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SKETCHES IN SPAIN

DURING

THE YEARS 1829, 30, 31, & 32;

CONTAINING

NOTICES OF SOME DISTRICTS VERY LITTLE KNOWN;

OF THE

MANNERS OF THE PEOPLE,

GOVERNMENT, RECENT CHANGES,

COMMERCE,

FINE ARTS, AND NATURAL HISTORY.

P.C. Monumental de la Alhambra y Generalife
CONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA

BY

CAPTAIN S. E. COOK, R.N. K.T.S. F.G.S.

JUNTA DE ANDALUCIA

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SKETCHES IN SPAIN.

CHAPTER XV.

Robbers.

The high way robbers in Spain may be divided into three classes. First, *rateros* or *raterillos*, a specific term derived from a substantive signifying mean and petty thieving. They haunt many districts, especially in upper Andalusia, where they sculk about the outskirts of towns and villages, attacking the unwary traveller in the dusk, generally with a great numerical superiority. They are not unfrequently gypsies and other vagrants of the same description, and their ignoble habits make it unnecessary to describe them more fully.

The second class is composed of bands occasionally mounted, but more frequently on foot, to whom the appellation of *salteadores* may be given. They either remain constantly out, or sally forth from their villages, on occasional, preconcerted enterprises, returning afterwards to their usual occupations.

The third, are the royal or noble race, who are regularly equipped and keep the field constantly, on horseback under acknowledged chiefs in open defiance of the authorities. They are now only found in lower Andalusia.

The second class is the most numerous. They are seen in the Castiles, Valencia, Murcia, Andalusia, and occasionally in Catalonia and Estremadura, but rarely in Galicia, Asturias, the northern or free Provinces, Navarre or Aragon.

A regular organisation of *salteadores* exists in the wretched villages of the Somosierra and Guadarrama, who infest the great roads of Bayonne and Valladolid, and occasionally even those which connect the *sitios reales*. They were seldom sufficiently strong to attack the diligences, but the couriers from France were never secure from them during the time I was in Spain.

They have correspondents in the villages from whom they obtain intelligence. Their beats extend to within a few miles of Madrid, and the favourite scene of their exploits is the plain at the south foot of the range. They are scarcely ever captured and no serious measures appear to have been taken to abate such an abominable nuisance, which a few cavalry would easily effect. The Russian ambassador was robbed and ill treated a few months since whilst travelling post, and just as I left the country, a lady from America who had the imprudence to display a quantity of diamonds at Burgos, was stopped on the way to Madrid by eight men, who demanded the casket, of which they knew all the particulars. She was in the diligence and I believe the other passengers were not molested. In other parts of old Castile they are now rare, but a few *presidarios* occasionally make their es-

cape, and exchange the monotonous employment of working on the canal for more congenial occupation. As they have no connections in the villages, they are, however, in general soon recaptured.

In the mountains of Valencia, a few months since a *salteador*, named from his diminutive size and activity "El Gato" the cat, had carried on his operations most successfully for a considerable period.

He had been a constitutional leader and being outlawed adopted this mode of life. He was courageous, generous and charitable to the poor, seldom injuring any one excepting the Miqueletes (armed police) to whom he bore implacable hatred. His unerring aim and knowledge of the country enabled him to kill great numbers of them. He was at last surprised whilst engaged in a love affair, being betrayed in all probability by a rival. He refused to surrender, and, I believe died by his own hands. The dreadful murder related by the young American took place amongst a savage race on the lower Ebro; very few persons were concerned in it. The regular bands occasionally take the redressing of grievances into their hands. Some years since, I believe in La Mancha, a party existed, the leader of which has been known to enter the villages in the day time and summoning the authorities, order the magazines to be opened and provisions to be distributed to the poor. It frequently happens, that after floating on the verge of society for a period, these characters either by positive *indulto* or pardon, or by connivance of the tribunals, from whom they purchase impunity by sacrificing a part of their gains, are again absorbed into the circulation, and become peaceable and orderly citizens. In two different towns of old Castile, I was lodged in the principal *posadas*, of

which the masters were retired robbers. They were both superior men in style and manners; one accompanied me about the town as guide, his house was orderly and well conducted. In that of the other the company had a more suspicious and equivocal appearance, and an individual was pointed out to me in the groupe assembled at the fireside, who had very recently been condemned to death.

