

Expulsion by Gordon L. Thomas

Part I

CHAPTER 1

The well-dressed man

‘Good gal. With luck, I’ll be stabling you here in a minute or two,’ he said as he patted the old horse’s neck and tethered her to the rail outside the inn. The mare looked around at him wide-eyed, appearing to know what he meant.

He lifted the latch on the heavy door and shoved it open. He eased his head back as he breathed in the cooler air that drifted from the inside, even though the smell of stale beer and sweat tainted it. He walked in. Several groups of men, some laughing, a number in heated argument and others looking half drunk, were scattered in the area reserved for drinking. One group shocked him into stopping: they were throwing a dwarf to each other and catching him as he fell after hitting the ceiling. The little man looked scared and tense, not seeing a way of escaping their brutality.

‘Put him down! Now!’ said the musician.

‘Who the hell are you to tell us?’ said one of the ruffians.

The musician turned, opened the door and shouted to the outside. ‘Come here lads. I need help!’

With that the men carefully put the dwarf down. He quickly walked away, towards a table at the back of the room. The musician continued walking into the inn, smiling to himself.

He imagined that many of these men were robbers, vagabonds, pickpockets or some other form of criminal. Some might be earning a more honest *real* but he doubted it. Except for one, they all looked dishevelled with hats at awkward angles and clothes appearing as if they had adorned the backs of beggars. The musician thought he recognised the well-dressed man in the corner, lecturing a group of untidy individuals in such terms that they could be the man’s employees.

The musician continued his anxious but expectant survey of the room. His heart leapt as he saw her, cloth in hand, wiping spillage from a table near the back. She knew how to attract a man. Her black hair fell in waves over the shoulders of her white dress, teasingly displaying a little cleavage and belted tightly to shape her waist. Her eyes had the sharp look of a vixen about to leap at its unknowing prey. She carried a look of pride about her and a knowing smile that drew men towards her whether they wanted to be or not. Most wanted to be.

‘God, what a surprise, Antonio!’ she said. ‘You haven’t been here in months!’

‘Just dropped by to say, hello!’

‘A lie,’ she quipped. ‘Not all the way from Madrid, just for that. Don’t tell me... the “Wandering Chordsmen” are back in Guadalajara. For how long this time?’

‘A few days. Maybe three. Depends.’

‘On what? Not the weather. Looks like it’ll be baking. This is the hottest September I can recall. And it’s nearly October!’

‘You’re right, Jac. Lope’s very latest *comedia* is playing at “The Coliseum”. Certainly for two days, could be three. As usual, we’re just the on-stage band. Me, Giant Carlos on guitar, Iago the Bad on dulcian and Josep on the harp.’

‘What’s the story in this one?’

‘Come along and see!’

‘You’re joking! I’ve got work to do here. Father isn’t well again and Mother can’t do it all on her own, despite her guts. So tell me, what’s the plot?’

‘Later. Got other things to sort out now.’

Within a minute or so, Señor Antonio Hidalgo, second in charge of the band, had arranged to stay for up to three nights at the Guadalajara tavern. His body ached, even though he bore the looks of youth. The band had played nearly all day out in the blistering sun. He and the others had fiddled, strummed, plucked or blown and sweated their way through two performances. The audience, on the other hand, readily accepted the discomforts of standing in the heat in this makeshift theatre, there in the central square - The Coliseum indeed - and yelled with delight at this entertaining yarn. The long queues at the pay desk, for standing places only, could easily point the way to a third day, if only an afternoon performance.

Antonio had no reason to rush back to Madrid. Born in 1585, and by then a mature and independent twenty year old, he lived alone in ground floor rooms in a massive house, owned by the grisly old woman, Doña Marta, a few hundred *varas* down the right-hand side of the Calle de Toledo from the Plaza Mayor. He remembered well his mother’s tears, not that many months before, as he climbed on his horse and headed from his parents’ farm in Pedraza down the uncertain road to Madrid and a new start in life. His father Diego laughed as if pleased to see him go but he, too, would miss his hard working, only son who could turn a hand to any task on their substantial farm. They had tried to persuade him to stay, if only until he was twenty five. There were ways in which, while he was young and active, they still needed him, not just to work but to manage the labourers, male and female who worked their land.

