'Spain wants a leader, someone to show the way, to gather up the scattered bands of guerrilleros, and above all a straight and downright declaration that the country is at war. No one has yet stepped out to lead us, although they slaughter us like flies, scorn us and spit on us — on us Castilians whose forefathers furnished the famous Spanish infantry that swept through France and Italy like fire. Who would think we were the heirs of those who fought at San Quentín?'

The people of the town pressed round the iron-grated windows of the council chamber, silent, but gazing on their rustic councilors, strung up with fury, cursing their impotence. At last the speaker, tightening up his sash, wiping the foam and moisture from his lips, took a long breath, and after looking round to Vilamil, who nodded at him, said: 'Friends and neighbors, I have served you faithfully for years. The time has come that I must now serve Spain. Therefore I, Andrés Torrejón, duly elected the Alcalde of this town of Móstoles, do declare war against the French.'

For a brief moment there was silence, silence so absolute that the breath of the people peering through the gratings of the windows sounded as loudly as when a horse upon a frosty morning pants up an incline. Then, rising to their feet, the conscript peasants surrounded the Alcalde, grasping him by the hand and shouting, 'War,

war to the knife; death to the assassins of Madrid!' The people in the little plaza caught up the cry of 'War, war to the knife! Uncle Andrés has declared war upon the French!'

In the closing darkness of that night of May, Andrés Torrejón sat down and penned his memorable pronouncement, the first and last that he was fated to indite, but one that made his name immortal throughout the Spanish-speaking world. 'Our country is in peril; Madrid is perishing, the victim of the perfidy of the French. Spaniards, hasten to save her. May 2, 1808. El Alcalde de Móstoles.' Nothing could have been more simple and direct, with just the touch of the ridiculous that gives sublimity. His next act was to send the son of his old colleague on the council, Simon Hernandez, on a good horse to take his proclamation to the Alcaldes of the neighboring towns. At once he mounted, and, first reaching Navalcarnero, left the fiery cross. Alcorcón, Navalmorál, and Escalona all received the message, and all of them at once declared war on the French.

The messenger crossed the Alberche and pushed on westward, riding without a stop across the plains all through that fateful night in May. In two days' riding he reached Badajoz, his horse still fresh, after having covered nearly two hundred miles. The city rose at once, and sent on word to Cáceres. Cáceres passed on the signal; and by the end of May all Spain had risen — not as an ordinary country rises in such circumstances, but town by town, village by village, each declared war upon the French.

The rest is history, the coming of the great 'Lor Vilanton' as he was called in the Spain of those days, with the English troops, and the long war of the Peninsula. The hour had struck, and from that moment Napoleon's star began to pale; Moscow completed that which Móstoles began, and when the French recrossed the swift Borysthenes, slaughtered like sheep by the pursuing Cossacks, their ruin — after God — they owed to the Alcalde of the little town, sun-dried and wind-scorched, in the Castilian plains.

LIFE AND THE CHILD¹

BY HENRY POULAILLE

[THE following story from *Ames nouvelles*, a volume of tales by Henry Poulaille, reviewed in our issue for January 16, is reprinted by special arrangement with the publishers.]

THERE was once a poor woodcutter who bitterly lamented his lot in life.

¹ From *Ames nouvelles*, by Henry Poulaille. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1925. 7 fr. 50 c.

He lived deep in a forest, in a modest hut that was just large enough for himself, but that he had to share with his wife and his little son. He complained noisily and constantly about the injustice of his fate.

One time his little boy, who was eight years old, put an embarrassing question to him. The man was grumbling as usual about his unhappy des-