In 1830, it was officially announced in the gazette, that the scattered bands from various parts of the Sierra Morena, after being some time in repose, had assembled their remnants, consisting of a considerable number, and had made an attack in the Despeña Perros (a celebrated defile on the road to Andalusia) upon a chain of presidarios who were on their way to some southern depot. The escort who were conducting them, however, had better fortune than their predecessors in their rencontre with Don Quixote in the same district, and they were repulsed. This expedition which required extensive cooperation and intelligence amongst people spread over a large tract of country, and was undertaken for the sole and disinterested object of releasing some companions from durance, could only have been witnessed in Spain.

Although the object cannot be defended; the motives of people thus true and faithful in a bad cause, reflect credit on them, and are very different from those which influence similar associations in other countries.

The wide range of Andalusia, however, is the classic ground of the robber tribe, where every rank and gradation may be seen, and the life of this peculiar modification of society studied in mass or in detail. The whole range of the kingdoms incorporated in this province, exhibit its semi arab race, in the constant exercise of habits derived

from their ancestors. The boundaries are so marked, that the instant you cross the Guadalquivir and enter the Sierra Morena, they are seldom seen. The population of the greater part of that range are so far from leaguings with or tolerating them, as is practised in the places a few miles distant, that a battue is commenced as soon as they are heard of, and nothing more than a foray or inroad is practicable. An instance took place whilst I was in the Sierra; a small roving party on horseback appeared suddenly near Guadalcanal, where the people who gave me the information had spoken to them the preceding morning. They remained only a few hours in a post where they were unmolested owing to the inactivity of the alcalde, and the absence of the commandant of realistas, the only dispositive force in the place; but they soon effected their retreat across the Guadalquivir.

The robbers of Andalusia differ from the others by their manners and gallantry, especially to the women, which are general, although exceptions may be found.

A lady whom I know, was saved from robbery, by her presence of mind and touching the point of honour of this singular race. She was travelling and had halted to breakfast in a defile where a band was stationed, who soon made their appearance. With admirable coolness she invited them to join her, in the frank manner usual in the country, which they accepted, and then left her unmolested. This could only have happened in Andalusia. Instances occurred whilst I was in Spain of their returning the chattels of ladies when they took every thing besides; but this romantic generosity is not always displayed.

When I entered Spain, the roads of Andalusia were tolerably secure, owing to the following circumstance :

An officer, named Castro, met with a party who robbed him and committed the last outrages on his wife, in his presence. He had no alternative than to submit; but like an ancient Spaniard, he vowed a deep and noble revenge. After maturing his plan, he went to the king and offered to exterminate the race of robbers, if his conditions were complied with : These were the absolute and independant command of a party of cavalry to be selected and managed entirely by himself; a roving commission, with jurisdiction unconnected with alcaldes and other authorities; and the power of executing those he should apprehend, summarily and without recurring to the tribunals, which would render all his efforts unavailing. These terms were granted; he soon sallied forth, like a new Hercules, and in a short time the roads became as secure as in most other parts of Spain. Amongst his feats, was the entire destruction of a band, I have heard amounted to forty, directed principally by a woman, who, if the stories related be true, occasionally caused strange and dreadful cruelty to be practised on the men who fell into her hands. I never heard the entire number he had caused to be executed; but it must have been very great. It was impossible such services should be performed without raising a host of enemies in the friends and connections of the departed and others who were interested in maintaining the abuses which led to these rigourous measures. Intrigues were set on foot, and it was determined to ruin him. The difficulty was how to proceed against a man who could be looked on only as a public benefactor, and who was to be prosecuted by the very persons who had granted his commission. At length it was effected. The office was undertaken by a prelate, whose diocese was the

chief scene of his operations, and who ought rather to have assisted him in bearing up against these machinations. He was accused of exceeding his powers; of interfering with the privileges of the church; of sending individuals to their long account, without their being properly shrived, by which the prayers of the faithful came too late and were made unavailing. These charges were the more plausible, as his favourite plans were to execute criminals as quickly as possible after conviction, and if practicable, on the scene of their offences. As these places were generally in *despoblados*, there might have been a difficulty in finding even a capuchin to smooth their way, had he been ever so zealous in the cause. He was accordingly suspended from duty, and ordered to be tried. What the result would have been, it is difficult to say, but he was saved by the energetic remonstrances of the Captain general, who knew his value. His powers were however taken away, and he was ordered to act under the common authorities. The effect of this ill judged interference soon became evident: robbers sprang up like the men of Cadmus, and in a short time the country became more infested with them than it had ever been in the worst times. They then offered to reinstate him, but he refused to accept an office fraught with such peril to the holder of it.