Antonio had other ideas and, while he loved them deeply, realised that, if he stayed much longer, he would become indispensable and a farmer all his life. Not for him while adventure in the great if dangerous city beckoned. So he pulled on the horse’s reins and galloped off, only to fall back to a trot when out of sight and earshot.

‘I’ll take the horse to the stables then. Usual rate, I suppose?’

‘More if you want to sleep there, too!’

‘Only if you sleep there with me!’

‘I gave up hay romps years ago.’

‘It’ll have to be a bed then! Yours or mine?’

‘Don’t rush me. I’m still in shock at seeing you! I may not feel that way tonight!’

The banter didn’t end there but end it eventually did and she and Antonio laughed as he went through the heavy doors again to fetch his patient horse and take her to the stabling.

‘Sorry, gal. Thought I’d be quicker,’ he whispered in her ear. The horse flicked its head. ‘But I could strike lucky tonight. I’ll let you know in the morning.’

The one thing she didn’t like about herself was ‘Jacinda’. She hated that name and could not forgive her mother for choosing it. She far preferred to be known as Jac. The family had always lived in Guadalajara, at least as far as ‘always’ went and that was for as long as she could remember. Not that long, for Jac was a mere twenty two years of age. Her mother possessed the strength of a bull in the *corrido*, both in body and in mind. Not so her father. His working life began in a copper mine not far from the town. While the job swelled his wallet, the constant hammering and dust had almost destroyed his lungs and hearing. So he spent as much time ill in bed as working at the inn and doctors paid him as much attention as he paid them in cash. Jac rode above it all and confidently held her own in working in the inn as cook, cleaner, bed maker and waitress as well as having some interesting relationships with her customers. She enjoyed the

intimacy of several of them, and that included the handsome Antonio Hidalgo. But she knew how to protect herself.

‘So what can I give you to eat tonight?’ she said, in her role as waitress. He had arrived after most others in the inn so wasn’t the first to be asked.

‘Do you have fish?’

‘Only something coarse from the river. I don’t recommend it. And it may hang on your breath in a way I may not appreciate.’

He saw her concern about his ambient odour as a good sign. ‘Do you have that meat pie you serve with green beans and artichoke?’

‘You’re in luck. No artichokes but will turnip do?’

‘Fine, and some red wine?’

She nodded acceptance and turned towards the kitchen. His mind followed his eyes and stopped at the well-dressed individual in the corner, talking to that medley of ruffians who seemed to consider him their leader. Despite racking his brain, Antonio remained puzzled about who he could be. Yet he seemed so familiar. Antonio just sat there at the table until the smiling Jac arrived with a plate of steaming food in one hand and a generously poured cup of wine in the other. She carefully placed it in front of him and extracted a bone-handled knife and matching fork from the pocket of her pinafore.

‘Maybe not the best meal to suit this heat but it’s colder in this stone built palace than outside,’ he said. ‘It’ll go down well. Want to join me for a drink? I’ll buy it.’

‘I’d love to but there’s too much to do. Mother is at her wits end sorting out beds and preparing the food for tomorrow’s breakfast. And father is none too well. Let’s meet at the bar in an hour or so and we can chat then.’

‘Accepted!’ he said. ‘I’m patient!’

‘And it will be better for your digestion if I’m not sitting here distracting you!’

He took his time in eating the tasty fare. He enjoyed the pie and the wine slid down like an aging rioja from a rich man’s cellar. She brought him a second cup and a plate of grapes for dessert. She uttered not a word, even while removing his empty plate.

While he relaxed in vacant reverie and all but dozed, she appeared and pulled up a chair at his table. ‘I’ve finished,’ she said. ‘That’s my work done for today.’

He struggled to interpret these words. She must know what occupied his masculine mind. Yet she gave no indication of what she wanted, at least not then. Somehow he needed to extract from her a less neutral statement. But how could he divine it? ‘I think bed is beckoning me,’ he ventured, chancing an off-hand rejection. One of them had to make a clear indication. He wondered about mentioning the word ‘love’ but that would be totally disingenuous, knowing that love played no part in this equation. He wanted nothing more than to make love to this attractive, friendly woman. Nothing more; and she’d mentioned his breath.

‘Time we went up then,’ he said, still an open statement but edging gradually towards his needs.

No reply.

So he decided to take control of the question. ‘In that case, back to my original request: the one I made before I went to the stables. Your room or mine?’

‘Not much subtlety in that. Surely a man of your talent can do better!’