The first who started was a man whose name will be handed down in the legends of Andalusia as the most perfect bandit who has ranged her territory for a very long period. His surname I never heard; but his baptismal appellation was Jose-Maria, and by that he is always known. He is a native of a village near Antequera, a district celebrated for producing these characters. He committed a murder and was outlawed. He then com

menced robbing, having probably no other means of living. He was soon joined by others, who procured horses by degrees, until a troop of twelve was mounted, when he gradually became master of the field. By the union of courage, skill, tact, consummate knowledge of the country and of conducting enterprises, he defied every effort to apprehend or destroy him. He had auxiliaries and correspondents in all the towns and villages within his occupation, and recruited at will, having, I have heard at least 40 candidates for a vacancy when it occurred in his troop. By a proclamation of the Captain general, the authorities of four places amongst which were Moron and Estepa, were publicly denounced as abetting and assisting him. His system was so completely organised that there were gradations of punishment for those who interfered with him. In one instance, the alcalde of some place had taken measures against him. He went to the spot where his bullocks were at work, and ordering them to be placed in a line, his troop dispatched them; a heavy loss in a country where there is no remedy for such misfortunes. A worse act of the same kind was performed near Antequera. The men of Alameda, which was in the centre of his principal beat, armed themselves and went in pursuit of him. As this system must have proved fatal to him if persevered in, he decreed dreadful vengeance; sending notice that the first men he met with belonging to the place, should be shot. In a short time he fell in with three men, and ascertaining by their *cartas de seguridad*, that they belonged to Alameda, he ordered them instantly to be put to death. One of them was only wounded by the first volley, and called out that he was not a native of the place; finding this to

be true, they bound up his wounds, placed him on horseback, and conveying him to a *Cortijo*, left him with sufficient provisions to last until he should procure other relief. These instances were, however, rare, and he seldom committed violence, unless on what, he considered reasonable grounds, or for self defence. In a short time, his second in command, whose name was Juan Caballero separated from him, and formed another troop, ranging the same line of country but without interfering with his former commander.

The country was thus scoured by these bands, whose range included all lower Andalusia from the gates of Cadiz to near Andujar, and the district between that river and the line of Antequera and Ronda. They commanded the great road of Andalusia, the communications of Malaga with Madrid, of Granada with Seville, and all those of the Serrania de Ronda; in fact all the principal routes of the southern provinces. The greater part of this tract consists of *despoblados* covered with brush wood and in some seasons affording pasturage. Vast plains with rising grounds, enabled them to command extensive views unseen, to move without difficulty in every direction, and constantly to vary their route and thus elude pursuit. Their marches were performed in incredibly short periods, and after a few days rapid evolutions they retreated into unknown fastnesses of the Serrania, to recruit and divide the spoil. Besides the other disadvantages of its being impossible to procure accurate information of his movements until it was too late, his troop was so well mounted that the cavalry were harassed to death, without the chance of coming up with him unless by accident.

One of his plans was to occupy some *cortijo* or suitable

post on the great road, when galeras and other carriages were expected. He took regular military possession of these places, detaining all the passengers to prevent alarm being given, until he had concluded the operation, when they were released.

I was at Seville, when he took advantage of the absence of the Captain general who was at Vejer with all the disposable troops, and occupied for a whole day a post on the great road of Madrid, which was actually in sight of the Giralda. His prisoners in the afternoon amounted to near seventy. The diligence passed during the time, but his object was not to rob that conveyance, which was too hazardous in such a locality, and drawing every body inside, he allowed it to pass without being perceived. Amongst the sufferers were some officers of a regiment in garrison, and a youth who was repairing to Seville with all the money his friends could raise, in order to be ordained a priest. He begged that it might be returned, but Jose only gave him a dollar, observing that the distance he had to travel was very short, and that he would find ample assistance from his brethren in the city.

The robbery of the diligences was always a separate enterprise, and was generally executed either at night or at dawn of day. I believe his gains from these conveyances were inconsiderable, and he found it better to accept "mail" which was paid by the proprietors. Galeras and occasionally convoys of arrieros conveying merchandize were his best prizes. He captured a galera from Cadiz whilst I was last in Andalusia, which was conveying the cigars intended for the royal mouth. They were sent from the Havannah, and the consumption was very great, the custom being only to light and then throw them down, when they were picked up by the attendants; on this