He pondered for a moment or two. ‘My dear Jac, I would delight in taking you to my bed. To make love to you. To give you the kind of pleasure you know I am capable of. Please indulge me. I am a desperate man.’

‘That’s better,’ she smiled. ‘But still clumsy. Actually, I’d prefer my room ...in case I fall asleep! I’ll go first and you follow after say, five minutes. I don’t want this lot to know what’s in store,’ she said, nodding towards the others in the room, ‘either for me or for you!’

By the light of the flickering candle he held by its holder, he climbed the narrow staircase and turned towards her room. His excitement rose at the pleasure he freely anticipated. He knocked on the door and waited. No reply. He stood there. He wondered whether to knock again. A full three minutes elapsed and still nothing. He placed an anxious ear against the door but could hear nothing, not a sound. Had she decided against a love encounter, he wondered. If so, she surely would have told him.

Then he heard a commotion from the floor above and the sound of footsteps rapidly descending the stairs. She shouted, ‘Antonio, it’s my father. He cannot breathe! He needs a doctor! Quickly! I’m sorry!’

‘I’ll find one! Go back and make him sit up... if he will.’

‘I’ll ask mother to help me. She’s with him now.’

His mind rushed into an ordered chaos. He had no idea where to find a doctor, especially at this time of night. He entered the drinking room. By then only a dribble of men remained.

‘Anyone know a nearby doctor? Jac’s father’s ill. He’s having bad trouble breathing.’

‘Not this time o’night, mate. You won’t get one now,’ said a crumpled individual sitting near the door by the stairs.

‘No chance!’ said another. ‘He’ll have to wait ’til tomorrow. Give him a drop of brandy. It’ll either kill or cure.’

Antonio’s mind spun as he despaired at these gratuitous remarks. He couldn’t just wander the streets in the dark shouting for a medic. That would be stupid. Then it dawned on him. Jac would surely know of a doctor, one who had attended her father in the past. He’d go back up and ask her. He was about to turn around towards the stairs.

‘Let’s go! There’s a doctor not far from here. He’ll come out in an emergency. I know him well,’ said the well-dressed man who was accompanied by only two of his followers.

The man grabbed an oil lamp hanging from the wall and led the way as Antonio followed. They ran out of the inn and down the road to the left. Dark cloud had all but obliterated the moon and after a few more turns and traverses of the narrow streets, Antonio realised he had no idea where he was. The well-dressed man stopped outside of what, in the almost total darkness, seemed a large house and knocked repeatedly on the door. They stood there for a few minutes. Then a woman, dressed in a full length nightgown and carrying a candle, appeared. Her puzzled features glowed in the yellow light. Antonio raised his eyebrows and leant forward at the exchange which then took place. He understood only the man’s first sentence in which he gave his name as Hajib al-Asadi. The man and the woman conducted the remainder of the brief and rapid conversation in a strange tongue which Antonio imagined to be Arabic, the use of which had been banned in the whole of Spain for nigh on thirty years, since the uprising. So the well-dressed man and the woman were *Moriscos*.

Antonio suddenly realised where he had seen the well-dressed man. He had led a street march in Madrid, not many weeks before, protesting at the treatment of Muslims in the city. The march had ended in all but a riot in the Plaza Mayor. He’d seen this man arrested by the constabulary and taken off along with a gang of *Moriscos*. So here he was, free again and now, of all things, helping Antonio in his quest for a doctor.

The woman in the nightgown then turned and shouted something up the stairs, again fearless in using Arabic. A minute passed and a large man appeared, dressed in day clothes, topped by a tricorn, and carrying what looked like a doctor's bag.

'You lead the way, Pedro. I and your friend will follow.' Not more than five or so minutes later all three of them were back in the inn and being welcomed by a tearful Jac.

'Come this way, doctor. It's good of you to come. He's in a bad way. Up here.' Jac and the doctor disappeared behind the door to the hallway, leaving Antonio, the well-dressed man and a few others, including his two colleagues, in the drinking room. Antonio was panting after the late night expedition and so too was the well-dressed Pedro. Antonio had no intention of telling the man that he recognised him but thanked him profusely for his help.

'It's a pleasure, señor. Anything to assist in a situation like this. Least I could do. It was lucky that my friend the doctor lived so close by. Well, gentlemen, I'm off to my bed, now.' He bade his colleagues good night and went through the stair door. His two dingy workers uttered a few words to each other and went through to the street.

Antonio walked to the table where not long before he had consumed his meal. He decided to stay there at least until the doctor appeared again. He had barely settled when Jac and the doctor emerged. 'How is he now?' asked Antonio, with genuine concern.

'Much for the better. I made him sniff some strong salts and he's breathing reasonably well. I'll come back in the morning,' he said, turning to Jac.

'Thank you, doctor. You are kind turning out this late. Mother and I are so grateful.'

'Don't worry. Just keep him up as straight as you can. Put some more pillows beneath him if needed.' He then turned and went, leaving only Jac and Antonio in the room. Antonio realised immediately that it would be wrong and unfair to expect to share a bed with Jac then and although she apologised for the hiatus, they agreed to go to their separate rooms, at least for the night.

Antonio had left the window open and awoke with a fresh, cool breeze blowing across his face. The early morning sun beckoned so he decided to get up and go for a walk before it became too hot. He closed the inn door quietly and set off in the same direction which he and the man Pedro had taken the night before. He would try to follow the path to the doctor's seemingly impressive property. After several wrong turns and retracing his steps, Antonio turned a corner and there it was, facing him and about a hundred *varas* away, on the curve in the road he walked around before. He had been right: the house stood proud, exalting itself as by far the largest property in the street. A large oak front door sat between two large ground floor windows as three more large windows on the second floor overlooked the roadway. The angle of the sloping roof was less than he might expect but this served to accentuate the elegant façade. He stood outside for a moment simply admiring the property. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

'What d'you think you're doing here, mate?' said a voice from behind him.

'Minding my own business,' said Antonio, casually. 'Why don't you do the same?'

He then felt something cold on the back of his neck: the barrel of a gun. 'I'm telling you, chum. Clear off! It won't be good for you, if you stay. I might even put a bullet in your pretty throat.'

'You leave me little choice,' said Antonio coolly, but not turning towards his interlocutor, in case the man fired.

'Just walk away, in the direction you came and you'll be all right.'

Antonio did as the gunman demanded. He feared for his life as he managed to restrict himself to walking the hundred or so *varas* back to the street corner and turning into the adjacent road. Then out of sight of the gunman, he breathed a sigh of relief and ran back to the inn.

‘Holy Jesus, what’s the matter with you?’ asked Jac’s mother as he burst in through the tavern door, panting like a dog chasing a rabbit.

He could see nothing to be gained either in saying that he’d been to see the doctor’s house or that he had been threatened by a faceless gunman. So, after a moment’s thought, he came up with a reply. ‘I decided I needed to exercise my muscles after sitting all day yesterday so I’ve been out for a run.’

‘But you look scared and pale in the face. What have you been running away from?’

‘Nothing. Really. I’m not scared at all. I admit, I did get lost but I soon got back on the right road,’ he said with a forced laugh. ‘Anyway, how’s your man this morning. That’s much more important.’

‘He’s much better, thankfully. We were really worried about him last night. Go and sit down. Jac or I will bring you some breakfast.’

Antonio sat at his table of the night before wondering about the gunman, what he wanted, why he was so anxious for Antonio to move from outside the doctor’s house, why he couldn’t manage this without threatening him with a firearm and what the consequences of going back there might be. Never before had he been threatened by a gun or felt his life to be in danger. He concluded that the gunman was for some reason guarding the doctor’s house or some other adjacent property in that street. There had to be a *Morisco* connection but could not understand what it might be.

‘What’s going on in your head?’ said Jac, while placing a plate of fried eggs, tomato and *chorizo* in front of him, along with a hefty chunk of oat bread.

‘Just planning the day ahead,’ he said, vacantly.

‘You look troubled about something. Not just playing the fiddle.’

‘No. Seriously, I was just thinking, another day in the raging heat of yesterday will be tough going. And I can’t think of a way out of it.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ she said. ‘Now father is much better, tonight we may... Well who knows?’

Antonio beamed back at her. ‘Let’s hope so,’ he said. ‘But family comes first.’ He didn’t know whether he meant it or not.

‘Enjoy your breakfast and leave your room key on the desk before you go. Is that all right?’

‘Of course. I’ll see you later.’ He could see no one looking so he placed a surreptitious kiss on her cheek.

Antonio finished his tasty meal, packed up his things and went around the back to the stables and his waiting horse. ‘Not so lucky after all, old gal. Maybe tonight!’